THE PROFESSIONALS AND THE POWERLESS: WHOSE REALITY COUNTS?

A key challenge for the Social Summit, argues Robert Chambers, is to define the "problems" and seek solutions from the perspective of the poor. If this challenge is not met, he says, we risk plodding along in worthy but well-worn ruts that lead nowhere new.

We are all part of a world system that perpetuates poverty and deprivation. Those who are poor and deprived do not wish to be poor and deprived. We who are well off and have power say that poverty and deprivation are bad, and should be reduced or eliminated. Yet poverty and deprivation prove robustly sustainable. Why?

The usual response is to seek answers by analyzing poverty and deprivation themselves. It is not surprising. We in power do not like to examine ourselves. To salve our consciences we rationalize: The objects of development are the poor anyway, not us. It is they who are the problem, not us.

But poverty and deprivation are functions of polarization, of power and powerlessness. Any practical analysis has to examine the whole system: "us" as well as "them." One of the most important challenges for the Social Summit, as I see it, is to ask the question: Whose reality counts? The reality of the few in the centres of power, or the reality of the poor, the many at the periphery?

As development professionals, our views of the realities of the poor, and of what should be done, are constructed mainly from a distance. We promulgate those views in the words and concepts we use, which then become confused with reality itself. In much professional discourse, for example, the term "poverty" has been narrowly defined for purposes of measurement and comparison. This narrow, technical definition, which I will call "income poverty," has overtaken common usage. What is recorded as having been measured—often low consumption—masquerades in speech and prose as a much larger reality. It is then but a short step to treating what has not been measured as not really real. Patterns of dominance are reinforced: of the material over the experiential; of the physical over the social; of the measured and measurable over the unmeasured and unmeasurable; of economics over disciplines concerned with people as people.

What matters most to poor people often differs from what outsiders assume. Income matters, but sometimes less than other aspects of life—health, security, self-respect, family and social life, access to goods and services. In the early 1980s, for example, N.S. Jodha asked people in two villages in Rajasthan, India to define their own categories and criteria of well-being. He then compared this to data he had collected some 20 years earlier. The 36 households whose incomes had shrunk sig-
nificantly in real terms, were, on average, better off, according to the criteria they had expressed themselves. While their real per capita income was less, other improvements had, in their eyes, made their lives better: improved housing, wearing shoes regularly, less dependence on patrons and landlords, not having to migrate in search of work.

As this and other research shows, people's own descriptions of well-being and deprivation—of the good and bad life—tend to be multi-dimensional. In recent studies in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, the factors cited as detracting from well-being included hierarchy and to embrace a new project them onto the very different realities of the poor are local, complex, diverse and dynamic.

The majority of world's families cope by having different members of the household perform different tasks in different places at different times of the year. For the majority of the world's people the challenge is not one of jobs or employment; it is how to make their life more productive and how to gain more secure, sustainable and adequate livelihoods.

By looking at poverty and employment from this vantage point, we begin to reframe the objectives of development. We are able to move from ideas about reducing income poverty to enhancing well-being; and from increasing employment to supporting sustainable livelihoods. Yet to identify and implement a truly new agenda for development will also require us to change: to will demand deep changes in the way we development professionals think and behave. At the most obvious personal level, this will involve looking at the concepts we use, the language we employ and the actions we take or neglect to take. While we have been quick to grasp the potential of concepts such as "participation," "ownership" and "empowerment," we have been slower to recognize the changes these concepts demand of us. We have failed to understand that participation by them means

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As with poverty, so it is with the notion of employment. Jobs, unemployment, workplace and workforce are concepts derived from the urban industrial experience of the North. Yet we project them onto the very different realities of the rural and agricultural South, and of the urban informal sector. The majority of the world's families cope by having different members of the household perform different tasks in different places at different times of the year. For the majority of the world's people the challenge is not one of jobs or employment; it is how to make their life more productive and how to gain more secure, sustainable and adequate livelihoods.

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