

# Poverty isn't just about the poor

**It might seem natural to assume that global anti-poverty initiatives should target the poor.**

**But unless such initiatives also target the social structures that make people poor in the first place, they will have no long-term impact, according to members of the WUN Critical Global Poverty Studies Group.**



"Over the last 20 years global poverty initiatives have sought to provide the poor with food, jobs, or other ways to lift them out of poverty," says co-leader of the Group and Professor of Sociology at the University of Bergen, Asuncion St Clair. "But without social cohesion and social policies to prevent excessive inequality and stop people slipping into poverty, such initiatives are bound to fail."

Professor of International Social Policy at the University of Sheffield, Bob Deacon agrees: "In the industrialised nations, people were lifted out of poverty thanks to the welfare state and infrastructure improvements such as clean water and sewerage. And these initiatives worked because they were designed to benefit all sectors of society, not just the poor."

The middle classes were a key driving force behind the development of welfare state societies and are just as important today to carry out a similar role in developing countries. Which is why the Group is focusing new collaborative research projects not directly on the poor, but on the middle classes.

"The middle classes are feeling vulnerable in the face of the financial crisis, a shrinking public sector, reduction in social protection, and the impact of climate change," says Professor of Geography at the University of Washington and co-leader of the Group,

Victoria Lawson. "We want to look at what this means for welfare state building. Will the middle classes kick away the ladder beneath them to protect their own position, or will they still try to build better social provision to benefit the poor as well as themselves?"

The Group plans to compare how the middle classes are responding to poverty politics in South Africa, Argentina, USA and Norway, particularly in the light of the recent economic crisis. This is exactly the kind of research for which the Group works best – crossing borders, disciplines and the traditional North South divide between developed and developing countries.

The approach has been endorsed by the UNESCO sponsored global research programme Comparative Research on Poverty – CROP – of which Professor St Clair is also Scientific Director.

"By carrying out serious research focused on a different approach to poverty, we hope to bring about a change in perspective amongst policy makers," says Professor St Clair. "We aim to provide policy briefs for key stakeholders and generate a debate in the media. There is an urgency to this – the impact of climate change and the financial crisis is likely to cause a huge increase in poverty and this will not be solved by traditional means."

But the middle classes now face a very different world to when the welfare states were first built in Europe in the 1940s. One of the main questions the Group hope to cover with their research is whether it is possible to re-establish a global politics of welfare state building within the context of globalisation?

"Globalisation means that the middle classes are no longer limited to social provision in their own country. It is now much easier to gain health and education benefits across borders, previously a prerogative of the elite," says Professor Deacon. "We want to find out what choices the middle classes are making. Are they opting out of the system in their own country, or staying in it to build better services for all?"

Comparing poverty politics in countries at varying stages of development underlines another key principle for the Group – poverty is not just an issue in the developing world.

"International analysis is fundamental to how the Group works," says Professor St Clair. "The poverty debate is dominated by rich countries, both in terms of defining what poverty is and how we solve it, yet often these countries are reluctant to admit the poverty inside their own borders. We try to provide a different perspective and explode some of the boundaries between North and South."

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