

Part III

The African Region

The three chapters in this part present a picture of some of the important variations of the region. Africa, in particular south of the Sahara, is the poorest continent, and predictions from the World Bank, UN agencies, and other economic reports hold no promises of improvement for the next generation.

There seems to be a direct relationship between poverty in a country and the occurrence of poverty research. The poorer the country, the less is the institutionalized and systematic knowledge about poverty. One explanation is, of course, that poverty research is a luxury commodity that a poor country cannot afford. Another explanation is the immature development of the social sciences in general in many of the African countries. A third explanation, which comes across strongly in the chapter on South Africa, is the fear of the political impact of poverty research. During early apartheid, official research was done only on poor whites, while research on poor blacks, i.e. the majority of the South African population, was made invisible by defining it as a non-issue. Throughout the papers it is shown that shifts in the political climate are marked by the acceptance or rejection of poverty research as a legitimate activity.

The gap in poverty research has been filled by outside agencies, such as the World Bank and non-governmental agencies, which have carried out studies on different aspects of poverty. The major definition of poverty has been economic, thereby imposing an international understanding of poverty rather than a definition of poverty tailored to national perceptions of poverty. Water, for example, stands out as a central element in an African poverty definition. Poor people have less access to clean water. Fewer of the poor have tap water in the house, they have to go a greater distance to fetch water, and the physical effort expended on carrying water requires the energy of an ordinary labourer. On top of all this, the poor are likely to pay more per litre for clean water than the non-poor. But water is not part of the regional poverty definitions.

All three chapters call for new, reliable, and longitudinal data as a first step towards more systematic knowledge on poverty. The data should be collected on a national basis, that is, they should cover the entire country. But they should also be comparable in order to benefit from data and research in other African countries, as well as in countries outside Africa.