POVERTY AND PROSPERITY
LOCAL AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES
A RESEARCH PROSPECT

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Perceptions of Africa are framed by images and concepts of poverty. These images and concepts are powerful and for that reason often go unquestioned. They are taken for granted. However, like all images and concepts, they are created within particular traditions by particular people for particular reasons. They reflect certain points of view—usually those of governments, aid-organisations or journalists. And they have very real consequences—not only for the international community's perception and policy vis-a-vis "The African Poor", but also African people's perceptions of themselves and their relationships with others. Images do not just reflect reality, they also create and reproduce it. So the first step in any research on African poverty must be to examine the concept of poverty itself and to see how our understanding of it influences our actions and policy decisions.

The concept of poverty in, for example, its dictionary definition is in fact a very complex and multi-layered one. Beyond its simple economic sense of a "lack of material resources" it refers to a variety of social, corporeal, moral and religious states. To be poor is to be ill, unfortunate, colourless, infertile, of a lower class, to have renounced comfort as a religious vow, to be unproductive, humble, lacking in any way, pitiable, abject and a variety of other things, each playing on a slightly different register of meaning, each conjuring up a slightly different set of connotations. And in all contexts the concept of poverty is only comprehensible in relation to the opposed concept of "prosperity".

In view of this fact, it is extremely interesting that the concept of poverty employed in aid and development circles, and applied with such ease and certainty to Africa, is in fact a very thin one. To be poor is a material and entirely measurable condition which is related only to income and nutritional intake. Poverty is a thing of coins, calories and nothing more. This is so, of course, because economists and their models dominate the discourse of development.
My point here is not that economic models are necessarily wrong or that coins and calories are not important indices of poverty but that this economists' discourse on poverty which dominates development is a seriously reductive one. It appears to offer a simple and revealing categorisation of areas, populations and their needs but by making income and nutrition the only measures for complex social realities, it can just as easily come to conceal and misrepresent important social and cultural processes that define and create poverty.

The very simplicity and self-evident reasonableness of this concept of poverty tends to blind us to the powerful and far-from-simple cultural imagery that collects around it, both in African cultures and in our own. Take for instance the icon images of poverty linked to the concept—the skeletal famine victim, the desiccated landscapes, the swollen-bellied children in refugee camps, and so on. The icon victim tends to be gendered; she is a woman, often accompanied by children. This is an image which resonates within a long-standing European images of poverty in which women and children are powerless, dependant and therefore innocent—absolute victims worthy of our pity and aid. This image has had a great deal of influence on women being defined as "the poorest of the poor" by aid organisations and their being targeted by poverty programmes all over Africa. It goes without saying that in many African contexts, women are not the poorest of the poor and may in fact have central roles in the local economy.

This is just one example amongst many of the ways definitions of poverty can be co-opted by cultural imagery and inadvertently trigger a series of gut-reactions and assumptions which in turn influence policy decisions. It is this sort of process which we in development research need urgently to understand.

Let us take another example of the way in which perceptions and definitions of poverty can be distorted by extraneous factors. This, like the earlier example, focuses our attention on the process of interpretation and the ways that context and cultural tradition influence it.

In his discussions of "rural development tourism" Robert Chambers has shown how aid and development professionals, along with many others, can be misled in their diagnoses of poverty by biases inherent in observation. Take, for instance, the "rural development tourist"—typically an aid or development professional. The "spatial bias" of rural development tours leads these people to be shown above all urban areas and those close to roads as opposed to inaccessible hinterlands. Equally, there is a "seasonal bias" which means that rural development tours are common in dry seasons when travel in many areas is at its easiest. There tends to be a "project bias" in that outsiders rarely get taken to areas where there is no development project. The "person bias" leads to development workers being introduced to men
rather than women and to local elite rather than the genuinely poor and underdeveloped. "Diplomatic biases" mean that outsiders are often excluded from certain restricted areas and "professional bias" leads them to focus solely on their area of professional expertise and interest. Together these biases tend to lead to an under-estimation of poverty and can even lead to whole groups of poor people being ignored.

"Disaster tourism" on the other hand, tends to lead to an over-estimation of poverty. Journalists and aid-relief workers in "disaster" will positively seek out the most wretched and heart-rending victims because they provide the best stories and photos, the most dramatic contexts for political intervention, and so forth. Rather than being concealed from view, poverty is exaggerated and takes centre-stage (see De Waal, 1989).

It is very interesting to note that some of these biases influencing the interpretation of poverty tend to act very differently in the contexts of different types of society. As we saw above, the spatial and seasonal biases inherent in rural development tourism tend to lead to the underestimation of rural agrarian poverty. In the case of pastoral societies located in arid areas, these same biases lead to quite the opposite effect. Since the dry season is the time of greatest scarcity in the pastoral calendar it is the time when people appear to be poorest, so that here the seasonal bias works towards an over-estimation of poverty. Similarly, the spatial bias towards "Town and Tarmac" here has the opposite effect for it is precisely by roadsides and in towns that the outcasts and poor of pastoral society congregate. The migrations to roads and urban centres where begging, mission help and waged labour are possible options is an established strategy for coping with scarcity when all other avenues have failed. The other thing that development tourists may not be aware of is that this is often a temporary strategy and that these same people will return to the hinterland when the period of scarcity is over. All in all then, the same seasonal biases which led to the under-estimation of agrarian poverty will lead to the over-estimation of pastoral poverty.

I have briefly discussed some of the ways that interpretations and diagnoses of poverty in the contexts of development research may be biased, and the ways that different societies present themselves, or are presented, to outsiders. But the problems of development research to define poverty are not only located in the relation between African society and outside observers. The internal organisation of many African societies themselves presents many serious problems to any simple and straightforward definitions of poverty.

The task of development research is not only to explore its own discourse of poverty but also to comprehend African discourses of poverty and look at the organisations and constructions of poverty operating within different African societies. It is instructive, by way of example, to contrast small-scale
pastoral societies of East Africa with the more centralised society of Christian Ethiopia and the large-scale Savannah societies organised around Islam.

Pastoral societies tend to conceive of wealth very much in terms of cattle rather than coins. They contrast the prosperous life of their nomadic camps with the "poor" life of foragers, farmers and fisher folks and others who they conceive of as existing on the fringes of society. Irrespective of income or nutrition, the cultural constructions surrounding cattle herders place them at the "centre" of society and portray them as "rich", while others who are at the periphery, in the "bush", are regarded as "poor".

In marked contrast to this construction, societies with Islamic and Christian traditions place poverty, ideologically and literally, at the "centre" of their society. Fasting and self-mortification, charity and alms-giving are core cultural institutions and take place physically in central spaces of its towns and cities. Here the "poor"—a category which includes monks, religious students, slaves, cripples, artisans, beggars and barren women—are publicly placed at the centre of social life. Core institutions attract them into the cities from miles around and make them highly visible.

While these societies are opposed in the ways they situate "the poor", they are united by the way in which the poor of both worlds form a heterogeneous and mobile category. In neither society do the poor constitute a "class" with clear and rigid boundaries as, for instance, has often been the case in Europe. Poverty in Europe has often been a direct result of relations to land and capital—relations which created a landless proletariat from which it would be very hard to escape. Crossing the class boundaries around poverty typically took generations.

In African societies it is typically quite the opposite. Poverty and prosperity are about relations, not to land and capital, but to labour (see Iliffe, 1987). Prosperity is created by access to the labour of large numbers of people who are usually kin. Systems of kinship are thus at the core of the processes creating and defining poverty and wealth. Structural poverty resulting from land scarcity appeared only slowly in Africa and continues to combine with lack of labour to produce specific patterns of poverty. In situations where the welfare state is weak or non-existent, close relationships continue to be of central importance. It is here that an understanding of the workings of kinship and family, of the ways that kin networks can be both a buffer against poverty and create it by creating gender and generation forms of inequality, is essential to the agenda of development research in Africa.

To conclude this overview of my programme I would like briefly to draw together some of the threads of the discussion under the heading of a grounded theory of discourse analysis which I feel should be central to the programme’s research into poverty in Africa. This type of analysis is certainly not intended to replace the more traditional economic or ecological
analyses with which development researchers are already familiar, but to provide an indispensable accompaniment to them.

As many of my comments have already indicated, the key to this type of analysis is a focus not on measurement or other "objective" modes of description but a careful examination of the language, the types of thought and imagery, which we and others use to describe and interpret the realities we seek to understand. Discourse analysis is, for instance, an analysis of the ways that "objective" descriptions are co-opted by different ideological agendas. It is about the ways descriptions are created and then used to reinforce opinion or change it, to legitimate or deny, to define realities and the actions appropriate to them. Discourse analysis concerns itself less with the question of whether a particular discourse is true than with the question of its social, political and economic effects. It is indispensable for helping us to understand how: 1) social identities are fashioned and altered over time; 2) how social groups are created and change over time; 3) how social inequalities are maintained and 4) the possibilities for emancipatory social change and political practice.

1) "Poor" is not simply an abstract condition but one of many social identities which an individual may possess. Like all social identities, it is fashioned from a complex of cultural meanings and interpretations. As I have stressed, poverty can mean many different things in many different contexts; in order to work with it we in development research must understand what this identity means, how it is constructed and how it changes in specific social and historical contexts.

2) Discourse analysis can also help us to understand how people organise themselves under the banner of a social identity such as "the poor" and how other identities such as those of gender and race intersect with this banner. It is also about the very real effects of discourses and identities in creating or preventing access to material resources.

3) Discourse analysis also asks questions about how particular discourses become legitimated while others are pushed into the background. The power to define reality is a crucial aspect of power and one of the major means by which certain groups can be foregrounded and empowered while others are silenced and suppressed. We need to understand how this works in different contexts to keep the poor in their place and

4) to understand how counter-discourses can be mobilised to effect change.

THE GENEALOGY OF THE POVERTY CONCEPT
One of the projects I am setting up within the programme aims to investigate systematically the concept of poverty in European traditions. As I hope is
clear by now, this concept—central to the whole programme and to so much development planning and policy—can by no means be taken for granted. It therefore seems appropriate to delve into the history of the concept and the important changes it has undergone in order to understand the way it is currently used by development professionals.

The idea, then, is to investigate the historical development of the concept in European traditions—how it has been influenced by different discourses about race, class and gender; how it was affected by colonial encounters with non-European cultures; how it is shaped by different political idioms of dependency and subordination. This is absolutely original research—nothing of the kind has previously been undertaken—and will undoubtedly provide novel perspectives on the problem which can then reshape our thinking on poverty and development strategies in relation to it.

I am already undertaking preliminary research myself and am also arranging cross-disciplinary seminars which will bring together not only economists, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists and historians but also theologians, literary critics, art historians and philosophers. The papers from these seminars will, of course, be published in the hope that they will become important readings in social theory and hopefully also in the field of development.

**REDISTRIBUTION SYSTEMS**

Another research project which will be carried out within the programme aims to develop and refine a concept which I have already started working on in association with Henrietta Moore, Professor at the London School of Economics and Director of the Gender Institute there. This research arises from our many years of work in East Africa, both in development-related contexts and anthropological research, and from our perception of the shortcomings of the sorts of economic models employed in the formulation of development strategies. It is an attempt to develop a more refined model which would more adequately deal with the complex social realities that development professionals are faced with.

Systems of redistribution form the core of the concept. The idea is that in order to understand poverty and inequality and formulate adequate responses to them, we have to understand the ways that assets are redistributed, both at the local-level and at the macro-level of the state. Here we are speaking not only of material assets, the stuff of economic analyses, but also the symbolic and social assets which are so crucial to the way power operates in any real social system.

One of our major dissatisfactions has been with the discourse of "needs" which dominates much development thinking. It is commonplace to talk of these "needs" in any given target population as if they were self-evident and
it was the simple task of development projects to satisfy them. This is far from
the truth. Few, perhaps, would contest the basic nature of "thin" needs such
as food, clean water and medical care and most would agree that govern-
ments and/or agencies have a responsibility to provide for them. But as soon
as we move beyond these basics, where need claims become "thicker", con-
troversy sets in. For instance, if nomads "need" education and health care, do
they "need" to be treated in hospitals and educated in schools? Do they
"need" to be settled? And so on. The more specific need-claims become, and
the more they go beyond the simple criteria of physical survival, the more
conflict they generate.

The fact is that the needs-discourse is far too simplistic to cope adequately
with the complexities of real social and political worlds in which there are
fiercely competing and contradictory claims, in which different groups vie to
have their claims legitimated and enforced, and in which racial, ethnic, class
and gender inequalities determine whether one's voice is heard or not.

It does not help to explore needs alone: we must look at rights and inter-
ests too, and it is here that we begin to unpack the true subtleties and com-
plexities of the social worlds we are trying to understand. Needs, rights and
interests are political issues and always ardently contested. It is the aim of
our concept of "redistribution system" to look at the way that these contested
discourses of needs, rights and interests intersect with the ways material
resources are distributed. It will explore the way claims are formulated, put
forward, adjudicated and either supported or ignored. It will also look at the
resulting resource flows.

One important aspect of the model is that it will seek to comprehend the
multiple and interpenetrating links between the local level and the broader
level of the state. At the local level, our concept presupposes that observable
social relations, with the patterns of exchange and redistribution which lead
to poverty and prosperity, are founded on a certain relation between the
processes of productive and reproductive labour. These process are, of
course, in every respect gendered; a fact that makes the understanding of
gender discourses pivotal to our whole enterprise. At these local levels in our
respective fields—Kenya and Zambia—we want to investigate the ways that
redistribution systems work and how they are channelled by discourses of
gender, kinship and power.

We want to focus upon complex effects of the state upon the system of
redistribution. State policies shape and are shaped by many kinds of dis-
courses, practices, and institutions—global, national and local. These will be
the subject of our research on the macro-level. The task would be to see how
the state apparatus determines ideas about what sorts of legal subjects under
the state women and men should be as well as regulating the relations
between them—for example in terms of conjugal contracts. State legislation,
ranging from marriage and property laws to those pertaining to business corporations and labour unions and the management of natural resources, is an integral part of any societies system of redistribution. This is because it influences the sets of social relationships and social interaction which are primarily responsible for maintaining the relationship between productive and reproductive labour. This in turn creates the necessity for redistribution along the whole continuum from the household to the state and beyond. In other words, the ways the state classifies its citizens, and regulates the relations between them determine each category's influence on state actions and access to state resources. This seems to us to be an important field for research.

The above are some of the considerations we will be addressing at the broadest level of analysis. At the micro-level within the system of redistribution we will focus attention on the household and suggest a novel way of analysing the interlinked arenas of 'public' and 'private'. The relationship between productive and reproductive labour, and the system of redistribution which it creates, is also crucial for understanding the relationship between households and the broader social processes and institutions in which they are enmeshed. Our focus on the system of redistribution will allow us to examine how gender relations within the household determine, and are determined by, extra-domestic networks and resource flows. We will view households as nodal points in a network of social relations and resource flows rather than as separate units or sets of overlapping units.

Competing discourses about rights and needs will also be stratified and organised along patterns of dominance and subordination. This is because societies are stratified, differentiated into social groups with unequal status, power and access to resources, cross-cut by major axes of inequality, such as gender, age, race, class, ethnicity and religion. Some discourses are hegemonic, authorised and sanctioned by the state, whilst others are non-hegemonic, disqualified and discounted. Focusing on the effects of the state, as they work themselves out in discursive fields and practices, we will be able to examine the politics of the interpretation of needs, rights and interests. We will look at the implications of need claims, right claims and interest claims in contested networks. We will ask who interprets the needs in question and from what perspective, and in light of what interests, for who gets to establish authoritative "thick" definitions of people's needs, rights and interests is in itself a political issue (Fraser 1989:164).

In short: the aim of the proposed research is to develop a comparative model of the system of redistribution which would be appropriate for the analysis of gender-state relations. The system of redistribution is founded on the fact of exchange and is structured predominantly by gender, but also by class, ethnicity, religion, occupation, etc. It provides the context in which to
analyse the bargaining and negotiation processes between individuals and groups on different levels of society. The focus will be on a novel approach to the problem of 'needs', integrating what we call the politics of need interpretation with the politics of distribution and need-satisfactions. This is because "needs talk" proliferates throughout all the links in the state–citizen chain by serving as a medium for the making and contesting of political claims: it is an idiom in which political conflict is played out and through which identities and rights are defined and contested. Inequalities are symbolically elaborated and challenged through needs claims, access to resources is allocated and resource flows are directed. Most significantly, the analytical framework proposed here, with its focus on the system of redistribution, will help us to show how discourses of needs, rights and interests are not just talk. They are also practical acts and interventions with an enormous political and economic impact in the development process.

We have chosen the pastoral Turkana and the agrarian Bemba not only because we already have in-depth knowledge about the working of these societies through several periods of intensive studies, but because they represent contrastive types of production regime, having inherent growth potentials and forms of accumulations that sharply differ. Each case combines the basic production and reproduction components of labour, land and capital in a specific way, influencing their social strategies and, by extension, the system of redistribution in specific ways (see Broch-Due, 1988). The social organisation of the Turkana and the Bemba also differs in its kinship and marriage system, division of labour by sex, age and property relations. They have different ideas and practices concerning gender and, not least, very different histories in terms of their relationship with the state. While the Bemba have a long history of labour migration and maize-cropping which has positively influenced their integration into the Zambian state, the pastoral Turkana exemplify a group whose encounters with the state, both in the past and the present, have been very tense. Indeed the Turkana have experienced a process of marginalisation and poverty concomitant with heavy investments of government funds in commercialised fishing and farming—all projects designed by the state in order to settle nomadic Turkana and move them away from livestock herding. What the Turkana and Bemba share, however, is the imposition of state structures and procedures that are essentially of the same design. They have also been confronted with the same aid agencies and development inputs. These differences and similarities make these two communities particularly useful as contrastive case studies for the testing of our general model.

In addition we want to prompt African researchers to undertake original fieldwork in other locations in East Africa. We also hope to be able to include case studies from Uganda and Tanzania. The research will be carried out in
conjunction with institutions and researchers in East Africa with whom we both have a long-standing knowledge and history of co-operation.

THE VIDEO DIARY PROJECT

Visual media imagery is extraordinarily powerful in shaping perceptions of the world. To many people both in Africa and the wider international community, "African Poverty" is summed up by certain standard media representations—swollen-bellied children, skeletal figures in a drought-stricken landscape, pitiable scenes from refugee camps, and so forth. These images are so powerful and affecting that they reduce rather than stimulate further questions and critical examination.

The other notable feature of these images is that they are created and transmitted mostly by foreign journalists and aid-workers. In the production of images, Africans thus appear as objects of representation, rarely as its subjects.

The simple aim of this audio-visual project is to reverse the equation—to explore different African perceptions of poverty and wealth by giving people in selected African communities the opportunity to make their own images of their world and communicate their own visions of poverty and wealth. The idea is that these visions will provide important material which will move beyond not only the standard repertoire of media images of African poverty but also the equally standardised vocabulary which has come to dominate both local and international discourse on the subject. By now, many Africans at the local level have come to be well-versed in aid- and development-agency discourses about poverty. When questioned many will effortlessly reproduce this discourse, knowing that it attracts interest and funding. By encouraging them to make visual representations of their condition, rather than verbal ones, we stand a much greater chance of gaining fresh perspectives on poverty.

Video technology is now cheap and widely available. This has given rise to one of the most interesting media developments of recent years—the rise of the video-diary format, a format which empowers people to make their own representations of their lives rather than to have them always represented by others.

This project proposes to extend this to communities in different parts of Africa, giving a few people basic instruction in the use of video and encouraging them to make video portraits of their own worlds. Since concepts of poverty and wealth are culturally constructed it will be extremely interesting to see the different ways in which different communities conceptualise and portray them. However there are not only widely different cultural visions between communities but also different perspectives within each community. In any community people have different access to both material and
non-material resources—for instance knowledge and the power to have one's interpretation of reality acknowledged. These differences profoundly affect people's experience of everyday life.  

By providing cameras to people positioned differently within any local arena, for instance in terms of gender or generation, the project will be able to highlight these different perspectives and experiences of poverty and wealth. The first aim of the project is thus to gather and investigate a variety of African images of poverty which go beyond the standard repertoire of media images and to portray important differences that exist in definitions and concepts of poverty. The second aim is to move beyond this to show how it is that these different definitions, ranging from those common in the international development community to those at the local level, interact and influence each other. To this end we will encourage aid workers and government officials to make video diaries communicating their vision of poverty and wealth and compare them to those of local people. We thus hope to investigate the divergences and interactions between people situated at different points on the local-global spectrum so as to deepen understanding of the types of negotiations and/or conflict between different perspectives which actually determine the politics of redistribution in these circumstances. A third aim is to create a framing film which would follow the course of the video-diary project. The idea here is that the setting up of the project—the training of local video-makers, the discussions about what they film, etc.—will in itself be a form of action research stimulating a great deal of local debate about what constitutes poverty, how to go about filming it, and so forth. This debate will be of great interest and will also be recorded on film.  

The overall aim of the project is to create a series of films which would constitute invaluable research documents for the project. These would deepen our understanding of the ways poverty is locally defined, enacted and reproduced and the ways different perspectives on it interact and influence each other. The project would create visual documents accompanied by texts on their interpretation which together would be an invaluable research resource for the centre. These will be incorporated into a multi-media, interactive data-base which will provide a means by which many of the problems of development could be strikingly communicated to researchers, aid-workers and the public at large. The aim is to create publications and films that would be perfectly suitable for both TV broadcast and teaching, and therefore be powerful means of influencing international perceptions of poverty and policies in relation to it.
References


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Aims and Scope

Poverty and Prosperity in Africa: Local and Global Perspectives is a series of occasional papers that seek to scrutinise the different perceptions, policies and practices carried by the interrelated concepts of poverty and prosperity. The series seeks to subject social and cultural reality to critical analysis and to present work that is creative, challenging and sometimes controversial. Above all, it aims to be a pace-setter for the development of fresh analytical ways of understanding and dealing with the problems of poverty.

All disciplines within the social sciences and the humanities are within the series’ interest, but we are also glad to publish papers which blend the approach of these with those of the natural sciences as long as it is relevant to the scope of the series. We welcome both longer and shorter manuscripts in a form accessible to practitioners and policy-makers as well as to an academic audience.

Notes for Contributors

- Manuscripts should be typed double-spaced with wide margins, on one side of the paper only. Authors are advised to keep one copy of their manuscript for reference.

- Illustrations, tables and footnotes should be submitted with the manuscript on separate sheets.

- The title should be brief, typed on a separate sheet and the author’s name should be typed on the line below the title; the affiliation and address should follow on the next line. In the case of co-authors, respective addresses should be clearly indicated. Correspondence and proofs for correction will be sent to the first-named author, unless otherwise indicated.

- The body of the manuscript should be preceded by an Abstract (maximum length 100 words) which should be a summary of the entire paper, not of the conclusion alone.

- The papers should be reasonably subdivided into sections and, if necessary, subsections.

- All references should be arranged in alphabetic order and grouped together at the end of the paper.

Journal references should be arranged thus:


Book references should be given as follows:


In the text, references should be cited by the author’s name and the year in parentheses (Smith 1979). Where there are two or more references to one author in the same year, the following form should be used: (Smith 1965a) or (Smith 1965b). Where references include three or more authors the form (Smith et al.) should be used.
This Institute encourages and conducts scientific research and studies on Africa in the Nordic countries. It is a documentation centre for African research and disseminates information about contemporary African affairs. The institute employs around 40 people.

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