

Agency and Economic Poverty Research in Africa

Piotrek Swiatkowski

Faculty of Philosophy
Erasmus University of Rotterdam
Netherlands
p_swiatkowski@hotmail.com

Abstract

The most important force behind the process of continual change that characterises human reality is agency. An agent is not a passive recipient that is destined to be influenced by the dynamics of the world. He is the constitutive part of the world, the very dynamics that characterise it. Agency means a freedom to construct and create one's own life. It stands for independence in constructing one's own reality. Attempts to monopolise this process are against agency. They stop the movements of invention. In this article the author tries to examine whether economic poverty research allows for the development and preservation of agency in Africa. Is such research adequate to describe the situation in Africa? Can it increase the agency of Africans? The article describes the history of poverty in Africa and discusses the issues of power relations that are the background of economic poverty research. Its first conclusion is that the economic poverty studies undertaken by international organisations are only partially adequate for a proper description of poverty in Africa. This is because Africans only partially underwrite their basic presuppositions. Despite this fact there are many features of African poverty that are not taken into account within this research. Agency in Africa is therefore partially undermined by economic research. Nevertheless attempts to open up the economic poverty research so as to allow Africans to express their agency have been made. More intensive, case-specific studies might, to a certain degree, broaden the scope of economic poverty research. It is however argued that as long as such locality specific research needs to be incorporated into the established development orthodoxy, the potential of increasing the agency will not be realised. A locality specific knowledge will always be distorted by the 'universal' development discourse. It must be concluded that the agency in Africa does not have much chance of developing within the North Atlantic economic body of knowledge. Africans can be in control of such research only as far as they agree with its presuppositions.

Agency

The focus on agency brings with itself a specific perception of human reality. It appears as a chaos. It is full of interaction, dynamism and change. This focus on the dynamics within the human reality seems to be particularly in line with contemporary social changes. In the light of the process given the name of globalisation the world does not appear as characterised by stability and continuity. The majority of the populations of the world see the old ways to guarantee order put under pressure. Institutions like nation states, political parties, working unions, and other traditional forms of power relations, like losing the system of chieftaincy in Africa, are losing their importance and grip on the reality. At the same time new systems of power relations are being born. International organisations, multinational corporations and NGOs that advocate a full participation in the newly emerging global capitalistic society, but also the African charismatic churches and movements that oppose the process of modernisation or globalisation, like for example the Islamic religious groups, become some of the new

important global and national actors. They transform life and structures of power on the global but also local scale.

The most important force behind the process of continual change is agency. Change is not produced by eternal laws that govern all human societies. No dialectics or teleology can give a correct description of the functioning of human reality. Reality does not change on the basis of an abstract process of negation and affirmation (*Aufhebung*). It is only when taking agency into account that the functioning of human reality can be described. An agent is not a passive recipient that is destined to be influenced by the dynamics of the world. He is the constitutive part of the world, the very dynamics that characterise it. Reality changes through thoughts, decisions and actions of independent agents, the carriers of the dynamics of the world. It is true that agents interpret and respond to the world only on the basis of habits and knowledge they inherited from the past. However, in this way one forgets the essence of the functioning of a human agent. Agency is not a prolongation of the past. It is an ongoing creation of the future. Only by an active and creative use of the past can an agent meet the challenges that surround him. Each of his responses must be adequate; each of his actions must transform the world around him. An agent is a creator of new worlds, a small-scale revolutionary.

This is still a very broad perception of agency. Different kinds of normative content can be added here. From the modernistic perspective of human rights one could for example state that agency implies the existence of several inalienable human rights. Those can be the rights to education or medical care. From this perspective one can be an agent only once enabled to make decisions, only once 'consciously' able to function within a particular society. One can be described as an agent only after having interiorised some of the fundamental ideas about the way a human society should function. This can mean that agency can be enabled via modern education systems or democratic institutions.¹ Such perception of agency often implies interiorising of the ideas that have originated in Europe. On the other hand, from a post-modern, (post-colonial) perspective agency can imply something completely else. Agency can be connected to a celebration of multiplicity or difference. Within this perspective agency can be realised only when the peoples of the earth are freed from the domination of the unifying structures that enforce one particular (read North Atlantic) way of living upon them. The critics of European modernity oppose the process of modernisation and globalisation. People must be enabled to live their lives as they did in the past. Small-scale local communities that are separated from the modern, global and capitalistic world should be either protected or built up again.

As stated by the authors of the book 'Empire' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 156), the choice between those two perspectives is not the only one. In their eyes, both perspectives actually serve similar forms of domination. Human rights have often legitimated the domination of the North Atlantic culture and its way of organising society. In that way competing ways to construct and organise social reality (Islam, traditional African) have been put under additional pressure. The post-modern, post-colonial perspectives have been criticised for similar reasons. In the eyes of some critics, like Anthony Appiah the post-colonial authors that are influenced by post-modern writing are actually the agents of global capitalism. Global capitalism lives from difference and multiplicity and the local communities become new products that can be sold on the world market. In the eyes of such critics, advocating difference means nothing else but cooperation with the new system of exploitation that characterises the new form of global capitalism. Also for Hardt and Negri (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 150) the focus on local communities, on preservation of difference does not seem to be the best way to

confront this new form of domination. It actually tends to support it, they say.

Hardt and Negri try to find a solution for this contemporary situation. It seems that agency is their answer, agency defined as an independent production of truth, free from any form of domination. As Hardt and Negri state:

It is not a matter of either/or. Difference, hybridity, and mobility (advocated by post-modernity – P.S.) are not liberatory in themselves, but neither are truth, purity, and stasis (one-sidedly believing in the advantages of the North-Atlantic modernity – P.S.). The real revolutionary practice refers to the level of production. Truth will not make us free, but taking control of the production of truth will. Mobility and hybridity are not liberatory, but taking control of the production of mobility and stasis, purities and mixtures is. The real truth commissions of Empire will be constituent assemblies of the multitude social factories for the production of truth (Hardt & Negri, 2000: 156).

Although both authors do not explicitly use the concept, agency appears as freedom to construct and create one's own life. It is an independence in making choices and in constructing reality. In that sense agency cannot be realised by advocating only one of the mentioned perspectives. It must be a combination of the good sides of both perspectives. On the one hand agency must imply an independent local and therefore differential production of truth, advocated by the post-colonial writers. On the other hand it still must appeal to some of the most fundamental of the human rights: freedom to choose and right to live one's life free from any form of domination. In that sense agency can be both pro- and anti-globalist. Within the scope of agency one can opt for a search for new directions, for an action against the existing local and global structures of power. On the other hand agency can also stand for a local resistance against the changes that come from abroad. It can be a defence of the existing social life and power structures. Agency is being able to choose. It is a freedom to invent, to adapt but also to preserve. In the case of Africa, agency can therefore describe several different positions. It can imply an active play with existing power structures and values of the three differing worlds, the traditional African, the North Atlantic and the Islamic, but it can also stand for a choice of only one of those worlds. The only precondition required by agency is the possibility of choice. It means that the play with the values and power structures that characterise those three worlds must be left to the African peoples themselves. Like any population of the world, Africans should be able to make choices about their own life. They should be in control of the production of their own truth and their own social reality. Whether they choose to go along with the global tendencies and try to integrate as much as possible with the world markets, whether they would opt for an Islamic republic or isolate themselves in traditional communities should always remain their own choice. The struggle to transform the society in any way possible should be enabled to continue. Each particular society should be organised in such a manner as to allow such a social, political and cultural struggle to exist. Any attempt to monopolise the organisation of social life is against agency. It oppresses and stops the movements of invention. The agents in a monopolised, totalitarian society can only adapt. They cannot construct the world they are living in. Such society becomes static and the space for change and creative development is lost.

Economic poverty research in Africa

It now needs to be examined whether such freedom is present in contemporary Africa. Just like elsewhere in the world it seems that the possibilities to construct one's own life, are not always present. Influences from outside, which defend the interests of vari-

ous foreign and internal groups, seem to diminish the choices open to the African people. The social and cultural struggles do not always have a space to develop. Liberal capitalism supported by the western form of the state and by various interest groups as well as Islamic militants are increasingly influencing life and the production of truth in Africa. An interesting case study is to look at the role and influence of economic poverty research on agency in Africa. Is economic poverty research, as carried out by several international development organisations, adequate for a proper, locality-specific description of poverty in Africa? Does it open a space for free choice in constructing African lives? If not, can this research be improved so as to provide such knowledge? Can economic poverty research produce knowledge that is not disturbed by the effects of hegemonic subversion of one group of people by another? Can it increase the agency of Africans?

Just like agency, poverty can also be analysed on the basis of different points of view. Also here the division can be drawn between the universal (modernist) and post-colonial (relativist) perspectives. Both perspectives seem to agree on a general definition of poverty. Broadly speaking the word poverty is used to describe a material and non-material situation of an entity. It stands in opposition to concepts like richness or prosperity and is related to concepts like low standard of living, bad life and being worse off. Characteristics of human life that represent poverty² can include absence of entitlements or 'basic necessities' required for economic or biological survival, hunger, malnutrition, homelessness, poor health, low consumption, exclusion from educational possibilities, or lack of respect and love, bad fortune and being discriminated. against. Nevertheless the differences between both worldviews appear fast. According to the relativist position poverty is a value judgment. The choice of defining characteristics and their evaluation is dependent upon cultural background, social position, religious conviction, profession or personal history of any possible entity using this description. The differences in the ways poverty is defined can also be caused by the economical structure of a particular society. In the economised³ industrial societies, the individual inability to consume industrial products can usually be regarded as poverty. In the societies based on the informational mode of development the individual inability to access technology and information is regarded as poverty. In the non-economisation societies, poverty is not necessarily connected to consumption. It can be connected to the lack of productive resources like land, cattle or people. Reasons of a spiritual nature can be its cause as well. Contrary to the other forms of society where poverty is considered to be controllable, it is perceived as an inevitable part of social life. It is also a matter of not only an individual but also of the social group one is part of.

Contrary to the relativist perspective, the universal (modern) perspective does not perceive poverty as merely a value judgement. According to this perspective there are universal aspects of poverty. The majority of economic literature for example believes in the existence of an absolute core of poverty. This core is shared across cultural boundaries and is related to the physical functioning of the human body. Sufficient nourishment, qualitatively good shelter, clean water and medication are considered to be the basic necessities of a human being. Access to those necessities should be provided in any circumstances and anyone who lacks it is poor irrespective of his and others' perception of the situation. The existence of cross-cultural universals has been often denied⁴. From a relativistic perspective it is impossible to decide which needs should be part of the basic human necessities. The universal levels of sufficient feeding, shelter or clean water appear as impossible to determine. The universal perspective is further unable to account for the fact that the physical needs or consumption of various products are often considered less important than other needs.

Giving priority to one of the two visions of poverty does influence the possible answers to the questions that were stated above. If there is a universal core of poverty, there seems to be little need for a definition that is locally determined. On the contrary if such a core does not exist, the definition of poverty must be left only to the Africans themselves and not to economists working for international organisations.

Again, just like in the case of agency, one should not be tempted to choose just one of the perspectives. Elements of both perspectives should be taken into consideration. Such an approach can lead to the following answer to the first question ('Are economic poverty studies, as carried out by several international development organisations, adequate for a proper, locality-specific, description of poverty in Africa?'). The economic poverty studies undertaken by international organisations are increasingly adequate for a proper description of poverty in Africa. They have a basis, which enables them to make judgements about poverty within the African context. In the last hundred years Africa has gone through a process of globalisation and economisation of its life. Characteristics of poverty that are defined on the basis of the values of the North Atlantic, and which are used by the international organisations, are increasingly shared among all people of the world. They become universal points of reference. The economic studies of poverty are indeed capable of describing this part of the multidimensionality of poverty. This still does not mean that they are entirely sufficient. Trends that make it possible to universalise certain ways of looking at the world do not form enough background to validate the economic studies of poverty. There are too many features of African poverty that are not displayed in this research. This hampers a more thorough identification of the African poor and profound understanding of their problems. Economic poverty research is biased towards values persisting in the North-Atlantic. Neither does it recognise issues of power relations in the world. The process of globalisation strengthens the shift towards the North Atlantic values, and the power structures influencing this process stand in the way of the development of own models and own sets of values. Agency in Africa is therefore partially undermined by economic research.

To provide evidence for the fact that African poverty is converging towards the North Atlantic views on poverty, a historical and anthropological account of poverty in Africa needs to be given. Poverty has indeed changed from pre-colonial to colonial and to post-colonial periods. It appears that the changes can be ascribed to the process of colonisation and the recent globalisation. While describing the nature of poverty one can concentrate on the physical need but also on its causes and its timely nature. Following Iliffe (1987) the major distinction to be made regarding poverty is between structural poverty (a long-term one, caused by the social circumstances) and conjunctural poverty (a temporary one to which generally self-sufficient individuals were thrown in by a natural, economic or military crisis). Iliffe (1987: 3) establishes that during pre-modern human history the long term structural poverty consisted of those who lacked access to labour needed to exploit land (both their own labour and the labour of others). Those were generally the incapacitated, elderly, the slaves, the young or those bereft of family and other forms of support. However, this situation has changed. In the majority of regions of the world the land has become scarce and new social structures related to the economisation of life have emerged. The very poor started to include able-bodied who lacked access to land or those who were unable to find work for a wage that was high enough to meet minimum needs. This kind of poverty appeared first in Europe. In the nineteenth century it also appeared in Asia. In contemporary times most poverty in those parts of the world is recognised as being due to structural characteristics such as land shortage, unemployment and low wages. In Africa this

kind of poverty started to appear in the twentieth century. Many of the able-bodied became unemployed, landless and received wages too small to meet the physical need of themselves and their families. As Iliffe (1987:3) states because of those changes of the economic structure of the society the role of the family in relation to poverty also started to differ. Especially in the cities, being part of a large family has started to become a cause of poverty rather than of wealth and pride, as was the case in the past and still is in the villages. The importance of the extended family started to diminish. Just as in Europe, in Africa taking care of oneself has increasingly become the responsibility of an individual or of the state and not of the family or of the small community. Nevertheless, poverty due to insufficient access to labour force that can work on the land is still the main reason for poverty. Being employed is regarded as a sign of a good social position but its lack not directly as poverty.

Just as in the case of structural poverty, the nature of conjunctural, temporary poverty has also substantially changed. In the past climatic and political insecurity were the major causes of conjunctural poverty. Drought, disease and warfare were the main reasons for temporary poverty of groups and of whole societies. The change of the system of production that is related to the processes of colonisation and globalisation brought some new causes of poverty. In the contemporary world, poverty is also caused by bad government as well as by the fluctuations on the world market. Unlike in other regions of the world, despite the fact that the shift into the new mode of production has substantially limited the impact of natural disasters on African societies, conjunctural poverty due to the old reasons remains of enormous importance. Next to bad governance and economic shocks, warfare but also diseases prevail.

The causes and characteristics of poverty seem to converge all over the world. Engagement in the capitalist mode of production leads to a homogenisation of the causes and characteristics of poverty throughout the world. As noted above, this gives some justification for the use of North Atlantic categories while describing poverty in Africa. As far as Africans have gone through the process of globalisation they themselves are also tempted to use the North Atlantic categories and values while describing poverty. Their own agency is not entirely undermined. Such a shift is however not the only issue of importance while discussing economic poverty research. As noted above, one should still be conscious of the North-Atlantic hegemony within the process of globalisation. Criticism of this process can reveal that economic research, as undertaken by international organisations, plays an important role in establishing of hegemonic discourse about poverty and development. In fact such research enforces the process of globalisation and helps to establish the hegemony of the North Atlantic values⁵. One form of economic poverty research that is characteristic of the majority of economic research is formed by the World Development Reports, periodically published by the World Bank. In those reports the specialists of the World Bank (usually trained in economics) design policies that various governments should follow to develop their countries (read their economies). In that way they also prescribe a particular way of looking at poverty. Their prescriptions are enforced via loans that finance a variety of the development projects or of the entire state budgets. Those reports have been a focus of criticism of some researchers. According to Nustad (2001) or Braathen (2001) reports such as WDR 2001 are not scientific publications as they often pretend. They are actually policy documents. They do not generate knowledge that presents a truth about the world, as (to some extent) the 'traditional' academic works try to do. They have a different epistemological background. They are a knowledge that can be relevant to the policy prescriptions. They form a knowledge that needs to be applicable in practice. Governments

can use it for social control and regulation (Nustad, 2001: 3). What is peculiar about this kind of knowledge is that it is constrained by the tools of intervention that are available to those using such reports in practice, the bureaucracy or those in power. Such structures have direct consequences for the kind of variables that are being collected. If policies are to manipulate social and economic variables, a relevant knowledge to a policy maker is one which identifies variables open to manipulation. Other variables fall outside and are not gathered. Knowledge on the border of politics is therefore structured according to the aims to which it is directed (Nustad, 2001: 3).

This is certainly the case with respect to the knowledge about poverty and about the target populations of the development projects. It focuses on characteristics of poverty the development practitioners, politicians, planners and economists think they should concentrate on. According to Escobar (1995), the chosen needs have little to do with what the different categories of the poor perceive to be their needs. Measures such as income⁶, percentage of illiterates, of radios, books, newspapers, the calorie intake per capita or the ratio of doctors, nurses, or of health centres to the population are too culturally insensitive and too rough to define poverty in any cultural setting. In such statistical accounts the needs of the poor are perceived to be universal, globally applicable figures. They are not connected to a particular mode of livelihood of people participating in a particular culture (Rahnema, in Sachs, 1993: 160).

The supposed scientific background of development reports allows the various politicians to justify and objectify political interventions (Nustad, 2001: 4). The scientific knowledge presents 'rational' solutions to various social problems. With such an aura, 'objectified' political programmes become impossible to oppose. In that way science becomes a major form of power in political life. Policy tends to be reduced to management. The political problem of poverty becomes a technical one. It appears as resolvable with the technical resources that are at the disposal of the bureaucracy⁷. Development policy 'extends bureaucratic structures to those who fall outside the influence of the state (the unemployed, participants in the informal sector, etc.), and describes their exclusion as an apolitical problem solvable by technical intervention' (Nustad, 2001: 4). The underlying issues of power relations and inequality are being neglected. Only those holding the knowledge and power have the authority to influence it. The political conflicts that express the agency of various groups within a particular society become blurred. People lose the possibility to express their needs in a manner different from the one prescribed by the development bureaucracy. Agency and conflicts do survive, but only under the surface of the supposedly objective world. Nevertheless, the situation can look different. Poverty research might be undertaken in a way that can enable agency. 'If the problem, poverty, is seen as a political problem and the specific instance [World Bank, IMF, NGO's, government – P.S.] as a part of a much wider network of power relations, then the potential developer has already defined him or herself away as the provider of a possible solution' (Nustad, 2001: 5). He is just one of the beneficiaries of solutions and his perception and values as not the only ones possible. Such an approach is still unpopular among various governments and international organisations⁸. They want to remain the providers of objective scientific solutions to problems they themselves define.

It is apparent that some the opponents of the policies of international organisations⁹ criticise the presupposed universality of the goal of development. They state that the North Atlantic hegemonic discourse of development, with its roots in the North Atlantic's middle-class, often violent, struggle for 'normality' defeats other possible ways of looking at poverty and development. In their eyes the human agency is disap-

pearing. They condemn the use of western notions of development and of western perceptions of poverty. They see a locality specific mode of development, one that is not connected to production for the global capitalist markets, and one that might provide a pro-poor or ecologically responsible development, as the remedy. They often focus attention on the particular modes of organisation of economic and social life that are and were present in the various cultures of the world. This idealistic 'anti-globalist' perspective needs to be moderately criticised for not entirely matching the global situation as well as for being too conservative. The global world is inter-connected. Separate cultures, considered as distinct entities, do not exist (van Binsbergen, 1999: 6, or Hountondji, 1996). People live in a world that shares and mingles values and ideas from different places and societies. Agency is expressed via such interaction. Capitalist modes of production have already become a dominant way in which various societies are organised. Those societies increasingly share values and ideals that correspond with this mode of production. Participation in the global consumption society is one of the most important goals of the majority of people on the planet. Contemporary poverty can to a high degree be defined as low consumption of technology, information and social services. Concepts like culture, often referred to by 'anti-globalists', cease to be an adequate concept to describe the present international situation. Concepts like cultural orientation (van Binsbergen, 1999: 12) seem more adequate. Specific cultures are divided into separate social layers, and do not form an integrated unity. The majority of cultural orientations are now shared over the world. There are increasing similarities in the way people relate to one another, how they behave at work, and how they make use of the new technologies. In that sense poverty and development cannot be entirely culture specific. Development and poverty contain both global and particular characteristics. Modes of development that are disconnected from global influences and ideologies seem therefore almost impossible to reach.

Authors contributing to the volume of Sachs (1993) present the changes related to globalisation as causing a homogenisation of various cultures of the world. Old forms of life are disappearing, and we are left with the aggressive, self-destructive culture of the North Atlantic, where nihilistic goals of consumption and profit-making are the only ones left. Globalisation is presented as homogenisation of various human cultures, as McDonaldisation. Despite the fact that global capitalism indeed spreads a new system of domination, as Hardt and Negri (2000: 43) state¹⁰, it does not necessarily imply that it is a cultural domination. Actually, the global capitalist system interacts with local cultures in different manners and creates situations specific to each locality. Consumption of goods is related to the continuing, locality-specific, social customs (Fardon et al, 1999).¹¹ New societies with new ways of consumption emerge. People adapt to the changes and fight against the cultural and economic domination. Human agency is not lost. It needs to be realised as well that the global capitalist economy can be described as heterogeneous. As Hardt and Negri (2000: 44) underline, the post-modern capitalist economy can sustain itself only by a high degree of cultural diversity.

The accounts of the activists have also been criticised (Mills, 1999) for not being engaged with what is exactly happening within the villages and small towns of the interior of, for example, Africa. Mills (1999: 109) questions whether attempts to surpass development are indeed what their inhabitants are looking for. Development as an ideology and a promise of a better future is according to him a necessity. He describes various village meetings that promote local development. These point towards modern North-Atlantic ways of living and underline the importance of education, western health and participation within the modern African society. On the one hand such

meetings indeed do legitimise the practices of the governments and of the elite but on the other hand they also carry the potential of eventually benefiting the poor. They raise the consciousness of the possibilities of a self-aware functioning within the modern society, and eventually provide a possibility for improvement of material situation. There does not seem to be another way to tackle the problems of the poor in African villages. Another way of development is yet absent. The poor can only improve their lives by an increased and more thorough participation in the modern African society. This participation means Western (not Islamic) education and consequently a partial denial of the present ways of living. Mills states that even though development can be regarded as a new kind of colonialism 'we have no choice but to work within the power relations the development word puts into place' (Mills, 1999: 112). The accounts of the 'anti-globalists' are too humanistic, spiritual and exotic, and the alternatives remain merely in the sphere of wishes, he states. Nevertheless, there is a lesson the activists teach. One should never cease to wish for a better and different future. History did not end with the liberal economic or even re-politicised (democratic) economic development. Development should be a continuous and never-ending story. In that sense development will also always open a field for human agency. The necessity of designing new ways of living, according to which the African poor become a part of the modern society, or on the contrary when they are left free to pursue whatever lifestyle they imagine, needs to be recognised. The agents themselves and not the development and state bureaucracies should be in control of this process. People themselves should be enabled to define their own needs, to produce their own truth.

So far it has been argued that there are still many features of African poverty that are not displayed in economic poverty research. This research still does not allow the African agents to be in full control of their lives. In that way economic poverty research is not yet capable of a more profound identification of the African or analysis of their problems. This research is too biased towards values persisting in the North Atlantic, and does not recognise issues of power relations in the world. It can therefore be substantially improved so as to increase the agency in Africa. This is an answer to the last question posed above (Can economic poverty research produce knowledge that is not disturbed by the effects of hegemonic subversion of one group of people by another? Can it increase the agency of Africans?) More intensive, case-specific studies might, to a certain degree, broaden the scope of economic poverty research. They might open the way to express values different from the North Atlantic ones and expose the particularities of each case. They might therefore be capable of exposing the important issues of power relations within such societies and or realising African agency. The importance of consulting anthropological and historic studies of poverty and an extensive consultation with local societies must be recognised by the economists.

Attempts to undertake such research have indeed been made by various international organisations. The typical poverty surveys concentrating on the income/consumption or social indicators have been amended by participatory poverty research that tries to express the local perceptions of poverty. Such attempts have been undertaken among others by the World Bank in various African countries during the 1990s. Nevertheless, those attempts have been evaluated as unsuccessful in generating a knowledge that is free of hegemony.¹² The reason for this lack of success has been among others the inadequate incorporation of the information from participatory research into the body of economic knowledge. The studies of the World Bank that made use of the participatory approach were still in general characterised by the income/consumption approach.¹³ Therefore, they were vulnerable to the criticism of this approach. The assessments over-

emphasised income (or consumption) poverty, they suffered from information problems often faced by the traditional household survey, and they paid attention to various social dimensions of poverty, for example to education, health or nutrition, only in an insufficient way (Hanmer et al, 1999: 818). The possibility of retrieving more information and of generating a knowledge that is closer to the actual needs of the poor was therefore not realised. Contrary to the envisaged goal, the influence of the voices of the poor on the gathered knowledge and on the designed policies remained marginal.

There are three major reasons for a failure of the combination of both approaches. First, there is a lack of methodological sophistication regarding how to combine them. According to Whitehead and Lockwood, 'the authors of the assessments have limited understanding of non-quantitative, non-survey based methodologies, poor conceptualisation of what PPAs can do and very little idea about triangulation and how multi-stranded methods can be successfully combined' (Whitehead and Lockwood 1999: 542). Secondly, according to Shaffer the difficulty in combining both approaches arises due to their different philosophical underpinnings. The naturalist paradigm for social sciences (income-consumption approach) described above as the modernistic, is not easily combined with a hermeneutic one (participatory research), described above as the post-colonial. According to him, the nature of the information gathered by both approaches is too different to be able to combine them (Schaffer 1996: 32). Often different groups of people become described as poor. In practice, due to an assumed objectivity, the naturalistic paradigm is always more likely to be applied. This attitude is expressed by the almost inevitable privileging of quantitative data from household surveys over qualitative information from the participatory research within the research of the World Bank.

The third point strengthens some of the considerations made above. The translation of locality-specific information into the language of another society or into the language of science cannot happen without disruption or a degree of 'violence' towards the locality herself, as Braathen (2001) or Mudimbe (1988) underline. When knowledge about a locality is translated into another language, it becomes subjected to its foreign rules and dynamics. Influence on those dynamics from the level of a locality is almost impossible. This is also the case with information about poverty that has been gathered in participatory research. Information that it provides has to be translated into the discourse of economic poverty research. This discourse is often the expression of the current ideology prevailing in the North Atlantic.¹⁴ In the discussed case, the disruption or the degree of violence towards the local knowledge appears to be high. The World Bank is an important actor in global politics. It is endowed with power and resources to make a global free-market economy a reality. All of the World Bank's documents, including the discussed poverty assessments, must be seen in the light of this project. They cannot provide results that might challenge this goal. As far as the participatory assessments did provide results that conflicted with this goal, their outcomes had to be suppressed, state Whitehead and Lockwood (1999).¹⁵ Those outcomes had to fit the model of poverty and anti-poverty policies that have been developed by the World Bank in the World Development Report 1990. In that document, poverty is defined in monetary terms and global development in terms of a growing GDP. Free trade and minimum state intervention into the economy are regarded as the best anti-poverty measures. In line with the goals of the World Bank, WDR 1990 presented a global free-market economy as the best solution to the social problems of the world. The outcomes of participatory assessments did not fit well into such a framework. Defining poverty in terms different from income could have undermined the hegemony of

a growing GDP and of a free market as the best anti-poverty strategies. Indeed, various authors¹⁶ underline that the discussed distortion took place. WDR 1990 had a negative impact on the discussed assessments in general. The historical perspective, political context, and international dimensions, such as debt and commodity price trends were ignored (Hanmer et al, 1999: 819). Neither was there sufficient information about poverty in the African context, since rural livelihoods, rural social and gender relations and agrarian socio-economic processes were not examined (Hanmer et al, 1999, Warner et al, 1997 and Whitehead et al, 1999). The socio-economic categories of the poor, a prerequisite for a more correct analysis of poverty, were not produced.

However, it needs to be noted that the World Bank has slightly amended its liberal worldview. World Development Report 2000/1 has tried to provide a remedy to some of the problems related to the inadequacy of WDR 1990. The free-market orthodoxy has been partially challenged and the importance of state intervention in the struggle against poverty has been recognised. Contrary to the WDR 1990, 'Consultations with the Poor' have also played a more integral part of its structure. The weight of those changes is high, and important. The future poverty surveys might be more successful and benefit the poor. Nevertheless, this report does not break with the universalistic background of the WDR 1990. It remains a universal body of knowledge all future poverty assessments will have to relate to. The values of the free-market have not been substantially challenged. This means that, just like in the past, locality-specific agency and related perceptions of poverty have little chance of challenging the set of values represented by the international organisations. The free-market ideology still plays a key role in this document. This also means that it is likely that only a small part of the world's population might benefit from the outcomes of this report.

There is one question left unanswered. Why did the World Bank choose to use the participatory approach in the first place, if their outcome could not have had much influence on the rest of the discussed documents? The most likely answer is that the concentration on the 'voices of the poor' has been merely a search for authority from the side of the World Bank. To legitimise its project, it tried to use not only the authority of science but also of the 'poor' themselves. The poor have appeared as active participants of development, as real agents who have constructive influence on their own future. Unfortunately, in sad reality, they became part of a project which they could not really influence. Their 'voices' have been used to legitimise a universal (North Atlantic) vision of poverty and anti-poverty action that was developed thousands of miles away from their own homes. The ones willing to listen to the voices of the poor have (willingly or unwillingly) heard only their own voices. This is a pessimistic conclusion from the intercultural point of view. The goal of participation of the poor in the poverty surveys was to come to a genuine understanding of local realities and to design political actions appropriate to those realities. It has not been reached. It can therefore be concluded that at the present time the potential of generating a genuine intercultural knowledge of poverty, one that might meet the challenge of agency in the area of development economics, is limited. No knowledge specific to any reality can exist on its own. Even if participation is carried out in the best possible way, it needs to be translated into a language on which it has no influence. This means that outcomes of a participatory research will have to be subdued to the changing dynamics of the discourse of development economics. This science is certainly not a value-free. It is organised according to values that have emerged in the North-Atlantic and it is committed to spreading them around the globe. Neither is this science free from the influences of the enormous global inequalities of power. The knowledge created for example within the World Bank,

which has a well-defined global policy agenda, is especially vulnerable to this criticism. The danger that this global actor will misuse the locality specific information, so as to legitimise its own goals, will remain to be high. Again those goals are not to be evaluated solely in negative terms. The global political context is not a hopeless one and the values expressed in the research are increasingly becoming the values of the local communities. Nevertheless, the international inequalities of power should be confronted. Agency is also a notion that can describe such a struggle.

Notes

- ¹ Look, among others, at the definitions of well-being given by A. Sen (1987).
- ² Rahnama, in Sachs (1993: 158).
- ³ Economisation is a process of engaging in the capitalist mode of development (Castells, 1996:12).
- ⁴ see: Gellner (1990), Winch (1964), Geertz (1984).
- ⁵ Examples of such criticism are Sachs (1993) or Escobar (1995).
- ⁶ According to the World Bank income below 1\$ PPP is a universal expression of poverty throughout the world.
- ⁷ Nustad (2001: 4) cites Fergusson (1990): 'by uncompromisingly reducing poverty to a technical problem, and by promising technical solutions to the sufferings of powerless and oppressed people, the hegemonic problematic of 'development' is the principal means through which the question of poverty is de-politicised in the world today'.
- ⁸ The possible improvement and their chance of being successful are discussed below.
- ⁹ Among others Escobar (1995) and contributors to Sachs (1993).
- ¹⁰ According to Hardt and Negri contemporary domination is one by global capital.
- ¹¹ For example van Dijk (1999) describes the way gifts function within the contemporary Ghanaian society.
- ¹² Hanmer et al (1999) and Whitehead et al (1999).
- ¹³ Expenditure below an arbitrary poverty line remained the main criterion of poverty. Half of the WB's twenty-five assessments used the absolute poverty line; others used the relative poverty line. All assessments relied on the standard household surveys as their major source of information (Hanmer et al, 1999).
- ¹⁴ The major development ideologies were ones inspired by Keynes, by the neo-liberal ideology, or the current Clinton-Blair inclusive markets orthodoxy, expressed in WDR 2000/1.
- ¹⁵ According to Whitehead and Lockwood (1999) influence upon the different country studies in practice was achieved by peer reviews of other members of the World Bank. Peers were situated in Washington.
- ¹⁶ Hanmer et al (1999), Warner et al (1997) and Whitehead et al (1999).

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