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Comparative Research Programme on Poverty

International Social Science Council/Conseil International
des Sciences Sociales

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I. BACKGROUND

THE COMPARATIVE RESEARCH Programme on Poverty (CROP) has as its major aim to facilitate comparative studies on poverty in countries in the North and the South and to create an international arena where different disciplines can meet and discuss poverty research. It was set up under the auspices of the International Social Science Council (ISSC) whose constitution states that the ISSC shall promote research for the benefit and well-being of humanity and focus on global issues of concern to the world community. The selection of poverty as a target for a major research programme under the ISSC was an evident and forceful choice. The Executive Committee of the ISSC decided, in May 1991, to explore the possibility of developing, and providing an arena, for an international and interdisciplinary research programme on poverty. It is from this that the CROP Programme developed.

II. POVERTY RESEARCH RETHOUGHT

THERE IS AN urgent need to know where poverty research stands in different regions of the world, to link discourses which have not been set in the same context before and to broaden the intellectual discussion of poverty. The comparative perspective brings forward different questions from national studies and it widens conceptualizations and measurements of poverty beyond the hitherto Western dominance of poverty understanding.

Although there is an abundance of research on poverty, few of the studies have a comparative perspective. Several attempts have been made to compare the extent and intensity of poverty on a global level and this has mainly been done (a) by international organizations using a few selected indicators to measure poverty on the national level, so as to rank countries according to their level of poverty; and (b) by social scientists using economic micro data, correcting for cultural differences. Some poverty studies covering a wider aspect of variables have been comparative in scope. But the comparisons have included only a limited number of countries and comparisons between countries in the North and the South have been avoided. New data banks are emerging which will help speed up international comparisons in the future but, so far, the lack of support for statistical institutions and the infrastructure they need in many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America will leave them out of such comparisons.

Underlying the idea of doing comparative studies in both the North and the South is a set of assumptions about the nature of poverty which are not always made clear.

- Can it be assumed, for example, that poverty is inherent in all societies, irrespective of their different social, economic and political structures? If this is the case, the discussion has to distinguish between causes of poverty that are inherent and indications or manifestations of poverty that are inherent.⁽¹⁾
- Causes of poverty can best be described as a set of (often invisible) causal elements that are woven into a dynamic process which

produces the observable manifestations of poverty. Can certain causal elements be identified in all countries and cultures, in spite of the differences in manifestations of poverty?

- Since poverty always operates within a social context (even under natural catastrophes), is it the causal elements or the manifestations which are the most influenced by the social context? Or, put in a different way, are the causes likely to be less culture-bound than the manifestations?
- Can the differences that are observed in the indications or manifestations of poverty be assumed to be merely related to the degree of the extent and intensity of poverty, more than to an entirely different poverty phenomenon? If this is so, it implies that the contours of a model of poverty develop in consecutive stages. If, on the other hand, poverty manifestations are expressions of different poverty phenomena, in what dimensions do the manifestations differ? And what are the implications for the proxies of poverty used in comparative measurements of poverty likely to be?
- The same causal processes of poverty can lead to different manifestations of poverty; similarly, different causes of poverty can lead to the same manifestations of poverty. How can these two observations be linked theoretically and produce comparative insights?

Comparative studies help to bring out such questions and these are much needed in poverty research where the theoretical foundation is weak and the methodological tool box is ready for a long overdue renewal.

Assuming that poverty is at the same time culture-bound and universal, future studies need to bring out both aspects. Hopefully, this will spur a sorting process whereby culture-bound causes and manifestations of poverty can be identified and marked as different from those causes and manifestations of poverty which seem to be universal, in the sense that they can be seen as part of a basic poverty-producing process, independent of the culture where poverty is found. Such a sorting process is a necessary first step towards a better theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of poverty. Bringing together different uses of poverty concepts and

poverty thinking from different cultures will help further this sorting process which must take place on the micro, meso and macro level.

The future challenge for poverty research lies in linking the universal with the particular and in tying the micro perspective to the macro perspective. For this purpose, the contributions of many different disciplines are needed with their diversity of paradigms and methodological approaches. So far, poverty research has only scratched the surface in explaining the causes and manifestations of poverty. Testable hypotheses brought out in different cultural contexts is another necessary step forward towards new theory formation. But this cannot be done unless new ways of cooperation between the disciplines are developed and facilitated.

So far, the major part of research on poverty has concentrated on measuring the extent of poverty. The tradition is long and well-established and it shows itself in a range of different measures mainly based on income and/or the cost of living of the individual and the household. The research literature abounds with criticism of the different measures and their shortcomings and much effort is invested in overcoming the defaults of the different measurements in order to increase their validity and reliability. It is well documented that the choice of one definition of poverty over another leads to quite different results. Efforts are also invested in finding alternative measurements and to accommodate the fact that much of the poverty is located in the informal economy and on the periphery of major societal institutions. Built into these efforts is the so-far unresolved issue of how to define poverty in an adequate and acceptable manner.

Another direction may be to shift the focus from comparisons of variables to comparisons of processes producing poverty, i.e. intensifying research on causal processes more than on indications or manifestations. That would be in line with Johan Galtung when he argues that "...a certain artisanal intellectual competence, with such elementary skills as care with definitions, ability to construct fruitful typologies, understanding of what inference means, knowing how to anchor the theory on the empirical end; yet tempering all this with theoretical pluralism,

epistemological eclecticism, a spirit of tolerance" is the way forward in creating comparative social science.⁽²⁾ Achieving this is no easy task but it matches the urgency to increase the scientific knowledge base and the need for a more global understanding of a wide range of poverty phenomena.

In most poverty studies, the poor are studied in an isolated context. The fact that they are also living in symbiosis with the rest of the society is more or less ignored. In research terms, the poor are mainly treated as an excluded group, living in a painful relationship with society at large. It seems as if the attitude of the "majority society" has rubbed off on the researchers' choice of understanding poverty. There is, therefore, an urgent need to develop a more realistic paradigm where the focus is shifted to the non-poor part of the population. The non-poor, and their role in creating and sustaining poverty, are as interesting an object of research on poverty as the poor.

Undertaking comparative studies in the social sciences involves a whole set of methodological and theoretical problems which run as an undercurrent in all comparisons, no matter what field of research. But doing comparative studies on poverty adds some extra problems. Poverty researchers are often weighed down by the conflicts surrounding their area of research and by the constant uneasiness of working in a field where the concepts, the methodologies and the theories are not precise enough to be useful working tools. There is also concern for the sheer scale of poverty and the lack of an up-to-date infrastructure for supporting the research. It is not an unreasonable hypothesis that poverty researchers feel more frustrated and isolated than do researchers in most other fields. It takes courage to live with the complexity of a poverty definition and the lack of an inadequate theoretical framework.

III. CROP ACTIVITIES

CROP HAS CREATED an international and interdisciplinary research arena to further comparative studies on poverty research. The arena is open for all scholars in the field as well as for institutions making use of such

research. Some of the major activities are as follows:

a. Research Projects

At present CROP is engaged in the following projects:

- Poverty and participation in civil society
- Social costs of poverty
- Images of poverty and the poor
- Ethics of poverty research
- Mapping the frontiers of poverty research
- Extreme poverty and human rights
- Follow-up on the UN World Summit on Social Development

Initiatives for research projects come from members in the CROP network and are coordinated by the CROP Secretariat. Financing is the responsibility of all parties involved and is usually achieved through combining several grants.

b. Workshops

Workshops are particularly important to the Programme to launch new research projects, fill in gaps in current knowledge and follow up on-going projects. To date, CROP has organized two to three workshops per year. The initiative for a CROP workshop can come either from the CROP network, from individual researchers or from research institutes and international agencies that are working in the field of poverty research. The initiative must contain a written proposal for a topic for the workshop as well as suggestions for venue, date(s) and funding sources. The topics can be within the themes of CROP "Plan of Action 1995-1996" or can be within the particular sphere of interest of the region or the researchers taking the initiative.

Among the workshops planned for 1996-7 are:

- The social costs of poverty, May 1996, Bergen
- Poverty and social exclusion in the Mediterranean, October 1996, with the University of Crete and the International Labour Office
- Human rights as an instrument for the eradication of extreme poverty, November

1996, with the Centro da Procuradoria Geral do Estado, Sao Paulo, Brazil.

- The role of the state in poverty alleviation, Addis Ababa, 1997, with the UN Economic Council for Africa and UNESCO.
- Law, power and poverty, May 1997, Spain.

For more details of these and other workshops, contact the CROP Secretariat.

c. Publications

Below are given some examples of CROP publications or co-publications. Some come from research projects, others from the edited papers presented at workshops. There is also a new overview of research projects on poverty and institutions and individuals working in the area.

Ewoldt-Leicher, Tinka and Arnaud Marks (editors) (1995), *Poverty: Research Projects, Institutes, Persons*, IDIN/CROP/ICSSD, Tilburg, Bergen, Amsterdam, 248 pages.

Environment and Urbanization Vol. 7, No.1, April 1995 on "Urban Poverty: characteristics, causes and consequences" and Vol.7, No.2, October 1995 on "Urban Poverty II: from understanding to action", IIED, London.

Eide, Ingrid (editor) (1996), *Feminization of Poverty* (in Norwegian), Kvinner Og Fattigdom.

Øyen, Else, S.M. Miller and Syed Abdus Samad (editors) (1996), *Poverty: A Global Review - Handbook of International Poverty Research*, Scandinavian University Press, 593 pages.

Atal, Y. and E. Øyen (1996), *Poverty and Participation in Civil Society*, UNESCO, Paris (available in late 1996).

d. CROP Newsletter

The CROP Newsletter is published four times a year. The newsletter is a double A-4 page with information on current and planned CROP activities.

e. CROP Web Page

Those who have an Internet connection and a WorldWideWeb browser programme can find the CROP web page at <http://www.uib.no/svf/helsos/crop>. The page holds general information on CROP including the latest CROP Newsletter, an overview of previous workshops and plans for upcoming workshops, a call for papers, an overview of on-going CROP initiated research projects, a list of CROP publications in print and those under preparation, a presentation of the CROP Standing Committee and the Secretariat and other relevant information. A Bulletin Board has also added to the menu.

f. CROP Database

CROP updates its mailing list and a database of poverty projects on a continuous basis. The staff at the Secretariat can now provide researchers and students of poverty with information on specific search words on demand. The database contains more than 800 registered participants in the CROP network and 130 project titles.

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References

1. Much of the literature on poverty refers to "symptoms" and "causes" of poverty; the reasons why we choose to avoid using the term "symptom" are discussed in Øyen, Else, S.M. Miller and Syed Abdus Samad (editors) (1996), *Poverty: A Global Review - Handbook of International Poverty Research*, Scandinavian University Press, 593 pages.
2. Galtung, Johan (1990), "Theory formation in social research: a plea for pluralism" in Øyen, Else (editor), *Comparative Methodology: Theory and Practice in International Social Research*, Sage, London, page 101.