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Conceptualising, Defining and Understanding the Concept of Poverty

Key Theme: The Concept of Poverty

Abstract: This paper will explore how poverty is conceptualised, defined and understood, in particular in the sub-Saharan context. This challenges the notion that there is a universal concept of poverty, applicable in any context of social, psychological, environmental and material deprivation. The paper questions current conceptualisation of poverty in South Africa, which is essentially based on western norms and values. The paper will argue that the specific contextual challenges of the global south in general and sub-Saharan Africa in particular, are not being sufficiently considered. As the adoption of components of western norms and values are becoming more widespread in South Africa, coupled with extensive urban migration, poverty is conceptualised and classified by anti-poverty proponents in a manner not dissimilar from the approach in highly developed countries. The paper will also question the more recent poverty reduction approaches, such as the sustainable livelihoods strategies as a means to combat deprivation, but in essence it is still a product of the global north. The paper aims to challenge our understanding of poverty and hopefully contribute towards the debate to deal with it more effectively. The paper argues for more localised access and control of resources, within appropriate national policy frameworks that allow scope for consideration of local complexities, diversities and multiplicities within the context of political, historical, institutional and social power relations.

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1. Introduction

While increased globalisation and trade liberalisation over the last few decades have resulted in unprecedented economic growth in the west, levels of poverty, inequalities and unemployment have escalated significantly in most countries in the 'rest'. The reduction of poverty remains the most illusive goal for most development agencies and governments across the globe and more so within the developing countries, where after decades of efforts to address this challenge, it continues to persist. This paper will explore how poverty is conceptualised internationally, within the context of sub-Saharan Africa and in South Africa specifically.

The UNDP Human Development 1999 report and more so its recent 2005 report underscore the trend of increasing levels of poverty and inequality in regions of the 'global south' in, South America, India and Africa. The 2005 UNDP Report indicates that the richest 50 individuals in the world have a combined income greater than that of the poorest 419 million, whilst the 2003 UN Habitat Report noted that 32% (921 million) of the world's population live in slums on extremely low (or no) incomes. According to Easterly (2006) almost 3 billion people live on less than two dollars a day (adjusted for purchasing power), 840 million don't have enough to eat; 10 million children die every year from easily preventable diseases; Aids is killing 3 million people a year; 1 billion lack access to clean water; two billion lack access to sanitation; 1 billion adults are illiterate and about one quarter of children in poor countries do not finish primary school.

Poverty and inequality have therefore obstinately remained as a central feature of urban and rural areas in the global south. This is in spite of many efforts by international aid, and by national public agencies, such as the South Africa Government, which has prioritised the elimination of poverty and inequality as a central feature of its developmental endeavours and has labelled itself as a 'developmental state' (Harrison. 2006). This goal is echoed by President Mbeki in the 2007 State of the Nation Address "*We must continue to respond to the perspective we spoke of as the present government began its term of office, fully conscious that 'none of the great social problems we have to solve is capable of resolution outside the context of the creation of jobs and the alleviation and eradication of poverty', and therefore that 'the struggle to eradicate poverty has been and will continue to be a central part of the national effort to build the new South Africa' "*. The last few decades have seen a number of governmental, academic and aid agencies based in the north, re-conceptualising and designing strategies and programmes aimed at alleviating and reducing poverty and inequality in the global south.

Jeffrey Sachs² (2005) argues that the poor are caught in a 'poverty trap' in which poor health, poor education and poor infrastructure reinforce one another (Easterly³.2006). Sachs' Plan to end world

² Jeffrey Sachs is director of the UN Millennium Project and author of *The End of Poverty*.

³ William Easterly is a former World Bank Official.

poverty include solutions ranging from nitrogen-fixing leguminous tree to replenish soil fertility, to antiretroviral therapy for Aids, to specially programmed cell phones to provide real-time data to health planners, to rainwater harvesting, to battery-charging stations, to twelve-cent medicines for children with malaria. According to Sachs, the UN secretary-general should run the Plan, coordinating the actions of UN, the World Bank and the IMF. Easterly argues that this approach is typical of *Planners* and that the Plan is the latest in a long list of Western plans to end poverty. However, because aid agencies don't have enough local information regarding the local needs and not enough agents, staff are poorly motivated and paid, and so on, this Plan is doomed to fail.

Easterly (2006) argues rather in favour of *Searches*, that are motivated and directed by market forces and incentives. He argues that Planners are pursuing infeasible objectives and should rather search for what does work. For example, instead of trying to 'develop' poor countries, programmes should be devised to give cash incentives to parents to keep their children in schools; selling bed-nets as a protection against malarial mosquitoes to the poor, instead of as a hand out, etc. Easterly advocates piecemeal solutions to problems, responding to feedback; ensuring programme implementers are accountability and pursuing 'home-grown' solutions that will result in gradual improvements in people's lives.

The South African Government has designed and implemented a wide range of policies; strategies, projects and programmes aimed at dealing with poverty, unemployment and inequality entrenched in the social strata of its communities through past Apartheid Policies. These interventions have been encapsulated in broader development programmes mostly at a central; government level, and include initiatives such as Urban Renewal Programmes; Integrated Rural Development Programmes; Local Economic Development Fund; Poverty Alleviation Programmes; Municipal IDPs as well as more recently in infrastructure investment programmes such as Municipal Infrastructure Grant (MIG), Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP, Breaking New Ground and Beyond The Brick, the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative (Asgi), the Neighbourhood Partnership Development Grant (NDPG) and so on.

These initiatives have explicable targeted impoverished areas and include measures such providing basic utility service; investments in public facilities and amenities; poverty reduction programmes, local economic development (LED) projects, housing projects, education and health facilities, land reform and land restitution and so on. Although the implementation of these policies and strategies has been accompanied by large amounts of public funding (in many case lack of funding is not the most critical issue and many municipalities and provinces are unable to spend their allocated budgets); recent indicators have shown that levels of inequality and poverty has increased in particular in urban areas in the South Africa.

What is however of interest is that although concepts such as reduction of poverty are generally a key objective of public sector policies and strategies, the underlying assumptions with regard to how poverty is understood and (re)conceptualised and how it should be identified and how it should be dealt with, monitored and evaluated are not challenged. However, most of the development policies and strategies pursued by the South African government stems from a neo-liberal macro-economic viewpoint, as advocated through international development agencies such as the World Bank, USAID and DIFD. In many cases the appropriateness of these approaches are not questioned and the implementation is merely 'warped' to the local context. This contrasts with growing call locally in South Africa for more contextually appropriate solutions. Interestingly, the South African government has also projected itself as a 'developmental state' and distances itself from the 'Washington consensus' (and its associated overt reliance on market forces).

Internationally, poverty conceptualisation and levels of measurement are based on assumptions of values and material well-being perceived from a western perspective. In the main within the context of sub-Saharan Africa, poverty has also been conceptualised and measured from a western (read USA) standpoint, through notions such as the number of persons living on dollar a day, or more specifically within the context of South Africa, access to basic services (read piped water, electricity, water borne sewerage removal, and more recently, a basic RDP house). Underscoring this is an assumption of what is an ideal or suitable living standard and this is significantly influenced by perceptions of how we should consume, what type of goods we should be accumulating and how and how we should be comparing levels of inequality, in essence how do we reduce the material 'gap' between the 'have' and 'have-nots'.

Within the context of South Africa, success is generally measured in terms of the extent to which households and individuals have reached the ultimate goal of accumulating a house in a leafy suburb or the coast, located on a single plot, with preferably two cars and within a gated community. This is translated for the poor within the South African context is a RDP house on a single plot, far from amenities and job opportunities, space for a non-existent car and measures such as high mask lighting and street committees to combat crime. There is therefore the assumption that there is a 'ladder of material prosperity' that should be pursued and that the state's role is to place households on the first step. In countries such as South Africa with a high level of rural-urban migration this approach assumes (perhaps unintentionally) that the ultimate goal should be to increase the living standard of the recently urbanised poor to a level compatible to the average American household. This urgency of this is underscored by the legacy of Apartheid, further legitimising the need and to prioritise poverty reduction.

Indications are however, that in spite of significant efforts from the state (in the case of South Africa) and international aid agencies (in the case of other African countries), levels of

unemployment, poverty, inequality and further marginalisation are increasing. The question therefore remains if current initiatives are dealing with the root causes of poverty and are the initiatives undertaken in response to understanding what the real needs are or are these merely based on assumptions that do not necessary responding to the specific South African context?

The following section explores the theoretical evolution from poverty line analysis towards the more recent poverty reduction strategies as a discourse defined through a set of ideas and practices and its current formalisation into the sustainable livelihood framework approach, as one of the mainstream measures. This highlights significant shifts in this discourse as this approach evolves from initial concepts to a fully-fledged framework.

2. Evolution from Poverty Line Analysis to Poverty Reduction Strategies

Poverty has traditionally been defined as a lack of income or consumption and its extent was therefore measured in terms of the proportion of people below a defined poverty line⁴ (Rakodi.1995). Rakodi argues that this approach poses problems, as it over-simplifies the conceptualisation of poverty and it does not explain its continuation, reduction and deepening. For Rakodi, poverty is, therefore, more than a lack of income or consumption and the current approach neglects the dynamics of poverty and fails to distinguish between aspects such as transient and persistent poverty; between different household⁵ trajectories; the nature of deprivation and the process of impoverishment; or between marginalisation and security of tenure, and so on. She argues that poverty line analysis can be regarded as reductionist, as poverty then comes to mean what is measured; and this affects who is defined as poor; how deprivation is understood; the methodologist used to quantify and understood it as well as the nature of the interventions designed to alleviate it (Rakodi.1995: 2002).

There has consequently been a shift away from poverty line analysis towards poverty reduction strategies during the mid 1980's and early 1990's through work done by Chambers and Swift dealing with participatory poverty assessment. Chambers (in Rakodi,1995) suggests that deprivation is a product of not only of material poverty, but also set of interlocking factors, including physical weakness, isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness. Material poverty arises from a lack of assets, inadequate and unreliable stocks and flows of food and cash as well as low returns to labour, despite high participation rates. Other contributing factors include lack of able-bodied adults (ascribed to illness, death, migration, etc) isolation due to physical location or illiteracy, access to information, etc. He also suggest that vulnerability prevents households from taking risks

⁴ Poverty line (PL), based on the cost of a basic food basket.

⁵ Rakodi, (1995) defines a household as a person or group of people whom live together in the same dwelling unit and contribute to and/or benefit from a joint income in either cash or domestic labour, i.e group of people who life and eat together.

associated with innovation, while powerlessness weakens their bargaining position with regard to political rights, access to services and the law and the sale of products, assets and labour.

According to Rakodi, symptoms of poverty include low life expectancy, high levels of infant and child mortality, high morbidity and under-nutrition. Whether a household is temporary or permanently poor, depends on its resource endowments, its organisational capacity to manage and deploy its resources, its labour force position, the coping mechanisms available to it and external or family contingencies which affect it. Poverty and deprivation should therefore be conceptualised as a set of relationships and processes, rather than a 'state', this recognises that it is both complex and dynamic and raises methodological issues, as not all aspects of relationship are quantifiable, for example measuring vulnerability and lack of power and autonomy.

Rakodi also notes that some analysts have taken issue with the term 'household strategy' as it implies that 'households' makes decisions and that these are based on an explicit process of setting objectives and planning their achievement. The term strategy should rather be used to infer a set of choices informed by circumstances, context, access to resources, etc. Furthermore, decision-making is informed by a complex distribution of power within a household informed by aspects such as gender relations as well as a longitudinal view of households incorporating life-cycle changes, possibly impacting on the bargaining power of different household members.

Also, relative bargaining power may also vary from culture to culture, and these variations can alter the balance between co-operation and conflict in household decision-making. Urban households typically seems to cope with the impact of recession and structural adjustment through strategies aimed at increasing resources; mitigate or limit a decline in consumption and changing household composition. Others diversify their household strategies (Rakodi 1995; 2002).

With regard to interventions, Rakodi argues that a number of policy approaches is needed and that provision must be made for a selection of the most appropriate to respond to the needs and priorities articulated by the poor themselves. These approaches include the provision of 'safety nets' to provide temporary relieve to vulnerable groups (however these are ineffective as a means to enhance employment and income-generating potential in the longer terms); opportunities to increase assets; enablement to take advantage of opportunities or provision of basic utilities and services and so on.

Carney identified the main components of a household's livelihoods assets, namely natural capital, human capital, social and political capital, physical capital and financial capital (Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones. 2002). The development of the assets pentagon represents a new shift in the development of measures to reduce poverty and it introduced the notion of *sustainable livelihoods*. This

approach focuses on the notion of an 'asset-vulnerability' framework and is based on the experience of poverty as a lack of secure conditions of life. Analysis of the 'threats' the poor face is then considered in relation to the 'assets' they are able to deploy to deal with these threats.

The UK Department for International Development (DFID) has signed up to the International Development Target to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015 and have adopted the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework Approach - the SLF approach. This can be regarded as the first step in regularising, institutionalising and standardizing an approach to reducing poverty by mainstream organisations such as DFID (Norton and Foster, 2001). The evolution of the SLF approach was taken further through the DFID funded publication, *Urban Livelihoods. A People Centred Approach to Poverty* (Rakodi and Lloyd Jones, 2002).

The SLF approach views people operating in a context of vulnerability but with access to certain poverty reducing factors, within a given social, institutional and organisational environment. The following definition of livelihoods (adapted from Chambers and Conway, 1992) is put forward: "A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base".

Assets are at the centre of the framework, with households or individuals drawing from these assets in order to build their livelihoods. Access to the use of assets and the formulation of livelihood strategies are influenced by policies, institutions, organisations and relationships between individuals and organisations; the nature of the external environment; access to infrastructure and services; the vulnerability context as well as the livelihood opportunities. Households have access to a portfolio of assets both tangible (stores of cash and food, and resources such as land, labour and physical investment) and intangible (skills, redeemable claims against others and the government example e.g. access rights to services). This allows policy makers a wider range of areas to intervene and alleviate poverty and to promote social development.

This brief review illustrates how this complexities around poverty reduction strategies have been regularised into a model and the shift from reference to access to resource (which as a broad meaning) towards reference to assets with significant material connotations. This to some extent reflects a western value system that permeates many international aid interventions. An important consideration is if the attainment of a certain quality of material well-being is an end goal in itself. Therefore, does pursue of this goal influence our perception on what is poverty and how can it be reduced or eradicated?

3. Critique of Initiatives to Reduce Poverty

According to Schuurman post World War II development paradigms essentialise the Third World and its inhabitants as homogenous entities; unconditional belief in the concept of progress and the unquestionable confidence in the role of the state to realise progress. Western style modernism paradigms have resulted in universalist, market-driven and neo-liberal forms of development and have been the primary force attempting to shape cities in the global south (Watson. 2005; 2006). International agencies such as DFID; ODI; CIDA; SIDA; UNDP etc have historically operated mainly within a modernism discourse and recent shifts are ascribed to as 'revisionist neo-liberalism' by some (Harrison, Peet, Nustad, Slater).

Although the South African government is pursuing a multi-facet approach to reducing poverty, most initiatives, as argued, originate from a mainstream, neo-liberal market orientated perspective. This section evaluate and assess the underlying rational for these development policies, strategies and programmes, most which have been largely imported from the north and applied uncritically in countries in the south, such as South Africa. The assumptions and objectives of these programmes are generally associated with modernism and universalism and their supposed effectiveness in reducing poverty. What is therefore also argued that although aid agencies are not as active in the RSA as for example, in sub-Saharan Africa, the South African government have shown tendencies to formulate and implement policies and strategies and control budgets from a centralist⁶ position and assumes to a large extent universal conditions at a local level.

There is therefore a concern that the interventions formulated to deal with poverty occur with at best, limited understanding of the nature and form of poverty and the development challenges individual and households face within urban areas in sub-Saharan in general, and the South Africa specifically. For example, at a macro level assumptions are made with regard to the nature of the development problem, while at a micro-level assumptions are made regarding the activities and 'strategies' households engage in, in order to survive and to improve their well-being; the nature of poverty, how it is defined by international agencies and centralist governments and how this is perceived recipients in the global south.

Also current government programmes does not seriously challenge the form that development takes and do not engage the debate regarding limitations to non-renewable resources and perpetuates western values of asset accumulation and methods of wealth creation to combat deprivation. Most policy interventions aimed at reducing poverty to some extent also assumes the

⁶ This is defined in the South African context as the tendency to control the bulk of development funding at central government level and its disposal to other spheres of government within narrowly set and defined policy parameters, assuming universal applicability.

same household economic growth path for the poor located in the urban global south as those socially excluded in urban areas in the north.

- Oversimplification of Complex Process Impacting on Poverty

Watson (2006b) points out that the 'poor' are not homogeneous and that poverty is a complex and a multifaceted phenomenon. Interventions based on income and poverty line ignores differentiating local circumstances and diverse factors and conditions that impacts on the how poverty is identified and the solutions being prescribed.

Mainstream international agencies (such as DFID, the World Bank and USAID) as well as governments have, the tendency to simplify complex theories into 'cut and dry' methodologies and to mainstream these, resulting in responses that have no or limited effect on the development challenges, such as poverty and deprivation. Programmes emanating from north based international institutions and governments (for example, urban renewal, local economic development) have historically been formulated from a western ('northern') discourse of modernisation and neo-liberalism, of which the unquestionable applicability in the south is widely recognised as seriously flawed (Arce and Long. 2000; Davis.2004; Watson.2006; Harrison.2006). The development of theories and their conversion into methodologies (due to administrative imperatives) by north-based development agencies is also based on the assumption that method can be universally applied.

This tendency is well illustrated when reviewing the theoretical evolution of poverty reduction strategies. The poverty line analysis method reduced the definition and measurement of deprivation to income and consumption levels, using indicators to simplify reality. The subsequent, earlier work on poverty reduction demonstrated higher levels of sophistication and introduced notions of vulnerability, powerlessness, risk and household coping strategies. In contrast, the DFID Sustainable Livelihoods Framework Approach, which focus largely on access to assets and aspects relating to vulnerability and without serious consideration of issues such as how power relations impact on control and access to these assets. The question is therefore if the SLF approach presents an appropriate and pivotal change in the policy of international development agencies to deal effectively with poverty as it claims it does? Alternatively, is this approach a misrepresentation of previous poverty reduction strategies and therefore part of a process of institutionalising and mainstream well-intended efforts by earlier theorist on poverty reduction?

Examples of this tendency, to pursue simplified solutions, in the South African context is the previous focus LED projects, without an appropriate local development strategy that contextualises and anchors such initiatives; strategies emphasising entrepreneurship and supporting small businesses, while the quality of education, skill development and training has remained poor;

highly centralised and ineffective formal businesses support services, within the context of informality and unsupportive environment to establish businesses. Also initiatives such as urban renewal programmes and public sector housing programmes have been pursued without seriously challenging the current pattern of a skewed land market that perpetuates historical inequalities. Decision-making and budgeting for resources beyond mere municipal funded local utility services, remains highly centralised with limited potential to accommodate local variation in social, climatic, historical, institutional, cultural and economic circumstances and poverty challenges.

- Impact of Macro-level Economic and Social Policies

Rakodi (2002) argues that policies, laws, social norms, rules of the game and incentives, etc are 'social' constructs and embody power and they can have a significant impact on the access of the poor to all types of assets as well as on the effective value of those assets. Macro-economic and social policies have a profound influence on local conditions and local initiatives are therefore significantly influenced and constrained to national and international policy parameters.

South Africa has vigorously pursued free market policies, with emphasis on mechanisms such as the removal of trade restriction, attracting foreign direct investment and emphasis on a competitive labour market. Importance has also been placed on home ownership as a means to stimulate economic growth and wealth (through asset escalation) that would eventually trickle down and permeate to the poor. However, although this has been achieved to a large degree with average GDP growth in excess of 6% over the last decade, the benefits have largely been accrued to the minority of middle and upper income individuals and households. In contrast, the vast majority are unable to compete in markets requiring increasing specialised skills, barred from the homeownership market that caters exclusively for the middle and high income group, provided with inferior education in contrast to the wealthy that continues to benefit from 'former' model C schools and are trapped within cycles of poverty and marginalisation.

The macro policy environment dealing with poverty reduction policies is therefore critical in setting the broad parameters and objectives impacting on aspects relating to growth, inequality and marginalisation. However the macro policy environment becomes counter productive when it attempts to be prescriptive and universal in its application and ignorant of local specific conditions and circumstances. Accordingly, the need for thorough social, historical, institutional, economic and political analysis, in particular how social and power relations produce and reproduce inequality, deprivation and poverty, is paramount and should occur at all levels, and not exclude the local environment.

- Relevance, Nature and Extent of Power Relationships and Knowledge

Most of the current the poverty reduction programmes do not challenges issues pertaining to the nature and extent of power relationships, how resources are mobilised and accessed and the subsequent impact on authority and decision-making. Nustad (2001) argues that poverty needs to be reconstituted within the political domain and include a consideration of how poverty is produced as well as the relationships between processes that produce wealth and poverty. Scott (1998), talks about the 'weapons of the weak' and refers to political actions that are small scale and sometimes 'unintended'.

An appropriate poverty reduction approach requires emphasis beyond the mere benefits of material progress associated with modernism and its attempts to de-politicise the development effort and requires rather consideration of the emerging power relations framed within the specific contexts of widening of inequalities, and influenced by factors such as culture, politics, etc (Peet. 1999; Watson. 2006). For Foucault, power is constructed and functions on the basis of particular powers and myriad of issues and he also highlights the interrelatedness of power and knowledge (Slater. 2004). Foucauldian deconstruction argues that power is everywhere and recognises that 'micro-power' is present in everyday life. Power is therefore potentially both positive and negative (and repressive) and there is always room for resistance. Also of concern is that current initiatives to reduce poverty do not challenge the status quo in terms of how 'modernity' is created, controlled, distributed and accessed.

Nustad (2001) notes that transformation through development is linked to the agencies of the elite and that technical constraints imposed on developers shape the way in which they construct the problem. He raises doubts about the possibility of democratic reform of the current development apparatus and the possibility of a bottom-up approach to development. Nustad argues that there is a need to extend the analysis to include how development interventions are transformed, reformulated, adopted or resisted in encounters with target local populations. Further, that the apparatus in which development is embedded, in itself, has certain effects, such as the depoliticisation of poverty, and this must be acknowledged. It also builds on certain assumptions such as the agency of an outside intervening body. He concludes that the task ahead is to reconstitute poverty within the political domain, examining how poverty is produced and the relationship between processes that produce wealth and poverty.

Corbridge and Williams argue that the broader development community is "...less homogenous than it is made to be by post-colonial critics" (2005: 260). Key questions raised by these authors include: the forms in which the politics of governmentality is played; how, if at all power is shared in political society; how individuals and agencies are made accountable and to whom; how is the economy managed and with what effects on income and livelihoods?. They further highlight the

danger of promoting policy agendas without specifying the political forces that would bring them about (Corbridge and Williams. 2005).

Simone (2002) argues that LED processes have focussed primarily on standardised sets of prescriptions to enhance local competitiveness and this ignores the fact that localities "... are located in successive larger spheres of operation and power, production cycles and networks" (2002:10). He notes that the predominant resource for LED is knowledge and a critical question is "...what social arrangements are viewed as capable of providing salient knowledge and information in terms of growing local economies?" (2002: 15).

The implications of the power and control of resources and associated knowledge base and the impact on poverty, requires more in-depth consideration, in particular within specific localities. Social and power relations and control and access to knowledge, are significantly influenced by local cultural, political, social and gender conditions and policy should be regarded with suspect when it assumes local universality and uniformity.

- Extent to which New Approaches are Emerging

A further concern is the extent to which new methodologies, such as the SLF-approach represents a new and innovative approach or if it is a rehash of previous theories on poverty reduction and local economic development. Norton and Foster (2001) argue that most of the lessons and guidance contained can all be located as key elements of other approaches (e.g. WDR 2000; participatory approaches, etc). Further they argue that the SLF approach has been stronger in developing the analytical framework than in showing how it may add operational value, especially to overall policy.

Virtually most of the current proposals dealing with poverty reductions already form part of public sector and aid agency policy frameworks of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including South Africa. This therefore raises the question of whether 'new' approaches, such as the SLF framework approach, contribute towards the development of new theory and solutions or merely conceptualises, theorises and repackages past and existing initiatives. Of more concern is if its possible to development a spectrum of new ideas and innovations that can respond to the multiplicity, diversities and complexities of locations within the differing regions and countries throughout sub-Saharan Africa?

- Role of the State

According to Corbridge and Williams (2005), the 'poverty debate' has shifted from an emphasis on jobs and services to social exclusion and self worth and honour, with the poor demanding not to be treated with disdain and disrespect, declaring 'we are the state'. Scott (2001) argues that states

produce simplified and schematic models of reality in order to control and intervene and this is dangerous and result in unintended results. This is of some concern with the importation and implementation of poverty reduction programmes. He also points out the danger of high modernisation, its appeal to universalism, its pretensions of epistemic knowledge and its emphasis on social engineering and state power. Scott argues for the need to take small steps, favour reversibility; plan on surpluses and plan on human inventiveness.

Corbridge and Williams (2005) comment on the differentiating sightings of the state, from the perspective of poor, vulnerable people, government officials in different departments, members of wider development community and so on. They argue that poor people often see the state because the state has chosen to see them. They note that if biopolitics involves the extension of sight from the sovereign to 'the state', governmentalisation (including of the state) involves a further extension of powers to those who profess expertise over the private body or the public body and that these persons claim the privileges of insight, foresight and even hindsight. Corbridge and Williams also discuss the notion of 'patronage democracy' where access to state resources is fiercely controlled by the ruling elite (e.g. group of politicians) acting in a discretionary manner. This therefore raises the question to what extent is poverty defined, analysed and solutions prescribed by 'experts' on behalf of the poor and how are the interests of those wielding power furthered by such interventions?

Watson notes that governments in the global south/east are generally weak and lack human and financial capacity (attributed to a legacy of structural adjustment programmes), while relationships between officials and councillors "...are ill defined and sometimes corrupts, and civil society organizations are weak and poorly organised" (2006:4). Norton and Foster (2001) cautions, that decentralisation processes may predominantly empower local elites rather than the poor. Corbridge and Williams (2005) argues that the cost of participation is high for poorer people and decentralisation is not a guarantor of empowerment.

Poverty reduction programmes are in essence silent on the role of the state and the method as advocated by DFID can be regarded as 'a simplified and schematic models of reality in order to control'. It also allows the status quo to continue as evident through the mundane applications advocated by Amis; Rutherford, Harper, Grierson; Brown and Lloyd-Jones and Devas (Rakodi and Lloyd Jones, 2002). Their main focus is on micro interventions and it can be argued that most of these activities form part of the 'normal' responsibility of the state.

These observations do not negate the important role the state has in formulating poverty reduction policies. However, this should not be at the expense of ignorance of the reality of how the poor

perceive and engage the state. It also calls for realisation of the limitations of the state's power and influence and the need to be more receptive to local circumstances and conditions.

- Role of International Development Agencies

It will be erroneous to assume that the development approaches of agencies such as the World Bank and IMF have remained the same over the last few decades. Nustad (2001) argues that there has been 'tremendous discontinuities' in the Bank's discourse over time. Examples of these shifts include work done by DFID on sustainable livelihoods as well as LED undertaken by the World Bank, although some may argue that aspects of these are still within the modernist paradigm. According to Corbridge and Williams (2005), DFID and the World Bank are complex organisations and "...its possible for agenda's to be argued within them that might seek to empower the poor in direct and possible 'radical' ways" (1998: 245).

However, although more recent World Bank documentation positions poor people as main actors and centre stage against poverty, it simultaneously also advocates seemingly contradictory policy, such as reducing public spending (Corbridge and Williams. 2005).

Harrison notes that the World Bank's 2001 *World Development Report* "...emphasises the importance of moving beyond a fixation on economic growth for its own sake to a position where the political, livelihood and social opportunities of the poor are given direct attention (2006: 2). He , however, also cautions that critics of the World Bank have referred to recent shifts in ideology and development practices as 'revised neo-liberalism' or 'neo-liberalism with a softer face'.

- Conflicting Rationalities and Call for Ethnographic Research

Consideration of power contestations challenges the assumption of 'universal theory', which ignores the differences that are not pre-given, but rather socially produced and multiply located (Watson. 2005; 2006). This sets up 'conflicting rationalities', which in essence is an interface between that exists between the logic of governing and logic of survival (Watson. 2006). Watson argues that on the one hand, organisations, institutions and individuals are shaped by the rational (logic) of modernization, administration, marketisation and liberalisation (broadly the state and the economy) in contrast with the organizations, institutions and individuals shaped by the (rationality of) the need and desire to survive and thrive (broadly the poors and the informals) (2006: 8).

Watson (2006b) notes that this tendency for rationalities to be in conflict is well illustrated by Hernando de Soto's work on *The Mystery of Capital*. Following in another long tradition of former World Bank officials who offer the ultimate solution once they have resigned and left international aid agencies, de Soto (2000), argues that the process of titling land occupied by the poor would enable them to use their land as collateral in the formal banking system, to raise loans and initiate

businesses, thereby addressing unemployment and poverty. These ideas have become mainstream within organisations such as the World Bank and IMF and have been generalised worldwide. Watson (2006b) challenges de Soto's thesis that only legal property has the properties and functions that can lead to development. Some of the criticism highlighted by Watson include de Soto's erroneous description of formal land law in economic development in the US; the limited use of titled land as collateral to initiate business and attributing development failures to poor land law, amongst a wide range of other aspects. Watson challenges the underlying assumptions of approaches such as these and their unquestionable universal application.

Roy (2001) also questions De Soto's assumption that once informal assets are legalised, ...' capitalist prosperity will flow into every corner of the world '(148). According to Roy, De Soto's assumption, that the end of poverty is just a matter of legally recognising the trillions in assets the poor hold, is 'ludicrous' (2001:152). Roy concludes that a fundamental issue at stake in informality is that of wealth distribution and unequal property ownerships.

Theorist such as Arce and Long (2000) juxtapose the 'official' discourses of development against the '...strategies and language games of local people who face new and increasing global social relations' (2000:3). They further argue that '...social change and development need to be portrayed as multi-dimensional and contested realities' (2000: 18). They also argue for the need for a more anthropological perspective on development.

The appropriateness and effectiveness of programmes aimed at reducing poverty need therefore consider if this is an efforts aimed at universal application of solutions or if the interventions are aligned with the realities that poor communities face in the global south. This call for consideration of the circumstances, forces and imperatives that inform the manner in which the deprived respond to pressing needs. Can theory be formulated that explains the rationality of the poor in the face of formalised and mainstream state and related interventions and do conflicting rationalities create more or less opportunities and constraints?

4. Conclusion

Although this brief critique of how poverty is conceptualise, defined and understood and respond to, in particular in the sub-Saharan context, it is by no means exhaustive. Most development scholars are in agreement that global past and current initiatives to reduce and eradicate poverty are not having the desired results, even within the scope of its own objectives.

Poverty and deprivation varies from one context to another and the differing symptoms include low life expectancy, high levels of infant and child mortality, high morbidity and under nutrition. The nature of interventions should therefore take into consideration the interlocking factors of physical

weakness, isolation, vulnerability, household composition and coping strategies, life cycle needs, gender, bargaining power, culture, and so on (Rakodi. 1995). These complexities cannot be 'built' into universally applicable programmes that respond to local and household specific priorities such as with HIV Aids or local economic development or education, and so on.

What this paper argues is that past and current initiatives promoted by international aid agencies are characterised by the biasness towards western norms and values, assumes homogenous conditions in poor communities and are largely ignorant of local circumstances. It also argues that national governments have also acted in a similar manner through their uncritical adoption of international solutions to development, centralised approach and universal application of development policy. However, it is not argued that modernity should be rejected. On the contrary technological innovations can play a significant role in improving the quality of life of those whose are impoverished. What is rather advocated is to develop an understanding of the processes by which multiple modernities are established (Arce and Long) and to enable different materialities and types of agencies to be juxtaposed and the interrelatedness of these to be explored, while embracing " aspects of modernity as well as tradition together" (Watson. 2006: 9).

Policy should therefore create the scope for 'home-grown' solutions at a local level to be identified, but not purely through market forces as advocated by Easterly, but generated through decentralised public sector initiatives. This approach would recognise the dynamics and complexities of localities; multi-dimensional realities; the limitations of the state and its attempts at simplifying reality (Watson.2006; Corbridge and Williams. 2005). It should therefore be embedded in social justice and respond to the differing values, cultures, traditions and growth aspirations of affected communities and not unquestionable pursuing USA materialism. There is therefore a need for a more anthropological perspective and ethnographic research that '...is grounded in the detailed observation and interpretation of the ongoing lived experiences of particular individuals and groups' (Arce and Long 2000:8).

At a practical level this approach implies that funding from aid agencies and central governments should not be earmarked for specific programmes to be universally applied. Funding, be it for housing, infrastructure, health, education should be provided as one development fund to local levels of government, within broadly defined, but not prescriptive national policy frameworks. This of course requires building capacity and pursuing partnerships with private, community and not-for-profit agencies at a local (municipal) level. The expertise of outside agencies could be made available with the emphasis on providing advice support and not direction and conditions. Although it could be argued that local institutions such as municipalities are also somewhat removed from individual households, they offer a better chance in developing an understanding of priority needs than a central or provincial government.

This of course would remove the opportunity for international aid agencies and central governments to create platforms for promoting self interest and grandstanding.

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