Bringing politics into poverty

The political dimensions of poverty alleviation
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Summary

This chapter explores the political dimensions of poverty and poverty alleviation. The first section reviews the prevailing poverty concepts to show that, despite the by now mainstream acceptance of multidimensional poverty thinking, these are insufficiently sensitive to political factors. The following section examines more closely the threefold political dimensions of poverty: exclusion from voice and power (‘political capabilities’); power relations and political processes that determine the availability of and access to other key capabilities; the politics that govern the willingness to prioritise poverty reduction within the international (donor) community. Subsequently, the chapter looks into interest positions and power relations in a given social context. This analysis is followed by an inventory of the political factors and constraints that influence donor country strategies for poverty reduction within international co-operation. Finally, the chapter distils several suggestions and recommendations for practitioners in bilateral co-operation.

Introduction

Sustainable poverty reduction is the central goal of the international cooperation efforts of the Netherlands. This goal is meant to shape all strategies, policies and actions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – particularly its Directorate General for International Co-operation (DGIS) – and the Dutch embassies in partner countries. Political interests and power relations significantly shape the access of poor people to key resources and hence determine to a considerable degree the poverty alleviation impact of these strategies and interventions.

This chapter starts from the assumption that the prevailing notions of poverty reduction – in the Netherlands, but also in international cooperation more generally – do not fully appreciate the political dimension of poverty and poverty alleviation. This may be partly due to certain conceptual blind spots regarding the ‘politics of poverty’, but it is also caused by political and operational constraints in the complex international, national and local environments in which poverty reduction strategies are designed, negotiated and implemented.
The poverty consensus

During the past 15 years, the world-wide commitment to poverty reduction has been based on a so-called 'multidimensional' understanding of poverty. This 'poverty consensus' defines poverty not only as material deprivation, but it also includes 'dignity, voice and protection': the capacity to influence or control livelihood conditions, to participate in power relations and decision-making processes, and to ensure protection against existential threats such as shocks, hazards and violence.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has pioneered this multidimensional poverty approach since its first Human Development Report (1990). Consensus on this approach was consolidated with the World Bank’s 2000 World Development Report (Attacking Poverty) and OECD/DAC’s Guidelines on Poverty Reduction (2001). Box 1 summarises and links the essence of the (roughly parallel) poverty concepts and approaches of the latter two agencies.

Box 1: Multidimensionality of poverty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>World Bank</th>
<th>OECD/DAC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity (for economies to grow and for poor people to benefit from growth to improve livelihoods)</td>
<td>Economic capabilities (to achieve livelihood outcomes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment (of poor people to participate in decisions and to make state institutions more democratic, accountable and responsive to the needs of the poor)</td>
<td>Human capabilities (to achieve human development outcomes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security (meaning the effective mitigation of risks and protection of vulnerable people to shocks, hazards and conflicts)</td>
<td>Political capabilities (to achieve empowerment: rights, voice, influence)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socio-cultural capabilities (to achieve inclusion, status and dignity)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protective capabilities (to achieve resistance or resilience against external economic shocks, disasters and violent conflicts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cross-cutting dimensions: gender and environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Today, the multidimensional poverty notion is commonly related to the concept of 'social exclusion', which expresses that deprivation or inadequate access to key resources and capabilities is not simply a matter of 'scarcity' or 'accidental mis-allocation'. Rather, poverty and deprivation are the result of social processes. After all, relationships between individuals and groups within and across social systems shape the pattern of access to resources, the ways to control these patterns, and the means to legitimise or denounce their outcomes. This is an important premise for approaching the political dimensions of poverty.

Research shows that that ‘expert’ (or objective) understandings of poverty share considerable common ground with poor people’s (subjective) experiences, perceptions and explanations of poverty. Powerlessness and vulnerability are prominent parts of this common ground. Recent
research on poverty and social exclusion also shows that the various dimensions of poverty - insufficient livelihood, powerlessness and insecurity - go hand in hand and are often mutually reinforcing. This means that to single out just one dimension of poverty in any given poverty reduction strategy, runs the risk of turning other dimensions into dead weight, ultimately leading to the failure of the poverty alleviation effort. It also means that social and political dimensions of poverty and exclusion should occupy central stage in poverty analysis and poverty reduction policies.

Existing approaches to poverty reduction: are politics the ‘blind spot’?

Over the past couple of decades, three main approaches to poverty reduction have dominated strategic thinking and policy practise:

· Economic growth (either with ‘trickle down’ or more pro-active redistribution)
· The provision of basic (material and human) needs
· Good governance and (human) rights

All three approaches fail to take on a sufficiently critical stance towards the political dimensions of poverty.

The economic growth approach
The notion of economic growth stood at the cradle of ‘development’ as a field of specialisation and global policy concern after World War II. For two decades, economic growth in and by itself was deemed a sufficient solution to failing development. Poverty was seen as inadequate (food) consumption and monetary income. Automatic (market-driven) trickle-down mechanisms were expected to deliver the fruits of growth to the poor. During the 1970s, these views were challenged by new conceptual insights and mounting evidence that showed (consumption) poverty to be persistent despite often impressive growth rates. Income and asset inequality - and hence failing mechanisms for redistribution at national and global levels - were factored into thinking on the relationship between economic growth and poverty reduction. During the 1980s and early 1990s, however, the rise of orthodox neoliberal thinking put a temporary stop to considering the distribution effect a concern in its own right.

With the emergence of the new poverty consensus, distribution was brought back in and the notion of economic growth was amended to mean ‘pro-poor growth’. The importance of equity was given an additional boost by growing econometric evidence on the superior growth performance in more equally organised societies - both in terms of growth rates and in terms of stability and sustainability.

This implies that the ‘growth paradigm’ must take politics into account. After all, (re)distributive and poverty-reducing qualities of growth – such as enhanced absorption and remuneration of labour, increasing fiscal revenues, and the enhanced delivery of public goods and services – cannot be expected to be the sole result of ‘correct policies’ carried out by technocrats. These also depend on political will, interests and power relations.

The basic needs approach
During the 1970s, the persistent lack of access to basic human needs (such as food, clothing, housing, education, health care, sanitation, transportation, to which were soon added ‘nonmaterial’ elements like dignity and security) became a key poverty concern in its own right.
The provision of basic needs was de-linked from the growth paradigm and the notion of poverty for the first time came to include elements other than private income and consumption. Governments of developing countries together with the international donor community were to consider the provision of basic needs as their prime responsibility. Soon, however, the pitfall of this approach became apparent: without attention for either economics (the availability of resources) or politics (sustained collective commitment), the delivery of basic needs ran the risk of becoming a mere ‘handout’. The negative effects included crowding out of productive subsistence efforts, lack of fiscal sustainability, misallocation of resources and aid dependency. For these reasons, the basic needs approach was discredited in the course of the 1980s. Only in the field of emergency humanitarian assistance does the direct provision of essential goods and services for survival continue to be common practise.

The good governance and the rights-based approach
After 1990, the orthodox view that structural adjustment policies and liberalised market forces alone would lead to poverty reduction was abandoned. It had become clear that markets must be governed to ensure the effectiveness and the desired social outcomes of structural adjustment. The ‘good governance’ concept initially was coined in connection to balanced market reforms. Later, so-called second generation reforms – focusing on key public institutions and their performance – entered the good governance paradigm. In the course of the 1990s, the political dimensions acquired greater attention through the incorporation of ‘legitimacy’ – in terms of accountability, transparency and the (democratic) support for public policy – into the good governance concept. This paved the way for notions such as empowerment, participation and rights to become part of poverty thinking.

From the mid-1990s onward, the discourse of ‘human and citizenship rights’ made its appearance as part of the newly emerging poverty consensus. This rights-based approach meant to incorporate the multiple dimensions of poverty (income, assets, common goods, public services, empowerment, dignity, security) into the international framework of human rights. The right ‘not to be poor’ was linked to the, by then accepted, three-tier conceptualisation of human rights – civil, political and economic/social/cultural rights – that was being codified in a growing number of international declarations and conventions. The poor, as principal stakeholders, were to be empowered to enjoy their rights. Different ‘duty bearers’ were identified: national governments, international organisations and (trans) national and local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

The rights-based approach contributed to making poverty approaches more politically sensitive. Firstly because the very notion of rights implies a political perspective: rights are embedded in politically defined communities and depend on political processes for formulation and implementation. Also the rights (and citizenship) discourse helped to build basic international consensus on the new poverty agenda across economic, political and ideological divides and among previously divergent multilateral agencies, donor governments and CSOs. And finally, rights point at the crucial importance of empowerment of poor and excluded groups, and the discourse on rights has given them an instrument to contest existing situations of deprivation and exclusion. Nevertheless, for a number of reasons the rights-based approach does not fulfil its potential of bringing politics into the poverty debate:

- A rights-based approach may get ‘stuck’ in the increasingly sophisticated juridical formulation of specific, and interrelating, rights. This technical approach fails to address the social, political and cultural conditions for acceptance and implementation of such rights
· Relevant duty-bearers (especially but not exclusively at the national and local levels) may disagree on the priority to be given to certain rights and for certain groups. They may also even use a rights discourse as window dressing to keep attention away from other agendas.
· The international community still lacks a clear unity of purpose as well as legitimate instruments to enforce a rights-based agenda aimed at poverty reduction. Poor citizens can thus not (automatically) rely on their national governments or on the international community for the endorsement and implementation of their rights.

Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and the Millennium Development Goals

The above critical assessment does not mean that no progress has been made on the international poverty agenda. In recent years, important initiatives such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) approaches have brought global poverty reduction strategies on more solid ground. Yet to what extent do these initiatives sensitise the poverty agenda to the political realities in partner countries?

The PRSP approach was designed in the late 1990s to secure poverty reduction strategies – based on the multidimensional poverty concept – as part of the debt relief offered to heavily indebted countries. The PRSP approach, which is political in its very nature, has put specific poverty alleviation strategies firmly on the political agenda. Under this approach, poverty reduction is to be the central concern of national governments, who have to invest political will and resources to achieve this objective. An important role in terms of monitoring the quality and effectiveness of the poverty reduction strategies is attributed to CSOs, with the added objective of structural empowerment of the poor. The donor community is expected to harmonise its support of the national government’s ownership as well as the participation by other local stakeholders in the poverty reduction strategies.

Initially, many PRSP efforts were little more than technocratic exercises, elaborated by national or international experts in close cooperation with the World Bank and IMF. Civil society participation often proved formalistic and ritualistic. Meeting the debt relief programme’s conditions and technical requirements was a paramount concern, making the PRSP effort an executive-led, top-down enterprise (with the advantage that strategies could not easily be reversed once a PRSP had been adopted). More recently, the so-called ‘second generation’ PRSPs have been more successful in securing broad political support and more effective civil society participation. Though it has not yet used its full potential to ensure effective political commitment, the PRSP approach still offers a major promise of contributing to long-term poverty reduction and empowerment of the poor.

The eight MDGs were adopted by the UN General Assembly at the 2000 World Summit, setting specific targets for comprehensive poverty reduction to be achieved in 2015. Together, they offer an impressive array of elements of poverty to be tackled by a concerted effort of recipient governments, donors and other stakeholders. However, because the MDGs reflect the minimal common ground for consensus among all United Nations members, they ostentatiously sidestep controversial political issues. Maxwell argues: ‘The MDGs are strong on material aspects of deprivation, but not so strong on non-material aspects’.

Furthermore, even on the material aspects, the MDGs are predominantly technocratic, and they fail to address the political variables which are likely to determine whether or not a given target
will be met. For instance, the overall MDG objective to reduce by half the number of people living in extreme poverty, will depend on politically determined factors that have an impact not only on net growth rates but also on distribution and equity. One can think of macro-economic policy choices, conditions for negotiating wage levels, redistribution of productive assets, broadening access to education, or eliminating gender and ethnic discrimination on job markets. Maxwell points at the telling absence of an ‘equity target’ in the MDGs.⁴

In sum, even the recent and more sophisticated approaches to poverty reduction, which are supposed to build on multidimensional poverty concepts that include political factors, fall short of fully taking these factors into account.

**The ‘politics in poverty’**

What are the political dimensions of poverty, beyond the basic inclusion of ‘empowerment’ and ‘political capabilities’ in the definition of poverty?

- Exclusion from voice and power (‘political capabilities’) is a integral part of the mainstream poverty concept
- Power relations and political processes determine the availability of and access to other key capabilities
- Politics govern the willingness to prioritise comprehensive poverty reduction within the international (donor) community

We will now take a closer look at these threefold political dimensions of poverty.

**Exclusion from voice and power (‘political capabilities’) is an integral part of the mainstream poverty concept**

This proposition is based on the notion that being able to participate in decisions affecting one’s own life is an important ingredient of human development in its most basic formulation. This fits with the findings of participatory poverty assessments which show that poor people often do not distinguish between material deprivation, powerlessness, lack of dignity, and insecurity in their reflections on poverty.

The basic assumption of the rights-based approach is that everybody should have ‘the right to have rights’. Being poor means not being able to exercise meaningful citizenship. It is not enough that rights are formally granted. Institutions that effectively implement rights must be in place and supported. Even more importantly, stakeholders must have the capabilities to claim and use these rights. Box 2 gives the example of recent empowerment efforts by so-called ‘neo-indigenous’ movements in Latin America.
The notion of ‘being disempowered equals being poor’ must, however, not be taken too absolutely. What is meant, is that disempowerment, in combination with other domains of deprivation, is an integral part of the poverty complex. It aggravates other types of deprivation and adds to overall feelings of poverty, vulnerability and exclusion.

Power relations and political processes determine the availability of and access to other (especially economic, human and protective) capabilities

In his early work on famine in (colonial) India, Amartya Sen showed that famines are not the result of the absolute scarcity of food nor of distributional bottlenecks, but are caused by ‘entitlement failure’. Entitlements are legitimate claims to resources, which are embedded in social and political relations and which are legally, culturally or morally endorsed. The social relations through which entitlements work include contracts, the formal legal framework, customary law, kinship, patronage, gender, reciprocal communal ties and religion. These mechanisms determine the extent to which resources such as land, labour, skills, collective goods and public services can be legitimately accessed and put to use. Entitlements are always the combined result of formal and informal rights, the mechanisms of governance and resource allocation, and the ability to pressure for certain outcomes, in other words, essentially political processes.

Influencing macro-policy
The ‘pro-poor’ outcomes of macro-economic policies are not automatic. The policy choices made are (to a large degree) based on power relations, that is, on the interface between societal interests and political strategies. Pro-poor choices in areas such as sector policies, fiscal regimes and the access to public goods and services depend on the ability of poor people to become an effective political constituency whose agendas – put forward by grassroots movements, CSOs and political parties – are able to influence political power holders and decision makers.
Accessing public goods and services

The provision of public goods and services (education, health care, justice, income transfer, productive support schemes, humanitarian assistance) to the poor depends on what are now generally considered mainstream ingredients of ‘good governance’: public policies and resource allocation that are (a) efficient and effective, (b) legitimate, transparent and accountable, (c) responsive to the needs and interests of the poor. Democratic and participatory forms of governance are increasingly considered supportive (or even necessary) for good governance. Participatory governance means that (representatives and organisations of) poor people have direct access to decision-making and public resource allocation. As such, participatory governance may strengthen voice and empowerment, which in turn may strengthen the legitimacy of, and trust placed in, the state and its public policies. The well-known case of participatory budgeting in the city of Porto Alegre provides a good example (Box 3).

Box 3: Urban politics, participatory budgeting and entitlements in Porto Alegre, Brazil

Between 1989 and 2004, the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre was governed by consecutive administrations of the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT). During this period, an elaborate and successful system for grassroots participation in municipal governance was set up around the annual municipal budget. The system included a participatory budget council at city level that debated and voted on a consolidated participatory budget. The mayor was held to incorporate this budget into his annual budget law proposal to be put forward to the municipal legislative council. The mayor and key top-level civil servants appeared before the participatory bodies to give accounts of the progress of policies voted for in previous years.

In practice, the participatory budget system favoured active participation in policy and spending deliberations, especially in the poorer neighbourhoods of Porto Alegre, home to half a million people or one fifth of the metropolitan population. In the course of a decade and a half, the system helped bring about a notable transformation of the poorer parts of the city: improvement of infrastructure and public services, improvement of security, and, perhaps most significantly, the strengthening of popular trust in and hence commitment to local democracy. This, in turn, contributed to the strengthening of comprehensive citizenship at the local level.

The impact was not only visible with respect to improved and better targeted provision of public goods and services in the poorest districts of the city, but also with respect to the quality of the political process of public policy making (transparency and accountability). The consolidation of formal democracy in Brazil after 1985 thus proved key to the emergence of a political party (the PT) that effectively sought new formats for local governance which has full citizenship as its core objective.

Securing livelihood

The livelihood strategies of poor people often depend on the degree to which access to assets or gainful employment can be secured. Political and institutional space and the capacity to use these are key preconditions for poor people to effectively pursue specific entitlements in domains such as work and income, assets or access to markets. Political exclusion usually means a lack of possibility to secure and defend such entitlements. The trade union struggles in labour-intensive export manufacturing zones, the so-called maquila industry, provide an example of the complex interplay between (political) rights, mobilisation and livelihood outcomes.
Politics govern the willingness to prioritise and target comprehensive poverty reduction within the international (donor) community

Politicians and practitioners within the international donor community often tend to think that the political dimension of poverty alleviation is only a matter of concern to developing countries. This assumption, however, overlooks two obvious political aspects of poverty alleviation strategies.

Firstly, donor agencies are themselves political actors in the national and local arenas where they enter into politically charged relations with ‘host’ governments – and hence donors may become part of certain political alliances, while being excluded from others. Sometimes, donor agencies enter into direct relationships with poor populations. They usually do so in order to bypass obstacles created by partner governments and to enhance the impact and visibility of their programmes. In the process, so-called ‘donor darlings’ are created, adding to the complexity of power and privilege, including the often competing interests between different donor agencies in a given host country.

Secondly, international poverty alleviation strategies are part of a broader agenda of competing economic, political and geo-strategic interests set in a highly complex arena made up of donor governments, national aid bureaucracies, multilateral agencies, and NGOs. The processes of power, influence, status and prestige that rule these arenas often yield incoherent policies and suboptimal outcomes.

The politics of donor interests will be further discussed later on, after taking a closer look at the actors and interests that shape political processes and outcomes at the national and local levels in developing countries.
Interests, power relations and mobilisation capabilities

Poverty is surrounded by politics. But who are the political actors? Power relations and political strategies reflect the societal positions and interests of a great number of relevant actors or ‘stakeholders’, who include: powerful individuals and their networks, organisations or movements and their leadership, and representatives or societal groups and categories based on class, ethnicity, professional background or kinship.

These stakeholders pursue political agendas and specific strategies in the intersection of formal and informal institutions, rules and practices. While the rational-legal-bureaucratic state and the formal domains of political and civil society are often taken as the a priori conditions for politics and governance, there is no society where these are the only or exclusive domains for politics. For a comprehensive understanding of the politics of poverty and exclusion, one needs to take into account so-called informal mechanisms such as clientelism, patrimonialism, charisma, ethnic or religious foundations of authority and primordial loyalties. These mechanisms are intertwined with mechanisms that characterise the formal domain, such as electoral mandates, rational policy formats, accountability and the legal framework.

The scheme in Box 5 offers a toolbox of questions that can be used to assess the political landscape with respect to the poverty problem and the poverty alleviation agenda in any given country.

Box 5: Political dimensions of poverty: identifying stakeholders and actors

Overarching questions:
· Who benefit from structures and social relations that perpetuate poverty?
· Who stand to lose from reforms and interventions aimed at poverty alleviation; how and why?
· What power do they have?
· Who will benefit from reforms and interventions aimed at poverty alleviation; how and why?
· How can their power be strengthened?

Obstacles:
· Which interests/interest groups form an obstacle to poverty alleviation? (likely from elite segments).
· What are their founding motives and forms of legitimation?
· How do they assess poverty and exclusion?
· What are their power base and resources? How can these be influenced?
· Do they block effective policy-alleviation interventions and policies? How?

Supporters:
· Which interests/interest groups support or drive poverty alleviation? (possibly from counter-elites and emerging/upward mobile groups).
· What are their founding motives and forms of legitimation?
· How do they assess poverty and exclusion?
· What are their power base and resources? How can these be influenced?
· Can they lose part of an effective anti-poverty alliance? How?
The scope for the international community’s political pressure and policy influence presents the fine line between two main principles in international cooperation: ownership and conditionality. Through ‘ownership’, the commitment of host governments to poverty alleviation agendas is consolidated and these will reflect the interests and priorities of the poor if and when host governments practise good governance with sufficient space for participation. ‘Conditionality’ has been widely disavowed in politically correct discourse (after the rejection of ‘tied aid’ formulas in the 1970s and structural adjustment packages in the 1990s). In practice, however, conditionality is still part of the new poverty alleviation agenda. Think of the alignment of national policies with the
international poverty consensus and of the pressure for change that donors exert when ‘good governance’ is faltering. This type of conditionality is determined by the political and societal support base for international cooperation in the donor countries and the requirements of effectiveness and accountability with regard to the spending of taxpayers’ money.

The implication of this tightrope act is that host countries and domestic stakeholders enter into a political process with the international donor community to negotiate the balance between ownership and conditionality and to determine the policy package that is to be supported by the donors. This process is set within a number of boundaries:

- Acknowledgement of and respect for national sovereignty
- The importance of political stability and institutional continuity
- Preference for working with the domestic ‘powers that be’
- Avoidance of political issues and flight into ‘technocratism’

The second aspect concerns the political interests, objectives and strategies of actors within the international community itself. Some key issues and questions of this complex yet important field are briefly reviewed below:

- Donor countries and agencies have different opinions and priorities concerning their shared objective, i.e. sustainable poverty alleviation. Moreover, specialised development agencies are always competing with the development agendas or policy impact of other sector agencies in fields such as finance, trade, technology, security, diplomacy and migration. This competition is the background to the debate on policy coherence, a problem that makes international cooperation often resemble the Echternach procession: two steps forward, one step back. ‘Policy coherence’ may sound like a technical or planning issue, but in fact presents a profoundly political matter.

- Poverty alleviation may be the stated common ground for international cooperation (reflected in the MDGs), but it is certainly not the only priority within the international community at large – if it is a real priority at all. National economic and strategic interests, as well as international alliances and loyalties between states, often prevail. Besides, states (and their multilateral agencies) are not the only international stakeholders: transnational corporations, transnational CSOs and advocacy networks, diaspora networks based on religion or ethnicity, and even unsavoury and ‘uncivil’ transnational criminal organisations and terrorist networks, further complicate the configuration of interests and the power structure of our so-called ‘global village’. The question to be asked is how these widely divergent and often antagonistic actors affect the international poverty alleviation agenda.

- How may the legitimate representatives and organisations of poor and excluded groups acquire voice in this complex and antagonistic international arena? Although modern communication facilities have contributed greatly to widening international space for so-called underprivileged actors, international support networks for empowering poor people at the international level remain of vital importance. At the same time, there is a risk that these networks turn into stakeholders themselves with their own agendas. Related to this is the issue of the so-called ‘global publics’: domains within public opinion that transcend national boundaries, that are concerned with global issues and that exert a certain degree of pressure despite. Initially, such ‘publics’ may rise in support of, in this case, global poverty alleviation (think of initiatives like ‘Live Aid’ in 1985, Jubilee 2000, and ‘Live 8’ in 2005),
but the question must be posed to what extent they adequately voice the concerns of poor people and whether they support poverty alleviation strategies that actually make sense.

Conclusions

It is clear that there is an important political dimension to poverty and poverty alleviation, which has been largely ignored in prevailing views on poverty. In recent years, the emerging consensus on the multidimensional concept of poverty and on the priority for poverty alleviation within international cooperation strategies, have helped to bring ‘politics into poverty’. The rights-based approach, the PRSP approach and the adoption of the MDGs have covered new ground. However, a more thorough conceptualisation of the political dimensions of poverty and poverty alleviation is still needed.

Politics should be among the core components of the poverty concept itself. Being excluded from voice and participation is a fundamental aspect of being poor. Political factors often determine other dimensions of poverty, namely access to livelihood and the incidence of insecurity. Politics shape the form and content of the poverty alleviation strategies of key stakeholders, especially national governments and international (donor) agencies, and the partnerships that these stakeholders form.

In order to become more sensitive to these political dimensions, stakeholder analyses are required with respect to the mechanisms and interventions that affect poverty and poverty alleviation outcomes. Key questions are: Who benefit from structures and social relations that perpetuate poverty? Who stand to lose from reforms and interventions aimed at poverty alleviation – and what power do they have? Who will benefit from reforms and interventions aimed at poverty alleviation – and how can their power be strengthened? What are the interests and power resources of the poor?

These questions can be directed at local and national arenas but should not ignore the international arena. The agendas, priorities and strategies of donor agencies are not immune to political interests and calculation. Not only do such agencies inevitably become part of local and national political arenas, but the international community itself constitutes a political space in which poverty alleviation is tackled differently by different stakeholders and where as a political and policy goal it has to compete with other interests and priorities.

Recommendations for practitioners

What does the above discussion mean for policymakers involved in the designing, planning, implementation and monitoring of poverty alleviation interventions? The following are broad-brushed recommendations (mainly in the form of alerting questions) which may help to make such interventions more sensitive to politics and hence more effective.

- Acknowledge that politics is part of the poverty complex, rather than an obstacle that stands in the way of ‘proper’, that is to say, technical or a-political strategies and interventions
- What are the key areas of the poverty problem in terms of livelihoods, empowerment and security? Who are the principal stakeholders? What are their interests? Which interventions or reforms will be supported or opposed, by whom and why? How effective will this support
or opposition be in practice?

- What are necessary and possible pro-poor alliances in local and national policy arenas? How can they be established?
- Supporting the rights, voice and empowerment of poor and excluded groups has a direct poverty relevance, but what are effective and legitimate institutions, organisations and representatives and how can these be effectively strengthened? How can this be balanced against the imperative (if any) to work with the formal or informal ‘powers that be’?
- Can the priorities and efforts for poverty alleviation of different donors be harmonised? Can other interests and priorities (irrelevant for or hostile to poverty alleviation) be mitigated? What are the relevant political conditions or obstacles to achieve this?
- How can donor strategies be linked to local or national policy arenas? How should key political issues such as ownership, conditionality, sovereignty and stability be dealt with?

References


Notes

1 Maxwell, 2003, pp. 5-25.
2 See chapter ‘Another blueprint from the drawing table’ in this book.
5 Yashar, 2005.
6 Amartya Sen (1933) is an Indian economist and philosopher, who won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1998, for his work on famine, human development theory, welfare economics, the underlying mechanisms of poverty, and political liberalism.
8 Koonings et al., 2002.
9 See chapter ‘Behind the façade’ in this book.
10 See chapter ‘A lesson in modesty’ in this book.