Experiencing poverty in Africa:
perspectives from anthropology

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Summary

The value of a multi-disciplinary approach to the understanding of poverty and the design of poverty-reduction strategies is now widely accepted. However, this paper argues, current expectations about the potential contribution to poverty analysis from disciplines other than economics remain rather too slanted towards what are presumed to be the special strengths of PRA-based PPAs: capturing poor people's perceptions, identifying their priorities and describing their coping strategies. Properly understood as centring on the observation and interpretation of behaviour, anthropological enquiry has relevant things to say at all the three levels that concern a poverty status report: 1) who are the poor? 2) why are they poor? and 3) what can be done to reduce poverty?

Key findings under these headings are:

- While anthropological work can help to enrich statistical poverty profiles, a more important contribution may be in documenting the variable, fluid, complex and contested categorisations and relationships that constitute the reality that poverty-reduction efforts must contend with on the ground.

- Documented responses to structural change are sufficiently diverse and affected by the particularities of local structures, including notably gender relations, that multiple paths of impoverishment or dis-impoverishment remain more likely than homogeneous national or regional trends.

- Anthropological studies help to remind us that the primary stakeholders in anti-poverty operations are, of necessity, active participants in constructing their own future, while the activities of states and development agencies are not always empowering of poor people.

The main implications for the policy and practice of poverty reduction are:

- The complexities which remain uncaptured by statistical and sociological categorisations of the poor are a source of uncertainty. Since it is known that they are numerous and important, planning for poverty reduction will generally benefit from a strong learning-process orientation.

- Diversity of social response does not mean that no generalisations are possible, or that those that remain robust (e.g. the gains from decontrolling rural markets, or legislating on women's rights) are unimportant. But it does strengthen the view that anti-poverty action needs to be built at least partly from the bottom up.

- Development interventions, including anti-poverty strategies, are likely to benefit from an approach that is more institutionally self-aware. This implies placing poor people's own efforts at the centre, and reflecting more self-critically on possible side-effects of the exercise of governmental and agency power.

1   Introduction: on asking the right questions

The scope of current interest in the status of poverty in Africa is indicated by the three questions: who are the poor? why are they poor? and what can be done about it? At each of these levels of enquiry – the profile of poverty, its causes and the implications for policy and practice – there is growing recognition of the value of a multidisciplinary approach. This is usually expressed in a rather bipolar way, in terms of the limitations of single-stranded work based on the analysis of household survey data, and the need to integrate this with more 'qualitative' evidence reflecting poor people's own experience. In this simple form, the argument forms the now widely-recognised case for including an element of participatory assessment in any policy-oriented exercise in poverty analysis.

First, there is much to be gained from comparing conventional consumption-poverty measures not only with a wider range of indicators of deprivation, but also with poor people's own perceptions of who the poor are, and hence what poverty is, or what matters about it. Second, analysis of causes is more robust if it is informed by the poor's own vision of the dynamics of poverty and the processes leading to impoverishment and disimpoverishment. Third, the design of policy interventions needs to take into account and build upon poor people's own coping strategies.

At all three levels, the argument runs, it is possible to use the results of participatory assessments and other grass-roots' case-study methods to check, qualify and enrich the findings from the more established analytical approaches. Independently of this, there is value in a participatory approach to the analysis of poverty and assessment of poverty-reduction efforts, since enabling the 'voice of the poor' to be articulated and heard by stakeholders at all levels is the key to changes in policy and practice (Carvalho and White 1997, Robb 1998, Holland and Blackburn 1998: Part 2).

One of the ways in which the above is basically sound but potentially misleading, concerns the relationship between the different 'alternative' traditions of enquiry. Some worthwhile clarification has been contributed by distinguishing the part of the argument that refers specifically to participatory methods or systematic stakeholder consultations – where the focus is primarily on the links between knowledge, learning and action – and the part that is about triangulating between different sources of data and styles of analysis to achieve more robust and sophisticated understanding.

For the latter purpose, it has been pointed out, the relevant distinction is not between survey-based and participatory methods, nor even between quantitative and qualitative data, but between approaches to data collection that are more or less *contextual*. The relationship between contextual and non-contextual methods is best seen as a continuum, with PRA-based exercises at one extreme, along with

not only ethnographic research but also field studies in farming systems, urban and rural sociology and political science, to the extent that they employ an intensive case-study rather than survey approach (Booth et al. 1997).

This point that PPAs, in the narrow sense of PRA-based enquiries, are not the only source of complementary understandings that can contribute to improved action on poverty is widely appreciated in principle, if not always in practice. It provides the principal reason for deliberately including a review of ethnographic or anthropological sources among the background papers for the 1999 Poverty Status Report.

A further clarification along these lines is also needed, however. This may help to explain why it was felt that this paper needed to be written as a separate contribution to the discussion of 'how the poor perceive poverty in Africa'. Notwithstanding the recognition now given to a multidisciplinary, rather than merely twin-track, approach, the language used to express the need for a diversity of perspectives still tends to be skewed towards the presumed strengths of PRA-based enquiries. From the perspective of anthropology and other fieldwork-based disciplines, there is too exclusive a stress in these formulations on *perceptions*, as opposed to the practices that embody them; on visions of poverty, as opposed to experiences of *process*; and on coping 'strategies' from within the range of relevant social responses.[1]

There is a well-established terminology in anthropology covering one of the main things involved here. What distinguishes the anthropological approach is sustained attention to both subtleties of meaning and belief (the *emic*) and patterns of observed behaviour and events (the *etic*). Ethnographic work focuses on the often difficult business of interpreting the frequently contradictory relationship between these two dimensions of social experience.[2] In these terms, what anthropological and other contextual methods have to contribute to the understanding of poverty is currently expressed too much as a contribution to *emic* understanding and not enough as an alternative perspective on *etic* issues and on the crucial interface between the emic and the etic.

A corollary of this is that if one interrogates anthropology just for answers to poverty-status questions of the type formulated above – in effect, the questions to which PRA has traditionally offered answers – the results must be expected to be disappointing. For certain, they will fail to do justice to the contribution that

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[1] We refer to the 'presumed' strengths of PRA, because it is not even the case of a best-practice PPA exercise either that it gives direct access to the perceptions of the poor (only to what some of the poor *say*, in a particular context), or that it is entirely limited to recording the testimony of the participants, as opposed to observing their actions and collecting independent evidence on what happens and what people *do*.

[2] Emic and etic are roughly translated as the actor's as against the observer's perspective respectively, the analogy being with phonemic as against phonetic issues in language. A classic source on these matters is Geertz's (1973, 1974) discussion of what is involved in 'thick description'.

anthropology and methodologically cognate disciplines are capable of making in this area.

This was strikingly confirmed by the initial search carried out for this paper. It might have been expected that anthropologists would have a great deal to say concerning how people defined by outsiders as 'poor' perceive themselves; the various ways in which well-being, vulnerability, insecurity and their causes are understood; and how the nature and causes of poverty – as locally-perceived – have changed over time. However, it seems that what anthropological studies have to say directly about these specific issues is both limited and, from the perspective of the discipline, rather problematic.

The focused anthropological literature on poverty in Africa turns out to be minimal, and what there is does not easily deliver up the visions of poor people about their condition. This is partly a matter of intellectual focus. The treatment of issues to do with poverty and well being is diffused across a range of specialist literatures: in early works on kinship, political and marriage systems, religion and economy; in more recent research into rural production systems, food security, gender, health, urban housing, identity and ethnicity, and so on. To some extent the entire corpus of African ethnography is relevant. However, to assemble fragments of insight from across these scattered sources is not only a monumental task but also a rather questionable one, requiring as it does extracting them from their theoretical and substantive contexts and forcing them into engagement with an external discourse on another subject.[3]

Another kind of issue has to do with the seriousness with which anthropology as a discipline approaches the interpretation of its material, including the spoken testimony of informants, poor and non-poor. Obviously, no anthropological work is 'raw' ethnography from which one could expect to glean 'authentic' perceptions in the sense of being uninterpreted and thus untainted by the theoretical, political and personal concerns of the researcher.[4] Under the influence of what is called the post-modern turn, recent anthropological work in Africa and elsewhere has become more rather than less conscious of this essential point about the nature of fieldwork.

As a result, few researchers today would pretend to provide an authoritative account of how well being is defined by the *x* people or *y* group. A more likely focus is on the relations between power, knowledge and discourse, drawing attention to how different people might describe such issues in different ways

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[3] For example, recent monographs which deal with long-term socio-economic change (such as Caplan 1997, Davison 1996, Moore and Vaughan 1994) in what is a generally relevant way are in fact more about the changing social contexts in which accounts of socio-economy are produced, than providing an account of local perceptions/experiences of the kind this review might have been expected to draw on.

[4] The same of course applies to PRA and its use for poverty assessment, on which relevant discussion is provided by Mosse (1994) and Mick Moore et al. (1998)

depending on who they are talking to and in what context. Statements about poverty, wealth and well being are seen, in this way, as idioms through which shifting relations of power – whether within 'communities', or with the state and international agencies – may be affirmed, negotiated or contested.

This is a view that when taken to extremes, can seem precious even in academic circles. However, we would argue that, even and perhaps especially in a policy context, the heightened self-awareness that anthropologists bring should be seen as a particular strength of that tradition. In this perspective, the bad news is that the concepts of poverty to be found in anthropological work are those expressed by particular local people in particular social contexts, as interpreted by the anthropologist armed, or disarmed, with a more or less relevant analytical perspective. The good news is that the conventions of the discipline are increasingly alert to the implications of this fact, possibly more so than those of other social sciences where the same caveats apply. In recent anthropology, the common charge of subjectivity is thus fairly typically answered in Henrietta Moore's injunction that 'the politics of positionality and location should be recognised and addressed' (Moore 1996: 2). In the best cases this entails that the researcher's theoretical framework and personal stance are made explicit, which means that biases are more open to inspection.

The problem, then, is not that anthropology has little to contribute to the illumination of the basic status-report questions – who, why and what can be done – but, on the contrary, that a potentially important contribution may be missed if the issues are posed in terms that are overly influenced by the valuable, but different, contribution of PRA-based PPAs. This paper is not, therefore, an account of what anthropological studies tell us about the views of the African poor on poverty and its causes. Nor does it pretend to reflect the 'voice' of the poor in any significant way. What it offers, instead, is a set of answers to the questions 'who, why and what to do' which generates in turn some important caveats regarding the use other evidence on these subjects for policy purposes.

That may not seem very much. However, we argue that it is a potentially crucial contribution. Moreover, it is important to appreciate that anthropology is a corrective or source of enrichment not just to survey analysis but also and no less importantly to PPA work. The best PPAs to date have undoubtedly been those that have benefited from the guidance of staff trained in anthropology as well as PRA, or which have incorporated some form of review of relevant anthropological studies. The greatest single threat to the credibility of PPAs at present lies in the tendency for their practitioners to view PRA as a simple tool-kit for consulting the poor, rather than as a philosophy of triangulation and fitness to purpose implying an obligation to draw optimally on the insights of both local knowledge and relevant specialist work. Highlighting the specific contributions from anthropology may be of some help in this regard.

The findings of the paper boil down to three sets of messages, corresponding broadly to the core status-report questions identified at the beginning. The sections of the paper develop these in turn. Section 2 examines the implications of anthropological evidence for the treatment of poverty concepts and the construction of poverty profiles, including the use of data from 'wealth ranking' exercises at community level. Section 3 addresses the 'why' question, drawing particularly on work by anthropologists and social historians on people's responses to sources of long-term change. Section 4 turns to the implications of these findings and other anthropological evidence for the design of anti-poverty interventions. Section 5 sums up.

Key points and policy implications emerging from the paper are:

- **Who are the poor?** While anthropological work can help to enrich statistical poverty profiles, a more important contribution may be in documenting the variable, fluid, complex and contested categorisations and relationships that constitute the reality that poverty-reduction efforts must contend with on the ground. Such complexities are a source of uncertainty, which means that planning for poverty reduction needs a strong learning-process orientation.

- **Why are they poor?** Documented responses to structural change are sufficiently diverse and so affected by the particularities of local structures, including notably gender relations, that multiple paths of disimpoverishment or re-impoverishment remain more likely than homogeneous national or regional trends. This does not mean that established generalisations (e.g. about decontrolling rural markets, or legislating on women's rights) are unimportant. But it does mean that effective anti-poverty action needs to be built at least partly from the bottom up.

- **What can be done?** Anthropological studies help to remind us that the primary stakeholders in anti-poverty operations are, of necessity, active participants in constructing their own future, while the activities of states and development agencies are not always empowering. It follows that development interventions, including the implementation of anti-poverty strategies, are likely to benefit from an approach that is more institutionally self-aware, as well as process-oriented and partially decentralised.

2   Poverty concepts and profiles

In the light of our introductory discussion, the reader will not expect from this section anything other than heavily interpreted and 'positioned' accounts of how poverty is experienced, and who the poor are considered to be, among some more-or-less poor people in Africa. What use can this be expected to be? There seem to be two main avenues, both of which depend on appreciating the

difference of character and function between anthropological research and conventional survey analysis.

Vigdis Broch-Due (1995) emphasises that the concepts of poverty employed in most development analysis are very 'thin', focussing on material and measurable elements, such as income and nutrition. In contrast 'thick' ethnographic work reveals far more complex, multi-layered pictures. The various concepts and definitions of poverty and wealth, or more broadly, ill being and well being, which policy agencies use have emerged in specific cultural and historical contexts. The same is true of the variety of terms which are found amongst African peoples and languages. Material deprivation – lack of food and income, poor health – may be important everywhere. But ideas employed by African peoples in particular contexts select aspects of material life and group them with other attributes in distinctive ways, and this forms the natural focus of anthropological work in or around the topic of poverty.

There are two possibilities here. One is that, despite the difference in their focus and function, survey work and anthropological findings can be harnessed together in a way that improves the quality of both. This follows the now familiar suggestion that questionnaire design and approaches to survey analysis can be given greater purchase on reality by reference to the findings of contextual studies. Conversely, case studies benefit from being 'located', prospectively or retrospectively, in statistical distributions (Calvalho and White 1997, Booth et al. 1997). The other type of contribution – possibly even more important – is in providing a basis for grounded judgements about the uses and limits of statistical poverty profiles in elaborating anti-poverty strategies.

A few of the themes developed in the following sub-sections may be candidates for attention of the first sort. All of them, on the other hand, contribute something to the general point that the necessarily 'thin' categories used in surveys, and hence widely adopted in policy discussions about poverty, become highly misleading when they are interpreted as sufficiently describing the social reality with which poverty-reduction efforts have to contend on the ground. This danger of 'reification' applies not only to the hard-core statistical categories – the bottom quintile, or those under the official poverty line – but also, we suggest, to 'the poor' as they emerge from well-being rankings using PRA methods. Probably, it applies even to some of the 'functional groups' that have been suggested by Hanmer et al. (1997) as providing a more secure basis for policy-relevant poverty analysis.

Social categories and multiple meanings

Fairly obviously, local conceptions of poverty do not follow the same principles of universality and consistency as apply to survey-based poverty analysis. For example, in some cases, poverty is associated exclusively with particular 'communities' or categories of people. Focusing on East Africa, Broch-Due

contrasts general perceptions of 'the poor' between small-scale pastoralist societies such as the Turkana, and the savanna societies. The former tend to conceive of wealth largely in terms of cattle, and:

> contrast the prosperous life of their nomadic camps with the 'poor' life of foragers, farmers, fisher folks and others who they conceive of as existing on the fringes of society. Irrespective of income or nutrition, the cultural constructions surrounding cattle herders place them at the 'centre' of society and portray them as 'rich', while others who are at the periphery, in the 'bush', are regarded as 'poor' (1995: 3).

Pastoralist societies in general tend to define poverty in terms of lack of livestock, this being their key resource.

Iliffe identifies two different patterns among pastoralists. Some societies, such as Tuareg and Moors in West Africa and Tswana in southern Africa, incorporated 'poor' people into openly inegalitarian societies. In contrast, the East African herdsmen excluded the poor from ostensibly egalitarian ones (1987: 65). For example, among the Tuareg in southern Algeria *izzagaren* cultivators lived in a hierarchical society dominated by camel-owning warrior-nobles (*ihaggaren*). Among the Maasai, by contrast, Waller (summarised in Iliffe 1987: 68) argues that rich and poor complemented each other because rich (*il karsisi*) and poor (*il aisinak*) had always coexisted to mutual benefit within Maasai society. The groups were linked particularly through demand for labour, which the poor performed. But poor Maasai would frequently leave pastoralism for farming livelihoods, simultaneously shedding their socially-defined status as poor and their social identity as Maasai.

Certain groups stigmatised in the pre-colonial period have remained so. For instance, cultivator ex-slaves of Fulbe continued to maintain that 'they were not equal' to Fulbe despite being championed by Guinean nationalists (Derman 1973). For some, reluctance to integrate with 'modern' economic processes, implying remaining in a state of poverty, has been in part a deliberate strategy aimed at retaining cultural autonomy in the context of the modern state; as argued for example for the San in Botswana (Lee 1979).

We are not saying that more individual, material issues concerning food, income and health are not significant in these societies. We are certainly suggesting that multi-dimensional notions around well being and ill being can coexist, and be selectively drawn upon in particular contexts of self-definition or comparison – an aspect that anthropological work has been at pains to highlight.

Indeed, the words which capture notions like well being frequently have multiple meanings which the same people may employ at different times. For example, in Kissi (Republic of Guinea) *kende* connotes 'well' both in a general sense of well being, fertility and prosperity, as when people ask '*a co kende*?' (are

you well?) as part of standard greetings, or carry out a community sacrifice for '*kendea*' (well being). But it can also be used to refer specifically to physical health.

In Malinke, the normal word for both 'poor' and 'indigent' in the nineteenth century was *fangantan*, meaning lacking power/wealth. This fitted with cultural traditions of centralised states and militarism, where war leaders epitomised the opposite, *fanga* (Iliffe 1987). The word is still used, frequently with the same connotations, when people relate settlement foundation histories, but also to refer simply to material wealth/poverty, and even to physical strength of an enduring or temporary nature, or to express tiredness.

Multiple meanings in African language words are no surprise; we take it for granted that 'poor' can mean many things in different contexts in English. However it is a basic point worth noting when interpreting the words people use or are quoted as using (in participatory poverty assessments, for example). 'Voices from among the poor' is an expression that may need to be used more often in substitution for the usual 'voice' in the singular.

Poverty and social relations

In discussions about the multi-dimensionality of poverty, it is commonplace that the ways people experience material conditions are mediated through social relations and institutions. Yet anthropological studies emphasise that well being is frequently also conceived or defined in terms of social relations and kin networks, and a person's place in them.

For example, Bledsoe (1980) describes for the Kpelle in Liberia how in broad terms 'wealth is people'. Both material prosperity and social power are linked with having large numbers of dependent clients and kin who variously provide services, labour and political allegiance. Similarly, among the Mende in Sierra Leone, both wealth and power are associated with 'big people', whether men or women, who have proven their ability to attract and support dependents (Richards 1986). Support from kin or a patron is, concomitantly, seen as necessary to avoid insecurity that might lead to destitution. Being 'held well' by kin or a patron was an essential part of notions of well being among materially-poor Mende villagers in the late 1980s (Leach 1994). Richards describes how when one man died of starvation in Mogbuama, the village he worked in, others were quick to explain that he lacked a patron (1986). In this sense, 'poor' was a socio-political category, albeit one which could be occupied very temporarily in the highly dynamic Mende world of shifting patron-client ties and reversible fortunes.

Tierney (1997: 256) presents verbatim statements which illustrate generational differences in local concepts of poverty in rural Tanzania in 1992: whereas an elderly man identifies the poor as those who do not have people to live with and

eat with, a man in his twenties reinterprets the same point and describes the poor as those who do not have access to education. Whilst the idiom shifts, neither the old man nor the young one defines poverty in material terms, but rather in terms of networks, contacts and opportunities. This is not to say that material poverty is unimportant – far from it – but to recognise that local perceptions of poverty highlight other elements of the problem as well.

The centrality of supportive kin networks to well being is an overarching theme identified by Iliffe (1987). Iliffe argues that, historically, poverty was associated primarily with 'the incapacitated and unprotected', with those who were disabled, or who lacked support within kin and patron-client networks.   In several African languages the common word for 'poor' implies lack of kin and friends. One example is *umphawi* in the Chewa language of Malawi (1987: 7). Iliffe argues that, in the savannas, many societies distinguished ordinary commoners from a category of 'destitute' that was identified with lack of normal social relations, and hence lack of support other than charity. For example, nineteenth-century Hausa distinguished *talakwa* (commoners) characterised by *talautsi* (poverty, humility, meekness) from those suffering *matsiata* (distress, poverty, anxiety, care) (1987: 42).

The significance of 'wealth in people' in many areas also related to the relative abundance of land compared with scarce labour. Iliffe argues that 'the weak household, bereft of male labour, has probably been the most common source of poverty throughout Africa's recoverable history' (Iliffe 1987: 5).   Structural poverty resulting from land scarcity – as is more common in Europe – has developed only slowly in the twentieth century, and combines with lack of labour to produce specific patterns of poverty (cf. Broch-Due 1995). Yet this simplified perspective overlooks both pockets of historically-important land scarcity, and the price which subordination to landholders could carry even in areas of land abundance.

The workings of kinship and family continue to be crucial to the ways poverty and wealth are defined and experienced. This has been picked up in a number of participatory poverty assessments as well as in anthropological work (see, for example, Norton et al. 1994, May and Norton 1997: 98-100). Yet in material terms, kin networks can be both a buffer against poverty, and a cause of it through the creation of forms of inequality around gender, generation or other positions (Broch-Due 1995).

Life cycles, gender and the fluidity of identity

Anthropological work focuses attention on how experiences of poverty and well being vary over the course of people's lifetimes. The developmental cycle of domestic groups (Goody 1971) was a key concept which drew attention to how opportunities and vulnerabilities might shift through the processes of establishing marriage, having children, children growing up, and ageing. There

are links here with economists' ideas about the importance of household size, dependency ratios and so on. However anthropologists pay attention not only to changes in economic status within developmental cycles, but also to how members at different ages and life stages may be differentially linked into wider kin networks and social relations, and hence be more or less secure and 'supported'.

Feminist anthropology – in interaction with feminist work in other disciplines – has not only 'deconstructed' the household, but emphasised the interdependencies between different categories of household-member and other institutions, including the state. These interrelationships all provide settings where needs and rights may be negotiated and contested, in what Moore (1994: 101-6) terms a 'system of redistribution'. A large number of anthropological studies show how women's and men's experiences alter in the course of their lifetimes in relation to their changing positions in such systems (e.g. Guyer 1984, 1997; Leach 1994; Moore and Vaughan 1994; Linares 1991; Whitehead 1984).

Equally, anthropological perspectives on child malnutrition and survival locate children's experiences in relation to their identity amidst broader social relations. Howard (1994), for example, shows how the 'selective survival' of Chagga children in Tanzania depends on their gender and perceived clan alignment as related to birth order, affecting their status in the eyes of kin and particularly of the grandmothers mainly responsible for care post-weaning. In Sierra Leone, Bledsoe (1990) locates child fosterage arrangements – and the circumstances when they lead to malnutrition and deprivation – in dynamics of patron-clientage and political alliance among Mende adults.

Current thinking on poverty acknowledges that certain groups of people are particularly significant, both in terms of understanding the nature of the problem and in defining priorities for policies aimed at reducing poverty. Partly on the basis of poverty assessments that include some element of iteration between surveys and contextual data-sources, female-headed households, the disabled, the elderly, casual labourers, street children and excluded ethnic groups have been recognised as being more vulnerable than other sections of the population.

There is quite a strong case for taking these and other 'functional groups' rather than the categories of poor and very poor defined by poverty lines as the focus for monitoring of trends (Hanmer et al. 1997). However, it is as well to point out that these categories hardly less than the strictly statistical ones involve fairly heroic abstraction from the social relations in which poor people live. They are on the whole not groups in the proper sense of the term, and most are not socially recognised categories. This is no doubt well understood in principle, but the danger of reification can manifest itself almost imperceptibly as analytical language becomes the language in which policy options are discussed.

There is a general anthropological attitude to categorisation which has merit in this context. When a population is divided into categories (such as the functional groups indicated above) it is considered important to remain as aware of the links between the categories as of the contents of each box. Abstraction from such relationships is legitimate but poses dangers when the original 'thick' ethnographic context gets forgotten, which is not only possible but likely, given the need for relatively simple, generalisable formulas to guide policy and practice. The danger applies, we believe, not only to statistical poverty-line categories and 'sociological' concepts of the above type, but also to the categories of 'the poor' which emerge from community-level wealth or well-being rankings when (as happens) these kinds of findings get abstracted away from the process which generated them.

Several types of example are relevant in addition to those mentioned already. They relate to the importance of the short-run micro-dynamics of poverty, the issue of multiple identities, and additional aspects of the embeddedness of poverty in social relations. One type of dynamic issue has just been mentioned, the sort relating to life cycles, but there are others. For example, the shifting circumstances of rural producers, the role of unpaid family workers and the conditions faced by immigrants, all raise again the question about people moving back and forth between social categories, and between different levels or kinds of poverty.

The complexities of an individual's identity are well represented by the case of the female household head. While a woman may be locally regarded, and may see herself, in terms of female headship, this is unlikely to be her only identity, in terms of how she sees herself, how she is perceived by others, and how she leads her life. It is also likely that the notion of female-headed households as the poorest of the poor, which has been a cornerstone of recent development thinking, is itself questionable.

Chant (1997) has explored this question in a way that is relevant here, even though the study is not concerned with Africa. She argues that a simple classification which focuses on female-headed households as amongst the poorest is unsatisfactory in several ways. It excludes those female-headed households that are relatively wealthy; it fails to represent the advantages of being a female household head (including greater personal autonomy, which an individual may choose, even if it means greater financial constraints); and it tends to ignore the importance of interactions between, as well as within, households.

Links between social groups are revealed as important in another way in Grinker's (1994) study of the farmers and foragers of northeastern (ex) Zaire. Whereas in the past the foragers (pygmy hunter-gatherers) were treated, by anthropologists and development personnel alike, as a separate social group, Grinker shows that the links between the pygmies and the neighbouring farmers

are central to understanding the lives of each group. Economic partnerships between farmer and forager men are fundamental to the livelihoods of both.

Recent work on disability emphasises how local perceptions and experiences of disability (e.g. Ingstad 1997, on research carried out in Botswana) are linked, through ideas about misfortune generally, to many other aspects of life, such as witchcraft, the breaking of taboo, and on-going relationships with dead ancestors. The integration of a biomedical explanation of disability with notions about cosmology shows how the categorisation of a person as 'disabled' leaves out significant elements of a disabled person's experience, and strategies for coping with disadvantage.

Porter's detailed (1996) analysis of the lives of working children in northern Tanzania provides insights into the impact of the market on children's economic contribution to the household. By reminding us that 'children are social actors in their own right', Porter shows that children manoeuvre effectively within their social networks to maximise their opportunities for income generation. Porter's account reveals the kind of social change taking place in rural areas – 'children's strategies … are increasingly conditioned by the market' – which may help to explain why some children end up living on the streets in urban centres (1996: 16).

A general principle to emerge from anthropological work is to question whether a category of the population which is associated with poverty is always experiencing hardship, and, when they do, how they cope with it. An elderly person, for example, can draw on a variety of different social connections in order to sustain a livelihood, provided that the social connections are there. The key to whether the person experiences poverty is not so much to do with being elderly or not, but rather to do with whether or not s/he has family members, or other forms of social support, to turn to. Anthropology's emphasis on multiple aspects of an individual's identity, and on the links between categories, should not be regarded as a pedantic insistence on a level of reality which a discipline has made its own – although it can be that too! Rather, diversification and the uses of social relationships are keys to how the poor cope with hardship, as well as to much else in development.

Discourses around poverty

The various ways people define and attribute meaning to poverty can be seen in terms of discourse. 'Discourse' perspectives in anthropology examine how people use particular types of language and imagery to represent themselves and others in particular ways. The focus is on how these images are underlain by, and reproduced through, power relations, and on what their social, political and economic effects are – rather than whether or not they are 'true'.

Broch-Due (1995: 4) highlights some of the general insights which discourse analysis of poverty generates. First, it serves to emphasise that 'poor' is one of many social identities which an individual may possess. Broch-Due shows what this identity means, how it is constructed and how it changes in different contexts. Second, the idea of discourse can help explain how people organise themselves under a banner such as 'poor', highlighting the real effects of such social constructions in opening or closing access to material resources. Third, it poses the questions how and why particular discourses are legitimated while others are pushed into the background: 'The power to define reality is a crucial aspect of power and one of the major means by which certain groups can be foregrounded and empowered while others are silenced and suppressed' (ibid.). And fourth, it points to the practical route of asking how counter-discourse might be mobilised to effect change.

This sort of analysis linking what people say with what they do, and with relationships of power, is relevant, also, to important issues in the policy processes of poverty reduction. In this context, the theme is taken up again in Section 4.

Putting measurement in its place: reification and uncertainty

Anthropological findings and analysis are important to the debate about poverty concepts and profiles in Africa. But we have suggested that this is not because they provide a privileged insight into 'the perceptions of the poor', still less into what poor people think. It is more because of the subject's traditional preoccupation with observing and interpreting the complexities of behaviour that surround issues of social categorisation in this field as in many others.

This is valuable, to a limited extent, because it may permit better abstractions to be made for statistical purposes, a point that has been well made in recent discussions. But probably more important is the role of anthropological insight in moderating and qualifying the policy conclusions that may too quickly and incautiously be made from statistical data.

The view is often expressed that for anthropological perspectives to be relevant to policy and planning, they must contribute to measuring poverty more accurately, and that their findings must be translated into a quantifiable value. Thus, references to anthropologists 'lagging behind' on measurement (Bevan 1996: 4) imply that they might catch up eventually, and that they at least ought to try. In contrast, the general attitude running through much of the anthropological literature conveys the message that the obligation to measure and quantify is a diversion, and that instead it is the quality of interaction that matters. The position we have been taking accords some legitimacy to both of these points of view.

Our emphasis is driven by a practical concern. Anthropological work can and should contribute to improving the handle that statistical data-collection has on the complexities of local reality. Good statistics are important to good policy. But no less important, and probably more so, is the contribution that anthropological work can make to policy that is sound in recognising the diversity and complexity of the real social world, and knowing the limits of the simplified formulas that (necessarily) form the stuff of national and global strategising for poverty reduction.

There are many practical implications of a healthy respect for social complexity. The most important have to do with the way, in the context of any kind of social engineering, complexity translates into uncertainty, and thus into the inevitability of actions' having unanticipated consequences. In the project and programme literature, there is a long-established argument leading from social complexity and uncertainty to the critique of 'blueprint' planning and advocacy of learning-process designs. The same logic applies, with equal or greater force, to the implementation of national anti-poverty strategies. The more serious they become, the more African efforts to eradicate extreme poverty will need to respond creatively to unexpected difficulties, and maybe some unexpected opportunities too, in handling the actual social relations in which poverty is embedded.

3   Poverty processes and responses to change

Throughout Section 2, in which concepts of poverty were reviewed, the anthropological evidence suggested the multi-dimensional nature of local perceptions of poverty. As a general observation this is increasingly accepted, and even commonplace. May and Norton (1997), for example, examine the components of people's experience of poverty in South Africa, and advocate a multi-dimensional concept of poverty for use by development personnel, so that understandings of the term reflect more closely the experience of the poor. But there are two parts to this argument, one of which has received more acknowledgement than the other.

PPA-based discussions about the 'meaning' of poverty move back and forth, as local concepts often do, between what social science would call definitional issues and explanatory issues respectively. Thus, poverty is often treated as *meaning* a lack of economic or social assets, because these things are seen as keys to the *causal* process that make people poor or vulnerable. For our purposes it makes sense to distinguish these analytical steps more clearly and identify two distinct parts of the multidimensionality issue. The point then is that PPAs and anthropological studies serve to alert us not just to possible complications in the meaning of poverty, but also to the role of a wider range of causal processes than has been recognised by mainstream poverty analysis.

Although PPAs have done a great deal recently to widen the range of asset and access issues considered in policy debates (see Booth et al. 1997 for a survey), much of this insight derives from anthropological literature. Because of the emphasis placed on long-term observation and the use of archival and well as fieldwork sources, anthropological research is better placed than PRA fieldwork per se to shed light on many kinds of issues that are relevant here. This forms one of the two themes of this section. The other concerns the likely limits to the generalisability of observed processes of impoverishment, disimpoverishment, vulnerability and coping.

Discussion of these issues is assisted by an initial basic distinction drawn from Iliffe. In his ambitious review of the history of Africa's poor, Iliffe distinguishes two kinds of poverty. *Structural poverty* is 'the long term poverty of individuals due to their personal or social circumstances', and *conjunctural poverty* is temporary hardship into which ordinarily self-sufficient people may be thrown by a crisis (1987: 4).

Iliffe argues that the greatest twentieth-century changes have been in conjunctural poverty, which at the beginning of the century was caused principally by climatic and political insecurity. The direct effects of these factors diminished through broad increases in wealth, diversified sources of income, improved infrastructure and governance, wider markets, and improved medicine, so that structural and conjunctural poverty converged. Conjunctural poverty arising from mass famine and war has, however, re-emerged since the 1960s. At the same time, structural poverty underwent shifts linked to colonialism and its aftermath, and processes such as commoditisation, opportunities for (male) wage labour, taxation, the growth of land markets, new food and cash crops, the rise of national policies and planning, and external policies such as structural adjustment. Certain new categories of poor were created by economic change and colonial rule.

Our review of anthropological findings begins with a range of issues that are especially relevant to forms of conjunctural poverty. We then address studies of long-term structural change and implications for assessing the 'impacts' of policy change since the 1970s.

Cosmologies and social ecologies

In general, anthropological work draws attention to the embeddedness of people's understandings of economic and social issues within broader, cultural understandings of how the world works and their place within it. From this perspective, misfortune, whether to the person or the community and whether manifested in terms of material suffering, ill-health or social problems, may be triggered by phenomena and events which lie well outside the purview of conventional development analysis. This is a dimension that is probably understated in PPA field reports, given the sensitivity and openness to

misinterpretation of these kinds of issues, but whose importance to practical anti-poverty work can easily be underestimated.

Witchcraft, sorcery, malicious spirits, or the breaking of 'rules' regarding reproductive activities, can all trigger problems for people's well being and the success of economic activities (e.g. agriculture) on which they depend (Gottleib 1992). The unpredictability of these phenomena, and of the actions of other people that may trigger them, can contribute to vulnerability and insecurity.

For example, Howard (1994) describes how for the Chagga of Tanzania 'the presence of poverty and even more the occurrence of *kuvimba* (to swell), the Swahili term people commonly used to describe one of the symptoms of kwashiorkor, tend to be taken as evidence of violation of Chagga cultural precepts regarding cosmological balance, particularly those that deal with marriage and reproduction (1994: 246). On similar lines, Fairhead and Leach (1996) describe how among Kissi peoples in Guinea, breaking ancestrally-set rules concerning the timing and placing of sexual activities can result in *maa*, a putting 'off track' or 'out of synchrony' of the social and ecological worlds, whose consequences can include, simultaneously, ill-health, failures in social relations, infertility, failures of economic activities, and ill-being (lack of *kendea*) more generally.

De Boecke, writing about the Great Lakes region, shows how inappropriate social activities can provoke 'famine to go around the land' (1995). Periods of hunger are thus ascribed social causes from within the community rather than being considered from without.

Such possibilities should not be associated with an imagined isolated African traditionalism, only to be overturned by 'modernity'. For there is evidence of some vibrant persistence, albeit reworked, of such ideas in highly contemporary, worldly contexts, whether in associations drawn between the actions of African politicians and national droughts, or in contexts of conflict and war (e.g. Lan 1985).

Nor are such ideas necessarily shared and invoked uniformly. Rather, people may make claims about their own or others' links with spirits or the supernatural worlds in ways which mark and reproduce social difference and power relations. For example in many societies elderly women are particularly vulnerable to witchcraft accusations. Someone gaining unexpected riches may be assumed to have privileged links with djinn spirits (e.g. Jackson 1977). Susu elders manufacture self-images as feared sorcerors to consolidate control over wives and junior men, and their labour (Nyerges 1997).

Claims to control over, or privileged relations with, land spirits have in a number of societies been linked to broader power, wealth and ability to extort from commoners (Schoffeleers 1979). On the other hand, spirit possession is widely

used as a means by which 'women and other depressed categories exert mystical pressures upon their superiors in circumstances of deprivation and frustration when few other sources are available to them' (Lewis 1966: 318).

Moral economies: safety nets or exploitation?

With due regard to their diverse forms, many studies document 'moral economies' and village redistributive systems of various kinds which in the past served to provide a minimum level of security and protection to the poor. On Kilimanjaro, for example, Howard describes how in the nineteenth century 'the destitute were under the care of the chiefs, who saw that they did not starve or go naked, and in return they owed labour to the chiefs' (1994: 242). The literature does not paint a nostalgic picture of 'merrie Africa'. It is recognised that these systems were frequently pervaded by hierarchy and inequality, and excluded whole categories of people – barren women, widows, twins, or those defined as mad. Furthermore, different people may present such arrangements in very different ways; the image of moral village community under chiefly control may be an invented tradition of village elites (and the anthropologists who have interacted with them), overlooking the extortion, contest and alternative survival strategies that the accounts of poor women and men might have stressed (e.g. Moore and Vaughan 1994).

The switch in representations of pre-colonial Rwanda in academic circles following the genocide is another case in point. An exactive past, with the Tutsi elite using forms of clientage which left extreme poverty among many cultivators, has been transformed into the 'checks and balances of the feudal system' (Pottier 1995).

Both their complex and varied social relations, and the co-existence of different interpretations, should serve to nuance and qualify the picture of 'breakdown of traditional arrangements' sometimes evoked in broad-brush accounts of African socio-economic change. Numerous studies document transformations in rural relations of production and distribution under the influence of colonial and post-independence policies, economic change, and the impact of world religions (e.g. Linares 1991; Nyerges 1988; Hill 1977; McCann 1987, 1995). While transformations in patterns of vulnerability are evident, the general 'breakdown' thesis does not hold.

Food security and famine

Anthropological literature on food security overlaps in many respects with work on production and coping more generally. Yet there are several key insights which anthropological work has generated, and discussions it has initiated, which serve to nuance and qualify the view that is taken of the relationship between conjunctural and structural issues in hunger. They are worth summarising briefly here.

De Waal (1989), in a provocative work, showed the cultural and historical particularity of the ways famine and hunger have come to be understood in the West, and by development and humanitarian agencies. Dominant perceptions derived from Malthusian notions of crisis, he argued, misconstrued the processes through which famine arose and the ways people in Darfur, Sudan (but also elsewhere in Africa, it was implied) defined and understood it. De Waal explored people's own definitions of hunger and famine, in which 'famine that kills', as emphasised by humanitarianism, is but one category. The book argued that people defined and approached destitution in ways which placed priority on recovering their livelihoods, holding onto seeds, cattle etc. And it argued that people die less because of lack of food, than because of health problems and disease, which are exacerbated by concentration into camps.

De Waal's conclusions have been variously confirmed and debated in growing anthropological literatures around each of these themes. Research has explored emic (i.e. people's own) definitions and categories of food problem and famine (see Shipton 1990), and the relationship between hunger and disease (e.g. Dias 1981, Miller 1982). And a large literature examines 'coping' responses to food shortages and famine. This work generally emphasises how rural people throughout Africa both plan for contingencies and respond actively to them. Key prevention strategies include diversification of livelihoods, consolidation of savings into illiquid, indivisible or incontestable forms, and social investments. In crisis, liquidation of savings, service labour, and movement, become key (Shipton 1990: 363).

Recent work, taking account of prevailing economic conditions in Africa, has emphasised how coping strategies may become enduring livelihood adaptations which may reduce vulnerability but imply lower levels of well being in other respects (e.g. Davies 1996, Mortimore 1989). Richards (1993) points out that, given the level of hardship currently faced by Africa's small-scale farmers, the ability to maintain a livelihood at all 'is oftentimes a brilliantly innovative achievement' (1993: 70). Nevertheless some argue that too much attention to coping is over-optimistic, occluding the experiences of those who fail to cope.

A recurring theme in anthropological works on famine and food security is the way 'normal' social relations may be transformed during food crises, sometimes with enduring effects. Close attention to apparent 'unities' such as descent group, compound, family or household reveals how relationships may shift within them as food crises precipitate reallocations of responsibility by gender or generation (e.g. Pottier and Fairhead 1991, Vaughan 1987) or even force the abandonment of 'normal' kinship obligations. For example, Shuwa Arabs in north-eastern Nigeria called the dearth of 1972-74 'the era of refusing to accept brotherhood' (in Iliffe 1987: 254).

Anthropological work on recent food problems has addressed their interrelationship with conflict and war in many parts of Africa. In this, the strategic creation of hunger, poverty and destitution as a part of conflict has been emphasised (e.g. Keen forthcoming, Richards 1996), as has the ways that some people profit from famine/destitution processes. In general, Keen emphasises that it is not always those who are most vulnerable (economically) who suffer the most in war-induced poverty and hunger. Rather, those who are vulnerable politically, and often well-off financially, are frequently targets in war. Having more to be taken from them, they lose relatively more, but can also become part of a new category of conflict-induced poor.

Poverty and structural change: generalising about complexity

Many studies by anthropologists and others have been devoted to providing nuanced understandings of how large-scale structural changes have worked out in particular parts of Africa. Often this has involved close attention to the qualitative dimensions of what they meant to people, and how they shaped and, in turn, were shaped by social and cultural relations and struggles. Trajectories of change, and people's responses, took particular forms in particular places, with diverse implications for poverty and wealth, their form and their social distribution.[5] One policy-relevant conclusion from this body of work as a whole concerns the range of factors that are of critical importance as intervening variables between the source of change and the 'impacts' on poor people.

That outcomes are invariably influenced by people's responses, which are embedded in locally-specific social, cultural and political relationships, is the key point here. This introduces an element of variability that needs not to be underestimated. Thus a theme of many studies has been the impossibility of, or dangers in, generalising about the effects of colonial and capitalist transformation (cf. Moore 1988). Much of the relevant work adopts a far longer time-scale than applies to current policy interest in the 'impacts' of economic liberalisation and institutional reform, but for this very reason it bears serious consideration. This forms our second theme.

Land and rural production systems

As anthropologists and social historians emphasise, rural resources are accessed through diverse, and frequently overlapping, social institutions. Shifting patterns of resource access and control during the twentieth century, affecting poverty and vulnerability, have both come about through, and in turn shaped,

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[5] More recent works have emphasised, also, how accounts of change, given by different informants at different times, not only reflect the particular knowledge sources available to them, but also particular social and political commitments in presenting change and its outcomes in certain ways (e.g. Moore and Vaughan 1994). This links up with the points about positioned nature of accounts and of 'discourse' in Sections 2 and 4.

social relations and identities (Berry 1993). Some of the most important shifts have involved changing intersections between 'local' social relations and processes of state action and 'development'.

Changing relations to land are a key and well-documented dimension of patterns of poverty and wealth during the twentieth century. While many parts of the continent still have relatively plentiful land relative to labour, in many others land scarcities have become significant, frequently linked to growing land markets. Sometimes scarcity has been 'manufactured' through expropriation. In Rwanda, for example, structural poverty was created in the nineteenth century through the expropriation of land and labour by rulers, creating a dependent class of day labourers (*umucancaro*) (Iliffe 1987: 62).

Land alienation to Europeans in eastern and southern Africa had varying effects on the poor, depending on how the process interlocked with existing social institutions. For example, among the Kikuyu, the *mbari* landholding families of inegalitarian pre-colonial society contained many dependents – *ahoi, athami* – without full landholding rights, while there were also many propertyless clients. Land expropriation to European settlers, while relatively mild in itself, intensified competition for land that was already increasing as a result of population growth and commercial change. It was mainly clients, *ahoi, athami*, and women, who lost out alongside the expropriated families themselves (Kershaw 1972).

More generally, tenurial reforms during and since the colonial period have frequently marginalised particular social groups, such as women of reproductive age (e.g. MacKenzie 1990, Davison 1996). By adding further layers to the already-multiple institutions through which people can legitimise land claims, they have pushed people – poor and wealthy alike – to invest more resources in upholding position in the institutions which might safeguard their claims (Berry 1993). Poor people may lose out in ensuing struggles over resources less because of their lack of formal rights than because of their relatively weaker social power to uphold them amidst other claimants. In this context it is evident that the links are between poverty and resource control, rather than ownership as such.

Gender and the construction of rural livelihoods

A large literature documents transformations linked to the introduction of new cash and food crops. An important theme in this work is the importance of social relations, and those of gender in particular, in mediating the eventual implications for poor people's livelihoods.

The colonial introduction of cash crops frequently meant increasing rural wealth, but at some cost in terms of greater vulnerability to world markets and weather, and widening inequalities. Positions in social relations gave some people the necessary access to land, labour and capital, as well as suitable state contacts, to

invest in cash cropping, while others were marginalised – especially certain women and strangers (e.g. Leach 1994, Berry 1988, Guyer 1984). Loss of control over labour and income among women, and sometimes junior men, precipitated heightened tensions and struggles within households.

Similar struggles characterised some post-independence development projects, such as those for irrigated rice in the Gambia (e.g. Carney and Watts 1991, Dey 1988), and changes linked to crop commercialisation (e.g. Mackintosh 1989, on Senegal). As in the colonial period, interventions predicated on assumptions about a male 'breadwinner' and pooled household incomes sometimes confronted very different arrangements for the allocation of labour and responsibility. They included, frequently, separate income/expenditure streams between women and men, and complex intra- and inter-household negotiations over labour and product rights.

The ensuing struggles have many implications for how poverty is understood and experienced. First, individual poverty cannot be read off from 'household' experiences, or predicted from household data. Second, struggle can be linked to loss of economic autonomy/control for certain peoples, or to experiences of domestic violence, which negatively affect well being. Third, several authors describe 'the battle of the sexes' as becoming a key idiom in which people encapsulate their experiences of poverty.

Schoepf and Schoepf (1984), for example, describe such a situation in the early 1980s in Kivu, (ex) Zaire, where struggles turned particularly on cloth, as a marker of social status. Men's failure to meet their obligations to provide it for their wives, and women's struggles to obtain it for themselves, provided a potent idiom for reflections on poverty. Yet as Schoepf and Schoepf point out, 'sexism here deflects attention from exploitation by plantations, traders and officials, as well as serious problems of land shortage' (1984: 118). Thus a fourth implication – as Whitehead (1990) has emphasised – is that a focus on intra-household struggles should not deflect attention from the wider manifestations and causes of poverty.

Most of the anthropology of gender and rural production has emphasised the increasing vulnerabilities faced by rural women, albeit sometimes strongly differentiated by age and other aspects of social status. However a small but notable set of studies has begun to focus on African masculinities and socio-economic change, yielding a nascent area of work on 'male poverty'. For instance, Pottier (1994), referring to north Kivu (ex Zaire), Zambia and Uganda, draws attention to men's growing inabilities to meet full bridewealth obligations. This is linked to reduced leverage in intra-household relations and loss of status and self-esteem, especially in economic settings where women's personal incomes from food cropping for the market are increasing.

Other recent work designed to synthesise the results of anthropological studies in different socio-cultural settings in Kenya (Francis 1998) and more widely (Francis forthcoming) contributes in another way to shifting the focus onto gender relations, as distinct from the status of women. Initially concerned with tracing the impact on gender relations of changing patterns of rural livelihood, including agricultural intensification and commercialisation, and the decline of migrant labour, Francis' overview documents compellingly the reverse relationship. That is, a more or less common set of macro-economic conditions end up producing quite a varied set of livelihood outcomes, as their effects are mediated by different local forms of the 'partriarchal bargain'. Across seven studies of gender and rural livelihoods in different parts of Kenya, quite different household processes emerged, depending not only on the potential economic rewards from cooperation between men and women, but also on the pre-existing domestic authority relations and ideologies of common or divided interest (1998).

As is well known, there is an on-going debate about how best to integrate gender awareness into development policy and planning. In the women-in-development (WID) era women were treated as a separate category, to be specifically targeted with assistance in development initiatives. The critique of WID emphasised that women were being ghettoised through this process, and that there were severe limitations to what could be achieved in terms of improving their quality of life. Gender and development (GAD) has promoted the mainstreaming of gender awareness, so that gender relations, rather than women, are the focus. This approach was to have been integrated at all levels into development policy. The last few years have, however, seen gender sidelined once again, the specific needs of women tending to be ignored within a more general concern with the poor. Jackson (1996) has argued convincingly for the need to 'rescue gender from the poverty trap', and ensure that gender relations maintain a central place in policy and planning.

The recent history of anthropology as a discipline has seen gender integrated in such a way that most anthropologists now take account of gender relations even where their research is not primarily about gender. This is probably because one of the discipline's main concerns has always been kinship, and this formed a foundation for gender analysis in recent decades. The attention given to gender relations as a basic explanatory variable in the study of the consequences of long-term macro change is another instance where, perhaps, anthropology has something more general to teach. The shifts in anthropological approaches have helped to demonstrate what mainstreaming gender might mean for practical development thinking.

Resources, population change and inequality

Another key dimension of twentieth century change involves population dynamics. Here a number of long-term, multi-disciplinary studies involving anthropology investigate trajectories of population change in relation to shifting

social and resource-control relations. They show that in many areas population increase has been accommodated through agricultural intensification and livelihood diversification, without growing general impoverishment but frequently at the cost of growing inequality. For example, Haswell's sequence of studies of a Maninka village in the lower Casamance area of the Gambia, in 1949-50, 1961-62 and 1973-74, showed that while village population increased from 483 to 771 and land cultivated per capita fell, agricultural innovations such as cattle-keeping and wet rice cultivation allowed food production to more than keep pace and the traditional hungry season largely to disappear. Yet the village was increasingly dominated by the 22 per cent of larger, longer-settled, households with access to labour and good relations with the outside world. Others – many drawn from ex-slave families – lacked swampland and access to innovations, and became poorer – the beginnings of a class of landless agricultural labourers (Haswell 1975).

A similar story emerges from Machakos in Kenya, where the much-cited 'success' of intensification between 1930 and 1990 resulted in increased food production, better average incomes and environmental improvement despite a five-fold increase in population (Tiffen et al. 1993). Yet it has been convincingly shown that inequality increased by class and gender (Murton 1997, Thomas-Slayter 1992) and that certain women experienced new forms of struggle to survive (Rocheleau 1991).

For Rwanda, André and Platteau (1995) show how population increase has been accompanied by growing inequality in land distribution, and growing poverty linked to landlessness, as inheritance arrangements have intersected with the operation of land markets. In Kanama Commune of Gisenyi they compare 1988 (672 people per km²) with 1993 (787 per km²). The number of households owning less than 0.25 ha. of land increased from 36 per cent to 45 per cent, while the percentage owning more than 1 ha. increased. Land sales had increased rapidly as those with off-farm income bought up land from the poor (often as distress sales). Vulnerable people who had previously accessed land via customary claims found that such claims were no longer upheld, both as there was not enough land to go round and because many Rwandese claimed that they only applied to inherited, not purchased, land. Thus many return migrants, widows, separated women, polygamous wives, handicapped people, orphans, and children of broken marriages, found themselves landless.

In Kivu, Zaire, similar processes were compounded by the confusion between multiple polities and social institutions regulating land access. Powerful coalitions between state administrators, traditional chiefs, army and police, and large landholders, have made it possible for much land to be extorted from poorer claimants, and for new claimants to extort heavy taxes of labour duties from those who lived on the land. This has contributed to growing structural poverty (Fairhead 1990, Pottier and Fairhead 1991).

Migration

Changing patterns of migrant labour have also been linked to shifts in poverty and its distribution. Migrant labourers, frequently employed on cash crop farms during (and since) the colonial period, became in some places a new category of the poor. For example, Mossi and other labourers from Burkina Faso constituted two-thirds of the labour force on Ivorian plantations in the 1960s and, excluded from minimum wage regulations and forbidden to form trade unions, constituted an exploited underclass (Iliffe 1987). Migrant labourers often already came from the poorest strata of society.

Sometimes what began as stigma – labouring for others was seen locally as a sign of poverty – became more acceptable over time, as in Hausaland between the 1930s and 50s. Farmers sometimes worked for others in particular years when their own crops failed or they had economic or health problems in the family, as in Yako village in southern Nigeria during the 1930s where 'poor relations' were equated with those who needed to offer labour to others at harvest in exchange for crops (Forde and Scott 1946: 64). Yet migration could also be seen positively, and viewed as a means of escaping poverty and vulnerability. Among the Fulbe it was Fulbe themselves who tended to migrate rather than their cultivating slaves, because the former had fewer means open to them to earn cash honourably (Derman 1973: 157)

Iliffe draws attention to interaction between the 'old' poverty of incapacitation and the new poverty of migrant labour. For example in Buganda by the 1950s most cultivators grew cotton or coffee, often employing immigrant workers from Rwanda, and a few poor Baganda, who earned poor wages (only about one-third of rates paid by other employers). Many migrants hung around waiting for odd jobs, and a tenant plot. A proportion of these were reduced to destitution by personal circumstances, including illness (for example, those who contracted leprosy feared to return home where they would be rejected) and alcoholism. In 1961-64 10 per cent of all homesteads housed people living alone, a condition strongly associated with poverty in local thought (Iliffe 1987: 153). Other studies have examined the impacts of migrant labour for wage employment on those left behind (Murray 1981), or on gender dynamics in the production systems of sending areas (e.g. Moore and Vaughan 1994).

Debt and hereditary poverty

A further area in which anthropological work and long-term studies have made some impact concerns the question of debt and its link to patterns of poverty. In general, debt and pawning have long been stock-in-trades of survival for most people. It has been part of normal life, and the reverse side of saving, not necessarily a sign of poverty. Indeed, in Hausaland from the 1950s through the 1970s, Hill (1984) argued that it was the inability to borrow (except from fools or strangers) that was the 'acid test' of poverty. However anthropologists have

been somewhat divided in their views of rural indebtedness and relations with moneylenders, perhaps reflecting different analytical lenses as much as real differences between areas (for example, see the debate between the Marxist-inspired position of Watts (1983) and the 'neo-populist' position of Richards (1990) on Hausa and Mende debt relations).

In savanna regions especially, it seems that the need to sell off harvest to meet debts did – and does – sometimes hold farmers in a cycle of poverty and hunger. Yet long-term studies differ as to the extent to which poverty is inherited between generations or is continuous among particular groups. A study of two sites among the Kikuyu in Kenya in the early 1970s did find that families supplying hired labour were descended from client groups of pre-colonial times (Collier and Lal 1980). Similar heredity of poverty was found among plantation workers in Cameroon (Henn 1988). Watts (1983) argued that a hereditary class of poor farmers was emerging in 1977-78 in Katsina, Northern Nigeria, among those who lacked inherited access to best land, were unable to practice risk-averting strategies, got into debt and had to sell their labour power to survive.

Yet others do not suggest that hereditary classes are forming. Richards (1986) argues that among rural Mende in central Sierra Leone, the dynamics of dealing with hazardous ecologies, uncertain social life and personal contingencies mean that status is much more dynamic. Personal misfortune and accident can plunge even wealthy farmers into temporary poverty. The fortunes of patrons and clients can reverse within a few years, let alone a generation.

Hill (1977, 1984) makes a similar argument from her detailed study of two Hausa villages. Poor people were those who lacked grain, manured land or off-farm skills and were forced to sell their labour, collect bush products or practice unrewarding crafts. While poor people found it hard to escape their condition, Hill argues that various factors militated against the formation of hereditary classes (for example: the dispersal of wealth among sons at a man's death; the fact that personal enterprise was still vital to success; the insecurity of the savanna environment for farming fortunes; and the risks of ill-health which could strike anyone).

Coping and vulnerability in urban areas

Taking a long historical perspective, Iliffe (1987) argues that the poor seen in towns in pre-colonial times, and seen increasingly in multiplying and expanding towns during the colonial period, were not bred in towns, products of urban degeneration, but were largely rural poor seeking opportunity. Yet towns gave poverty new forms: crowdedness and slum squalor, unfriendliness, unemployment. New forms of poverty in towns supplemented older ones during the twentieth century: proletarianisation, unemployment, delinquency. In the colonial period, most of the poor in African towns were unskilled labourers, while the very poor were the ill, the very old, and children alone. Subsequent

changes, including retrenchment of skilled workers linked to economic reforms, have qualified this situation.

Recently, key areas where anthropologists have contributed to understanding people's experiences of urban poverty include studies of urban housing on one hand, and work on coping and survival on the other. We consider these in turn.

Anthropological studies of the urban poor – like studies in other disciplines – generally find that overcrowded housing and poor health conditions are among the key problems people face. A significant literature has focused on housing issues, examining how the personal circumstances and range of exchange entitlements available interact to shape people's opportunities. In as much as experiences of poverty are linked to housing conditions, the emphasis is very much on the dynamic processes by which people's housing fortunes change. With reference to Nairobi, for example, Amis (1987) shows the key role of state urban housing policies, a role acknowledged by poor people themselves, in declining opportunities. Policies to restrict self-built housing mean that individuals must look elsewhere, principally to the market, where poor people find their position weakened by low wages and insecure employment.

In studies of economic coping and survival, the concept of the 'informal sector' coined by anthropologist Keith Hart has framed many studies. Debated and critiqued as the term has been, it has nevertheless focused attention on the many ways people 'get by'; ways frequently invisible to official statistics and quantitative studies based on them. Most towns in Africa are rich in informal means of survival, whether in small-scale industry, trade, artisanal activities, services or begging. Many insightful studies emphasise how the activities and practices of poor people, including their health-seeking behaviour, are shaped not only by economic factors but also by questions of social identity and cultural understandings (e.g. Wallman and associates 1996, King 1996, Nelson 1987).

Trade has been especially significant for women in many towns, especially in West Africa where they dominate markets (e.g. Clarke 1994). The multiplicity of petty traders is itself a symptom of poverty, as consumers can only afford to buy in small quantities, and poor sellers compete for minute rewards (Iliffe 1987: 174; Hewitt de Alcántara 1992: 8). The twentieth-century history of informal-sector activities has involved processes of destruction and re-creation. Modern industry destroyed many occupations but created others; economic reforms and the activities of the state – both formal and 'informal' – have also had effects (MacGaffey 1987; Tripp 1997).

Nelson's recent re-study documents a number of such processes for Mathare valley, Nairobi (Nelson 1997). For example, beer brewing used to be a key activity through which people 'got by'. But as the profitability of brewing was realised, small industries came in and undercut their market and moreover lobbied successfully to outlaw artisanal brewing. This was not only an economic

process but one which involved the culture of consumption, and changing tastes among urban populations.

Along with other disciplines, then, anthropology has joined the debate over whether the informal sector is the last, secure bastion of survival for the urban poor, or vulnerable to take-over by the formal sector as soon as it gets profitable. However it examines such experiences as embedded in and shaped by broader shifts of cultural preference and urban social relations. Other studies have focused on the culture and practices associated with small-scale trade, and their changing articulation with – including resistance to – state policies. For example, Clarke (1994) provides a highly insightful and detailed study of the perceptions, life circumstances and actions of market women in Kumasi, Ghana, while Horn (1994) deals in a comparable way with women traders in Zimbabwe.

Social networks and associational life

Another strand of work examines the relationships, networks and forms of association in which people engage in towns, whether for housing, or other social or economic activities. Explicit references to perceptions and experiences of poverty in this literature are few, though the processes discussed are clearly relevant for understanding poor people's experiences.

In general, anthropological work shows that kinship ties were not dissolved or weakened in towns but remained vigorous, albeit in re-worked ways (e.g. diffuse networks replacing corporate groups). For example, Marris describes how to support aged parents was an 'absolute duty' in Abidjan in the 1960s, and 49 per cent of arrivals went immediately to a relative (Marris 1961). Yet studies also show the cross-cultural and city-to-city variability in type of support. Where support was lacking, it was a major cause of anguish. As Iliffe reviews, Copperbelt families in controlled housing were less hospitable, while Ghanaian workers in the 1970s said they were treated badly by their families.

Family structure made a difference: the large corporate households of the Luo made it easier to accommodate relatives in Nairobi than it was among Amhara in Addis Ababa, characterised by shallow bilateral kinship and unstable marriage (only 121 of 600 household heads supported extra relatives in 1960). Hence family structures helped to shape the types of support people could expect, with implications for who might face destitution. Again the nature of local social relationships turns out to be critical to the implications for poverty of a generalised process of change.

Forms of association among non-kin which provide forms of social support and security include informal savings groups (e.g. Nelson 1996, Tierney forthcoming), urban-based cult associations and 'secret societies' (e.g. Cohen 1969), and numerous informal networks and mutual help arrangements (e.g. Mitchell 1969, Ardener and Burman 1995). A particularly interesting strand of work focuses on

how such arrangements, and associated cultural practices, operate among street children. Street children are widely assumed to be amongst the poorest and soccially most deprived of urban inhabitants, yet they show some of the most creative means of gaining livelihoods and ensuring mutual support (e.g. PEA, 1990).

A general theme to emerge from the anthropological literature is that many of those who face poverty display impressive personal qualities of ingenuity, innovation, resilience and perseverance, and also skills at working effectively with groups and networks to achieve what cannot be done on one's own. As Iliffe has put it, in the past '[the African poor] relied for their survival chiefly on their own efforts … [and this] is their inheritance amidst the harshness of the present' (1987: 8). The significance of the anthropological evidence which supports this thesis is that it portrays the poor as being rich in the human resources associated with entrepreneurship and teamwork, qualities which are widely recognised as being of fundamental importance for the sustainability of development initiatives.

We return to the implications of 'coping' in Section 4. Here it remains to underline some implications of the broad picture on responses to long-term change.

Summing up complex change: diversity as a reality for policy

Anthropologists have still written relatively little that is focused specifically on poor people's responses to economic liberalisation and adjustment since the 1980s. What exists generally combines this concern with an interest in processes that, in the perspective of history, are rather less episodic, like commercialisation or urban growth. It makes sense therefore to address the literature on structural change and poverty as a whole and aim to extract some general principles that may be applicable to current policy concerns.

On the basis of the above review, there is more than adequate evidence for the proposition that the 'impacts' of general processes of change on the livelihoods of poor people are never just that: a generalised set of outcomes reflecting in a mechanical way a common set of causes. People *respond* to change, and the way they respond is constrained, shaped and given distinctiveness by the economic, social and political relations – including those that apply at the community and household level – in which their lives are embedded. These structures remain, even today, highly diverse. The implication is that outcomes are often very different in different parts of Africa, including within countries and regions of countries.

It is not that there are no generalisations about large-scale change that stand up to scrutiny. For example, in Francis' (1998) comparison of rural Kenyan experience, it is clear that the existence of modern legislation on women's rights

was consistently favourable to livelihood outcomes across an otherwise highly varied panorama of change. Although more contested, the proposition that some measure of downsizing of state trading monopolies was necessary for rural economic recovery in the last decades would stand up well to scrutiny across the range of cases. As these examples suggest, however, the generalisations that can be made with confidence are limited and rather simple. No less important, from the point of view of designing more effective poverty-reduction approaches are the more complex propositions that can be advanced about the range of variability, and the kind of factors that seem to be relevant to the explanation of diversity.

Matching our conclusions about poverty profiles – that statistical patterns need grounding in observations about social relations – the implication here is that anti-poverty policy needs to become more capable of handling diversity. To an important degree, therefore, it needs to be able to build analysis of problems and solutions from the bottom up, as well as from the top down. Other things being equal, this points to the need for greater and more effective decentralisation of many kinds of decision making that are currently bureaucratic and centralised.

4 Lessons for poverty reduction policy and practice

We have already made explicit several implications of anthropological work for the conduct of poverty-reduction policy and practice. In this section, we argue that these points are reinforced by research conclusions that are focused more directly on the relationship between poor people and the institutions responsible for policy, the state, donors and NGOs. The starting-point here is a further implication of what has been said about the assets poor people bring to coping and the construction of livelihoods.

Social creativity and the limits of 'coping'

At the beginning of this paper it was noted that anthropological accounts are often about poor people, but anthropologists tend not to focus their work in these terms. There are two sides to this. In some cases, anthropologists are guilty of turning a blind eye to the very real hardship and disadvantage faced by people who participate in their research. However, more positively, not referring to people as poor is often a reflection of the way anthropologists recognise, and choose to emphasise, the ways in which communities and individuals cope or manage their lives without external assistance. Ordinary people use their ingenuity to find ways round difficulties, often because public services are inadequate or non-existent and development agencies have not found ways to reach the poor. The view of the poor that emerges from anthropological research is of 'proactive primary stakeholders' (Tierney 1998: 8) who take responsibility

for maintaining their livelihoods because their experience leads them to expect very little official assistance.

As a rule, the poor are not waiting for development agencies to perfect their poverty alleviation policies; they cannot afford to be dependent on external assistance. In other words, contrary to much mainstream discourse, official institutions can be quite marginal to the lives of the poor. This is not to say that development institutions are irrelevant, but rather that they are one of a range of opportunities that the diversified strategies of poor people take into account. Anthropologists are probably better placed to assess this aspect than PRA practitioners, because of the almost inevitable association of the latter with some form of external assistance, and because of the fieldwork time-scale needed for effective observation of self-reliant behaviour.

This may be more true the less the focus is on the rather narrow band of expressions of social creativity that is captured by the term 'coping strategies'. It has been convincingly argued by Gould (1997) that the currency gained by this particular expression of anthropological origin has served to give anthropologists and others a rather restricted vision of people's responses to the challenges of development. The concept of coping strategy focuses attention too exclusively on forms of action and cooperation that are easily articulated, usually by individuals, in terms of a clear ends-means relationship. This risks missing out enquiry into the broader, deeper and less easily-grasped dimensions of the way contemporary African societies may be said to be 'constructing modernity' collectively in their own particular way.

While this proposition may seem abstract and unrelated to the dire realities of everyday poverty on the continent, it takes off from the same mainstream concerns as Berry's (1993) survey of the dynamics of agrarian change. Like Berry, Gould aims to map out a pathway for anthropological research that steers between the 'systems' of sociological modernisation theory – and certain anthropological approaches to the study of culture, in which human agency is largely suppressed – and the excessively individualistic rationalism of the various offshoots of neo-classical political economy. Gould's own empirical material documents a local 'construction of modernity' that turned out to be something of a dead end: agricultural marketing cooperatives in Zambia. However, his study provides strong pointers to the sort of enquiry that is increasingly needed given the new policy salience of concepts of social capital (especially, Narayan 1997).

People and the state in an era of reform

The same commitment to long-term observation that can give anthropologists a good perspective on the extent and limits of people's self-reliance and social creativity is also relevant to interactions between local people and outsiders, and thus to the realities of policy on the ground. There is probably less writing on

this subject than there could be and should be. Some anthropologists have unparalleled insight into aspects of what is conventionally called policy implementation, on the basis on long-term residence or repeat visits to rural and urban areas where poor people live. Yet it still seems relatively rare for this type of expertise to be tapped for policy-planning purposes, as distinct from project design and appraisal. At the same time, although we mention some exceptions below, the sheer awfulness of the people/state relationship in many local areas does not seem to command sufficient interest in the discipline to be written about for publication.

One type of exception is the general theme of escaping or avoiding the state. Much of this work relates to an era that is now past in large parts of the continent but remains generally relevant. For example, analyses of the market (Fairhead 1992b, Hewitt de Alcántara 1992, Porter 1996) have focused attention on local responses to the difficulties created by different forms of state intervention originally justified in terms of the need for regulation. Schatzberg's (1988) analysis of the nature of oppression in Zaire claims to represent a tendency of African governments more generally, though in most cases not in the extreme form found in Zaire. Given Schatzberg's general argument that the state uses market intervention to siphon off wealth from the people, it is easy to understand why the farmers and foragers of Grinker's (1994) ethnography seek to maintain their separateness and isolation. It is a way of protecting their resources from expropriation by the state, reminiscent of Hyden's (1980) view that the Tanzanian peasantry used their 'exit option' as a way to resist demands by the state. Fairhead (1992b) shows that roads built in Zaire, ostensibly to make the market more accessible to people living in remote regions, had the effect of making it easier for officials to extend their control and authority over those people.

Multilateral and bilateral development agencies, and even some NGOs, are usually compelled to work through the government institutions of aid recipient countries. The evidence about people-state relations in the anthropological literature suggests corresponding reasons why it may be difficult for such agencies to reach the poor. Where the government continues to be regarded by the majority of the population as extractive, it is hardly an ideal vehicle for poverty reduction. The vision of public administration serving the people lingers on and influences decisions to work through existing government structures, but the reality in some African countries is very different. Unfortunately, it is hard to see what alternative international agencies have, because setting up alternative institutional structures clearly brings problems of its own and is open to the objection that it means bypassing the central issue. Nevertheless, the negative perceptions of government that are reflected in anthropological reports provide a suitably illusion-free starting point for thinking about this intractable problem.

Anthropological contributions to understanding African states are not, moreover, restricted to merely negative portrayals. There is an incipient literature suggesting how the character of the state, in both its generality and its variability,

reflects deep-seated social patterns more than most reform agendas are inclined to assume.

The recent study by Chabal and Daloz (1999) makes the case that 'Africa works', implying among other things that contemporary social and political trends on the continent are not adequately grasped by approaches that veer between naïve ideologies of reform and quasi-racist forms of 'Afro-pessimism'. The African state can neither be assimilated to Western or Eastern models of increasingly bureaucratic authority (in the Max Weber sense) nor treated merely as an incomprehensible aberration.

While continuing to work with the concept of the patrimonial state, which has been standard in political science for some time, Chabal and Daloz set their account of the 'taming of structural adjustment' and other issues in the context of a wide-ranging treatment of the place of the state in African *society*. In effect they pick up, but develop in what seems a more promising way, the hypothesis of Hyden (1983) about the links between Africa's governance problems and the 'economy of affection' growing out of peasant society. This new anthropological political science contains a good deal from which those engaging with African policy makers about poverty reduction can afford to learn.

Once again, however, the likely limits of generalisation across countries and regions need to be borne in mind. Not only does it seem that certain general features of the state in Africa south of the Sahara may be explicable in social terms, but differences in the patterning of social relationships may help to account for important long-term divergences in state formation. As Boone (1998) has argued on the basis of a comparison of Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and southern Ghana, conflicts within rural society and between rural elites and government shaped the kind of post-colonial state that emerged in those places. Regionally-specific political dynamics eventually emerged within countries. These differences help, in turn, to explain some of the unevenness and variation in attempts to democratise and decentralise public institutions in the same countries during the 1980s and 1990s.

Development institutions: power, participation and discourse

Another trend of recent anthropological work is highly relevant in the present context. This is turning the spotlight on NGOs and other donors and asking questions about how particular images of poverty arise, reproduce themselves and are deployed in the discourses and practices of aid organisations (Broche-Due 1995, Gardner and Lewis 1996). The concern here is with the historical and social circumstances that produce particular conceptions, how these are manifested in policy, and how they intersect with the conceptions and organisation of African societies.

Relevant case studies for Africa include Ferguson (1990), Gatter (1990), Harrison (1995), Mills (1997) and Tierney (1997). An edited volume by Grillo and Stirrat (1997) collects work from both Africa and Asia under the title *Discourses of Development*, and a similar theoretical approach has been employed in research done in Bolivia (Querejazu 1987), Guatemala (Siebers 1997) and Malaysia (Larsen 1998). One of the interesting aspects of this emerging field, and what makes the research from other parts of the world relevant to the present discussion, is the potential for generalising about interactions between local and imported concepts of development and of poverty.

Political processes and power relations have been central concerns of anthropology for many decades, and this has been carried over into studies of the development process. There are two different aspects to this focus on power which are relevant to policy and planning. One is the contribution anthropologists can make to analysis of local political structures and positions of authority in aid recipient regions, and the ways these can facilitate or obstruct the flow of resources to the poor. This aspect is not particularly controversial within development thinking (though it is widely acknowledged to be very problematic in practice). The importance of understanding of how micro-politics intersects with other dimensions of local social life and with wider political influences – in other words, doing a good local stakeholder analysis – is an increasingly recognised principle of project and programme design.

The second aspect of power relations which anthropology highlights is the inevitably political nature of the interaction between development agencies, national governments and citizens. Recent work has extended Ferguson's now classic (1990) account of the systematic efforts of development agencies to depoliticise key distributive decisions, often in practice to the detriment of the least powerful, in Lesotho. Similar interactions between power and the language of development have been noted by other authors (Aubrey 1997, Gardner and Lewis 1996, and much of the work on discourses of development cited above).

Awareness of the power imbalance between multilateral agencies and aid recipient governments, and between those governments and their citizens, causes many anthropologists to feel that the development process is simply a version of exploitation of the poor through the spread of capitalism. Others resist this conclusion but nevertheless give evidence of a clumsiness or insouciance on the part of some of the larger agencies that is equivalent in its effects. This emphasis on power relations in development at the macro level is more controversial, because it can reveal policy statements about poverty and participation as empty rhetoric. Even more disturbingly, it draws attention to how the aid 'industry' is dependent on the poor for its existence.

Power differentials are of course not absent where a 'participatory' approach to development is pursued, despite the strenuous efforts that may be made to create opportunities for the equal sharing of information between primary stakeholders

and development personnel. Some anthropological critiques of participation (e.g. Stirrat 1997) reveal striking discrepancies between the principles of participatory development and the realities of the social interaction involved. On the other hand, the anthropology of development interventions also reveals that the power differentials between the various stakeholders are not fixed. Several studies provide evidence of negotiation and resistance by seemingly powerless people. This point relates to the one about ingenuity on the part of the poor. Local responses to development initiatives can result in the apparent failure of a project being reinterpreted as success, when primary stakeholders gain access to resources but use them for purposes other than those envisaged by the project management.

Apart from revealing in this way the room for different kinds of outcomes in interactions between poor people and external agencies, anthropology has the potential to contribute to the theory and practice of participatory development in two ways that have as yet been little explored. These both involve the scaling up of the concept of participation so that it is not treated as a purely local issue.

First, the anthropology of development institutions (Shore and Wright 1997, Wright 1994) advances the understanding of organisational cultures, and identifies ways in which working relationships among development workers can become more participatory. Second, work on discourses of development can help to identify generalisations about what local people say through social practices of many different kinds (including, but not limited to, speech and text). This work has the potential to contribute to a more sophisticated theory of participation – a fuller answer to the question 'can the poor influence policy?' – in the sense that patterns or principles in local responses may be able to be identified (Gaventa and Robinson 1998, Robb 1998).

Reversing the lens: the anthropology of development practice

We began this section by emphasising the way anthropological research tends to portray poor people as active participants in constructing their livelihoods, rather as mere beneficiaries or targets of assistance. This is probably the single most important contribution of the anthropological perspective to improved policy and practice for poverty reduction – providing a constant, nagging reminder that the lives of poor people do not centre on their contacts with the state and other external agencies. We have also argued that serious research into the ways poor people construct their worlds needs not to be focused narrowly on the behaviour that falls under the rather individualistic and rationalistic rubric of coping strategies. If we do so, we shall certainly not move any closer towards understanding the origins and transformations of local-level social capital.

Another thing that emerges from the discussion in this section is that, contrary to some expectations, anthropology actually has quite a lot to say, not only about processes of long-term change, but also about policy, politics and power. It is

obviously not the only professional perspective on these issues, but it has a specific contribution that may have been underrated. This derives from the capacity to turn the lens of observation and self-aware interpretation not only on the livelihoods and social constructions of people in poverty, but also 'upwards', onto the state and other institutions that have a key role to play, for better or worse, in the process of poverty reduction. The general notion that language and action are embedded in social and political relationships generates important insights into the macro and meso as well as the micro processes of empowerment and disempowerment.

That for deeply-rooted institutional reasons or through sheer carelessness, development organisations can actually contribute to the *dis*empowerment of the people they are intended to support is not a claim that it is easily recognised by those organisations themselves. It is considerably less easy for them to accept than the proposition emerging from the literature on the state, that the informal realities of politics in much of Africa may deeply inimical to poverty-reduction efforts. The major challenge for policy and practice arising from this discussion is, nevertheless, just that: the incorporation of these kinds of critical insights into the institutional self-awareness of development organisations, not only individual agencies but donor-coordination and partnership bodies as well. The change of attitude needs to be quite thoroughgoing, if it is to make headway against the 'disbursement imperatives' and other factors working in the opposite direction. Furthermore, if aid is to be on balance a positive factor in achieving a substantial reduction in poverty in Africa in the next decades, it needs to happen soon.

5   Conclusions and implications

In the past, anthropology's contribution to development has usually been thought of in terms of specialisation in a geographical area. Anthropologists employed in development have often been recognised as providing in-depth knowledge of the social and cultural context within which projects and programmes are taking place. This strength should continue to be recognised, but it could well be used more often for policy as opposed to project-design purposes. As this review has illustrated anthropological work also contributes evidence and analytical perspectives that could lead to better implementation of policies whose goal is poverty reduction. None of this is incompatible with maintaining that anthropological findings often derive their comparative value from forms of research that concentrate on understanding what is there, without any immediate intention to change it.

As indicated throughout this paper, anthropological findings emphasise the interdependence of many different dimensions of social interaction and change. The focus is typically on the links between agricultural activity, the health of the community and individual health problems, or the interactions between kinship

and politics. This holistic approach to describing a social context or process has yet to be fully accepted by development agencies, which still tend to compartmentalise issues within separate realms, such as health, natural resources and governance. The rise of a specific 'social development' specialism in several agencies has contributed to change in the right direction, but some distance remains to be travelled before the sort of inter-penetration of economic, social and political issues in poverty reduction that has been emphasised in this paper is adequately reflected in the structure of even those organisations.

In interrogating the anthropological literature for insights into African poverty, we have insisted on the need to ask the right questions. On this basis, it seems that anthropological data and perspectives are of value not only in understanding how poverty is conceptualised and experienced by diverse African peoples, but also in appreciating the extent of possible generalisation about structural patterns and processes of changes affecting the incidence of different kinds of poverty.

On the first aspect, the principal contribution seems to lie less in the potential to enrich or correct the statistical poverty profiles, and more in guiding the uses that are made of such data in arriving at appropriate policies and practices. To the question what is poverty and who are the poor, anthropological literature provides one kind of answer, and survey analysis another. We have argued that to a limited extent these concerns overlap, such that complexities revealed in ethnographic case studies – multiple meanings, life-cycle issues, the fluidity of identities – provide pointers to improvements in the design of surveys or questionnaires to give them better purchase on grass-roots realities. But a more important set of messages has to do not with improving survey instruments but with putting them in their proper place and, in particular, drawing attention to the importance for anti-poverty action of not reifying statistical categories (or, for that matter, PRA-based wealth-rankings) by treating them as if they were real social categories and even actors.

As regards structural changes, including those of current policy concern, the message of our argument might be summarised as 'beware spectacular generalisations'. As we have emphasised, people *respond* to change. The way they respond is constrained, shaped and given distinctiveness by the economic, social and political relations in which their lives are embedded. These relationships remain highly diverse, and this introduces an element of variability that needs not to be underestimated. In Africa's foreseeable future, multiple paths of dis-impoverishment or re-impoverishment remain more likely than homogeneous national or regional trends. Some overarching generalisations do remain valid across a range of different experiences of change, and these are important for strategic policy purposes. But the weight of our conclusion falls behind the view that for very many purposes, planning for poverty reduction needs to be based on a good knowledge of local circumstances and history.

Finally, we have seen that recent anthropology has usefully trespassed from intensive study of particular peoples and groups, to inspection and critique of the institutions of the state and international agencies. Anthropological studies help to remind us that the primary stakeholders in anti-poverty operations are, of necessity, active participants in constructing their own future. At the same time, anthropologists' commitment to long-term observation places them well to record the awful conditions that are often the reality of policy on the ground, as well as to analyse why well-intended interventions so often fail. We have suggested that, in fact, they in do less of either than they could usefully do. Nevertheless, along with an incipient literature on projects, there is useful recent work on the character of the African state, both in its generality and in its variability, suggesting relationships with deep-seated social patterns. Neither the activities of states, nor those of development agencies, are always empowering of poor people.

Three policy implications of these arguments have been highlighted. None of them are new. All of them remain important. Anthropological work shows that poverty as it is actually experienced is not just multidimensional but socially-embedded in complex and varied ways. This does not mean that it is not useful, for some policy purposes, to simplify and standardise. But at the end of the day poverty-reduction policies have to engage with poverty as it is lived. That means interventions that deal with the poor should be designed in a way that accommodates the uncertainty that goes with complexity; that is to say, on a process basis. The evidence that the structural changes that are important to poverty reduction are systematically variable across localities and cultural areas, suggests that such interventions should also be decentralised, so that they are able to build from the bottom up. Finally, they need to be informed by a strong element of intellectual modesty and critical self-awareness regarding poor people's own efforts, and the possible negative, as well as positive, implications of their greater involvement with powerful outsiders.

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