

# CROP newsletter

Comparative Research Programme On Poverty

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## contents

### Page 1

#### **The Polyscopic Landscape of Poverty Research**

by Else Øyen

### Page 2

#### **Call for papers:**

Poverty in the Light of the Informal Economy

#### **Call for papers:**

Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Context of Discrimination of Ethnic-Racial Groups: The Latin American Case

### Page 3

**Editorial** by Charles Waldegrave

#### **New CROP publication:**

Elite Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality

### Page 4

#### **CROP Annual Report 2004**

**The International Glossary on Poverty New Poverty Research Projects in Database Events 2005-2006**

## frontiers of poverty research

### **THE POLYSCOPIC LANDSCAPE OF POVERTY RESEARCH**

In August 2004 the Research Council of Norway announced tenders for a «State-of-the-art» report within international poverty research. The Research Council wanted the report to give an overview over what is the present state of knowledge in the field, indicate where the frontiers of research are, identify what the most pressing needs for new knowledge are, and suggest how Norwegian expertise can contribute to poverty research in the South. CROP was successful with its tender. Several members in CROPnet took part in the project, writing chapters or giving advice.

The Report was not easy to write. It would have been easier to write a report on the state-of-the-art in non-poverty research. The non-poor are fewer in number, more visible, better and more adequately researched, and as a group likely to be more homogenous than the poor. Still, nobody would ever expect such a report to be complete and satisfactory.

The understanding of poverty is in the eyes of the beholder. Different actors see different things, emphasize different aspects and develop different paradigms of poverty understanding according to their discipline, position or vested interests. Research is to gather as much relevant information as possible and to see the actual research question from different angles. When information becomes overwhelming and relevance takes on still new meanings, the researcher finds himself/herself in a polyscopic landscape. Poverty research and semi-research on poverty mixed with political

and moral interpretations, provides the perfect example of a polyscopic landscape.

The Report describes some of the directions different approaches to poverty have taken. The emphasis is on poverty research undertaken in the South and on the kind of poverty research outside the South which is likely to have had an impact on poverty research in the South.

Many of the disciplines within the social sciences and several outside the social sciences have incorporated poverty as a research topic, some of them fairly recently and some through a well established tradition. As could be expected, the disciplinary approaches to poverty understanding are coloured by the discipline's theories, methodologies and previous research. The understanding of poverty is fitted into the dominant paradigms of the discipline. It follows from this that the frontiers of poverty research follow closely the state-of-the-art within the discipline in question. So far there have been few successful attempts to integrate different disciplinary approaches in a theoretical and coherent manner.

There are many other actors in the poverty landscape besides those found in the disciplines. Some are producing basic research full time, others are producing applied research stemming from basic research, while still others are using research results in new constellations that bring forward interesting additional knowledge. Some of this activity is performed according to normal scientific criteria, while some of

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what is presented as research is infected with political and moral views and/or based on incomplete or even faulty data. It seems that there is more of the latter than of the former. If unacceptable research is to be sorted out from acceptable research every study and report needs to be scrutinised. Since the numbers of studies and «studies» internationally have increased enormously during the last decade, this task was not possible within the given limits of the tender.

Poverty research has not seen dramatic paradigmatic changes where new discovery suddenly brings about new insights and shifts the focus. Rather, it can be said that much of the research and semi-research carried out by the many actors in the landscape of poverty has found its focus only in the sense, that certain ideas or disciplinary paradigms or financial carrots point out the direction. Indirectly a mental co-ordination is taking place. In the fuzzy field of poverty understanding some actors are pushing their paradigms harder than others, and some paradigms fall in more fertile soil than others. Some research paradigms have a merit in themselves as structures on which to link researchable topics and develop new questions that push the understanding further. They come to the fore through their intellectual strength and coherence. Other paradigms become dominant in the sense that they influence research because their promoters manage to gain visibility and political influence. That does not mean they provide the best theoretical frameworks for research. Still, they inspire research due to their high profile and on their edges are found a prolific research literature.

The description of the polyscopic landscape of poverty research demonstrates at least three trends in the understanding of poverty. The major trend is that disciplines and actors use concepts for the understanding of poverty and poverty reduction, as an integral part of their disciplinary or organisational position. This narrows down the analysis and prioritises certain aspects of poverty while other aspects are systematically ignored. Another trend is that a few concepts dominate the understanding of poverty and poverty reduction. Throughout changing discourses and policies some concepts seem to be more persistent than others, no matter their usefulness or the context in which they are used. A third tendency is that the same concept used to describe poverty and poverty reduction is given a different content in many of the studies. On the one hand it makes comparisons between studies invalid, thereby diminishing learning effects.

On the other hand one can ask why a new content is introduced for a certain definition. When is this due to innovation and when to incomplete knowledge?

Part of the Report is 6 in-depth studies of importance to poverty understanding. Two of these studies are regional and discuss

respectively the development of poverty research in Latin America and South Africa. Four of the studies are topical and discuss poverty in relation to water, legal frameworks, human rights and institutionalisation of poverty reduction.

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## CALL FOR PAPERS

CROP & Economic and Social Council, Portugal (CES)

convene the workshop

### *Poverty in the Light of the Informal Economy*

Lisbon, Portugal, April 2006

The workshop aims to study the meaning and relationships of the informal economy to poverty in the Mediterranean Region. The workshop follows others previously organised by CROP to facilitate a network of poverty researchers in the region.

The conference sets out to critically discuss the policy-linkages made between the control of the informal sector, the strengthening of the formal economy and the expansion of the small enterprise sector in relation to the reduction of poverty.

An increasing number of economists and other social scientists argue that the distinction between formal and informal economies is questionable due to its reliance on context and that the encouragement of the small enterprise sector can lead to the expansion, rather than contraction of the informal sector. Moreover, it has been shown that in an increasingly globalised reality, unquestioned support for the formal and free market and of the small enterprise sector can have the unintended result of worsening general work and social conditions.

The workshop aims to study these contradictions, to highlight and question their structural and theoretical basis, and to discuss the content of a more rigorous and nuanced research on the informal and formal economies. As such the workshop aims to research, through reference to empirical case-studies and applied theory, the role of formality and informality in shaping both production and reduction of poverty.

Key questions that will be addressed include:

- To what extent is the informal economy reliant on the formal economy, and vice versa?
- What are the relationships between informality and poverty?
- What role does the small enterprise sector have in reducing poverty?
- How can an "entrepreneurial poor" be defined?

The workshop is limited to 25 participants. Preference will be given to scholars from the Mediterranean Region, but scholars from other areas are also invited. All participants will be expected to take part in the proceedings by either presenting or discussing papers. Participants bear the responsibility for their own funding. However, a limited number of travel grants are available. The grants will be awarded according to geography and the relevance, quality and originality of the abstract/paper. Details on how to apply for travel grants will be forwarded to those authors whose abstracts are accepted for the workshop. As a rule, accommodation will be covered for all participants during the workshop.

#### THE DEADLINE FOR ABSTRACTS IS OCTOBER 15, 2005

The abstract should include: the title of the proposed paper and a summary of the main theme or argument. The summary should indicate theory, methods and findings of your proposed paper, and should not exceed ONE PAGE (A4). IMPORTANT: A brief CV along with a list of your most recent publications should accompany the abstract. Please state clearly your name, title, nationality, full postal and e-mail address, telephone and fax numbers. The abstract and CV should be sent (preferably by E-mail) to:

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Participants will be notified by December 15, 2005, whether their proposals for papers have been accepted or not, and will then be given details of the format in which the papers should be prepared (the deadline for submission of the paper will be February 15, 2006).

A background paper and more detailed information about the workshop is available by contacting the CROP Secretariat.

## editorial

**Charles Waldegrave**

*Joint Leader*

New Zealand Poverty Measurement Project

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### **PUBLIC DEBATE, POVERTY RESEARCH AND POLICY SETTING?**

I am mindful that New Zealand is an OECD country and probably considered by many to be a paradise in the Pacific, rather than the focus for an article on poverty. Well, New Zealand is a beautiful place and it is now beginning to rise again in the league table of countries' living standards, but that is after a crisis in which living standards spiraled downwards, relative poverty escalated and the welfare state was substantially reduced.

After pioneering the welfare state in the 1930s prior to many of the post-war European welfare states, New Zealand had the dubious distinction of substantially dismantling it 50 years later in response to its economic crisis. In the process it created inequality at a higher rate than any OECD country. With the arrival of the new millennium, it has effectively begun to decrease inequalities, reduce child poverty and create a new social and economic policy balance. As such, the country offers one of the sharpest illustrations of policy impacts on the severity and rates of poverty and the place of poverty research in the public debate.

In the late 80s radical economic reforms were introduced to arrest the country's plummeting economic fortunes and these were followed in the 90s by extreme social policies. Incomes for those on benefits were substantially reduced and at the same time rents on state houses for low income families were increased from an income related rent (25% of hh income) to a market rent with a subsidy which for most people in the cities increased their rent by around 50%. New part charges were introduced for healthcare and education along with stricter eligibility criteria for benefits.

Research work we undertook in the New Zealand Poverty Measurement Project indicated that in 1993 19% of households fell below the poverty threshold which was set at 60% of median, equivalent, household, disposable income after adjusting for housing costs. Although 60% of median household income is widely used as a poverty threshold in Europe, we arrived at it through budget setting on focus groups with low income families. Their consistent estimates of minimum adequate household income were around the 60% mark.

In that same year our research showed that 33% of New Zealand children were below the

## **NEW CROP PUBLICATION**

**Elite Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality**

CROP International Studies in Poverty Research

Edited by Elisa P. Reis and Mick Moore

*For policies to eliminate mass poverty to be effective, the national elites who control governments and economies in developing countries need to be convinced that poverty reduction is in their own and the national interest, and that public action can make a difference.*

Drawing on case studies from a range of developing countries, the contributors to the volume have discovered major differences in how national elites understand and represent poverty. The classic threats that induced elites in late 19th century Europe to be concerned about poverty - the fear of crime, epidemics, military weakness or political unrest - do not feature prominently in the consciousness of most developing country elites. Nor do most of them believe that there is a viable solution to poverty through public action. The findings help to explain the relative ineffectiveness of poverty reduction strategies so far, and illustrate the need to present poverty in ways that tie in with how national elites understand their world.

For ordering information contact Zed Books, 7 Cynthia Street, London N1 9JF, UK, Tel: +44-(0)207-837-4014, Fax: +44 (0)207 833 3960, Web: <http://www.zedbooks.co.uk>

threshold. So too were 73% of single parents. The indigenous Maori population was 2½ times more likely to be in poverty than the European population and Pacific households 3½ times more likely. During the decade these figures remained much the same varying a few points either way.

As the 90s progressed public outcry about the levels of poverty and inequity increased. Health professionals identified the rise of poverty related illnesses, growing numbers of schools introduced meals to cater for children in low income households and foodbanks grew exponentially. The poverty research which was consistently published in peer reviewed journals was also prepared in easily accessible form for the print, radio and television media. This contributed substantially to a more informed and evidence based debate.

A major outcome of the public debate was a call for a greater balance of social policy alongside economic policy. A new Government took office in late 1999 promising to achieve that. Since then there has been a considerable turn around with a concentrated investment in both social and economic policies. The key areas of housing and income identified in the poverty research have undergone substantial changes.

State houses, for example have been returned to income related rents at 25% of hh income for those on low incomes. The superannuation pension for those over 65 which had begun to fall below the poverty line has been lifted to its previous

level above the line. It is a universal system and a substantial savings fund has also been introduced to smooth the transition for the growing older demographic.

More recently the increasing problem of child poverty has been addressed by the largest redistribution of income in three decades. A mixture of family income assistance and tax credits for working families are being phased in by April 2007. They are calculated to reduce poverty in households with children by 30% using the sixty percent of median hh income threshold and severe poverty using the fifty percent of median hh income by 70%. These in turn will move New Zealand to relative child poverty rates lower than the European Union average and much lower than the other English speaking countries.

Interestingly, this has been achieved in the new millennium alongside an economy that has had consistent GDP growth rates above the OECD average and currently the lowest unemployment in OECD countries, suggesting the social policy settings may be contributing to economic growth and vice versa.

There are of course debates about the different emphases and timings of policies. There is still considerable hardship for numbers of families. Not all have benefited equally. However, the changes have been dramatic. They have been achieved through public debate, robust and easily accessible research, political will and careful and sustainable policy settings.

(continued from page 2)

The last chapter provides some recommendations for future research. While an appendix gives an overview of institutions engaged in poverty research.

The full Report can be accessed at [www.crop.org](http://www.crop.org) or at the homepage for the Research Council of Norway <http://www.forskningsradet.no/forport/> (see *Ny tilstandsrapport om internasjonal fattigdomsforskning*) with the comment that this Report is an important instrument when the Research Council draws up its programme for future research on development.

Your comments to the Report will be welcome.

Else Øyen, Scientific Director of CROP

## NEW POVERTY RESEARCH PROJECTS IN CROP DATABASE

Members of CROP network of poverty researchers send information about their on-going research. The following projects are the latest additions to the CROP database:

*Africa:*

- Education and poverty in rural South Africa.
- Rural change processes and the impact of development intervention in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria.
- The Ruling Class and The Poor: The Nigerian Case Study.

*Asia:*

- Responding to the Needs of HIV and AIDS Affected Families: A Survey of Healthcare Providers in Visakhapatnam.

*Latin and Central America:*

- Trade liberalization and Poverty in Haiti.

Contact the CROP secretariat if further information is wanted about the projects listed.

## CROP ANNUAL REPORT 2004

The CROP Annual Report 2004 is now available. An overview of CROP's academic activities (workshops, publications, regional collaborations) and achievements in the past year are included.

The report can be downloaded from the CROP website at <http://www.crop.org>.

## LIST OF CROP EVENTS 2005-2006

### August 2005

20-24: *Poverty Reduction Practice and Reassertion of Sub-nationalist Identities in the Post-Colonial Asia*. Panel organised by CROP and the South Asian Studies Centre, University of Rajasthan, India, at the International Convention of Asia Scholars, hosted by the Shanghai Academy for Social Sciences.

### September 2005

5-9: *The Politics of Poverty Production*. Session organised by CROP and CLACSO at the International Forum on the Social Science-Policy Nexus, hosted by UNESCO/MOST and the Government of Argentina, in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Papers for the session by invitation only.

### October 2005

*Where Does Poverty Research Stand in Africa Today?* Workshop organised by CROP and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), in Dakar, Senegal. Papers for the session by invitation only.

### November 2005

23-25: *Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Context of Discrimination of Ethnic-Racial Groups: The Latin American Case*. CROP and CLACSO workshop to be held in Cali, Colombia, in co-operation with CIDSE, School of Social and Economic Sciences, Universidad del Valle, Colombia. See insert for details.

### April 2006

*Poverty in the Light of the Informal Economy*. Workshop organised by CROP and the Economic and Social Council, Portugal (CES), in Lisbon, Portugal. See page 2 for more details.

### October 2006

*The Socio-Economic and Environmental Cost of Poverty*. Workshop to be held in Jamaica, in co-operation with the Office of the Prime Minister, Jamaica.

## 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 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](http://www.crop.org). The site holds 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  
Hans Egil Offerdal, Latin American Co-ordinator  
Inge Erling Tesdal, Executive Officer

## INTERNATIONAL GLOSSARY ON POVERTY

The *International Glossary on Poverty* was published by Zed Books in the "CROP International Studies in Poverty Research" series in 1999. A second edition of the glossary is now being prepared. The editors have put together an additional list of topics they would like to see included in the new edition. These can be found on the CROP webpage at <http://www.crop.org>.

Those interested in developing any of the listed entries, should contact the CROP Secretariat.