

The Paradox of Poverty Research: Why is Extreme Poverty not in Focus?

Abstract

Relevant and reliable knowledge based on research is indispensable if extreme poverty is to be combatted. It is a paradox that three of the most significant paradigms in poverty research fail to focus directly on extreme poverty. This failure is due not only to the complexity of extreme poverty, but also to the structure of the paradigms, their built-in limitations and the fact that research on extreme poverty is an investment with few academic rewards.

Keywords: extreme poverty, disciplinary approach, development research, human rights, paradigm failure

Else Øyen In the following it is argued that extreme poverty as a research arena and a target for poverty reduction is losing out in major paradigms that have as their principal rationale the understanding of poverty phenomena in the South.¹

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Poverty research is flourishing. So are programmes for poverty reduction, political interest in poverty, global discussions on poverty, shared explanations of why poverty is so persistent, and funding of poverty-related research. Twenty years ago the situation was quite different. Poverty research was limited and the public interest was low. While the arts had a long tradition in using poverty and its causes, manifestations and consequences as central themes, the social sciences were reluctant to engage in a broader understanding of poverty than the one offered by popular myth-making and moralistic frameworks.²

The rationale for poverty research is not only intellectual. Many poverty researchers engage in the pursuit of poverty understanding because they see it as a worthwhile undertaking beyond ordinary research. Likewise, the rationale for the funding of such research is often an explicit or implicit expectation that the research results will contribute to more efficient poverty-reducing strategies.

Over time three major paradigms have developed in poverty research directed towards developing countries: disciplinary approaches, development theories and the human rights approach. In

1 The paper is written upon invitation from the FDS to appear under Debates and can be seen as a summing up of my earlier works where references and further arguments can be found.

2 For a more elaborate discussion, see Øyen, 2004, or www.crop.org

the following it is argued that although the focus of the paradigms is on poverty, the very nature of their conceptual framework indirectly bypasses extreme forms of poverty. Thereby not only is the original focus of their research undermined, but more importantly a limited picture of poverty is drawn that ignores the needs of the most disadvantaged people.

Extreme poverty can be defined to comprise that part of a population that scores the lowest on a combination of variables expressing basic conditions for human life and survival.

Disciplinary approaches

The paradigm of a discipline is its power base. The consistent use of certain methods, concepts, hypotheses and theories defines a discipline, its arena for research and its intellectual limits. Students are taught within a disciplinary framework and their careers are based on the paradigm of the profession. Universities are organised around disciplines and huge amounts of public funding are invested to conserve the disciplinary paradigms and develop them further. Interdisciplinary teaching and research are a challenge to the disciplinary power base and have so far had meagre conditions. Trespassers are welcome only if they acknowledge the authority of the disciplinary paradigms.

Poverty research does not have a power base of its own. Many of the disciplines within the social sciences and several outside the social sciences 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 disciplines' theories, methodologies and previous research. The understanding of poverty is fitted into the dominant paradigms of the discipline. It follows from this that the frontiers of poverty research follow closely the state-of-the-art within the discipline in question.³ At university level, poverty is mainly taught as courses within a discipline where the emphasis is on the disciplinary paradigm's own heritage and tools. Students who do their degrees are judged by their ability to apply the paradigmatic tools rather than by applying knowledge from outside the discipline to throw light on poverty phenomena. The courses lead to careers within the discipline rather than a career in poverty research. In spite of some very important institutions on poverty research and

3 Some of the arguments here are elaborated in Øyen *et al.*, 2005; see <https://bora.uib.no/handle/1956/2260>

some educational institutions, particularly in the South, focusing on poverty as a research field of its own, a profession of poverty researchers has not emerged. Poverty research is pieced together from elements of different paradigms and has not developed what could be called a specific paradigm that would provide an intellectual and organisational power base. Poverty researchers, too, often have their intellectual attention divided between their mother discipline and their chosen area of research. One of the outcomes is that the full picture of extreme poverty as a research arena does not receive sufficient attention.

The disciplines with the longest tradition in the study of poverty are economics and sociology, and to a certain degree also demography, medicine and agricultural science. As a result paradigms from these disciplines dominate the academic and political field of poverty research.

Economics is about the distribution of material resources and the effects of different distributions. Extreme poverty plays a role, as the poor by definition are found at the lower end of the distribution curves. This phenomenon has received much attention in the discipline. Within economic models it becomes important to calculate the size of the problem, and effort is invested in measuring poverty in different ways and in analysing the conditions under which changes occur. The standard measure of poverty as the proportion of a population living on less than one dollar a day (now readjusted to 1.25 dollar a day) is a strong indicator of mass poverty. It is, however, a limited indicator of human life in poverty. The immense resources that have been invested in measuring poverty nationally and internationally, and researching the relationship between this kind of poverty and other social and economic variables, can hardly be justified when the issue is to throw light on the complexity of extreme poverty. Research is focussed on employment opportunities for the poor, access to markets and microcredit schemes. Questions have been raised as to whether the very poorest are able to profit from these measures and generate an income. Those who live in extreme poverty are not likely to be part of the formal economy. They generate whatever means they can from the informal economy. The paradigmatic push to see entry into the formal economy as a poverty-reducing strategy may actually be counterproductive. The informal economy in low development countries is at present likely to offer better opportunities for survival than a badly organised, exploitive formal economy. Strong actors such as the World Bank have for many years pushed hard for the

implementation of basic economic paradigms in countries where mass poverty prevails and have argued that mass poverty has been reduced through such measures. Whether extreme poverty has been reduced proportionally to a reduction in general poverty, however, remains an unresearched question.

Sociology is the discipline most closely associated with social problems. There are numerous qualitative and quantitative studies of deprivation, marginalisation, exclusion, the life of the underclass, inequality, distribution of skewed resources and the like, on the micro as well as the meso and macro level. The notion of citizenship and the inclusion of all citizens in a society, including the poor, has become a cornerstone of modern poverty research. Most of the research has been carried out in Western countries and within a Western cultural setting where mass poverty and the extreme poverty of former days have yielded to more moderate forms of poverty. Concepts, theories and methods have been developed within a Western culture and for a long time research on poverty in the South was carried out within paradigms alien to non-Western cultures. When the social sciences developed educational programmes for their own students in the South poverty perspectives were broadened to include both indigenous characteristics and a more applied approach that emphasises the need to focus on poverty-reducing strategies. Whether extreme poverty is a central concept in current research is hard to say. A search for 'extreme poverty' in a new 300-page social science publication on poverty research in developing countries yielded only 13 hits, eight of which referred to official documents and only five to concrete research projects. Further searches for synonyms such as 'poorest' and 'most deprived' did not change the picture (Tekiya, 2008). This might indicate that the interest in extreme poverty is more pronounced among policy-makers in the North than among those doing poverty research in the South.

Anthropology has studied poor people throughout the life of the discipline, as for example through research on production systems, management of natural resources and land tenure. Qualitative studies embedded in anthropological knowledge provide unique insights into the lives of poor people as well as extremely poor people, and local in-depth studies supply the cultural contexts in which poverty is formed and upheld. The analysis of poverty per se is less notable. The many small studies pertaining to poverty from different regions in the South have not been brought together to form a more coherent picture of the processes of poverty formation and how the empirical variations in cultural contexts can be

confronted to provide a fuller understanding of poverty in general and extreme poverty in particular.

In the past, political science has been remarkably absent from poverty research. The growing emphasis on poverty nationally and internationally has led to the entry of political scientists into the field. Studies of mass movements, civil society and democracy formation are now directed towards the poor. Studies of the role of the state in the development of national and international policies for poverty-reducing interventions in the South have become part of the research agenda. Analyses of international agreements, including those concerning poverty are added to the research agenda. As policy-makers turn to extreme poverty as an important goal for interventions, political science research projects follow up. The interest in human rights as a research arena has increased. The latter is shared with the legal professions that have taken up human rights as a new and important area.

Development research

Development studies incorporate concepts, theories and methods from the social sciences as well as from other sciences such as medicine, the natural sciences and the legal sciences. A major framework is centred around theories of the state and citizenship, and an explicit goal is to create stable and well-functioning states in developing countries, and to build a physical and social infrastructure that will increase human capital and the standard of living for the entire population – that is, including the most deprived, who are often described as the major target for the interventions.

The economists were the early interventionists with the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programmes tailored specifically to developing countries and the emphasis on economic growth as the main tool for bringing about economic progress and reduction of poverty. Thirty years of research brings home the fact that whatever else economic growth has achieved, it has not had a sizeable impact on reducing the percentage of people living in extreme poverty. The discussion has focused on the actual number of people who have moved from living on less than one dollar a day to one dollar a day (now 1.25 dollar a day). This is hardly an adequate measure. Those people are still among the extremely poor and on the margins of society. Through economic growth infrastructure has expanded and new social structures have been created. The elites have increased their economic and political power base, the old middle class has

expanded, and a new middle class has grown up that has likely been recruited from the not-so-poor rather than those living in extreme poverty. The trickle-down effect has been selective in its class formation and it may take generations, if ever, to reach the poorest layers of the population.

Knowledge based on political science, sociology and the legal professions has been central in the development of institution building. Through an improved social infrastructure such as political, financial, legal and educational institutions, the state is to be consolidated, predictable and able to offer its citizens opportunities for a better life. Concepts like democracy, human rights and political stability are central within this mode of thinking. To achieve such aims, systems of voting for example are developed and monitored, and as a result, the percentage of voting does increase. However, the poorest are the least likely to take part. Voting and the benefits of voting do not fit into their basic needs. Even in a well-developed state with a voting system such as the United States, neither the several million homeless nor a large part of the impoverished segments of the population take part in voting. The effort and the rewards of taking part in the present voting structure do not fit with their basic needs.

The building of a legal base with courts and police is another goal in development research. While this is no doubt important in creating a more stable and reliable state, these institutions seem to be of little value to the poorest part of the population. Several studies point to the fact that the extreme poor lack not only the necessary resources and knowledge to bring a case to court, they are also and with good reason afraid of public authorities, including the police and bureaucrats. At a recent conference on 'Building Institutions for the Poor', papers were written mainly within the framework of development research. Expectations of a trickle-down effect in favour of the poor/poorest once the infrastructure was in place, were more or less taken for given. Discussions of institutions specifically tailored to the needs of the poorest part of the population were not prevalent. It was as if the framework of development research put brackets around the participants. It was interesting to note that the economists' much scorned trickle-down effect has now taken a prominent place in development research, with the belief that over time the new infrastructure will benefit the poorest, too. The time frame for this kind of development is never offered.

If a major goal of development research is to build institutions that will help abolish extreme poverty, researchers need to consider

in detail how the infrastructure promoted actually works with regard to extreme poverty. One answer is to gain an understanding of the mechanisms that exclude the extreme poor from taking part and try to address their faults. Another more radical answer lies in constructing new institutions directly tailored to the needs of the extreme poor. The latter is the most efficient if reduction of extreme poverty is the issue, although it may not be the most welcome in society at large. Measures to increase the specific infrastructure for the poorest were presented in a recent report on the need for legal protection of the basic rights to food, clean water, shelter and personal security. The report was accompanied by recommendations for financial and structural follow-up and sent out for consultation to a set of relevant decision-makers.⁴ Reactions were mainly negative: the preference was for a broader infrastructure such as visualised in the development paradigm to be prioritised. This is not surprising, but a fact which has to be taken into consideration when concern for the extreme poor is a major rationale in the development paradigm. For the development researchers it implies further explorations on how the needs of the poorest part of a population can gain political backing in the home countries, too.

The medical sciences have met a different scenario. They have not been directly involved in development research, except as planners in medical facilities. The profession's main interest has been in diseases rather than poverty. Analytically, the extreme poor are defined mainly as people with increased health risks and vulnerable carriers and victims of diseases. The medical profession has met the extreme poor with attacks on mass diseases and preventive medicine. This in turn has brought it into closer contact with the poorest populations, and it has contributed with more direct help to the extreme poor than most other professions. There have been few negative reactions from society at large. The poorest are considered by society to constitute a health risk, spreading contagious diseases that should be contained. While the extreme poor would benefit more from basic medical units located nearby, the new emphasis is on large, centrally located, high-tech hospitals. A growing middle class is taking advantage of expanding public goods, while the new hospitals provide at best only limited access for the extreme poor.

The architects of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) chose a different strategy where the development paradigm hardly

4 Øyen *et al.*, 2008, unpublished UNESCO document, at present not available.

played a role. The goals of reducing poverty in low development countries were clearly defined, the net cast wide in the sense that everybody falling below certain fairly low economic, educational and health standards was targeted, and powerful international and national organisations pledged to back the initiative. New infrastructure is expected to develop in the effort to meet the MDG goals. The present infrastructure is seen as performing a – so to speak – ‘reverse trickle-down effect’ when exposed to the needs of the poorest, and is expected to change accordingly. It is a daring experiment and it remains to be seen how it will develop. It is stated that the goals set for halving world poverty will be met by 2015. If the goals are reached, and several doubts have been voiced, the prediction is – in accordance with what has been said above – that those poor who reach or exceed the goals set by the MDGs will be those who are already a little better off, meaning that those living in extreme poverty are likely to be left behind once more.

The challenge for future development research lies in at least two areas. On the one hand it is necessary to define more precisely what is meant by extreme poverty, who the extreme poor are, who is supposed to benefit from the planned development, how they are supposed to benefit, and what they are likely to gain over a given period of time. On the other hand it is also necessary to look at the antagonists, those who do not see any advantage in reducing extreme poverty. As has already been mentioned there are many interests linked to upholding poverty and these need to be taken into account if extreme poverty is to be abolished or even reduced.

The human rights approach

The ideology of the human rights paradigm is based on the principle of indivisibility and interdependence. All human rights are considered to be equally important, as confirmed by the 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development, the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They are seen as so closely connected that they are inseparable and one cannot be given preference at the expense of another. It can be argued that when the principles of indivisibility and interdependence are applied, they work against the removal of extreme poverty.

The human rights framework has been established both theoretically and institutionally in a way that discourses on poverty and organisations working in the area of poverty reduction have

not accomplished. Legally, the status of human rights has acquired an international standing that the interests of the poor have not achieved and may never achieve on their own merit. At present there are close to one hundred independent national human rights institutes in the world which work in close co-operation on a wide set of human rights issues.⁵

Most human rights organisations link their work and arguments to poverty reduction, using a broad definition of poverty. International organisations use the human rights instruments in their arguments for eradication of poverty in general and extreme poverty in particular. Their arguments are well founded in empirical studies. For those who have worked with poor people and poverty issues there is no doubt that poverty encompasses the lack of basic human rights. The experience of people who live in poverty is one in which they are deprived of the most basic human rights such as the rights to food, shelter and work, not to speak of rights to education and health care, access to knowledge, technology and improved empowerment. Equally, the rights of vulnerable people are at greater risk of being violated. If human rights were fully respected, protected and fulfilled, mass poverty would become history.

Human rights span a wide array of rights embedded in the fundamental framework of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Over time these rights have been further developed and exemplified to address still more aspects of human deprivation. This ideology and well-wishing for all human beings have moved towards what at present looks like utopia. As a consequence, and in order to manage the many variables created by a still expanding human rights scenario, the concepts of 'progressive realisation' and 'core rights' have emerged. Progressive realisation refers to the fact that resources available for the implementation of even a reduced set of human rights are limited and priorities have to be made. The core rights concept refers to a hierarchy of needs where the fulfilment of certain rights is seen as more pertinent than others. Realistically, it cannot be expected that all human rights can be implemented at the same time, since full implementation not only implies that sufficient resources are available, but also requires that moral public backing and political will are in place. Therefore it is considered acceptable, although seen as a reluctant break with the principle

5 Some of the arguments here are based on Øyen, May and Tekaya, 2007, and Øyen *et al.*, 2005, including ch. VIII by B. A. Andreassen and A. Eide, 'Human Rights as an International Poverty Reduction Strategy'.

of indivisibility, for a step-by-step process of implementation of human rights to be recommended.

The concept of core human rights might have facilitated the relationship to poverty reduction if it had been more precisely defined. Poverty consists of many elements, often referred to as a complex web of deprivation. Those elements appear in different combinations and in varying strength. Likewise, the human rights toolbox exhibits an intricate web of instruments that have different effects in different settings. One of many challenges is to provide more precise definitions of the kind of poverty intended to be reduced, the kind of human rights instrument considered effective and the link between the two phenomena. There is no one strategy that fits all situations, cultures and populations.

The reality is that different organisations (and disciplines) practise their own version of core rights since they have different areas of responsibility and are able to attack poverty within the human rights framework mainly from their own specific kind of expertise. The UN system is divided into sub-organisations with different kinds of responsibilities that are all taking part in fighting poverty and implementing the MDGs. International organisations like the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Food Programme, for example, both have their major focus on hunger, while UNICEF focuses on child poverty. UNESCO has its major focus on education, science, culture and communication, and analysis of poverty and the promotion of poverty reduction is characterised by the features of their allocated arena.

In practice some rights are being promoted more strongly than others. The right to education, for example, has been carried forward through the entire UN system, global campaigns and broad-based mobilisations with slogans like 'Education for all'. Commitments were made at the World Education Forum to mobilise for poverty reduction through investments in basic education. Basic education is considered a human right in itself as well as a tool to achieve other human rights and reduce individual poverty. At the same time it can be argued that poverty is the greatest obstacle to education. Although there are still about a billion adults unable to read and write, the right to education has been successful in the sense that more and more children are actually going to school. However, many do not complete school and the quality of much basic education is not satisfactory. Girls, women and marginal groups, in particular, are often deprived of the right to education.

Other rights have not received the same attention, with poten-

tially negative consequences. For example, since protection of cultural rights does not have the same standing and organisational backing as the protection of educational rights, marginal groups such as indigenous and tribal peoples are often actively excluded from mainstream initiatives, disregarded by policy-makers and unclear about their rights and the way in which they can benefit from poverty-reducing initiatives. In these circumstances poverty may persist in the face of poverty-reducing policies that fail to take account of these social dynamics.

There are at least two trends within the picture presented above that work against the efficient reduction of extreme poverty. Both are connected with the extent and richness of the human rights system and the underlying principles of indivisibility and interdependence of rights. The human rights system can be seen as a system 'sans frontières', in the sense that it transcends not only geographical barriers but relates to all walks of human life and offers remedies to all kinds of violence, injustices, inflicted miseries and deprivations.

It is in this setting that choices have to be made if the abolition of extreme poverty is the target. This means that first of all it is necessary to decide who the extreme poor are. Taking into consideration that millions of people die every year from being deprived of the most basic necessities for survival, it seems obvious that securing the right to the individual's survival must be the first priority. Extreme poverty within a human rights setting translates into a lack of basic rights to food, clean water, shelter and personal security. This set of minimum survival rights must be the baseline for any poverty-reducing strategy and is necessary as a first step in the progressive realisation of human rights. This set of rights stands out as absolute and universal and can in principle not be overlooked by any government that has put its signature to the human rights agreements. Unless the right to survival is fulfilled first, all other kinds of poverty reduction become meaningless. Investments in education cannot be exploited fully. Participation in the formal economy will be very limited, and there will be no surplus energy among those deprived of basic rights to take part in political activities to improve their own situation, exercise free speech, make use of public goods and develop human capital further.

However, basic rights tend to be overlooked, among all the other rights, descriptions of poverty and principles guiding human rights implementation. It seems that human rights experts are seldom content to concentrate on these few basic rights. Still more rights

are added, ones that can be called second- and third-level rights in relation to extreme poverty, in that they are important for the further development of the individual life situation once survival has been secured. After a while they seem to take priority. Poor people need to be 'empowered' to escape poverty. 'Fundamental freedoms' are essential for poor people. Trade union rights are 'equally important' for poverty reduction. The poor need to organise to 'improve their position'. They need the 'right to make legal claims' and help to get out of 'social exclusion', 'increase their cultural heritage', and so on. Many human rights NGOs specialise in one of these second- or third-level rights, as we have called them here.

All violations of human rights, many of which affect large populations, are important to take into consideration in the implementation of human rights and the battle against poverty. However, paradoxical as it may sound, they deflect attention from the abolition of extreme poverty and the basic right to survival. Somehow, the less deprived populations become more rewarding to work with; certain human rights get more attention, receive more financial backing, or are more likely to result in positive outcomes. Large organisations have concentrated on certain kinds of poverty and certain human rights, such as interest groups working with gender issues, labour organisations working with labour issues, political organisations working with freedom of speech and mass mobilisation, not to forget the disciplines zooming in on certain forms of poverty.

These different actors set the agenda, influence political actors and donors, and have an impact on the public discourse, which all in turn directly or indirectly influences the choices of the research agenda. The abolition of extreme poverty is a harsh agenda to tackle. It is not made easier within a human rights framework that refrains from setting operational priorities and makes its way into international agreements through imprecise language and strategies of indivisibility and interdependence that leave behind their major goal of the abolition of poverty.

Reflections

It is a paradox that three of the major paradigms of relevance to global poverty research are not in the forefront with an operational focus on extreme poverty in the South. There seem to be several reasons for this, all interlinked.

It is an underplayed fact that investments in efficient reduction of extreme poverty in a developing society are in several ways a

bad investment. It is extremely costly to bring large groups of people who live at the subsistence level up to a level where they can function as other citizens and take part in society. First of all their most basic needs must be met, needs such as sufficient provision of food for the whole family, access to a scarce and expensive resource such as clean water, and a kind of housing that will offer protection from the weather as well as a minimum of personal security. That alone costs enormous sums of money in a society where a quarter or maybe as much as half of the population can be defined as living in extreme poverty. In addition comes what can be called a second-level investment in education, health and development of skills that will enable the extreme poor to take part in the labour market. The time frame is at least a decade, and more likely two, three or four, depending on the level of achievement planned for. Unskilled or low-skilled labour is in surplus in developing countries, and the infrastructure called for to absorb masses of new workers over a relatively short period increases the costs. The total cost of such investments has not been calculated. The outcome from a little developed society's point of view is meagre. The enormous expenditures required for efficient reduction of extreme poverty need to be measured against limited resources that can be invested elsewhere with a more immediate outcome and an improved infrastructure that benefits other segments of society. For the non-poor and the not-so-poor in a developing society the first choice is not eradication of extreme poverty. So far, the discipline of economics in conjunction with other disciplines has not brought a realistic costing of the removal of extreme poverty to the fore and given it a focus in research.

The relative lack of interest in research on extreme poverty may also be partly due to the fact that strong forces in both developed and developing countries' societies have little interest in poverty reduction in general or the reduction of extreme poverty in particular. Within this picture it has to be acknowledged that certain interests are actually served by upholding poverty and a population living on the fringes of society (Øyen, 2004). In the rhetoric, poverty is usually portrayed as negative not only for the individuals themselves but also for other members of the society, as well as for society at large and its future development. However, the fact is that widespread interests are actually served by upholding poverty. These interests are economic (for example, access to cheap and unorganised labour), political (for example, uninformed and non-demanding voters) and social (for example, the need for underdogs and targets

for moral stereotyping). These interests can be so strong that the actors promoting them not only interfere with poverty-reducing measures; some actually contribute to producing poverty in order to defend their sphere of interest. To accommodate these interests, donors, governments and international agencies present their pro-poor plans within a framework of harmony – as if everybody were in favour of poverty-reducing measures (Øyen, 2004). There is no mention of counterproductive forces. Researchers stress that a framework of conflict provides a more adequate base for analysis in moving towards more efficient poverty reduction. The harmonious, benevolent official documents, with their unprovocative and imprecise language, tend to interfere with those more realistic research agendas that depend on financing and access to data.

The fragmented approach to the study of poverty research is coloured by the lack of precision of the concept of extreme poverty and the heterogeneity of the voices calling for eradication, abolition, reduction and alleviation of extreme poverty as well as all other kinds of poverty. The calls come from many sources such as churches, donors, political organisations, moral and ethical voices. All have their reasons for why it is important to do away with extreme poverty, what causes such poverty and what it takes to remedy such a social ill. As long as they use the same wording – that is, extreme poverty – it is taken for granted that they are speaking about the same phenomenon. That is not necessarily the case. The vagueness and dualism in the concepts add to the vagueness of the research agenda. They play a contradictory role insofar as they help to downplay the more determined defenders of abolition of extreme poverty and those who are likely to have the strongest interest in promoting research on extreme poverty.

Researchers may also have a personal interest in avoiding projects on extreme poverty. Involvement in extreme poverty is altogether a bad academic investment. To do research on extreme poverty is exceedingly demanding on time, manpower, background knowledge, academic skills and resources. Extreme poverty is a complicated phenomenon that is made up of an intricate set of variables, causes and manifestations. No comprehensive theoretical framework is available to sort out this complexity in a satisfactory manner. The disciplines are at the outset oriented only towards certain limited aspects of extreme poverty. Researchers working to study the fuller picture of extreme poverty quickly become aware of those shortcomings and have to find a way of living with an incomplete understanding of the problem they are studying. That

in itself is frustrating for any serious scientist. At the same time researchers are often expected to produce results that can lead to poverty-reducing strategies. One compromise is to sort out either a limited number of manageable variables concerning extreme poverty, or to move sideways into less severe and complex forms of poverty. We all need to succeed in what we are doing, and for that purpose research on extreme poverty may at present not offer sufficient success (Øyen and Jafar Javan, 1997).

To do away with extreme poverty and all the suffering involved is one of the most important challenges of our time. Relevant and reliable knowledge based on research is indispensable for the development of efficient policies to meet the challenge. The research community is a key player here. In spite of all the obstacles, some of which are outlined above, the research community is a vital part of the answer to a world problem.

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