

Part V

The Latin American Region

Poverty research in Latin America demonstrates the close relationship between politics and academia in the search for useful knowledge. Much of the poverty research is applied, in the sense that studies are geared towards finding solutions to overwhelming poverty problems and providing data that can be used as a base for national social policies. During this process academics are developing a political role that involves them in debates and public consultations on poverty issues, as well as in the making of concrete social policy measures.

The Latin American continent has undergone economic and political turbulence during the past couple of decades, which has had an impact on the incidence of poverty. A succession of adjustment and restructuring policies has run its course in most of the countries, many of which used to have wealthy economies. Macroeconomic policies aimed at poverty alleviation have not been too successful. Poverty seems to have increased both in metropolises and in the rural areas, as have income differences. This development has influenced research on poverty in several ways. Powerful theories on the macro level have appeared, trying to explain the causes and consequences of economic and social changes, directly or indirectly including poverty. Indicators have been developed to capture the manifestations of changing policies and compare them across the different Latin American nations. The eruption of research on poverty lines can likewise be seen as part of this picture.

Here, as elsewhere, a major aim in applied research is to create a poverty line that adequately portrays poverty and at the same time is easy to administer. Politicians and bureaucrats alike are pressing the researchers to come up with an efficient and unambiguous social policy instrument. So researchers and official data collecting institutions are attacking the problems of constructing a fair and unambiguous poverty line as fiercely as if they were attacking the complex problem of poverty itself. Numerous poverty lines are constructed, and poverty lines created elsewhere are tried out in a Latin American context.

The debate on various aspects of poverty is widespread and influenced by structural explanations of poverty. The many economic crises have spurred an overall feeling that poverty is produced in the social and economic system, and the redistribution of resources and a more equitable development are proposed as necessary to curb injustices and poverty.