

# Introducing the *Glossary*

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Constructing a glossary on poverty seems an endless 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 authors have to put a stop to the process; or, better, they have to decide that this *Glossary* is a first step in a process which may lead to a more perfect glossary. To this end, readers are invited to comment on the definitions that follow and to submit definitions which are still lacking.<sup>1</sup>

This invitation is extended in particular to readers outside the Western realm of influence. There is no denying the fact that this *Glossary* leans towards Western definitions, although much effort has been made to include non-Western concepts. The Western dominance is partly due to the long-established tradition of poverty research in Northern Europe, most notably in Britain, and in the discipline of economics, both of which have set the standards for poverty definitions all over the world. National understandings of poverty have often taken on the colour of external definitions, in spite of local variations in culture and economic circumstances.

Another driving force towards homogeneity has been the search for a universal measuring stick for the incidence and depth of poverty. If such a universal instrument of precision were to be found, it would allow for comparisons between groups, regions and nations and over time, and it would be a powerful tool in poverty analysis and policy-making. The many attempts to establish poverty lines can be seen as one example of the search for measuring sticks, however inadequate they may be.

The alternative is to learn how to live with complexity and accept the fact that the lives of the poor are as manifold as the lives of the non-poor. Poverty cannot be described using only one or two variables. Rather, a great diversity in poverty manifestations is the rule, and the many different poverty definitions in the *Glossary* reflect the hetero-

geneity which is found in real life. Poverty researchers and policy-makers have tried to develop definitions which suit their specific purposes, whether it be a causal analysis of poverty in an urban district or a bureaucratic distribution of scarce resources to alleviate poverty. Sometimes definitions developed by researchers and policy-makers overlap, thereby strengthening the usefulness of the definition. The diversity of definitions also reflects the fact that different disciplines favour different understandings of poverty. Psychologists may focus on coping strategies in a poor household, while economists focus on income and expenditure in the very same household. The two pictures which emerge may have little in common. Likewise, policy-makers also have a vested interest in how poverty is defined. If resources are scarce or the public understanding of poverty is limited to moral explanations, a narrow definition is likely to gain ground. When resources and political goodwill increase, a broader definition is likely to be adopted.

Researchers need precise tools for their analyses. So far, much of poverty analysis has suffered from a lack of precise definitions which are both valid and reliable. This results partly from a stereotyping of poverty. The existence of a general consensus about the poverty phenomenon has been taken for granted, so the poverty in question has not been made explicit and defined in a precise manner. Partly this is due to an uncritical use of standard definitions of poverty which have been transferred from one area of analysis to another without a critical examination of the contextual limitations of such transfers.

Comparative studies call for poverty definitions that allow for the same understanding of poverty in the cultures that are to be compared. If the same understanding cannot be obtained, it is a minimum requirement that the different cultural interpretations of the poverty concept be made explicit and visible, and that those differences be integrated in the final poverty analysis.

Through its presentation of the large variety of definitions available, as well as the references to the contexts in which they have been used, the *Glossary* widens the choice for the observant researcher and offers a shortcut into the enormous literature on poverty. Read carefully it can be used also to demonstrate the point that the choice of one definition rather than another will provide quite different results.

In selecting relevant poverty definitions the net has been cast widely: the *Glossary* contains almost two hundred entries. Some of these are on the fringes of poverty issues, and others will be familiar only to those academics who work within a certain disciplinary definition of poverty. Some are carved out in a detailed manner, while others are presented in a more sketchy way. Some of the definitions now have only a

historical value, while others are currently *en vogue*. The aim has been to present as broad and diversified a picture as possible, across time and space, to provide inspiration for a rethinking of poverty concepts.

The Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (CROP) is an international network of poverty researchers whose major objective is to improve the quality of poverty research and to promote comparative studies on poverty.<sup>2</sup> One of CROP's objectives is to develop analytical instruments which can facilitate comparative studies on poverty in developed and developing countries. The first such instrument was an overview of researchers working in the field of poverty and the specific projects in which they are engaged.<sup>1</sup> The second instrument was an international state-of-the-art review of where poverty research and thinking about poverty stand in different regions of the world.<sup>4</sup> *The International Glossary on Poverty* is the third instrument in this series and will facilitate comparative studies in poverty throughout the world.

The *Glossary* has been prepared with the financial assistance of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) and the generous academic assistance of leading scholars in poverty research who helped to identify definitions and write entries. The Editorial Board for the *Glossary* helped set the whole process in motion and followed it through to the end. We are extremely grateful for this assistance, without which the *Glossary* would not have appeared.

## Notes

1. You may send your comments to the CROP Secretariat, Fosswinkelsgate 7, N-5007 Bergen, Norway; fax: 47-5558-9745; e-mail: [crop@uib.no](mailto:crop@uib.no).

2. For more information about CROP, visit the website [www.crop.org](http://www.crop.org) or write to the CROP Secretariat.

3. T. Ewoldt-Leicher and A. F. Marks (eds) (1995), *Poverty: Research Projects, Institutes, Persons*, Tilburg, Bergen and Amsterdam.

4. E. Øyen, A. S. Samad and S. M. Miller (eds) (1996), *Poverty: A Global Review. Handbook on International Poverty Research*, Oslo and Paris.