

## 1 We Don't Intend to be Party Poopers!

People who read and write about poverty in poor countries have cause to celebrate. Poverty is back on the international development agenda – perhaps higher than it has ever been. Working through the OECD, the major aid donors have committed themselves to a series of social development targets that include halving, by 2015, the proportion of people in developing countries who live in extreme poverty. Bilateral aid donors, animated in particular by Clare Short, the UK Secretary of State for International Development, have defined poverty reduction as *the* aid and development goal. In 2001 the World Bank will publish a decennial *World Development Report* on Poverty that will reflect a more generous and flexible attitude to defining poverty and understanding its causes and remedies than did its predecessor, the 1990 Report. The 1990 Report elevated into international development orthodoxy the conservative New Poverty Agenda, comprising 'pro-poor growth', better public services for the poor, and 'safety nets' (only) for those who really need them. That New Poverty Agenda, along with many other neo-liberal orthodoxies of the 1980s and early 1990s, is withering before our eyes. We are in the midst of rapid political and ideological shifts at the global level and within the domain of international development policy. Whatever the outcome, we can at least celebrate the opportunity to help define anti-poverty policies that are less narrow and mean in spirit than the save-taxpayers'-money-at-all-costs ideas that inspired neo-liberal policies. Why then are we talking of spoiling the party rather than joining it? There are three reasons.

First, what we have to celebrate is a change in attitude and policy in international aid and development organisations, not some great breakthrough in actually doing anything to reduce poverty.

Second, the influence of neo-liberalism does not disappear once World Bank Vice-President Joseph Stiglitz has delivered his third public lecture exposing

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# Editorial Introduction: Nationalising the Anti- Poverty Agenda?<sup>1</sup>

**Mick Moore and  
Stephen Devereux**

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the limits and fallacies of the doctrine. Neo-liberalism was not some narrow intellectual conspiracy foisted on the developing world by a clique of intellectuals, ideologues and politicians rooted in Washington and a few other major cities in the rich world. It was, and is, an intellectual movement of virtually global proportions. It remains very influential. The core ideas of the neo-liberals about poverty are ungenerous to the poor, and their trust in the efficacy of public action against poverty is low. There is still a great deal to combat. Ideology and culture are increasingly globalised. Development fashions and ideologies are disseminated outwards from Washington. But that process takes time. Ideas that are being jettisoned in Washington may just be making their mark on public policies in countries of the South. Iliana Yashchine's article ('The Changing Anti-Poverty Agenda: What Can the Mexican Case Tell Us?') demonstrates how Mexican government anti-poverty programmes are moving steadily in a neo-liberal direction, becoming less generous, more top-down, and more narrowly targeted on the extreme poor. That is not because the World Bank has any significant direct influence on programme design in Mexico City, but because the ruling ideas about governance among the Mexican elite have become more neo-liberal through 'normal' processes of globalisation, including the increasing seniority of public officials who received their university education in the United States.

Third, we question whether an internationally-defined anti-poverty agenda, driven by the commitment and money of the aid donors, really is such a good thing. It might undermine rather than enhance the effectiveness of anti-poverty efforts. Should we not be looking to *nationalise* rather than *internationalise* the anti-poverty agenda in poor countries?

## 2 Ideas, Doctrines and History

John Toye's article, 'Nationalising the Anti-Poverty Agenda', provides the lead for the Bulletin in every sense of the term. John begins from the history of major public anti-poverty interventions in Europe. He argues that these interventions were not driven by universalistic or altruistic concerns on the part of governments, elites or middle strata with poverty *per se*, but by interpretations of the nature and causes of poverty that were specific to culture, time and place, and by motives that to modern eyes can

easily appear self-interested and ignoble. National elites did something about poverty because they were persuaded that it was in their own interest to reduce crime or disease, head off insurrection, or rear a generation of young men fit enough to serve in the army and thus protect the nation against the British/French/German threat. How public authorities chose to intervene, and which of a range of 'poverties' they decided to target, depended on a range of specific cultural, political and other factors. To be induced to take action, elites had to believe first that poverty created a problem for someone else other than the poor themselves; second, that some sections of the poor *merited* support rather than simply repression and punishment; and third, that public authorities actually possessed the means to do something about the problem. Anti-poverty interventions were diverse. Benign measures intended to benefit the 'deserving poor' were often packaged with harsh and punitive treatment of the 'non-deserving'. It was not always a pretty story. 'Unwanted' children were being shipped from Britain to the colonies as cheap labour long after the foundations of the welfare state were in place. The point from the European historical record is that national elites developed moral and practical commitments to do something about particular poverties. John Toye worries that the internationalisation of the anti-poverty agenda in poor countries will undermine any national commitment that might otherwise exist. International and aid organisations define the problem. National governments and elites in developing countries play little role. International organisations are virtually obliged, for operational purposes, to use some kind of money-metric measures of poverty – for example, the famous \$1 a day. This measure makes for international comparability, but robs the definition of poverty of any moral content, especially a moral content that resonates locally. Bangladeshi elites may perhaps be willing to view a range of 'poverties' as grounds for public support: the poverty of old people with no surviving children; the poverty of deserted mothers; the poverty of families who struggle to send their children through school; the poverty of the rickshaw-pullers who visibly work so hard in city streets, etc. And each of these separate poverties may afflict a sufficiently small number of people that effective public action appears feasible. By contrast, the claim that 57% of Bangladeshis are poor according to the global standard because they

live on less than \$1 a day rings no moral bells locally and whispers: 'insuperable problem; turn attention elsewhere'. That is not the way to persuade national governments and elites to take poverty reduction seriously. John Toyé's paper is short. Read it even if you read nothing else in this Bulletin. It is guaranteed to make you think.

Like any other globally dominant idea, an 'international' consensus about poverty in poor countries is likely to be rooted more in some parts of the world than in others. International ideas about poverty are heavily influenced by aid donors and by economists. They are especially likely to be rooted in the values, interests and influence of the contemporary United States, in the intellectual traditions of the Anglophone world, and in the neo-liberal ideas that are themselves mainly an outgrowth of Anglo-American worldviews and institutions. Several of our contributors warn us against the global influence of this trinity: the US, *Anglophonie*, and neo-liberalism. Ron Herring ('Persistent Poverty and Path Dependency: Agrarian Reform Lessons from the United States and India') argues that agrarian reform is a precondition for effective poverty reduction in the transition from deeply hierarchical agrarian society. The elimination of the multiple inequalities that cluster around major asset inequalities are almost a condition for the success of other anti-poverty measures. The recent experience of the Indian state of Kerala illustrates the positive case, while continuing deep racial and income inequalities in the United States, and the socio-political tensions and fractures associated with them, can be explained by the failure to implement land reform in the American South after the Civil War. Redistributive land reform has been off the international development policy agenda for a couple of decades. Even now, the idea generates nervousness from aid officials who otherwise suggest that all radical anti-poverty options are open to consideration. Ron is telling them two things: the first is that redistributive land reform can be highly complementary with other anti-poverty measures; the second is that it is inexcusable to hide behind the chant of 'land reform is too difficult'. All anti-poverty policies are difficult. Is 'pro-poor growth' any easier? Even its original proponents admit to some ambiguity about what it is, and ignorance about how to promote it. In the case of land reform, at least we understand what needs to be done and what tools are available.

In Brazil at least, there is a strong consensus among the national elite in support of land reform (see Elisa Reis's article). Although rooted in part in US values and institutions, 'global' ideas about the best route to reduce poverty do not even reflect a realistic appraisal of US history.

In 'Perceptions of Poverty: The Historical Legacy', Michael Ward makes a parallel case, contrasting two historical traditions in official attitudes to conceptualising and tackling poverty. The English and Anglophone tradition is 'mimimalist', seeing poverty as a material issue best dealt with through public programmes that are limited in scale and focus on selected poor individuals and households. By contrast, the French tradition is more generous (to those defined as 'citizens'), integrationist and inclusionary. It focuses more on the societal causes and dimensions of destitution/poverty/exclusion, and is more likely to imply targeted public investment, especially in infrastructure in poor areas and localities. No prizes for guessing which of these two traditions Michael identifies as dominant in the contemporary international development community.

Mick Moore's 'Politics Against Poverty? Global Pessimism and National Optimism' targets contemporary 'global' ideas about the politics of poverty, including the ways of thinking about the political process that have formed much of the intellectual core of neo-liberalism. These ideas are used to tell the international development community that serious, redistributive anti-poverty policies are politically very difficult. They are misleading: logically flawed, and inconsistent with actual experience in developing countries. There is consistent exaggeration of (a) the degree of societal conflict and polarisation that redistribution efforts are likely to generate; and (b) the extent to which success depends on mobilising large numbers of beneficiaries – the poor – behind a redistribution agenda and movement. Conversely, there is consistent understatement of (a) the extent to which members of political, governmental and other elites – and indeed middle classes more generally – may perceive themselves to have a positive interest in the redistribution of income or assets to the poor; and (b) the scope that reform-minded governments and political leaders enjoy to exercise political leadership in favour of redistribution: to control information, manipulate symbols, determine agendas, take

initiatives, define the public interest, create coalitions, and confuse opponents. Let us not *think* ourselves into pessimism about the potential political feasibility of action on poverty.

### 3 Targeting the Poor Domestically

The New Poverty Agenda and neo-liberalism more generally lead to 'targeting': the concentration of public resources on a limited number of households and individuals. The arguments of principle for and against targeting have been well rehearsed. What about the practical experience? Mexico is undergoing a steady transition. There is a tradition of anti-poverty programmes that are well-funded and implemented in ways that are not only (a) highly clientelistic, designed to create support for the ruling party and president, but also (b) collectivist, proving spaces for local groups to cooperate to obtain and use anti-poverty resources partially independent of party political affiliation. Iliana Yaschine traces the growing influence of neo-liberal ideas on succeeding generations of programmes, especially the shift from PRONASOL to the current PROGRESA. PROGRESA is narrower in scope, targeted on individual households rather than collectivities, and provides much less scope for either 'local clientelist politics' (the sceptical interpretation) or 'local collective action on the part of the poor' (the optimistic interpretation) in programme implementation. Yet PROGRESA is in principle and probably in practice more targeted on the poorest 20%, who tend to be rural and often missed out on previous programmes.

It is too early to make any judgements about what works best in Mexico. Stephen Devereux ('Targeting Transfers: Innovative Solutions to Familiar Problems') is willing to reach some policy conclusions from the research he has been leading on targeted anti-poverty programmes in Africa. Targeting entails a series of costs as well as benefits. The practical task is not to make general judgements about the relative merits or not of targeting, but to look at the specific dilemmas that arise in particular contexts and programmes, and, in particular, to see how they have been alleviated or solved locally. As is so often the case, local adaptability and experience obliges us to be sceptical of international conventional wisdom and of norms based on logic rather than experience. Once again, beware the international agenda.

### 4 Targeting Poverty Internationally

International targets for poverty reduction have become a part of the current international agenda. We are very pleased to publish two articles that tell us a great deal about that agenda. Simon Maxwell ('International Targets for Poverty Reduction and Food Security: A Mildly Sceptical But Resolutely Pragmatic View with a Call for Greater Subsidiarity') very neatly summarises the arguments for and against setting international targets in relation to aid. He concludes, with some reservations, that we are better off with than without. In 'Are Poverty and Social Goals for the 21st Century Attainable?', Lionel Demery and Michael Walton present the most authoritative available estimates of the feasibility of achieving by 2015 the social goals to which the aid donors have signed up through the OECD Development Assistance Committee. Lionel and Michael do the job country by country, projecting forward on the basis of actual recent performance. Are their conclusions optimistic or pessimistic? Bear in mind that their estimates of recent performance were made before the impact of the Asian economic crisis in late 1997. Even before that, it was going to be a very difficult task, especially to halve poverty in Africa and to cut infant and child mortality by two thirds globally. Now the challenge is even greater. Let us hope that the targets were not set so high that they act as a depressant rather than a stimulant to action.

### 5 National Elites and Poverty

Whose state of mind should we be thinking about? It follows from John Toyé's argument that we should pay attention to national political elites in poor countries. What do they think about the nature, causes and solutions to poverty? Which of the many potential poverties do they see as meriting public action? How far and in what ways do they see poverty as a threat to themselves and their families? Which sections of the elite are most sympathetic to doing something about poverty? What instruments do they believe will be effective? These are very big questions. It is difficult to arrive at reliable and comprehensive answers for any one country. And we can expect each case to differ. How can we research these questions?

The IDS Poverty Research Programme, working in association with the CROP (Comparative Research

on Poverty) network based in Bergen, has made a start on this research. We have ongoing a series of studies of national and, in India, state level elites. We round off this Bulletin with three summaries of some initial findings from Bangladesh (Naomi Hossain and Mick Moore), South Africa (Noushin Kalati and James Manor) and Brazil (Élisa Reis). The articles are intended to be read in the order in which they appear, each reflecting on the article(s) before it. The authors speak for themselves. Let us consider here what these findings, limited and preliminary as they are, appear to tell us about the usefulness of even asking the questions set out above. Two generalisations appear to be emerging.

One is that, in our sample countries at least, it would not be easy to mobilise elites to do something about poverty, and certainly not the worst poverty, by appealing to their fears. Poverty is not generally perceived as a source of threat to the elites themselves. At this moment in history, fear of insurrection is muted. More surprising, the links between poverty and crime provide little positive leverage. All our elites see crime as a problem in terms of their daily lives. White South African elites are obsessed with crime, and do view measures to tackle poverty as a potential solution. But the 'poverty' they link to crime is the unemployment of young men in the black townships. The much more acute poverty of the rural black population is barely recognised, and not seen as problematic in the same way. At the other end of the scale, Bangladeshi elites do not connect crime closely with poverty. The crime that concerns them is attributed not to the poor – who are generally described in patronising but benign terms – but to urban middle strata, often connected to local politicians. Other potential threats to the elites from poverty, notably the threat of disease transmission or the threat to national security from an unhealthy population unfit for national defence, barely feature at all within the cognitive frames of our respondents.

If one hopes to use poverty-as-threat arguments to stir those national elites into action, then our findings so far are not very encouraging. However, reasoning based on the notion of poverty-as-obstacle-to-development appears more promising. Large sections of

each of our three elites tended to view low levels of education as the principle tangible cause of poverty, and to see more education as the best single solution. Many respondents were unable to specify the causal linkages more precisely. A few people did perceive a link from education to development in terms of the quality of the labour force and national economic competitiveness – and made plausible reference to comparative national experiences. More common was a highly unspecific and patronising conception of the poor as 'ignorant' and 'unaware'. Quite how education would help reduce poverty was unclear. But John Toye has warned us not to dismiss the strategic potential of perceptions that fail our tests of moral correctness. 'Education' is a potential lever. The case for more education for the poor can be argued plausibly in terms of achieving other goals, notably the two mentioned above: the contribution to national economic performance and dispelling 'ignorance'. Once it is accepted that it is important that poor children attend school, other anti-poverty measures can be attached: health and nutrition programmes for poor children to ensure they make good use of the education that we are generously providing them; literacy and family planning for actual and potential mothers so that the education we have so carefully provided in schools does not become dissipated at home; perhaps even allowances so that destitute mothers can afford to send their children to school with clothes on their backs.

We are illustrating potential here, not trying to construct yet another new international poverty agenda. This potential will have to be realised principally in local languages and idioms. If it does emerge that bundles of ideas about the links between education, the labour market, national economic performance, motherhood and gender provide a plausible basis on which to convince some national elites to be more active in tackling poverty, then it will be a bonus that they will be talking much the same language as the international development community, which currently places a great deal of faith in education. The substance of some national poverty agendas may not differ radically from international agendas. But it is important that we demonstrate rather than assume this, and, where they diverge, try to build first on the national agendas.