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Poverty Production:
A Different Approach to Poverty Understanding[1]

Poverty understanding and poverty research can be said to have gone through roughly three phases: Tale-telling, studies with a client focus as well as development research, and knowledge building about poverty reduction. The stage is now set for a new phase, that of understanding the processes that produce poverty and continue to produce poverty at a rate no present poverty reducing measures can possibly win over or even compete with. The challenge ahead is to make poverty production visible and place it firmly on the research agenda.

1. The First Phase: Tale-telling

Poverty has always been with us. It has taken different forms in different cultures and its extent has varied over time and across cultures. Since all societies are stratified according to some criteria, the consequence is that somebody always has to be at the bottom. Whether this bottom layer is an expression of poverty and the people inhabiting this bottom layer are considered poor, depends on indigenous definitions of poverty.

The people at the bottom of a hierarchy are likely to be deprived in the sense that they have less of what is considered desirable resources in that society, whether the resources are tangible assets such as income, water and education or less tangible such as prestige and access to information or a marriage market. While the upper layers not only have better access to desirable resources, they are also likely to have more control over those in the layers below them. Such control may not necessarily be physical. It is more likely to be moral, in the sense that the higher layers claim the right to define

what is good and bad behaviour, what is right and wrong in terms of social norms, and what is best for society at-large.

Such stratification is part of the social context in which people live, and as such they have to relate to it and incorporate it as part of their cognitive map. Over time pictures of poor people and their lives have been formed along with pictures of other social phenomena. Those pictures have given rise to words that describe poor people, how they behave, how they are believed to behave, and how they ought to behave. These pictures and words do not necessarily depict the truth. The need of upper layers to distance themselves from the layer(s) below has coloured these descriptions. As a result, those layers at the bottom are not likely to be described kindly. This is both part of a self-identification by social groups and an attempt by the individual to present himself in a positive light. The people at the bottom layer are seldom able to defend themselves and change the stereotypes created for them. That is the very character of their lowly position. Those above have more impact on the public discourse. That is the very character of their position.

As a result, the popular presentations of poor people and the reasons for their poverty are mainly negative. Throughout this process a crude picture is developed, where stereotyping takes over for a more detailed and factual description about causes and manifestations of poverty. The picture is fortified with irrelevant details when repeated and built into a tale-telling tradition of how poor people behave and think. As a group, they are likely to be portrayed as lazy, dirty, criminal, sinful, producing too many children, or greedy for social support. Poor people are said to enjoy living with garbage all around them, to be unwilling to send their children to school, and to move ahead in society. Even the highly respected Brundtland Report (1987) added indirectly to this negative picture when it was argued that the behaviour of poor people increased environmental degradation. The Report took a rather simple definition of poverty as a starting point. Based on a more complex understanding of poverty and the relationship between poverty and the environment, later research points to a different picture: it is rather the behaviour of non-poor people that adds to environmental degradation (Angelsen, 1997; Ambler, 1999; Norwegian Research Council, 2002).

The tale-telling tradition has continued into modern poverty research. The tales run as an undercurrent in the way much of poverty research is designed, results are interpreted and then reinterpreted before they are put to use. A review I made of poverty studies during the 70s and 80s showed a substantial lack of documentation in the way hypotheses about the poor were formed. Much of the knowledge about the poor was taken for granted. Since empirical knowledge about the poor was scarce, tale telling substituted facts. In some studies tale-telling knowledge was questioned, but in others it was not.

It is interesting to note that a major part of the objective, subjective, empathic and analytic knowledge about the poor and their lives is found in popular literature, classic as well as modern, and in the media as well as on

the stage and on the screen. It is evident that the abstract world of the poor belongs largely to the non-poor. Why this is so, is also a matter about which we know very little. Why is it that the non-poor stand back when faced with concrete poverty, but take so much interest in abstract poverty that a literary market portraying and analysing misery worth millions of dollars can be sustained for generations? Is it only the non-poor's built-in fear of becoming poor, their past history, their victory over poverty or the pleasant background it provides for their present lives, that keep this market alive? There are plenty of hypotheses here that also play into poverty research.

Theoretical knowledge about poverty processes was and is limited. Although "everybody" has his or her own theory about the cause(s) of poverty, the scientific foundation for understanding poverty is still weak. The fact that popular perceptions of who the poor are, how they behave and why they are poor, actually may be one of the major reasons why a scientific approach to poverty has been slow to develop. It was not considered necessary to invest in research and the systematic production of knowledge on a topic where the answers seemed to be already in place.

The tale-telling phase in poverty research is not over yet. In spite of recent developments and new accumulated knowledge, the understanding of poverty and the use of poverty research are still dominated by tale telling.

2. The Second Phase: Research Focus on Poor People and Development Research

The second phase of research can be said to move in two different directions, although with a good deal of overlap: one with a direct focus on poor people and one with an indirect goal to reach out to poor people.

The former approach confronts the deficiencies of the first phase and leaps forward with the World Bank pushing for big surveys in the 70s. Studies started to be directed towards obtaining more precise information about poor people and their living conditions. At the same time, small-scale intimate studies among poor people in city slums and remote rural areas ran parallel to the large-scale studies based on national and international indicators. An enormous amount of data was gathered. Extensive new knowledge on how the poor live, extent and usefulness of their assets, nutritional and health status among grown-ups and children, access and lack of access to education and social networks, economic shortcomings and opportunities, work and work hazards was collected in poor countries and regions.

Some of this information shows that the formation of poverty is culture specific. The extent and characteristics of poverty depend on the cultural context in which poverty is formed and defined, the way people experience their poverty, and the opportunities the culture and organisational set-up allow for moving in and out of poverty. Other parts of the information point to

the more universal consequences of poverty. For example, poverty seems to cast the major part of the burden on women. Poor women and girls are on average even more deprived than poor men and boys (Stølen and Vaa, 1991; Heyzer and Sen, 1994). Poor peoples' relationship with the non-poor society as visualised through their contact with authorities such as the police, courts, local government and educational facilities, are likely to stress their deprivation. As an overall conclusion, it can be said that those contacts are negative in the sense that poor people do not experience those institutions as solutions to their problems. On the contrary, some public institutions are more likely to increase poor peoples' feelings of marginalisation and are at times even directly criminal in their relation with deprived groups (Chambers, 1997; Narayan, 2000).

NGO's and others have taken part in this process of collecting data. While some of these organisations have provided valuable new information, others have muddled the picture with undigested and politicised data. This becomes worrisome when such data is used as a basis for anti-poverty policies (Tvedt, 1998).

The return effect of descriptive studies focusing directly on the living conditions of poor people diminishes rapidly in the 90s. At present, it might be said that we know almost enough about poor people from the empirical richness of many of these studies. We know much less about the processes leading to and sustaining poverty. However, a prerequisite for understanding these processes is the information base accumulated during the second phase of poverty research.

Development research took off in another direction. Some of the theoretical foundations were already in place and through processes such as modernisation, industrialisation, economic growth, the use of more efficient tools in industrial and agricultural production, investment in human capital and development of more adequate skills, poor regions were to be put in a position to make improvements. Through such improvements, the situation of the poor was to be obtained through a trickle-down effect. The theoretical framework for such trickle-down effects was fairly simple. However, looking back it is clear that improvements for the poor did not live up to expectations. Reality was much more complex. Where improvements took place, strong forces among the non-poor tried to reap the gains from the development processes. Institutional structures for reallocation of resources favouring the poor were not in place. Bringing poor, uneducated and unskilled labour into a new economic sphere proved to be more difficult than imagined. On average, development processes on a small scale and close to the direct needs of the poor were more successful in poverty reduction than ambitious large-scale projects. This said, a major gain from a theoretical point of view was new knowledge acquired about processes leading to poverty and sustaining poverty.

Development research covers a wide variety of approaches and different disciplines and interest groups define it in ways that fit into their specific conceptual framework. In an overview of all development research projects

with some connection to the Norwegian research arena and carried out in the period 1988-90, development studies was defined as projects "concerned with: developing countries or regions; relations between developing countries or between developing countries and industrialised countries; the global situation without reference to a specific geographic area (e.g. North-South relations); cooperation with a developing country institution" (Norwegian Development Research Catalogue, 1990: viii). Of the 490 projects listed, technical, economic, political and environmental keywords dominated, while only four projects used the keyword 'poverty' as an identification of the project contents. In 2001, the same source redefines development research as studies that are relevant for the understanding of processes of change and contribute to sustainable development and poverty reduction in the South and in countries in transition, as well as to the promotion of sustainable relations between the North and the South (Helland, 2001: 1). A review of the abstracts of the myriad of articles and books produced by development research institutes world-wide, university departments offering degrees in development studies and organisations of development researchers show such a wide variation of topics and approaches that they can hardly be folded up under one umbrella, except for the fact that they somehow relate to the South. Development research has become a nametag, not a distinct research field.

3. The Third Phase: The Search for Poverty Reducing Strategies

In the 90s, mass poverty in the South reached the political agenda of countries and donors in the North, partly as a result of the UN World Summit for Social Development in 1995, the UN declaration of 1996 as the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty and the following decade as the UN International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. The yearly UNDP *Human Development Reports* on national achievements in improving the living conditions for its citizens provided an important input to the agenda. Once mass poverty was defined as an issue of collective concern, the next step was to look for measures to reduce poverty on a larger scale. Research was faced with a new challenge: providing knowledge not only about poor people, but also of strategies that could lead to 'alleviation', 'reduction' or even 'eradication' of poverty.

The World Bank already had its strategy in place. The answer was economic growth for all underdeveloped countries. Throughout the previous two decades, the Bank implemented Structural Adjustment Plans (SAP) in Africa, Asia and Latin America, which emphasised neo-liberalist strategies with economic growth as its centrepiece. One of several goals was to improve the economic situation of poor countries and improve also the situation of poor people through a trickle-down effect. Today there is widespread scepticism

about the positive effects of the SAPs (Caufield, 1996). However, the SAPs spurred a tremendous amount of economic and semi-economic research and the vocabulary and goals of the SAPs infiltrated other disciplines as well as the political discourse. In 2001, the World Bank published the *World Development Report. Attacking Poverty*, where the Bank offered a more nuanced approach to the understanding of poverty and the strategies necessary to reduce poverty than it had previously. While economic growth is still at the core of the attack against poverty, other strategies such as pro-poor improvement in legal institutions, public administration and service delivery were stressed, as was the need to reduce the vulnerability of the poor towards health-, weather- and economy-related risks. Some of these strategies were backed by research, others were based on notions that whatever works in the North ought to also work in the South. Through the so-called PRSP's (Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers) governments in the South were expected to provide national plans for poverty reduction designed within this framework (see www4.worldbank.org/sprojects/).

Donor countries in the North followed up with national and collaborative pro-poor and anti-poverty plans for poverty reduction in the South. While they had many visions on how the future of these countries ought to be, there were fewer concrete strategies. The UN Millennium Development Goals (see www.un.org/millenniumgoals/ index.htm) followed the same pattern, as did the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development (4 September 2002) as a result of the recent UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (see www.johannesburgsummit.org). Throughout this process, donors sought contact with researchers and links with development research institutions were fortified. The evaluation of previous strategies was introduced and new strategies tried out. During this period databases on 'best practices' cropped up. All kinds of poverty reducing experiments were initiated and compared across national boundaries. However, the variations in the cultural contexts for the successful outcome of a 'best practice' were seldom taken into account. In this enterprise, NGO's were the preferred partners rather than researchers or governments. New and original approaches were considered more interesting than those comprehensive strategies proven efficient in the welfare state. The term welfare state was not considered and welfare state researchers were sidelined in this process (Øyen, 2002).

All pro-poor plans were presented within a framework of harmony, as if everybody were favourable to poverty-reducing measures (Øyen, 1999). This is hardly a realistic picture. Poverty researchers have found a framework of conflict more adequate for their analysis, but have not been heard so far. Such an approach does not fit in with consensus-seeking politics. All kinds of poverty-reduction strategies entail some kind of redistribution. Redistributive measures are seldom welcome among those who have to turn over resources to people for whom they have little affection or trust.

4. The Fourth Phase: Research on Poverty-Producing Processes?

Throughout the previous phases the search for causal explanations of poverty has been part of the research process. As could have been expected, no homogenous picture has emerged. Causal explanations have a tendency to follow the definition of poverty in a project – and poverty is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon. So far, too little effort has been invested, not in understanding the relationship between causes and effects, but in understanding the common nature of the causes and the way they interrelate. It is a missing link in the research process that needs to be investigated.

A different kind of vocabulary may instigate this process. In scientific language it is considered neutral to speak of the 'causes' of poverty. It is not neutral to speak of the 'production' of poverty since the wording suggests some kind of action to produce poverty. One way ahead in understanding the complexity of poverty formation may be to look closer at those 'actions' and the actors involved in the process. In an early (and largely overlooked) paper by Gans (1973), he discussed the positive 'functions' of poverty, and stressed the fact that certain interests are actually served by upholding poverty. The interests vary from economic and political to social and emotional gains. This is a picture that strongly contradicts the harmony model within which official pro-poor plans avoid taking conflicts of interests into account.

It can be argued that the time has come to focus research on poverty production and to better understand the forces that keep producing poverty in spite of the many poverty-reducing strategies that have been introduced. Likewise, it can be argued that unless new knowledge is acquired to stop these poverty-producing processes, or even better reverse them, there is little gain in introducing measures to counteract those forces. The process can be likened to the famous Lambeth Walk: one step forward and two steps back.

The available research literature contains scores of case studies that document how different groups, individuals, institutions and processes initiate and sustain poverty. Some studies show how actors deliberately participate in a process that creates massive production of poverty over a long time. Apartheid in South Africa is a classic example. A different structural example is the caste system in India. Others show how a single act unrelated to poverty can result in unintended poverty production. A regional water board, for example, behaves rationally when shifting a scarce water resource from a thinly populated rural area to a crowded urban area. At the same time, the decision exacerbates poverty in the rural area and contributes to an increased infant mortality and diseases, due to a shortage of water for production and reproduction. When trying to interpret the many cases of poverty production, we tend to fall back on causal explanations within such generalised frameworks such as evil forces, personal greed, moral decay, paternalism, historical determinism, capitalism, globalisation, and the spirit of multi-national corporations. That may be so; however, as researchers we need more if we

are to proceed in understanding where those forces are born, in what kind of context they thrive, their direct and indirect impact on poverty formation, and the means by which they can be suppressed or done away with.

This is an important and difficult research arena that also needs support from outside of the academic circles if it is to succeed and serve as part of the poverty-reducing agenda. To achieve this aim, it is necessary to make the nature of poverty producing processes more visible and have authorities, politicians, bureaucrats and civil society acknowledge that such poverty production does take place and that poverty reduction may be futile unless poverty production is brought to a halt. Of the many pro-poor and anti-poverty plans exhibited during the last decades, on the national as well as the international level, poverty producing forces are sometimes mentioned, but mainly in general terms. This may either be because the specific links between a poverty-producing agent and the resulting poverty is known only in general terms, or, as mentioned before, because there is little will to enter a conflict where strong poverty-producing agents or forces have to be challenged. A model of harmony is more comfortable to live in than a model of conflict, particularly when this means that actors with different agendas have to co-operate. A model of harmony tends to lead towards a consensus built on the lowest common denominator. The final declaration from the UN World Summit for Social Development in 1995, the UN Millennium Development Goals 2000 and the Johannesburg Declaration 2002 all bear witness to this principle.

4.1   Identification of Poverty Producing Agents

Poverty production takes place on all levels of society. On the individual level, a poor school child is subjected to a poverty-producing force when he/she is bullied out of school without an education and thus faces a continued life of poverty. The 'perpetrator', to use the Human Rights language (Human Rights in Development, draft 2002: para 179), can be another child who is stronger and commands more resources, or it can be an alien school situation that offers no coping strategies to a poor child. This may be just a small-scale case that can be rejected as an individual failure and unimportant in a poverty context. However, if a pattern emerges and many such cases occur, a strong poverty-producing agent is at play and needs to be identified if the process is to be reversed. An organisation like the educational system is fairly clearly set out and lines of command are usually visible. Therefore, identification of the poverty-producing agent becomes possible.

Take as another example a corporate mining company in Western Africa that produces ill-health and poverty through an unhealthy environment, minimally protects the workers, pays wages too low for the survival of a family, and fires those workers who protest or organise. Different perpetrators on different levels with different influence and interaction are at play. In

order to sort out the set of actors involved, it may be useful to distinguish between levels of perpetration. Within this mode of analysis the first-line perpetrator in this fairly simple example is the management of the industry that gives the orders. The second-line perpetrators are the members of the board of the company. The third-line perpetrators are the shareholders and their persistent demand that their investments give the best possible return. Removed from the direct line of perpetration, but still part of the poverty producing process, is a government that refrains from interfering in the mining industry on behalf of its citizens.

Another example can be located in one of the more universal features of poverty research mentioned above: 'poverty casts the major part of the burden on the women'. In some cultures women do all the physical labour, while the men control the income of that labour and thereby keep the women in poverty. In some cultures, malnutrition among women is due to the fact that the men get the best part of the food available. Here the men and fathers can be identified as first-line perpetrators. The cultural context in which they have learned to put their own needs first may be identified as second-line perpetrator. Admittedly, the language exposing such realities does not sound pretty.

These are only a few examples out of tens of thousands, some of which are very well documented through research. Some of the poverty producing forces are simple, in the sense that only the first-line perpetrator needs to be identified since the poverty producing force rests with only one perpetrator. Others are difficult to trace because they have a long line of perpetrators to be identified, some of whom are part of parallel networks where other poverty producing, as well as poverty reducing, forces are at play.

The identification of perpetrators is crucial because it circumvents the more general 'cause' of poverty and points to concrete actors engaged in poverty production. Within such a perspective it t is not sufficient to write in an anti-poverty plan that malnutrition or unhealthy labour conditions should be dealt with. The perpetrators need to be identified and dealt with, regardless of whether they take form of individuals, groups, institutions or carriers of harmful social traditions. Although a parallel can be drawn with the legal system where perpetrators are brought to justice, the aim is different here. The research aim is identification in order to produce knowledge for policy intervention. The policy aim is abandonment of the destructive force. The concept of justice enters only in relation to justice for the poor. Punishment of the perpetrators might be interesting mainly from a policy point of view and as far as it can be seen as an instrument to increase visibility and prevent future poverty production. It can be argued that punishment is built into the abandonment of poverty-producing forces as the perpetrator has to give up the privileges and benefits obtained through the discontinued production of poverty.

4.2   Unintended and Direct Poverty Production

Poverty producing agents can also be described and classified according to their awareness of the harmful effects their activity has on other people, their intentions with this activity, the benefits reaped from the poverty-producing activity, and the vested interest they have in keeping up this activity. The results of such an analysis provide an indication of their strength as poverty producers.

It can well be argued that the major part of poverty producing activity is unintentional. Take for example the day-to-day poverty production we all take part in. It is likely to total more than the sum of all the other poverty-producing activities. Such poverty production takes place in spite of the fact that a majority society of non-poor has little interest in increasing poverty. It may even invest sizeable sums in poverty-reducing activities. Still, such societies go about creating institutions within the sphere of non-poor interests and the majority mode of thinking. Educational systems are created to fit the needs of non-poor children and students, transport systems are created to accommodate cars and airplanes, public spaces are planned for the use of the non-poor, banking is organised around those who have money, ever-increasing industrial development calls for the constant updating of new skills and the introduction of still more highly developed technical equipment, sophisticated and extremely expensive health facilities are prioritised, etc.

In general, it can be said that the major bulk of public and private resources are invested in an infrastructure that ignores the needs of people already marginalised, while institutions of all kinds are built on the norms and needs of the non-poor who set the agenda based on what is good for its own kind. Much of this activity cannot be said to benefit the poor, unless one is a strong believer in a fast trickle-down effect. In reality, part of this activity is directly and indirectly harmful to the poor. The polluting highways and industry the non-poor do not want in its vicinity are built on cheaper land in the neighbourhoods of the poor (Wratten, 1995). Scarce water resources are channelled to those who can pay, or have the power to have their needs heard. The non-poor demand for high-technology health services are constructed at the expense of those decentralised health centres for ordinary diseases the poor is more likely to need (WHO, 2001). Courts and public offices are staffed in such a way that they are likely to give better service to people who speak the same language and are dressed the same way as the public servants, etc.

The examples are numerous, and together they add up to a massive, unintended and invisible poverty-producing process. In this we are all perpetrators. This kind of poverty production can only be slowed down, or reversed, if all citizens become aware of it and see the sense in changing some present priorities. One of the many obstacles in changing such poverty production is that most of these activities lie within legal and legitimate bounda-

ries. Therefore, the arguments in favour of a more pro-poor behaviour at the expense of less favouritism of non-poor interests, have to rest on moral grounds and the self-interest of the non-poor. Traditionally, the wealthy have been able to live in enclaves, protected from contact with the poor by social institutions, space and fences. As societies open up, such protection may become part of past privilege.

Direct poverty production has a different nature. Some agents will have a purposeful intention in sustaining poverty. Again, the examples are plentiful. There are dictators and elites whose power is built on uneducated and poor people who cannot mobilise resistance. At present, Zimbabwe displays a sinister case where poverty is induced politically and lack of food is used to suppress the opposition. In Latin America patrons have a tradition for relying on a partially deprived electorate to support their candidacy for a political post. An educated and informed electorate might chose their patrons differently, or do without patrons. Industries locate their production in poor countries where they feed on a constant renewable flow of deprived and unorganised people who are willing to accept any kind of wage. The expenditure of these industries would increase considerably if international labour rights were enforced. Fruit growers in North America depend on a moving proletariat during the harvest season. The level of living conditions for elites in Arab states rest on the exploitation of poor female labour from poor countries. Much of the poverty producing activity portrayed here is visible and the perpetrators can be identified. Some of them operate within the law, whilst others ignore legal constraints. In general, it can be said that the basic rights of the poor are not protected, or enforced. For much of this poverty producing activity there is no legal framework to control it. International agreements and recommendations on labour rights coming from the International Labour Organisation and UNICEF (1989) on children's' rights are largely ignored, as are the more general protection of individual rights laid down in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966/76).

Poverty production also happens in such major uprootings as war, epidemics and natural disasters. People are impoverished through these kinds of processes, where they loose belongings, infrastructure, people on whom they depend or have to leave everything behind and become a refugee. Poor people are particularly vulnerable. Part of their poverty is that they are less protected in all kinds of events and command fewer resources to buffer unexpected events and diseases. The wars in Afghanistan, the Balkans and Rwanda have created massive poverty. Some of this poverty production was unintended although it was a calculated risk that a civil population would suffer. Other parts of the poverty production was intended and used as part of the war strategy, in particular as part of an ethnic conflict. The enemy was to be fought not only with weapons, but also with deprivation of all available means, whether it was loss of belongings, land, personal security or identity. Some of these events are now brought into the legal arena. First-, second- and

third-line perpetrators are defined not only according to their actual partici-
pation in the violations, but also according to their rank in the military and
para-military hierarchy.

Natural disasters provide still another scenario. No intention of poverty
production can be claimed and no direct perpetrator can be identified in spite
of the fact that natural disasters create poverty and are likely to hit the poor
harder than the non-poor. However, it can be argued that those responsible
for not preventing the disaster, if at all preventable, and those responsible for
not providing adequate help afterwards can be seen as a second- and third-
line perpetrators.

4.3   Making the Impact of Poverty Production Visible

Identifying poverty-producing agents and trying to describe their activities
and strength is only one step toward a broader understanding of the impact of
poverty production. The next step is to understand the specific nature and
extent of poverty production. Among other things this means to make the im-
pact of poverty-producing processes more visible through research and new
kinds of data, and to initiate a discourse based on research and a more ade-
quate approach to poverty understanding. The research literature is already
addressing some issues of poverty production and studies from different dis-
ciplines and approaches are available. However, what is lacking at this stage
is a comprehensive overview through a collocation of existing studies that
make it possible to compare analyses from different countries and different
sectors. The many databases on 'best practices in poverty reduction' (Krüger
2002) need a database-cousin of the 'worst practices in poverty production'.

A database of worst practices would not only make poverty production
and the poverty producing forces more visible, bit it will also provide the op-
portunity to ask new questions and develop more powerful strategies to
counteract poverty production. Comparison across countries is a central ana-
lytical tool for identifying patterns of behaviour that may go unnoticed in na-
tional studies, where the context is taken for granted. Comparisons make it
easier to ask questions like: why is certain behaviour acceptable within one
culture and rejected within another? Under what conditions is a ruthless pov-
erty-producing force at play? Have there been similar experiences in other
countries that have now abandoned such practices? What were the conditions
and interventions necessary to change such practices? Who are the major ac-
tors in poverty production and what is their power base for such activity?
Who are the partners in this activity? Can a line of perpetrators be estab-
lished? Who are the victims? What kind of poverty is developed or sus-
tained? How much poverty is produced, and for how long has this production
been going on? What are the social costs of this production? Are there any
social gains? If so, how can they be used to reverse a poverty production?
What is the moral and ethical foundation for continued poverty production?

What are the social and economic gains of this production, besides the direct gain for the perpetrator? Are the perpetrators aware of the impact their activity has on poor people? Have they created a moral foundation for their activity that leaves them free of guilt? How much difference does a legal framework make in one country as compared to another? How much impact is the new donor pressure on accountability by the government in poor countries going to have on poverty producers located outside of the government?

The questions seem endless, because there is so much we do not yet know about a very important side of our societies. Here researchers have an enormous challenge to open up a field where answers are needed if efficient poverty reduction is to be induced.

Another means to make poverty production visible is to develop official statistics that portray poverty producing processes and their effects. At present, no such data is available. Aggregated data as seen in some national statistics and on a comparative national level in the UNDP Human Development Index and Human Poverty Index (UNDP Human Development Report, 1997) present an important, but static picture of the present state of poverty and deprivation in a certain country in a certain year. The processes behind can only be hypothesised and it is not possible to read anything into those figures concerning where and how poverty is produced.

Methodologically it will not be easy to develop reliable and valid indicators that are dynamic and point directly to poverty production. Much more information about the poverty producing processes is needed as well as their impact before such a scenario is likely to materialise. Still, it should not be abandoned. Good indicators developed for industrial production are part of official statistics in many countries. Perhaps they can serve as an example. Such indicators are considered important and necessary as input in order to understand the national economy and plan for future development. Poverty production needs the same kind of indicators, particularly if it can be argued that poverty producing processes hamper national development, e.g. the discussion on investment in social capital as a basic tool for the creation of economic growth. Policymakers will depend on this type of information if they are to develop more pro-poor interventions. Researchers will benefit from such information as a base for their studies.

Politically, the identification of poverty production is not likely to be easy. Poverty producing agents who benefit from such production may not be inclined towards accountability and the change an exposure in their activities might provoke. However, one should not underestimate the fact that some of those agents may not be fully aware of the detrimental effects brought about by their activities.

Practically the identification of poverty production is not easy either. There are great lacunae in official statistics in countries in the South. In general, it can be said that the poorer a country is, the poorer is the available statistics on that country. However, it is not only the poorer countries that will need this kind of new addition to its statistics.

Part of the process is also to make the likely consequences visible if the present poverty production is allowed to continue at the same speed. On the side of the poor, we know much about those consequences, which are spelled out in terms of high infant mortality, diseases, malnutrition, victimisation, exclusion from basic rights and life in constant deprivation. The documentation is plentiful. On the side of the non-poor we know much less about the consequences of different kinds of poverty producing activities and a high frequency of poor people in a region or country. There are individuals and institutions that benefit from poverty producing activities and a certain amount of poverty. What part of the population is involved in direct poverty production is not known, and the extent of their benefits from the poverty producing activity is also unknown. The non-poor in general are likely to share a differentiated view of the consequences of poverty production and continued poverty. Some will want to reduce poverty out of fear of crime, contagious diseases and rebellion. Some will fear the moral decay a society suffers when it allows a large amount of people to live in abject conditions. Others will deplore the loss of potential consumers and manpower that an uneducated mass represents. Still others do not see the poor and accept the situation as is.

4.4   The Need for a New Discourse

There is an urgent need for a new discourse on poverty understanding that challenges the dominating discourses of the last decades. Part of the process of introducing a new discourse is to analyse previous discourses in order to better understand their aim and function better. Discourses do not just happen. They can be seen as an expression of certain vested interests, regardless of whether they are political, material or intellectual. To understand them better, it is necessary to raise questions like: why was a certain discourse opened up in the first place, who introduced it and what kind of impact does it have on the questions researchers pose? What kind of interest lies behind it and why did a certain set of arguments become so powerful that they dominate our way of thinking and the choice of analytical approaches? Why are certain concepts and strategies pushed to the front and others made invisible? For example, Amartya Sen's concept of 'capabilities' coined in 1980 took almost a couple of decades to enter a discourse dominated by economic concepts, and was then used and transformed by major actors (Clair, forthcoming). Who adopts a certain discourse, and why? What is the impact of a certain discourse on actual policymaking? How much power is invested in keeping the discourse alive? Who are the benefactors of the outcome of a certain discourse, and just as important, who are those excluded through such a discourse? Unfortunately, this history of ideas and philosophical understanding of poverty has not been written yet.

Part of the same process is to question previous practices stemming from a certain discourse and show that they are still valid, or no longer valid. A

key word here is accountability, where the burden of proof ought to lie with those who promote certain poverty reducing strategies. They need to be held accountable for reporting on the expected outcome of their ideas. For example, those who vigorously promote a dogmatic trickle-down effect need to document its effects: who actually benefits from this principle, to what degree do they benefit, how much poverty of what kind is done away with, and how long does it take before the effects of a certain trickle-down process can be observed? Also, the underlying assumptions in a trickle-down effect need to be made visible. The major actor in the present discourse, the World Bank, needs to be held accountable for the strategies it has implemented over time and the fervour with which it still promotes economic growth. The burden of proof ought to lie with the Bank that has the moral responsibility as well as the resources to follow up on the consequences of its actions. From individual researchers and research institutions outside the Bank it has been argued that economic growth not only reduces poverty, but also actually produces certain kinds of poverty. The dominance of the so-called 'Washington consensus' is being challenged through more complex analyses (Caufield, 1996; ISSJ, 2000; Dagdeviren, van der Hoeven and Weeks, 2001; Bigsten and Levin, 2001; Stiglitz 2002). The World Bank has been reluctant to answer to these assertions and its discourse continues to fasten its dominance in scientific and political circles.

The promotion of democracy as a poverty reducing strategy offers another example of an incomplete element in a dominant discourse. Democracy is an icon of Western culture and donors as well as some researchers promote it as a central strategy to mobilise poor people, who can then help improve their own living conditions. Still, democracy as a major poverty reducing strategy needs to be challenged, too. In some of the largest democracies in the world such as the United States and India, poverty is flourishing and the poor live on the outside of the non-poor society. Western-style democracy may be a necessary condition, but in its present form it represents an insufficient model for efficient poverty reduction. The concepts of participation and citizenship need to be rethought within this context.

A new discourse on poverty production and the effects of different kinds of poverty production is research-based knowledge that brings out well-established facts about unintended and direct poverty production. A second focus is the attempt to develop a new language built on more adequate concepts that catches poverty production as a reality. Researchers need new tools to work with. A third focus is a critical approach to the present dominating discourse that describes poverty in a quasi-scientific language that conceals major poverty-producing forces. A fourth focus is an approach that overlooks powerful tale telling, ignores ineffective and dubious standard solutions to poverty reduction, and repudiates empty rhetoric about concern for the poor. A final focus in the discourse is the right to turn every stone without being stopped and the right to ask questions and gather necessary information wherever it will serve an understanding of the extent and effect of poverty

production. Partners for a broad discourse as outlined above are civil society, media, government, the churches, industry, the educational system, political movements, grass-root movements, labour unions and all interested parties.

The discourse will be forfeited if it turns into a witch-hunt, although some may be tempted to do just that. Neither should it be a discourse that belongs only to the Left trying to fight off neo-liberal forces. This discourse has a much wider range. Rather, such a discourse should serve as a tool for the broad exchange of information and understanding about those unwanted forces that destroy the lives and futures of millions of people. It should encourage a search for strategies that will put an end to practices that run counter to the principles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – as a first step towards effective poverty eradication.

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