INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND POVERTY IN LATIN AMERICA: PROBLEMS OF CLASSIFICATION, SELF-DEFINITION, AND SELF-DETERMINATION

It is widely acknowledged by international organizations working on poverty issues such as the United Nations Development Program and the World Bank that Latin America’s indigenous peoples are the poorest, most marginalized group in the region according to multiple indicators, writes Camilo Perez-Bustillo from The Monterrey Institute of Technology, Mexico.

It is less generally noted, however, that there is no standard definition employed by these organizations and others at both the international and national level, as to who exactly is indigenous, and according to which criteria. These can be either racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or religious, or all or some of these in varying combinations. The results of applying each of these variants can lead to widely varying results. For example Mexico, which is generally considered to have the largest total indigenous population in the Americas, has only 8.7 million indigenous people according to the last national census in 1990, which only counted speakers of indigenous languages as such. Many Mexican anthropologists criticize these figures as grossly under-inclusive and for their failure to incorporate cultural criteria of other kinds (identification with pre-Hispanic customs and traditions, modes of self-governance, collective systems of labor, etc.). On the other hand if the kinds of racial categorization prevalent in the United States were applied to Mexico, primarily based on a combination of skin color and ancestry, over 90% of the population would be classified indigenous (e.g. brown-skinned). As Claude Lévi-Strauss noted in his famed lectures to UNESCO about the difficulties of striking the proper balance between universalism and particularism in the study of cultural diversity, the issue of how to define the identity of indigenous peoples is both complex and potentially explosive in its implications if unchecked by an ethical, and ultimately political, center of gravity.

The dangers of both under- and over-inclusion are manifold. Interestingly it is apparently more acceptable to explore implications of this kind in the context of «ethnic» identities than of «racial» ones, despite the equally dubious scientificty of either set of concepts. Latin American indigenous identity can span both racial and ethnic axes, depending on how it is constructed. What is clear however is that despite the evident extent to which both kinds of identity are socially and culturally constructed, and not in fact biologically or genetically predetermined, it matters a great deal to the racist, the chauvinist or the xenophobe who falls into which category. At the same time it is more clear that this determination has great resonance as well for those classified. But one
most important point is that increasingly it is the objects of such categorization who are reclaiming their status as subjects capable of, and entitled to reclaim and determine their own identity. In this sense the most important single act of self-determination is that of naming and affirming one’s own identity.

For the indigenous poor of Latin America the balance struck can begin with an affirmation of the right to self-identification, as well as with an insistence on determining who falls into this category for purposes of disaggregation. Equally fundamental is a recognition that indigenous poverty has specificities in terms of both its causes and its solutions. Failure to consider these can doom much poverty research to misrepresent the standpoint of the needs and rights of these populations, and reproduce - rather than combat- the powerlessness that poverty itself foments.

our email address is
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HUMAN RIGHTS AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR THE ERADICATION OF EXTREME POVERTY

In September 1997 CROP organised a workshop on “Human Rights as an Instrument for the Eradication of Extreme Poverty” in Santiago, Chile, in collaboration with Centro de Estudios Sociales y Educación, SUR and Asociación Latinoamericana de Organizaciones de Promoción (ALOP). Participants from 13 Latin American countries attended the workshop. A publication, based on the papers presented at the workshop will be published early 1999. Editors are professor Willem van Genugten, Netherlands and professor Camilio Perez-Bustillo, Mexico.

The following papers were presented:


The workshop was conducted in Spanish and English.

Professor Else Øyen presented the paper “Knowledge production about poverty in an international perspective” on the official inauguration of the workshop. On the last evening of the workshop Maribel Wolf presented the book “El derecho a la equidad” edited by Terres des Hommes, France and ALOP.

CROP PUBLICATIONS


SEND ORDER (including your credit card details) to CROP Secretariat, Foss winckels gt. 7, N-5007 Bergen, Norway, fax: +47 55 58 97 45) PLEASE USE CAPITAL LETTERS
At the recent CROP workshop on human rights as an instrument for the eradication of extreme poverty a group of participants hammered out a set of recommendations for action based on the knowledge produced during the workshop. As Chair of CROP I refrained from signing. When invited to sign as an individual I likewise refrained, although sympathetic with the recommendations. While the distinction between two such signatures was evident in the audience present, it might not have been so in a wider audience.

It is not unusual that CROP is requested to use our network for a worthy purpose. We are asked to sign petitions in support of deprived groups, important political initiatives, and new definitions of poverty which will renew the agenda for poverty research, just to mention some. Colleagues ask us to circulate questionnaires to members of CROPnet, either to know their opinion of certain issues or to use them as subjects for research purposes. We are requested to provide a copy of the CROPnet mailinglist so others can approach our members and invite them to support good causes or to join different kinds of charitable organisations.

So far the policy has been to decline the signing of petitions and refuse all external uses of electronic and postal addresses of CROPnet. There are several reasons for such a seemingly harsh policy. CROP has no mandate to act on behalf of its members outside the realm of research. CROP has no mandate to act on behalf of a certain interest group among its members. The many members in CROP are as heterogenous as any other population, except they share an expertise and interest in poverty research. On a more practical note it can be argued that members in CROPnet should not be inundated with advertising and other material, which appear to have a quality stamp from CROP.

You may have a different opinion on this issue, and if so, we would like to hear from you.

Else Øyen, Chair of CROP

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THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION

From the 8th to 11th of October, 1997, the first of a series of CROP workshops on the Role of the State in Poverty Alleviation took place in Gaborone, Botswana. The workshop was organised in cooperation with the Botswana Institute for Development Policy Analysis (BIDPA) and the University of Botswana. The main sponsor of the event was the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), with additional funding from the Bank of Botswana, the United Nations Development Programme and CROP.

All together, 45 persons were registered as participants in the workshop. Four of the participants were visitors from Europe and one was from Asia. Twelve papers were presented and discussed. The workshop had been planned by a Programme Committee consisting of Dr. Jan Isaksen (BIDPA), Dr. Henning Melber, The Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit (NEPRU), Dr. Thandike Mkandawire, CODESRIA, Senegal Dr. Patrick P. Molutsi, Department of Sociology, University of Botswana (UB) Professor Francis Wilson, University of Cape Town, South Africa, Professor Else Øyen, Chair of CROP.


On the 10th of October the organisers invited to a Public Meeting to create a dialogue between researchers, politicians, bureaucrats, media and the general public. The topic was: “The Role of the State in Poverty Alleviation - A Briefing”. It was chaired by Dr. Patrick Molutsi. Nearly 60 persons attended the meeting, bringing forward many questions and a lively discussion. The Public Meeting was definitely a positive experience which will be developed further in future CROP workshops.

The participants in the workshop expressed a strong interest in developing a joint research project. It was decided that the present Programme Committee should function as an ad hoc Programme Committee for the project, and promote a comparative research project on the Role of the State in Poverty Alleviation. The Programme Committee was supplemented with Prof. Archie Mafeje. It will organise a follow-up workshop next year, which will likely take place in Cape Town in September 1998. Mr. Einar Braathen at the CROP Secretariat will function as Programme Officer for the research project, and he was commissioned to draft a comprehensive background paper for the next workshop.

Else Øyen, Chair of CROP

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CROP VICE-CHAIRS
At the recent meeting of the Executive Committee of the International Social Science Council two Vice-Chairs for CROP were appointed. Professor Julio Boltvanik, El Colegio de Mexico, has his degree in economics and has worked on poverty issues for many years. He has served on a number of public commissions and been a consultant to UN organisations and regional development banks. Professor Francis Wilson, University of Cape Town, has likewise worked on poverty issues for many years, and was director of the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa. The two new Vice-Chairs met with the CROP Chair and other members of the CROPnet in Turin in November when they all presented lectures at the Course on Poverty which CROP co-organised with the UN Staff College.

AWARDS FROM THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF OVERSEAS SCIENCE
The "Academie Royale Des Sciences d'Outre-Mer (Royal Academy of Overseas Science) in Brussels, has announced its 1998 and 1999 competitions. For the 1998 competition they, among several proposals, want studies about the possibilities and advantages of a modular construction (traditional, rationalized, partly or totally prefabricated) applied to the building of cheap houses for the most underprivileged populations of the third world, taking chiefly into account the implementation of suited techniques and local building material. The works must be received at the Secretary of the Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences before May 1st, 1998.

As for the 1999 competition the Academy asks for a study on the social implications of new urbanization projects in the developing countries, and a study on the evolution going from traditional precolonial communication to the emergence of a private press during the democratic transition in the Subsaharan African states. Works must be received at the secretariat of the Academy for Overseas Sciences before May 1st, 1999. Each award-winning work in the annual competition is given a prize of 30 000 B.F. For additional information please contact:
Academie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, rue Defacqz 1, boîte 3, 1000 Brussels, BELGIUM, tel: +32 2 538 0211, fax: +32 2 539 2353

LIST OF CROP EVENTS 1997 - 1998
November 97:
17-28: UNSCP/CROP "Course on Poverty", Turin, Italy

February 98:

July/August 98:
26-1: "Poverty Research Through a non-Western Lens", Symposium organised by the International Social Science Council at the International Sociological Association XIV World Congress, Montréal.

Chair: Professor Else Øyen.

September 98:

WORKSHOPS UNDER PREPARATION
"Poverty and development" (working title), Mexico, Spring 1999

"Law and Poverty III", May 1999

WHITE PAPER ON INTERNATIONAL AID
The UK government, represented by the Department for International Development, launched a "White Paper" on international aid in the beginning of November. Aid will not be closely tied to trade anymore, but will be focused directly on poverty reduction. A summary and the full text of the report can be found on the Internet (http://www.1oneworld.org/dfid/) or you can write to Department for International Development, 94 Victoria St., London SW1E 5JL, UNITED KINGDOM, tel: 00 44 171 917 0503, fax: 00 44 171 917 0523

WORLD BANK STUDY
The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has commissioned CROP, in collaboration with the Christian Michelsen Institute, to do a study on the poverty reducing strategies of the World Bank in East Africa. A team of experts from Africa, Asia and Europe will conduct interviews in the region and at the World Bank headquarters in Washington D.C., review the current literature, and analyse available statistical material.

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. CROP is developing an international database on poverty researchers, and documentation of ongoing research. CROP is chaired by professor Else Øyen, University of Bergen, Norway.

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

WEB PAGE FOR CROP
Those who have an Internet connection and a WWW browser programme installed, find the CROP web page at http://www.svf.uib.no/helsos/crop/ or http://www.crop.org The pages hold general information about CROP, news about past and ongoing activities, as well as the latest CROP newsletter.

Please note: We can no longer 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.

AT THE CROP SECRETARIAT
you will meet:

Else Øyen, Chair of CROP
Hans Egil Offerdal, CROP Co-ordinator
Einar Braathen, CROP Programme Officer
Inge Erling Tesdal, CROP Assistant

THE QUOTE
"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."

Dom Helder Camara
Brazilian archbishop