

## ROUTES OUT OF POVERTY – UNDERSTANDING WHY THE WORLD'S POOR STAY POOR

Those concerned with world security issues would do well not to forget that some of its most profound roots lie in the unremitting poverty experienced by a large proportion of the world's population. So argues Dr Allister McGregor, director of the recently launched ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD). "Poor people live in a fundamentally insecure position and yet even in remote villages in the poorest countries people are increasingly aware of the great wealth enjoyed in other parts of the world and even by elites in their own country," he points out. "Those looking to respond to threats to world security need to take increasing account of the groundswell of disaffection that the insecurity of day to day poverty can generate."

Addressing the continuation of poverty around the world is one aim of the Wellbeing in Developing Countries Research Group. Based at Bath University, WeD is dedicated to the study of poverty, inequality and the quality of life in developing countries. Coherent and in-depth research on poverty from a rigorous and independent social science perspective is urgently needed, Dr McGregor insists. Despite years of international spending in the name of 'development', the persistence of poverty and the widening of inequality are more striking than are development successes.

Despite sharing a common concern for understanding and reducing poverty there is much caricaturing of the gap or difference between academics and practitioners in the development industry, he continues. "In its overstatement, the emphasis on the gap is damaging to the relationships between the two but, prosaic though it may seem, the view held in WeD is that a sound social science understanding of the processes involved in reproducing poverty in particular communities should be an essential underpinning of poverty policy," he explains.

Indeed, a lack of a proper understanding of the social and cultural circumstances in which people live is one important reason that development interventions fail. Dr McGregor cites the specific example of a 40-year-old Bangladesh widow Taheranessa. A weaver with a young son, she is unable to go to market to sell her cloth herself because she is female. The social organisation of the weaving market is such that she and her son are profoundly disadvantaged and must sell cloth and buy supplies through middlemen traders who extract a margin for their services. Despite the apparent opportunity of a government development programme targeted at poor weaving households, Taheranessa chose not to apply for a loan because she reasoned that trying to meet repayments would only generate further difficulties until her son was old enough to take the cloth to market himself.

The aim of WeD is to ensure that future interventions (such as loan schemes) arise from a sounder understanding of what will actually work in lifting the poor out of poverty. Over the next five years a range of rural and urban based community research projects will be undertaken in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. These projects will explore the processes involved in keeping people in poverty with the ultimate aim of providing policy makers with real insight when compiling future poverty reduction strategy plans.

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