

CROP newsletter

Comparative Research Programme On Poverty

Vol. 10, No. 1, March 2003

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POVERTY - NEW EXPLORATIONS IN AN OLD TERRAIN

Concerns about poverty—who is the ‘poor’, why they are poor, and what can be deemed a proper response to them—have long been at the core of discourses about society and its ‘others’. Far from being a straightforward condition of deprivation and destitution that is easily defined empirically, poverty is a contentious and complex construct, an archetypal ‘thick’ discourse, encapsulating a vast range of social, political and historical struggles, constantly evolving new values, social identities and material outcomes.

One emergent frontier in poverty research is the study of the ways definitions and discourses of poverty have been shaped historically and then, in a reciprocal movement, have shaped the realities they were intended to interpret. The 19th century European poor laws, for example, in their various manifestations, embodied a complex interaction of material reality, ideas, discourses, institutions, technologies and abstractions - all propelling the formation of modern states and mass-culture. While this process began in Europe, spread quickly, with common tropes and significant variations, across communities and continents. European perceptions of poverty centrally influenced, and were influenced by, colonial encounters; particularly to the ways in which ideas of the “poor” and the “primitive” became juxtaposed in social reports and policies. The interplay between European class politics and colonial racial politics continues

in the post-colony era. In various transmutations, it continues to effect discourses of development, globalisation and their implementation.

Thus beneath the veneer of the self-evident objectivity and taken-for-grantedness of contemporary poverty definitions, there lies a conflicting mass of negative images and older stereotypes that continue to filter definitions and interpretations. Even in the most recent transformations of the topology of poverty where the concept has aligned itself with benign discourses of democratization and human rights, this submerged, negative ‘other’ of poverty surfaces again.

Just as the 19th century poverty discourse not only prescribed a way of dealing with poverty but a grand project for the reformation of the poor into a new form of social life, so development discourses prescribe a new form of life for peoples of other cultures and continents. The dramatic spread of mass poverty in the contemporary world and the myriad unintended consequences of interventions in the name of modernisation, demonstrate the shortcomings of standardised recipes and social engineering from the North designed to improve the livelihoods and lifestyles of peoples in the South. The scope for critical research into poverty producing processes is thus enormous.

A second frontier of poverty research is the crucial role poverty has played in ‘identity politics’ - an area now receiving much scholarly attention. What has largely escaped this emergent focus is the fact that

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the forging of social identities - an ambivalent process of both creation and counterfeiting - has in no small way been played out around poverty matters across centres and peripheries alike. Throughout, discourses on poverty and prosperity are constantly being reconfigured in relation to changing and contested ideas about gender, race, power, dependency, and domesticity, - and in relation to the broader structural shifts in local and global economies. In the process, the generic label "poor" has emerged as a highly ambivalent identity. While in some situations, to inhabit the category of the "poor" holds up the prospect of provision and empowerment, in other situations, being labelled "poor" may lead to stigmatisation and further impoverishment.

What is most significant is that the local context in which projects and policies unfold already include ideas about the experiences of earlier encounters and interventions. Thus the whole range of interventions in the name of poverty are parts of recursive processes continuously at work across the colonial and post-colonial landscapes. In this process, the representations carried by new models recombine with signs, values and social identities already in circulation, creating new reconfigurations out of existing and imported elements. In other words, interventions and struggles in the name of poverty are social activities; they bring certain modes of engagement and certain social identities into being.

The uneasy articulations between local and global agendas world-wide and the divergent perspectives that exist bring us to the realisation that global and local models each approach the problem of

poverty with their specific ideological bias. This is not to say that poverty is merely a matter of divergent ideas, but that even where its social manifestations are blatantly evident and concrete, its meanings and interpretations are inevitably culturally and conceptually mediated. Thus ethnographies of wealth and want, exploring the precise ways poverty are being produced and maintained in different places, are urgently needed. In particular, we need studies focusing on how the politics of wealth and power are being reconfigured as local peoples are forced to confront, with increasing frequency, the interests of a host of transnational entities- like oil, mining and logging companies; forestry and soil conservation projects; tourism or the competing discourses of western environmentalists.

These confrontations are often explosive ones. Yet a third frontier of research is the way discourses of poverty have often tried to diffuse the explosive potential of poverty by shunting it, as it were, from discourse to discourse. It has been redescribed in terms which variously relates it to "natural" conditions, "spiritual" conditions, "cultural" conditions, "pathological" conditions and "mental" conditions, and so on. The impetus for each discursive shift comes from historically specific social struggles over the interpretation of the concept of poverty in its previous discursive site. As a result of such struggles poverty is moved on to a new site where it will inscribe itself in a new vocabulary and become the focus of new interpretative struggles and material outcomes. What it means to be poor in material, socio-political and imaginary terms has dramatically changed over time and across communities. Yet the generic core of

poverty concerns primary questions of power and sociability, typically mobilised in situations where solidarity and sharing is being encouraged, challenged or negotiated.

To acknowledge the complexity of poverty is of course not to give up on large-scale generalisations. It rather suggests that in order to abstract, focus and compare more adequately, one needs to build upon more refined, in-depth, processual studies and comparisons rich in historical and social specificity. In its ambivalent blend of generic and specific attributes, poverty has a great potential for generating both innovative interdisciplinary and comparative projects, and thus can become a prime force invigorating development research. The challenge is to balance the attention to discursive and interpretative practices whilst retaining a grounding in the material realities of political economy and social institutions that surround poverty.

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BACKGROUND PAPER FOR "LAW AND POVERTY V" WORKSHOP

The background paper for the upcoming CROP and Social Science Academy of Nigeria "Law and Poverty V" workshop is now available. The paper can be downloaded from the CROP webpage at <http://www.crop.org>, or it can be requested by writing to the CROP Secretariat.

CROP SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE 2003-2004

The CROP Scientific Committee 2003-2004 was appointed by the ISSC General Assembly in December 2002.

The Committee now has the following members:

- **Chair Francis Wilson**, University of Cape Town, South Africa
- **Vice-Chair Maria Petmesidou**, Democritus University of Thrace, Greece
- **Vice-Chair Elisa Reis**, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- **Julio Boltvinik**, El Colegio de Mexico
- **Atilio Boron**, CLACSO, Argentina
- **Ellen Bortei-Doku Areyteey**, University of Ghana

- **Veena Das**, University of Delhi, India
- **Svetlana Glinkina**, Russian Academy of Sciences
- **Paul Hunt**, University of Essex, UK
- **Santosh Mehrotra**, UNDP Human Development Report Office, New York, USA
- **Rhoda Reddock**, University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago
- **Yolanda Ricardo**, Centro de Investigaciones Psicológicas y Sociológicas (CIPS), Cuba
- **Nader Said**, Birzeit University, Palestine
- **Syed Abdus Samad**, Bangladesh
- **Julia Szalai**, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

- **Giancarlo Vilella**, European Parliament/ISSC Executive Committee
- **Lin Zhu**, Chinese Academy of Sciences

Honorary member

- **Amartya Sen**, Trinity College, UK

Scientific Director

- **Else Øyen**, University of Bergen, Norway

Legal Adviser

- **Willem van Genugten**, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

CROP thanks the outgoing members and welcomes the new committee. We look forward to working with you to further develop the agenda of poverty research worldwide.

editorial

Research on Poverty in Russia

Poverty is a relatively new subject for Russian social scientists. Research started in a new context of societal transformation with the beginning of market-oriented reforms. In modern Russia this problem acquires specific importance: According to official estimates about 40 % of the population lives below the poverty line.

A number of research bodies in Russia are engaged in poverty studies on a regular basis. Among them the Russian Academy of Sciences is to be mentioned specifically. It includes organizations such as the Institute for Social and Economic Studies of Population (ISESP), Laboratory for Distributional Relations, Institute for International Economic and Political Studies (IIEPS) and Centre for Social Studies. Sociological studies are carried out by the Institute of Sociology and VCIOM (Center for Public Opinion Studies). The Department of Population Income is responsible for the poverty analysis in the Ministry of Labour and Social Development. The All-Russian Center for Living Conditions has also been established under the Ministry's auspices. Among recent influential studies the following works can be mentioned: Mozina M. (ed.) (1994) *Poverty: Scientists' View on the Problem*. Moscow, ISESP; *Feminization of Poverty in Russia* (2000). Moscow, Ves' mir.

The Moscow based ILO, UNDP, World Bank and EU offices demonstrate considerable interest in studying poverty in Russia. Traditionally they pay attention to the development of theoretical and methodological as well as practical aspects of poverty. They initiate and finance a number of studies that are conducted in close collaboration with Russian researchers. Such co-operation has proved to be productive and can be evaluated by such projects as "Poverty in Russia: deprivation and social exclusion" (TACIS, 1997); "Poverty: alternative ways of defining and measuring" (Moscow Carnegie Centre, 1998); "Monitoring poverty in Russia" (World Bank, 1998-2001). These and other studies help to monitor poverty in a transitional economy and clarify strategies used by the Russian population to adjust to the course of market reforms.

At present, the priority on the research agenda is to define a poverty line and establish a system of constant poverty monitoring and a targeted system of social benefits. Today poverty studies in Russia predominantly use quantitative research methods. Their aim is to quantify the number of "the poor" and to depict their main characteristics from the point of view of certain living standards (subsistence minimum and consumption basket). Household expenditure surveys, data on income and expenditure structure have become the most important sources of information. As a result, poverty is discussed first of all within the general framework

TRAINING COURSE ON POVERTY REDUCTION FOR SIDA

CROP has carried out a pilot training course on poverty reduction for staff of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). The course was held in Bergen, Norway, January 14th-16th. 24 persons of the Sida staff attended.

The course package consisted of research based lectures, thematic discussions, a course manual, and the establishment of a network for lecturers and course participants for future contact and collaboration. The main aim was to contribute to further development of Sida's strategies for poverty reduction in the South.

In co-operation with Sida, CROP selected a set of topics of particular relevance for the understanding of the complex processes involved in poverty reduction. Experts from the CROP network was called on to share their knowledge with the Sida staff through lectures and round table discussions that were held throughout the course.

Given the limited time of a 3-day course the selection of topics covered only a fraction of the many important topics that are needed to give a full picture of the poverty arena. The selection was made with an eye to the interest of the Sida participants, and what the lecturers would like to impart by way of new knowledge.

The emphasis of the course was not on concrete methods and evaluations of poverty reducing strategies, but on analytical skills that can enable the Sida participants to understand the principles underlying methods and thereby help them assess the reports laid before them.

The course covered nine major topics. The first lecture by Else Øyen, "Poverty Reducing Strategies", laid out a range of different poverty reducing strategies and

of people's income and living standards. The main research problem is how to define poverty, to set a poverty line and to construct poverty indicators. These help to measure poverty and influence political and economic decisions.

However, a number of such important processes as poverty in the context of social exclusion, its impact on people's social standing, social mobility as a way to overcome poverty during the life cycle, ways to empower people to overcome poverty both at a local and national level, are still underresearched in Russia. As reforms in the social sector proceed it becomes important also to understand poverty in relation to various groups of social service users, in particular education,

discussed their aims, targets and rationale. The following three lectures offered methodological approaches needed in poverty reduction. The lecture by Paul Spicker, "Eleven Definitions of Poverty", covered different definitions of poverty and linked them together in logical clusters. The lecture by Nazneen Kanji, "Poverty Assessments and Programme Evaluation", contrasted quantitative and qualitative approaches to poverty reduction programmes. The lecture by Julio Boltvinik, "Poverty Measurements" built a classification system of poverty measurements that can help assess different measuring methods.

The next four lectures focused on poverty reducing strategies that have appeared during the last few years, such as "pro-poor growth", "social capital building", "PRS(P) processes" and "human rights". All lectures, held respectively by Julian May, "What is so Difficult about Achieving Better Pro-Poor Growth?" and "PRS(P) Processes", Sanjeev Prakash, "Making Participation and Social Capital Work for the Empowerment of Poor Communities", and Roberto Gargarella, "Poverty and Human Rights", looked at the roots of the concepts in the strategies, discussed different understandings and uses of the concepts, and assessed the likely impact of the strategies on poverty reduction.

The final lecture on "Ethical Considerations Involved in Poverty Reducing Strategies" by Asunción St. Clair was on a topic that so far has been largely ignored. That is the ethical perspectives involved in taking part in poverty reduction.

CROP is now in discussion with Sida about further courses.

health and housing.

Western scholars have accumulated considerable knowledge in these areas of research, that can be very useful for Russia in her attempts to develop adequate measures to fight poverty. Russian research centres are open for international co-operation in studying the issues mentioned above and other relevant subjects. We welcome any initiatives from our foreign colleagues to start joint research projects, and to conduct conferences, workshops and training courses.

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SESSION ON *POVERTY PRODUCING PROCESSES*

CROP held a special session on "Poverty producing processes" at the International Conference on Social Science and Social Policy in the 21st Century, in Vienna, Austria, December 9-11, 2002. The Conference was organised by the International Social Science Council (ISSC) in cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to celebrate ISSCs 50th Anniversary.

Much of the academic and political attention concentrates around poverty reduction. Less in focus are the poverty producing processes and the measures needed to stop or reverse those processes. Poverty production occurs on all levels of society and much of it is embedded in ordinary ways of life. Some of these poverty producing processes are visible but linked to strong economic and political interests that make interference difficult and at times even hazardous. The session's main aim was to bring out examples of poverty production, analyse them within a framework of conflicting interests and discuss policy options to minimise the harmful effects on poverty formation.

The session was chaired by Professor **Michael Filani**, Social Science Academy of Nigeria. The following papers were presented:

- *Poverty production: A different approach to poverty understanding**
Else Øyen, Scientific Director of CROP, University of Bergen, Norway
- *Tracking poverty production practices in Greece*
Maria Petmesidou, Democritus University of Thrace, Greece
- *Distribution of water as a poverty producing process*
Maliha Khan-Tirmizi, Lahore University, Pakistan / School for International Training, Vermont, USA

(*) Øyens paper has been published in:

Nikolai Genov (ed.) (2002)
Advances in sociological knowledge over half a century, Paris: ISSC.

The paper can also be downloaded from the CROP webpage at <http://www.crop.org/publications/reports.cfm>

LIST OF CROP EVENTS 2003

March

19-21: *The Role of the State in the Struggle Against Poverty*. A joint CROP, CLACSO and Fundação Joaquim Nabuco (FJN) workshop, in Recife, Brazil.

June

5-6: Consultation meeting on the UNESCO document *Abolishing Poverty Through the International Human Rights Framework: Toward an Integrated Strategy*, Bergen, Norway. By invitation only.

June

14-15: *Poverty and Social Deprivation in the Mediterranean Area*. A joint CROP and Department of Social Administration of Democritus University of Thrace workshop in Komotini, Greece.

November

Law and Poverty V. A joint CROP and the Social Science Academy of Nigeria workshop in Abuja, Nigeria. See background paper announced on previous page.

NEW BOOK ON POVERTY

Prepared by an international team of experts the book *Making Global Trade Work for People* has recently been published by Earthscan Publications.

The book argues that although trade has enormous potential to contribute to human development the current trade regime has fallen far short of expectations and its inequities are at the core of controversies surrounding globalization. It examines these issues and presents perspectives from developing countries, civil society organizations from both North and South, and academics and experts that have not been widely heard.

To order the book contact Earthscan Publications Ltd, 120 Pentonville Road, London N1 9JN, UK, Tel: +44 (0)20 7278 0433, Fax: +44 (0)20 7278 1142, E-mail: earthinfo@earthscan.co.uk, Web: <http://www.earthscan.co.uk>

UN DOCUMENT PREDICTS HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

A confidential UN document predicts that 30 percent of children under 5 in Iraq, or 1.26 million, "would be at risk of death from malnutrition" in the event of a war. The draft document, *Integrated Humanitarian Contingency Plan for Iraq and Neighbouring Countries*, was produced by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on 7 January 2003.

CROP IN BRIEF

CROP is a world-wide network of researchers and experts on poverty. The aim of CROP is to establish an arena for interdisciplinary and comparative research on poverty in developed and developing countries. CROP organises regional workshops, symposia and international conferences, promotes joint research projects and publications, links poverty researchers and disseminates information about poverty research, on a non-profit basis. CROP has developed a database on poverty researchers, and documentation of ongoing research.

If you wish to have your name listed in CROPnet, you are welcome to write to the Secretariat and request a copy of the CROP Database Survey form. For further information please contact the CROP Secretariat

Please note: We cannot answer the increased demand for copies of single papers presented at CROP conferences and workshops. However, if you have the patience, most of the papers become available through the publications that follow the conferences and will be duly announced. We still supply the authors addresses, phone & fax numbers.

WEBPAGE FOR CROP

Those who have an Internet connection and a WWW browser programme installed on the computer, can find the CROP webpage at www.crop.org. The pages hold general information about CROP, news about past and ongoing activities, as well as the latest CROP newsletter.

AT THE CROP SECRETARIAT YOU WILL MEET:

Else Øyen, Scientific Director of CROP
Kirsti Thesen Sælen, Co-ordinator
John McNeish, Lat. Am. Co-ordinator/
Researcher
Inge Erling Tesdal, Executive Officer

NEW BOOK ON POVERTY

The Himalayan Poverty: Threat to the World by **Krishna Bahadur Kunwar**, has been published by Meena Prakashan, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Contact Krishna Bahadur Kunwar, E-mail: adbnic@ntc.net.np, for ordering information.