

[Book review] "Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?; Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change; Voices of the Poor: From Many Lands, by Deepa Narayan...[et al.]"

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BOOK REVIEWS

Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us? by Deepa Narayan with Raj Patel, Kai Schafft, Anne Rademacher, and Sarah Koch-Schulte, New York, Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 2000, xi + 343 pp.

Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change by Deepa Narayan, Robert Chambers, Meera K. Shah, and Patti Petesch, New York, Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 2000, xvi + 314 pp.

Voices of the Poor: From Many Lands edited by Deepa Narayan and Patti Petesch, New York, Oxford University Press, and Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2002, xvi + 509 pp.

The three volumes comprising the trilogy, *Voices of the Poor*, are the product of comprehensive research work on poverty that was published in connection with the *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty*. The first volume, *Can Anyone Hear Us?* has gathered together the reports of the participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) carried out by the World Bank. Through qualitative analyses and detailed case studies, it has sought to present a clear and comprehensive understanding of poverty as a social phenomenon. The other two volumes, *Crying Out for Change* and *From Many Lands*, have brought together the results of fieldwork studies carried out in 1999. As can be gathered from this brief summation, this trilogy is a compilation of the extensive studies on poverty that have been undertaken by the World Bank, and all three volumes reflect the excellent research work of Deepa Narayan and the team of scholars that has been under his direction.

Four points characterize this work. One is the systematic use of participatory poverty assessments in the study of poverty. The second is the analyses of institutions and organizations (state and civil, formal and informal). Third is the importance of not only consumption and income but also the assets and capabilities of the poor when examining the extent of poverty. Fourth is the connection of gender and poverty.

Looking first at the methodology, the trilogy is characterized by the extensive use of PPA surveys and international comparisons based on the results of these surveys. The major purpose of this entire work, as summed up in *Crying Out for Change* is to try as much as possible to study poverty from the viewpoint of poor people themselves. *Can Anyone Hear Us?* tells the reader that PPAs were developed by the World Bank starting in the early 1990s to complement poverty assessments which had been mainly based on the quantitative analyses. PPAs allow the poor themselves to participate in the evaluation process, and are a means for trying to understand the phenomenon of poverty from within the context of the institutional and political aspects of the community. From the three volumes composing *Voices of the Poor*, one can see how PPAs are used in the World Bank's analyses.

The first volume, *Can Anyone Hear Us?* is based on selections from over 300 research reports that made use of social analyses and participatory methods and were conducted from the latter half of the 1990s in association with the World Bank's poverty assessments and poverty focused studies (pp. 15–17). Chapter 1 of the volume explains the following two points which it says essentially characterize the participatory approach. First, this approach enables the people who are answering the questions of the surveys to be actively involved (through open-ended and participatory methods) in the survey process. Second, the participatory approach through the survey process empowers the participants and leads them to follow-up action, which is considered to be the main purpose of PPAs. According to this volume, there are two reasons why PPAs can procure information that is missed by standard poverty assessments. One is that PPAs use an open-ended approach with questions not being determined in advance; therefore, by interviewing the people of the community, it is possible that researchers can pick up important information which they cannot otherwise know. Another reason is that PPAs differ from other conventional poverty surveys conducted at the household level in that they pay attention to more individualistic aspects of a household, taking into consideration, for instance, gender. This enables researchers to analyze the inequality of power relationships between men and women that exist within the household and within the community.

The second volume, *Crying Out for Change*, brings together international comparative studies based on fieldwork carried out in twenty-three countries in 1999. The volume focuses on the powerlessness of the poor that is ordinarily seen within a diverse political, economic, and social context. It places the diversity of ill-being and factors that underlie this powerlessness into ten dimensions, and from these it seeks to provide suggestions for the reduction of poverty.

The third volume, *From Many Lands*, a collection of country studies, analyzes by means of systematic context analysis the results of fieldwork that was conducted in 1999, and it has sought to discern common themes running through these studies. The volume takes up fourteen countries including disaster-plagued Bangladesh, Indonesia with increasing vulnerability of its poor people since the 1997 economic crisis, areas of conflicts such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, countries in transition to market economies, and four Latin American countries, and it compares the experiences of these different countries. As significant factors affecting the condition of poverty, it points out the diversity in assets and capabilities, the influence of economy-wide policies and market downturns, the problem of "the culture of mediating institutions," and the extent of gender inequality and children's vulnerability (pp. 12–13, 488).

Turning to the second characteristic of this three-volume study, its analyses of institutions and organizations, in Chapter 3 of *Can Anyone Hear Us?* state institutions are dealt with, and the chapter states that institutional behavior is understood as being dynamic and is seen as "regularized patterns of behavior that emerge, in effect, from underlying structures, or sets of rules in use," and by means of PPAs, the chapter analyzes the formal institutions that are embedded within the power relationships of a society (pp. 84–85).

Chapter 4 of *Can Anyone Hear Us?* also analyzes civil institutions such as community-based organizations (CBOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The chapter argues that NGOs alone are insufficient because pressure from governments and the

difficulties of procuring long-term funding reduces the long-term capacities of these organizations. Instead the chapter directs attention to CBOs which “typically command confidence because people feel a sense of ownership of them, and feel that these organizations are responsive to their priorities. Indigenous identity, based on caste, ethnicity, clan, gender, and age, lays the foundation for many of these organizations” (p. 144). The bonds of solidarity that the poor have with mutual informal networks give identity and meaning to their daily lives, and these can be relied on for mutual assistance in time of crises, although the chapter also points out that the resources for mutual assistance are limited. CBOs are sensitive to local needs, but as these organizations grow, the likelihood of them falling under the control of the affluent and powerful classes also grows along with the tendency to exclude the poor and women. In essence, this volume argues that the challenge for NGOs, governments, private organizations, and international operations in reducing poverty is setting up organizations through which the poor themselves can mobilize the resources that meet their own needs, and which will enable them to participate in local and national government (pp. 165–66).

In *Can Anyone Hear Us?* as well as in *Crying Out for Change*, state institutions are given low evaluations while those for CBOs are relatively high. However, *Can Anyone Hear Us?* stresses in Chapter 3 that it is necessary to show how state institutions are to function effectively. Although recognizing that dysfunctional state institutions cannot provide services to the poor, and legal and other formal barriers that impede the access of the poor to benefits or economic activity exacerbate the problem, Chapter 3 argues that “The answers do not lie in shrinking the state, bypassing the state, or in focusing only on poor people’s networks. The answers lie in starting with poor people’s realities and experiences with the state in order to design appropriate processes to produce change at the local level” (p. 109).

Turning next to the question of what these reports show about poverty and the problems of the poor, of the three volumes that make up this World Bank study, Hazel Johnson has written a book review of volume one, *Can Anyone Hear Us?*¹ While referring to the comments made by Johnson, this reviewer would like to comment on five points which he sees as encapsulating the significance of this three-volume study for research on poverty and for policies to reduce poverty.

The first point is the effectiveness of the PPA method. Johnson recognized the contribution of her reviewed volume in drawing attention to the multidimensional nature of poverty, in clarifying the many interlinked factors that comprise poverty, and showing that people’s further impoverishment can be a diverse process. On these points this reviewer is of the same opinion as Johnson. Research that focuses solely on income and expenditures is surely insufficient, and the opinions of the poor themselves have to be taken into consideration. Analyses that only rely on macro indicators like the poverty ratio and the Human Poverty Index (HPI) of the UNDP² cannot reveal the fundamental problems of society. If poverty is formed through diverse processes, then among exceptional and extreme examples one can expect to find cases that clarify fundamental problems affecting society. The causes for peo-

¹ Hazel Johnson, “Book Review: *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?*” *Journal of International Development*, vol. 13, no. 3 (April 2001), pp. 377–79.

² United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2000* (New York: Oxford University Press for the UNDP, 2000).

ple falling into poverty, such as transitional change in economic system, currency crises, or destruction of traditional social structures, are likewise diverse which means that poverty analyses based only on specific indicators are insufficient. What is needed instead, in this reviewer's opinion, are qualitative analyses using case studies that can provide detailed explanations of the poor and their conditions, and thereby elucidate types of poverty that were not apparent before. In this respect, disaggregated poverty research like *Voices of the Poor* offers instructive suggestions for research in development economics and also for policy planning.³

However, the opinions and evaluations expressed by the poor in this three-volume study change depending on the context of time and place, but it seems to this reviewer that the study has not sufficiently taken into consideration this alteration in survey information. Another drawback of this work, in the reviewer's opinion, is that it seems that PPAs have no established measures for ascertaining the true meaning of interviewee responses. This aspect is important because institutions and organizations are likely to set implicit rules that restrict the choices and behavior of the individual, and these implicit rules frequently become norms and conventions which are something that individuals may not be clearly conscious of. This reviewer would like to have seen substantial indicators about the way these implicit rules were revealed within the spoken words of the poor. But these comments are not intended to negate the effectiveness of PPAs themselves. Rather this reviewer would like them to be understood within a wider context.

The second point of comment is that while this study focuses on "context specificity" (*From Many Lands*, pp. 8–12), to this reviewer's mind, this does not provide a clear hypothesis for the mechanism involved in the occurrence of poverty (or in its reduction). In other words, this study places too much emphasis on the causality of poverty that is specific to an individual case. This problem is connected with Johnson's point that the findings of this World Bank study fail to shed sufficient light on the fundamental problem of why poor people are poor in the first place. This reviewer agrees with this study that poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon, but while acknowledging this fact, he also thinks that a factor which has been pinpointed to cause a certain type of poverty can also become a key factor that induces deterioration of other factors, thereby affecting other types of poverty. Nevertheless, this comment does not lessen the value of this work because a thorough understanding of institutions and well-being kept within context would be a very effective premise for model building. In this sense, to come up with a more effective scenario for overcoming poverty, the meaning of institutions and well-being will, in this reviewer's opinion, have to be understood within a more comprehensive perspective of causality.

The third point of comment concerns the appropriateness of the definition of the concepts used in the analysis. In her review of the volume *Can Anyone Hear Us?* Johnson pointed out the need for a more precise application of concepts like "social capital" and "networks." This reviewer is of the same opinion. When considering networks of human relationships, for example, what criteria should be considered as forming a network of human relationships that plays an effective role in enlarging an individual's choices rather than restricting

³ This is a well-known view, as in Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 30) who used an entitlement approach for a precise analysis of famine.

those choices is an important question for making good use of this World Bank study in policy making. Also in *Can Anyone Hear Us?* “social capital” is too broadly defined as referring “to the benefits of membership within a social network” (p. 55); it is defined as “a two-way street” whereby “social networks provide benefits such as access to scarce resources, membership also entails having claims made on one’s own resources” (p. 56). Moreover, things expressed with the same word are not necessarily alike. For example, in Box 4.5 of *Can Anyone Hear Us?* (p. 158), the action of Kenyan women’s groups gaining income through their participation in marketplace transactions is placed under the title of utilizing social capital although the descriptions in the box itself make no effective use of the concept of “social capital.” It is true, as in the words of Joel Sobel, that “No one could dispute that social capital is multifaceted.”⁴ However, the existence of this multifacetedness makes it difficult to precisely define the concepts pertaining to institutional analysis. But when policy agencies, such as international organizations or governments of developing countries, give priority to institution building, this reviewer thinks that clear definitions of the concepts pertaining to institutional analysis will become of the utmost necessity.

The fourth point of comment concerns the procedures for partnership building. One of the points of institutional analysis in *Can Anyone Hear Us?* is the mutual connection between bonding and bridging institutions (pp. 144–45). According to this volume, when there is an inequitable distribution of power at the local level, different social groups differ in the extent of their access to resources and opportunities. If a social group is cut off from another group of the similar character, they cannot build organizations for social reform. If a social group is isolated from another group of a different character, the resources of the stronger group will not be accessible to the other group. In such a situation, the isolated group will lack sufficient social capital for bridging in order to bring about bonding.

Can Anyone Hear Us? says that “Harnessing the potential of local-level associations and networks for poverty reduction requires an understanding of the nature of crosscutting ties, the extent of bonding and bridging ties, and the extent of substitution or complementarity between local institutions and the state” (p. 150). It also says that “Local traditions and practices can be used as the basis of crafting organizations for the poor for governance and service provision in partnership with NGOs or the government” (p. 160).

However, on the matter of how to build substantive partnerships, the same volume only says that “Effective partnerships require not just changes in procedures but changes in mindset, so that all partners—including external support agencies—see themselves as learners rather than as experts” (p. 161). There is no clear statement about who is supposed to do what first. *From Many Lands* also states that there are no simple solutions or approaches to development which enable inclusion of the poor: “There are no easy solutions for identifying local partnerships that do not reinforce existing hierarchies but rather build on the strength of local clusters to foster more inclusive development processes” (p. 490). In dealing with this problem, the distinction that Justin Yifu Lin and Jeffrey B. Nugent pointed to in their article, “Institutions and Economic Development,”⁵ between institutional arrangement (a set of

⁴ Joel Sobel, “Can We Trust Social Capital?” *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1 (March 2002), p. 144.

⁵ Justin Yifu Lin and Jeffrey B. Nugent, “Institutions and Economic Development,” in *Handbook of Development Economics*, ed. Jere Behrman and T. N. Srinivasan, vol. 3A (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1995), pp. 2306–13.

behavioral rules that govern behavior in a specific domain) and institutional structure (the totality of institutional arrangements in an economy), as well as the distinction they said had to be drawn between analyzing change in individual organizations and change due to the interaction of organizations would be useful for the readers of this study. In order to have partnership and accountability, there has to be the appropriately balanced inclusion of cooperation and counteraction. This will insure the counterbalance and checks and balances of diverse organizations. For this reason it is important to have organizations that carry out the diametrically opposite functions of bonding and bridging institutions.

My fifth point of comment concerns the implications of this study on a framework for policies to reduce poverty. Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen stressed the aspects of protection and promotion in poverty reduction policies (cf. footnote 3). If the focus of policy is on promotion, then the issue becomes that of raising the assets and capabilities of the poor. Johnson indicates in her review that in people's daily life it is assets rather than cash income that is important for reducing poverty and she acknowledges that this finding is one of the major contributions of this World Bank study. Assets as referred here is broadly inclusive and means those things that give people security and status in their daily life, and that enable them to obtain money and procure the goods and services they need. This is the view taken in *Crying Out for Change* which sees development as: equitable well-being for all, putting the bottom poor high on the agenda, recognizing power as a central issue, and giving voice and priority to poor people (p. 263). But poverty is multidimensional and demands multiple intervention. Therefore, when designing policies for poverty reduction, the questions that come to this reviewer's mind are: who is to provide the diverse range of assets, and how are they to be provided; and how is multiple intervention to be realized?⁶ Poverty reduction policies require financial and human resources, but if these policies have to be evaluated multidimensionally, it will be difficult to evaluate the results and the effectiveness of these policies. When dealing with the problem of poverty reduction, governments with limited funds and capabilities will have to set out policies that prioritize certain specific poverty indicators (or specific social groups) and target them for support. As stated in *Can Anyone Hear Us?* investing in the organizational capacity or social capital of the poor and improving their capabilities are problems demanding long-term financing, trust, and flexibility (p. 277). The merit of this three-volume study in dealing with the complexities of poverty reduction policies is having provided not only to poor people but also to those on the side of the donors and local society a sound foundation for judging these policies. However, readers of this study would have benefited more if it had offered more substantial proposals and methods for poverty reduction.

The significance of this World Bank study lies in its clarification of poverty as an important problem that development policies will have to solve, and in demonstrating that PPAs are useful as a part of development policy. Johnson states at the end of her review that one critical issue for the future is how such work will give new direction to the World Bank's

⁶ Of great interest here are the places in *Crying Out for Change* that report on people who have been able to free themselves from poverty. The reports show the importance for escaping poverty played by self-employment and entrepreneurship, and multiple sources of income including that from wages and salaries, benefits from family, and income from agriculture, livestock, and fishing, as well as access to land (pp. 64–69, figs. 3.1 and 3.2).

approach to poverty. This comment reminded this reviewer of an article by A. B. Atkinson which discussed the significance of government poverty reports.⁷ In this article Atkinson said that (1) while pursuing a variety of objectives besides poverty reduction, a significant aspect of economic and social policies is that when reducing poverty, they show the terms of reference through government poverty reports; and (2) simply presenting the indicators of poverty skews the reporting of poverty conditions, but a government's publishing of its poverty reports can draw attention to the limitations of existing statistical indicators on poverty and to the appearance of new forms of deprivation. For these reasons Atkinson rated poverty reports highly. This reviewer feels that a high rating like that of Atkinson's is also valid for this three-volume study and for World Bank policy. (Hiroki Nogami)

⁷ A. B. Atkinson, "Promise and Performance: Why We Need an Official Poverty Report," in *Living as Equals*, ed. Paul Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 134–36.

China's Retreat from Equality: Income Distribution and Economic Transition edited by Carl Riskin, Zhao Renwei, and Li Shi, Armonk, N.Y., M. E. Sharpe, 2001

This book is a sequel to *The Distribution of Income in China* edited by Keith Griffin and Zhao Renwei,¹ which was published in 1993. Both are the products of full-fledged international joint studies by researchers from the Economics Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Sweden, the United States, Britain, and other countries. This collaborative research is based on sample data drawn from extensive proprietary national surveys of household income. The elaborate research design, reliable sample data, and sophisticated analytical methods combined synergistically to produce this book, which, without dispute, is the fruition of first-class studies on the Chinese economy or research on income distribution.²

¹ Keith Griffin and Zhao Renwei, eds., *The Distribution of Income in China* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993)

² Previous excellent research on China's economic development and income distribution in Chinese language was done by Chen Zongsheng (*Jingji fazhan zhong de shouru fenpei* [Economic growth and income distribution] [Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Shudian, 1991] and *Gaige, fazhan yu shouru fenpei* [Reform, development, and income distribution] [Shanghai: Fudan Daxue Chubanshe, 1999]). Partly due to limited availability of sample data, his studies were not necessarily sufficient in their analysis of income inequality across the country and the causes of inequality. The Rural Survey Team of the State Statistical Bureau made an analysis of inequality in rural household income by region, using proprietary sample data, but the results were not entirely satisfactory in terms of the clarification of the causes of inequality (State Statistical Bureau, Rural Survey Team, *Zhongguo nongmin shouru yanjiu* [Studies on peasant income] [Taiyuan: Shanxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1987]; Zhu Xiangdong, eds., *Zhongguo nongcun jumin xiaofei yu shichang* [Consumption and market in rural China] [Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 2000]). There is also the elaborate work done by Hiroshi Sato in Japan, but this, too, left much to be desired in the analysis of inequality in income and factors behind it, due to the limited availability of data (Hiroshi Sato, *The Growth of Market Relations in Post-reform Rural China: A Micro-Analysis of Peasants, Migrants and Peasant Entrepreneurs* [London: Routledge Curzon, 2003]).