

CROP newsletter

Comparative Research Programme On Poverty

Vol. 6, No. 3, October 1999

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ELITE PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY

Elisa P. Reis

While much has been said about the ways poor people perceive their situation and devise strategies to cope with it, little is known about the perception of poverty and inequality by the non-poor in general and by the rich in particular. Quite often, ideological and normative arguments are invoked to discard the focus on the role of elites in poverty research. To some, the very studying of the better-off implies a disregard for those at the bottom of society. To others, such an approach implies an acceptance of the strategic power of the wealthy which can prevent those plagued by poverty from being empowered. In turn, prejudiced views of this nature may limit access to crucial information which is necessary to understand better the conditions for the implementation of anti-poverty policies.

Arguments like those above were heard when CROP in 1994 initiated an international research project aimed at comparing how certain national elites perceive poverty issues. Inspired by a few pioneering works done in industrialised societies, the task was to assess how elites in third world countries see poverty and the poor. Particularly important in this sense was the analysis provided by one of the members of our research team, Professor Abram de Swaan, on the historical conditions that lead elites in Europe to back welfare policies.¹ He showed that under certain circumstances, European elites realised that poverty could affect negatively not

only the poor but even themselves. Threatened either by the risk of epidemic contagion, by the danger of rebellion, or by the loss of potential economic resources, those elites saw that it was in their own interest to take steps against pauperism. The realisation that poverty had negative externalities, the belief that initiatives to reduce poverty actually were possible, and some personal sense of moral responsibility towards the poor, together created the conditions for collective action in education, health and social security.

Research on the views of Brazilian elite members about poverty and inequality added to the background knowledge and stressed the need for increased knowledge through comparative studies in a set of different third world countries in order to throw more light on the subject.²

It is important to make clear that a focus on elites do not necessarily entail the claim that poverty exists because the elites hold certain values and attitudes. Nor can it be assumed that because poverty exists those at the top invent certain beliefs to rationalise it. The relationships between beliefs and values on the one hand and material interests on the other are important epistemological questions, which shall be addressed at a later stage. What is important in the present context is to accept that ideas and interests are analytical dimensions that in real life affect one another. The ways elites conceive of poverty are important elements to be taken into account because major policy decisions (and non-decisions) are formed by those who control power resources. Particularly

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important in this sense is to identify cognitive and normative images of poverty and inequality among national elites. To map and understand better how much awareness there is about the poverty phenomena among those who have the effective means to initiate policies or to veto them is a crucial task to further the relevance of poverty research.

Some of the questions to be addressed were: Do elites in third world countries today hold perceptions similar to the ones de Swaan described, that is, is it possible to identify more general elite attitudes towards poverty? How do elites in third world countries explain persistent and even growing poverty? What do they think should be done about the problem? In order to approach these questions, as well as several other questions, in-depth interviews were conducted with a selected set of elite sectors in different countries. In order to obtain comparability, a common set of questions to be covered were developed as a rough guide to the interviews.

The major issues around which the project

centres can be summarised as follows:

1. The way elites perceive and define poverty has a significant impact in the making and implementation of social policy and therefore in the future life quality of the worse-off.
2. By definition elites have power, be it through control of material or political resources, and/or through authority, legitimacy and control of symbolic resources, which can have an impact also on poverty formation.
3. The perception of elites influences the degree to which power will be used to reduce poverty and even the nature and direction of the actions to be taken.
4. National elites are not necessarily homogeneous, and their spheres of influence may be interdependent or overlapping.
5. Social policies depend upon the formation of a "social consciousness" which is not the equivalent of good will or charity, but rather a set of perceptions conducive to the adoption of measures to reduce poverty. Basically, it entails a belief in social interdependence, a sense of responsibility, and an as-

essment that it is possible to change status-quo.³

Notes:

¹ Abram de Swaan, *In Care of the State. Health Care, Education and Welfare in Europe and the USA in Modern Era*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.

² Elisa Reis and Z. Cheibub, "Elites, Cultura Política e Consolidação Democrática", *DADOS, Revista de Ciências Sociais*, 38, 1, 1995, pp 31-56.

³ Abram de Swaan, James Manor, Else Øyen and Elisa P. Reis, "Elites and their Perceptions of Poverty and Poor People", *Current Sociology*, forthcoming. A background paper prepared for the project.

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LAW AND POVERTY III

LAW AS A TOOL FOR COMBATING POVERTY

From the 19th to 21st of May 1999, the third in the series of CROP-initiated workshop on law and poverty, "Law and Poverty III: Law as a Tool for Combating Poverty", was held in Oñati, Spain. The workshop was made possible due to a generous grant from the International Institute for the Sociology of Law in Oñati.

On the Programme Committee were Professor **Asbjørn Kjønstad**, University of Oslo, Norway, Professor **Camilo Perez-Bustillo**, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM), Mexico, and Professor **Peter Robson**, University of Strathclyde, Scotland.

The following papers were presented and discussed: *The Right to Development as a Basic Human Right* by **Ahmed Aoued**, Algeria; *Non-Governmental Organisations in Bangladesh: An Assessment of their Legal Status* by **Mokbul Morshed Ahmad**, Great Britain; *Letting the Victims Decide: The Pinochet Case and Its Implications for Human Rights, Poverty, and Social Justice* by **Camilo Perez-Bustillo**, Mexico; *Exclusion and Rights* by **Paul Spicker**, Scotland; *Child*

Support by **Peter Robson**, Scotland; *International Human Rights and the Development of Nordic Social Security Law* by **Asbjørn Kjønstad**, Norway; *The Effect of Legal Mechanisms on Selective Welfare Strategies for Needy Persons: The Greek Experience* by **Gabriel Amitsis**, Greece; *Dynamics of the Use of Law as a Strategy for Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria* by **Sylvester Omoregie Imhanobe**, Nigeria; *Towards Organizing Labour Struggle under the Legal Framework of Social Justice: Rhetoric and Reality* by **Debi Singh Saini**, India; *Does Alcohol and Tobacco Legislation Help in Poverty Reduction? The Evidence from Sri Lanka* by **Kalinga Tudor Silva**, Sri Lanka; *Enforcement of Legal Instruments in Combating Poverty in the Less Developed Countries* by **Akintola Jimoh**, Nigeria; *Poverty Revisited in a Post-NAFTA Era* by **Lucy A. Williams**, USA; *Equality Proofing as an Instrument for Combating Poverty* by **Susan M. Nott**, Great Britain; *Legal Aid, Judicial Review and Social Antagonism: The Use of Litigation as a Tool for Combating Poverty* by **Antonella Mamei**, Italy.

A book with a selection of papers presented at the workshop is being edited by Prof. Asbjørn Kjønstad, Prof. Peter Robson and Prof. Lucy Williams.

A follow up workshop is planned to take place in May 2001 at the same location in Spain.

JOURNAL OF POVERTY

The Journal of Poverty welcomes manuscripts, especially articles guided by conceptual analyses involving quantitative and qualitative methods. The intent is to produce and disseminate information on poverty and social, political, and economic inequalities and to offer a means by which non-traditional strategies for change might be considered. For more information contact **Erick Swank**, Morehead State University, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Morehead KY 40351, USA, ph: +1-606-783-2190, E-mail: e.swank@morehead-st.edu

editorial

The UNESCO World Social Science Report 1999 has an article on CROP's and its approach to poverty under the heading: "Contextual Poverty – A Social Science Approach". It says: "The perspective of contextual poverty is an analytical approach to understand poverty in relation to a society's cultural, economic and political structures. In contextual poverty analysis the non-poor world and its institutions and their role in creating, sustaining and reducing poverty, are as important to understand as the world of the poor.

So far, most poverty research has been about the poor, i.e. their numbers; their characteristics; their modes of life; their spending patterns; their coping strategies and their deprivations. Much of this micro level research treats poverty and the poor as a phenomenon which has little to do with the remainder of society, and through its heavy focus on the poor, indirectly the causes of poverty are placed with the poor themselves.

Another approach to poverty points to lack of development and modernisation as a major cause of poverty, and economic growth and structural adjustment have for a long time been seen as necessary for large scale poverty reduction. In economic theory a new consensus has emerged that non-economic factors are important in explaining different growth patterns, and the causal relationship between growth and poverty reduction is partly questioned, partly presented as highly complex. The non-economic influence cited the most often is the intermediate character of the modern state. An underdeveloped state with lack of redistributive capacities is seen as unable to reduce poverty efficiently and to benefit from or contribute to economic growth. However, this discussion on the macro level is not linked analytically well to the actual world of the poor.

The challenge for poverty research is to develop a comprehensive contextual analysis in which the many micro data from the complex world of the poor can be differentiated and understood in relation to particular institutions, state formations, non-poor groups or macro level developments which influence the specific aspects of poverty which identifiable groups of poor people encounter. Only then can effective poverty reducing strategies be developed.

In contextual poverty analysis the academic

search light has to be directed towards those parts of the non-poor world which directly or inadvertently play a role in the process of poverty production or poverty reduction. Research on marginalisation, in particular in the labour market, and the impact of the educational system on the poor are examples of current research which falls within this area, but in general contextual poverty is an under-researched field.

Powerful groups in society need to be studied because of their influence in the prioritising of public resources. The poor are not likely to benefit from a mega space station with a pricetag of USD 40-60.000.000.000. This is only the dramatic example. But just as dramatic in long term consequences for the poor are the many small decisions on the use of public and private resources for purposes which at best do nothing to reduce poverty, and at worst undermine the livelihood of poor people. Little is known about this picture. Elites, for example, are likely to set certain standards and influence the attitude of others. Again, little is known about the cognitive map of the elite when it comes to poverty and the experience of a social responsibility for the poor. International donors bring in their experts and ideas about poverty reduction. Some of these ideas may have an impact, while others may be transformed to a local model. Some states will have a professional bureaucracy and a legal framework which protect the poor and secure their basic human rights. Other states promote corruption and exploitation which harm the poorest the most because they are too vulnerable and unprotected to protest. The same poverty reducing strategy which succeeds in one community, may be met with resistance and fail in another community. How is it possible to account for such differences?

All these factors, and many more, tend to be highly culture-bound and institutional, carried by agents and structures that are specific in time and place. The interplay between the various factors – economic/non-economic, global/local, structures/actors, poor/non-poor groups – and their institutionalised relationships need to be focused and analysed. That calls for an approach that is truly comparative in time and place in order to sort out and identify commonalities and specificities of poverty.

All in all, ahead of poverty research lies a large and unexplored landscape which needs to be studied as meticulously as that which so far has fallen to the world of the poor.

There is little doubt that the complexity of this perspective can only be carried out through an interdisciplinary and international organisation of poverty research. " (p.280).

Under **Frontiers of Poverty Research** elsewhere in this Newsletter professor Elisa P. Reis describes one of the CROP research projects which uses the framework of contextual poverty. Other CROP projects within the same kind of framework are "The Role of the State in Poverty Reduction", "Law and Poverty", "Human Rights and Poverty" and "Social Costs of Poverty".

Else Øyen, Chair of CROP

CROP RECEIVE GRANT

The Norwegian Research Council has given CROP a yearly core grant of NOK 500.000 (appr. USD 65.000) to help finance the infrastructure and to develop further the CROP network. The grant is given under the programme "Development Paths in the South" and runs until year 2007. CROP is extremely grateful for the financial support and the confidence extended by the Research Council.

CHANGE IN THE CROP SECRETARIAT

CROP co-ordinator **Hans Egil Offerdal** has moved to Latin America and taken over the position as Special Adviser to CROP in order to follow up the increasing Latin American number of activities in our network. **Kirsti Thesen Sælen** has taken over as temporary CROP co-ordinator. Ms. Sælen is an experienced university administrator, with a professional background from research information, and rich international experience from work with NORDICOM, UNESCO and ECSSID.

NEW POVERTY DATABASE

The Poverty Monitoring Database on Internet at <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/data/povmon.htm>, provides information on household surveys, participatory poverty assessments, poverty assessment summaries, social indicators and news on upcoming surveys.

HDR 1999

The Human Development Report 1999 is on globalisation. The report argues that a "smaller" world offers greater opportunities for enriching people's lives and creating a global community based on shared values. However, markets have been allowed to dominate the process, and the benefits and opportunities have not been shared equitably.

Read the full report on Internet at <http://www.undp.org/hdro/report.html>

WSSR 1999

The World Social Science Report 1999 has recently been launched by UNESCO. Leading scholars review the place of the social sciences on a world scale. The report takes up major issues facing the world, asking what solutions the social sciences have been able to bring.

For ordering contact UNESCO Publishing, Promotion and Sales Division, 1 rue Miollis, F-75732 Paris Cedex 15, France, Fax: +33-4568-57-41, E-mail: publishing.promotion@unesco.org

NEW BOOK ON POVERTY

Poverty in Transition and Transition in Poverty is edited by **Yogesh Atal**, India, and published by Berghahn Books in association with UNESCO. Focusing on countries-in-transition belonging to the former Soviet bloc, the book examines the ways in which these countries are dealing with their newly acknowledged and rapidly increasing poverty.

For ordering contact UNESCO Publishing on same address as above

NEW BOOK FROM HEAD OF UNRISD

Our Continent Our Future – African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment by **Thandika Mkandawire**, Director of UNRISD, and **Charles C. Soludo**, Nigeria, has been published by Africa World Press, Inc. Extreme poverty and underdevelopment continue to plague the "forgotten continent", the problems were not solved by structural adjustments and the authors argue that a new approach is urgently needed. Each country has a unique history and current conditions which must be taken into consideration when a new path is laid out. The role of the state must be reformulated and the state become an active partner in the process.

LIST OF CROP EVENTS 1999 - 2000

November 1999:

7-9: "The Role of the State in Poverty Alleviation III", Amman, Jordan, and
10: "Best Practices in Poverty Reduction", joint CROP/UNESCO/MOST workshop, Amman, Jordan.

March 2000:

29-31: "The Demography of Poverty in Latin America", a joint CROP/CLACSO workshop, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

WORKSHOPS UNDER PREPARATION

June 2000:

"Social Capital Formation in Poverty Reduction: Which Role for the Civil Society Organizations and the State". Symposium during the UN Social Summit + 5" organised jointly with UNESCO/MOST and ISSC, Geneva, Switzerland.

October 2000:

"The Role of the State in Poverty Reduction IV, with Particular Emphasis on West Africa", workshop organised jointly with ISSER, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana.

ECOSOC ON POVERTY ERADICATION

F. Paolo Fulci, President of United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), made a statement about poverty eradication following a session in Geneva earlier this year.

Fulci said that it is estimated that 40 billion USD a year are needed to achieve the international goals related to poverty eradication. As a first step, the proportion of people living in abject poverty (with an income of less than a dollar a day) should be reduced by half by 2015. To achieve this goal, focus at the national and international level are needed on productive employment, hunger and malnutrition, safe water and a clean environment, health, education, social services and good governance. Action is also needed towards empowering the poor and women and forging global alliances to fight poverty.

Read the full statement on Internet at <http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/ecosoc/>

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. 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 Database Survey. For further information please contact the CROP Secretariat

WEBPAGE FOR CROP

Those who have an Internet connection and a WWW browser programme installed on the computer, find the CROP web page at <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

Kirsti T. Sælen, Temporary Co-ordinator

Hans Egil Offerdal, Special Adviser, pt. Mexico

Einar Braathen, Programme Officer

Inge Erling Tesdal, Executive Officer

THE QUOTE

The major challenge facing the world in the new millennium is the eradication of poverty

F. Paolo Fulci, President of United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)