

Introducing the glossary

ELSE ØYEN

A glossary is ‘a list of difficult terms with explanations’¹ It is a scientific toolbox that provides a historical background for definitions linked to a certain field of research, the changes in contents they have undergone over time, and their current contents and use. Definitions are the stable element in an ever expanding theory formation – until they themselves are given a new content. Their present meaning is the result of a historical process of social change and dialogue in the scientific field.

Definitions are building blocks for theories. Although it may seem so, definitions are not neutral. In poverty research they are more value laden than in many other fields of research. The choice of one definition rather than another one may indicate not only academic preferences but at times also political, societal and moral preferences. The choice of one definition rather than another one may also provide quite different research results in a project.

Definitions are powerful tools for thought and action. The understanding of poverty is in the eye of the beholder. Different actors see different things, emphasize different aspects and develop different paradigms of poverty understanding according to their discipline, position or vested interests. There are many actors in the poverty landscape, and some try to establish ownership to poverty understanding through the use of certain poverty definitions. As a result a limited number of definitions have dominated academic and political discourse and poverty understanding during the last three or four decades.² The aim of the *Glossary* is to widen the choice of definitions

available, thereby expanding the scientific field of poverty research so that it gets closer to the complex reality of poverty and the lives of poor people.

Many of the disciplines within the social sciences and several outside have incorporated poverty as a research topic, some of them fairly recently and some through a well-established tradition. As could be expected, the disciplinary approaches to poverty understanding are coloured by the discipline's theories, methodologies and established definitions. The understanding of poverty is fitted into the dominant paradigms of the discipline. Poverty is only one of many other topics being studied. To the extent that it is being studied it is not necessarily poverty as such that is being studied. Often it is the use of the different tools of the discipline that are being tested out.

The poverty phenomenon is complex and comprehensive and covers so many dimensions of human and social behaviour that almost any theory relating to human beings can add to a fragment of poverty understanding. As with all kinds of analysis of poverty, disciplinary or not, the picture is incomplete. Only fragments are presented. If a more complete picture is to emerge, some of the disciplinary bonding needs to be loosened, new links established and a wider array of definitions put to use, including outside their established context. That is a research challenge in itself. The *Glossary* can be used as a tool for those who want to move in that direction.

Poverty research has for a long time been closely linked to poverty reduction and has featured definitions that point to causes of poverty. Implicitly and explicitly those definitions point also to certain interventionist strategies and how resources are to be allocated. Bureaucrats, politicians, donors and voluntary organizations need definitions and benchmarks to carry through their programmes for poverty reduction and allocation of resources. The emphasis is to move towards well-defined and simple indicators that can be used also for evaluation of the programmes. The *Glossary* contains scores of definitions that at first glance do not fit this purpose. However, those definitions are closer to the reality of poor people, and if put to use are likely to offer better tools for efficient poverty reduction than simpler measures. People working with poverty reduction are invited to search the *Glossary* for new and better tools for their poverty-reducing interventions.

The *Glossary* is a thoroughly revised version of the first *Glossary*, which was published in 1999.³ Not only has poverty research increased rapidly during the last few years. This in itself calls for an updating to catch the new and different poverty definitions that have arisen along with changing research foci. The first version was too Western in its presentation of poverty definitions. In particular, the Latin American perspectives were neglected due to language and the differences that arise when apparently similar terms take on dissimilar meanings. This is an inherent problem in all the social and human sciences. We have met the challenge by inviting a distinguished Latin American poverty researcher to join the two British editors and by creating an editorial board of international scholars who have provided inputs and corrections throughout the process of collecting and collating the *Glossary*. In addition, a call went out to all members of the CROP network inviting them to come forward with new or changed definitions and references. The result is a collective work in the sense that many of the entries are the product of several hands.

Constructing a glossary on poverty is an open-ended process. New definitions continue to trickle in, while definitions already established become altered as new or previously unknown literature emerges. At a certain stage the editors have to put a stop to this process; or, better, they have to decide that this *Glossary* is just another step in a process which may lead to a still more perfect glossary. The editors are the first to acknowledge that even this second *Glossary*, into which they have put so much effort, is not and cannot be the end product.

New entries have been added while old entries have been revised and updated. References have been extended and subjects further developed. Examples of national definitions of poverty and definitions of poverty lines have been added and the *Glossary* now comprises more than two hundred definitions. Each entry contains both definitions and explanations, with references to contemporary academic and professional literature. Altogether the new *Glossary* has been extended with about 16,000 words.

There is no universally agreed vocabulary for the analysis of poverty, and terms and concepts vary between the disciplines to such a degree that no scholar is familiar with the entire vocabulary. The editors have not always been in agreement when discussing an entry and the references needed to support it. Its meaning, roots

and context have been argued, and its importance for poverty research has been questioned. Such disagreements are in the nature of a complex research field like poverty. Where disagreements have not been resolved through dialogue or external advice the three editors have used a simple majority vote to settle the dispute. Users of the *Glossary* will have similar experiences when entries are put to use in concrete research projects.

Paul Spicker, one of the volume's editors, provides a framework for the *Glossary* when in the last chapter he reviews and explains some of the many different and competing meanings associated with the word poverty.

Many are those who have given a helping hand in the construction of the *Glossary*. The Editorial Board and members of the CROP Scientific Committee have provided inputs and corrections, as have researchers from other parts of the CROP network. María Aguilar and Marcelo Ibarra have worked on the many new entries from Latin America. Inge/Tesdal has taken care of the technicalities. While the International Social Science Council and GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit) have helped finance the work. We are immensely grateful to all those who have taken part in developing this new tool for poverty research.

The work will continue.⁴ Poverty research needs to develop its own toolbox if it is to advance further. A *Glossary* is a vital part of such a toolbox and it is our hope it will sensitize researchers, students and policymakers to the large variety of definitions available and the wide range of insights it offers to a broader understanding of poverty and the lives of poor people.

NOTES

1. Webster *New World Dictionary*.
2. Else Øyen (ed.), *The Polyscopic Landscape of Poverty Research – 'State of the Art' in International Poverty Research. An Overview and 6 in-depth studies*, Norwegian Research Council, 2005, www.forskningradet.no/CSSStorage/Flex_attachment/stateoftheart.pdf, and www.crop.org.
3. David Gordon and Paul Spicker (eds), *The International Glossary on Poverty*, CROP International Studies in Poverty Research, Zed Books, London, 1999.
4. Suggestions for new entries and references as well as changes to the present text are welcomed and will be considered for the next revised version of the Glossary. Send mail marked 'Glossary' to crop@uib.no.