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## Poverty and its Representations: An Anthropological Analysis of Indigenous Knowledge and Western Science Discourses within the Sustainable Development Debate

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### Abstract

Poverty continuously lays a breeding ground for capitalist orientations and perceptions of the concept in itself and “justifies” the adoption of foreign-based solutions with little or no affiliation to local and socio-cultural contexts. Meanwhile, the contextualizations surrounding the poverty debate in development aid and intervention seemingly underpin the assertion that development aid is problematic in itself given binary tensions surrounding indigenous knowledge and western science as post-modern development discourse. This paper succinctly explores the orientations of poverty within the development aid conundrum and discusses dichotomies between indigenous knowledge and western science in defining development processes in developing countries and Sub Saharan Africa. It seeks to underscore the socio economic, cultural and politically constructed “representations” of poverty by discussing theoretical standpoints to question development aid agencies’ interventions in the Global South, and the impending changes in local and community relationships as a result. The paper concludes that while anthropologists’ role within this development and knowledge debate is pivotal, it is imperative for development aid to go beyond mere economic and measurement led framings of poverty, to affix a more salient perspective of culture and local knowledge systems that will shape the understanding of poverty and guide concurrent interventions.

**Keywords:** culture; development; poverty; Global South; indigenous knowledge; western science

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## **1. Introduction**

Working as a community development practitioner in very remote areas in the Global South, the notion of poverty is not overwhelmingly anew. Scenic images of anguish, suffering, and inability to enjoy resources are common characteristics of these distant settings. Poverty seems to be a dreary reality which scourges the face of our beloved planet and world; leaving only a memory marred by scars of despair and futility. It seems we are lost in a crazy conundrum, spiraling down a slippery slope and heading towards a deadly collision. But is it so? What can we do? One might plausibly ascertain that much of the literature and research surrounding the development discourse is affixed on the concept of poverty. It does not take an intellectual, scholar or expert in social relations to realize that the systemic and persistent poverty problem, has caused the harmonization of an international socio-economic and political agenda for development stakeholders, governments, academicians and policymakers, to act in the face of this possible “world killer”. The distorted social relations, the skewness of wealth in most developing countries, and the increasing social exclusion of local communities from the development process could be blamed on poverty, given the structural impediments to which these societies are subjected to.

In the mix of it all, we find ourselves in some kind of a “chess game” where every move accompanies contested binaries and constructs on which such is based or dependent upon, and every player watches the other keenly; ready to cry foul at every single suspicious move. Thus, what was considered as a mutual relationship turns into a blame game. This seemingly describes the polemics and dynamics surrounding contemporary poverty debate and its representations, in which dominant discourses and alternative approaches have been seen as opposing frameworks to actually understanding the concept of poverty, in order to ensure the sustainability of this world and its people. The ever increasing polemics surrounding indigenous knowledge as a tool for reconstructing development processes obscure the significance of traditions, customs and local knowledge systems in contributing significantly to addressing poverty in developing countries. At this juncture, it is imperative to ascertain the unwavering contribution of Anthropology to these discursive frameworks, which shall be explored in the latter part of the paper.

## **2. Poverty: Deconstructing the Polemics**

In so far as this, unfortunately, presents itself as a sad reality, a new paradigm emerging in contemporary development discourse, positions the concept of poverty as a “social construct” and “chastises” the contested and or controversial approaches and conceptualizations of the concept especially in the Third World as a “development abnormality” that needs treatment (Escobar, 1995). The poverty debate seems to be marred by the conceptualization of the concept, following historical processes that shaped human relations, epitomized by a devastating surge of power relations existing between the North and South, and the “unconscious” creation of inequalities amongst people in various societies. However, this captured the poverty problem and portrayed the manner in which development agencies intervened in the process.

This trend invariably continues to enhance counter-discourses of mainstream understandings of poverty and its representations, to which I inadvertently contend

that the methodological framework for understanding poverty, usually through measurement led conceptualizations such as the “poverty line” tenet promulgated by the World Bank, is a “serious” misrepresentation of the actual connotations of poverty and what it means. For instance, Sundaram contends that global poverty is said to be halved by 2010, while global hunger seems not to decrease concomitantly despite the fact that the poverty line is supposed to be principally determined by the money income needed to avoid being hungry. However, it is essential to contend that measuring poverty has always been a strategy for contemporary poverty reduction policy discourses, to which end popular participation by local communities, is gradually being recognized by alternative discourses as beneficial to the entire policy process. It is thus pertinent to go beyond economic measurements of poverty, towards negotiating spaces that will provide the framework for local people to participate in development processes, through which local realities of poverty are deconstructed from the perspective of local people, and enable appropriate framings as to what poverty really represents.

Arguments put forward by Marxists, converge on the salient position of poverty generated from the structural power relations between the dominant North and the “dented” South, as earlier mentioned, leaving one to ponder critically and question poverty and its representations, given that it is not a natural fact but a social construct as Green & Hulme (2005) argues. Who then is responsible for poverty? In Renzo Marten’s *Enjoy Poverty*, a thought-provoking and seemingly satirical account of poverty in Congo vividly documents the poverty discourse and clearly questions the burden and responsibility of poverty. Amidst the gore and violence reeking throughout the country’s landscape during that period, one can perceive the “double face” of poverty lying on the trail of development interventions and international assistance, which seemed to be more concerned with external gains and plundering the rich resources of the country, than actually seeking for solutions to put an end to the crisis. I question therefore if the concept of poverty is a systematic design to perpetually subjugate a people while advancing personal gains and interests? Can poverty be perceived as an opportunity or resource through which the “poor” themselves can benefit from, depending on their ability and willingness to take charge and change their current predicament? These questions alternately expose other binaries and double standards that are reflective of the representation of poverty debate, bringing culture and local knowledge systems onto the scene, and increasingly renders complex the poverty burden and responsibility.

### **3. Conceptualizing Knowledge Systems within the Sustainable Development Discourse**

In a world dominated by Western worldviews, the unwary conceptualization of indigenous knowledge in development processes has undermined the diverse forms of such knowledge whose very foundations is deeply rooted in the relationships and way of life existing between communities and their immediate environments. Interestingly, Hobart (1993) argues that the exercise of power relations between the North and South is capped in the hemisphere of development interventions, to which he ascertains that not only is indigenous knowledge ignored and shunned, but the nature and solution of development problems in the global South, is being defined by western

worldviews and or western knowledge. Scientists and policymakers have created a furry of underrated and unfounded assumptions on sustainable development, which has created no space for local/indigenous knowledge (Leach & Mearns, 1996). This assertion is compounded by the fact that theorists of development and western science subjugate traditional knowledge to a non concomitant role, describing or perceiving this form of knowledge as inefficient, inferior and scientifically unfounded (Agrawal, 1995).

However, it was not until recently that indigenous knowledge has become a kind of hymn, clearly depicting another paradigm of viewing development processes and a sustainable alternative of tackling poverty and attaining “real” development. Emphasis has been placed on the understanding of the complexities of the interrelationships existing between people and their communities as a step towards ensuring socio-economic development for local communities. This entails that development approaches resound on community participation and involvement in all things affecting the lives of rural poor and given voice to the people to determine their livelihood (see Herbert, 2000: Chambers, 2001). Escobar (1995) even asserts to this change in development discourses by capturing indigenous knowledge as a salient alternative to the development debate for sustainable change amongst the world’s poor communities and I quote *“the remaking of development must start by examining the local constructions, to the extent that they are the life and history of the people, that is the conditions for and of change”*.

Therefore, there has been growing conviction among development practitioners and theorists to promulgate the “tapping” into the wealth of indigenous knowledge in order to subsume alternative and innovative strategies to tackling poverty and development in the Global South. However to conclusively assert the universality of indigenous knowledge as a better approach to deconstructing development processes, will prove problematic because the binary tensions existing between western science and indigenous knowledge, revolves around the subjective claims of the universality and transferability of western knowledge as compared to indigenous knowledge, a position aptly refuted by indigenous knowledge proponents. Meanwhile, the institutionalization of indigenous knowledge as a tangible object (due to its deep rootedness in the cultures and way of life of communities) ironically positions such knowledge as an object that can be transferred and universally applicable in itself.

#### **4. Indigenous Knowledge & Western Science: A Conflicting Conundrum**

It is conspicuously true that indigenous knowledge and western science is usually submerged in a divide based on different epistemological frameworks and approaches to poverty and sustainable development. Such debate has been belated for centuries leaving western science to be perceived as a systematic and more objective knowledge process based on rationality and experimentalism, while indigenous knowledge is confined to primitive practices that are deemed backward, traditional and more or less residual. Much of the literature on knowledge systems, with particular reference to indigenous knowledge, has tended to pay keen attention to environmentally sustainable development processes notably in agriculture and water resource use. It has been argued and with considerable research undertaken, that local farmers have successfully appropriated farming systems and there is an implicit knowledge amongst them that

demonstrates their ability to determine soil fertility and achieve high yields (Lamers & Feil, 1995). Though factual and somehow related to formal science, western science contests this knowledge system to be scientifically tested to determine its acceptability. This presupposition of development therefore on the application of scientific knowledge to local farming practices clearly exemplifies the power relations exerted by the West given that the criteria of what is knowledge and who defines such, reeks of western orientation. This view is further compounded by Hobart who resolves that it is not just that the categories of 'traditional' and 'modern' are vague and idealized constructions, but the process of development is defined in reference to the supposed state of the dominant party, which in this instance is symbolic of Western science.

Imagining that development is achieved on the basis of applying western science and that local indigenous knowledge has little to offer in offering local ways in combating poverty, is very problematic as earlier mentioned. This can simply be attributed to the fact that these knowledge systems intervene in different contexts and it is increasingly being acknowledged beyond anthropology that other people have their own effective "science" and resource use practices and that to assist them we need to understand something about their knowledge and management systems (Atte 1992, Barrow 1992, Morrison, Geraghty, and Crowl 1994). By applying subjective lenses to indigenous knowledge as a resource to sustainable development, Western science implies a defective connotation of the former, equating its unsuitability in development discourses, often perceived to lack the much-needed rigor and accuracy enshrined in more scientific and formal approaches. This point is proven in Sillitoe (1998:227) wherein he argues that there are dangers inherent in comparing and contrasting scientific explanations with other people's understanding of their activities, notably the threat of ethnocentrism.

However although these tensions and conflicts do persist, there has developed an entanglement or hybridization of both knowledge systems which supposedly provides a loophole for anthropologists to exploit as a strategy of decolonizing knowledge through an understanding of how Western sciences transform or transcends other knowledge forms as well as establishing the connections that exist between the kinds of knowledge. For instance, Chokor and Odemerho (1994: 153) went as far as demonstrating sheer optimism in the possibilities of interplay in both knowledge systems as they suggest that "once official views and community values are integrated, conflict and rivalry associated with traditional and modern land conservation measures in tropical Africa will be considerably reduced". This resounds a new paradigm to development as local communities, may out of the sheer need to ensure socio-economic survival, find themselves underpinning a hybridized knowledge system, which may somehow assume the nonexistence of indigenous knowledge in its very pristine and "virgin" form, to the extent of describing it as local knowledge.

## **5. Playing The Blame Game**

In *We Are Not Poor* (Villiers, 2005), there is an emergence of what is termed "subaltern discourses" of pastoralist development that challenges the initial dominant perception of pastoralist communities in Nairobi as poor, by Western discourse, and shifts the blame to these development aid agencies and their institutions, condemning the discursive framework on which their communities have been by and large

considered poverty-stricken. The phenomenal weight of culture is glaring in this cinematographic account with values such as connectivity, the voice of the people, welfare, and solidarity seemingly threatened by development aid interventions. Reason enough, it is ascertained that poverty means different things to different people at different times, and the “foreign” generated solutions may not always be reflective of the practical realities on the ground. The subordinate discourse generated in this account depicts a community of people who exacerbate their pastoralist livelihoods, on the basis of a community, caught at the centre of intricate socio-cultural, economic, political and environmental relationships, that manages itself and subsequently guarantees the welfare of the disadvantaged in that community. Concurrently, this contradicts the received wisdom of poverty based on the picturesque representation of the South as one of ‘starving children with flies around their eyes, too weak to brush them off (Cameron & Hanstra, 2008) and portraying these people as helpless and passive beings in dire need of assistance or help.

It is needless to say therefore that the cultural underpinnings of poverty put representations of the latter in some form of “capitalist web” to which the already disadvantaged groups in these communities are continuously being hampered by their very own elites, as evident in the above-mentioned account. This paradox takes us back to the initial question on the responsibility and burden of poverty, which lies as well on the shoulders of the poor themselves, as well as the various structures and institutions that continuously lay a breeding ground for capitalism and further complicate the poverty problem. It is based on this premise therefore that the field of Anthropology and its relative discourses is generating new paradigms and approaches towards deconstructing poverty polemics and its representations. To what end, therefore, can Anthropologists harmonize populist or alternative accounts of poverty with dominant perspectives, and go beyond contentious representations of poverty, to provide a more holistic interpretation of poverty while placing at both ends of the hall, the peculiar dynamics surrounding each discourse and or approach?

## **Conclusion**

Conclusively, this paper discussed the contextualization surrounding poverty and sustainable development, underpinning the pragmatic conflict involving indigenous knowledge and western science as plausible practical approaches in tackling development for poor communities. A content analysis was made and although clear pathways could be charted from the analysis, it definitely seemed that all through the development discourse the conceptualization of indigenous knowledge and western science have been quite problematic and have turned out to render the development and poverty reduction process complicated. Though the focus of this paper does not revolve on deconstructing the meaning of *indigenous* the term in itself denotes a subjective connotation and conceptualization (always perceived as some folk knowledge standing at the forefront of the persistent binary tensions surrounding the knowledge system divide. As Sillitoe (2000) argues we have to convince development aid agencies to avoid interpreting and testing local experience and knowledge according to Western canons alone, reproducing a dominant world view of development which may be misleading, even inimical to the interests of the poor and their communities.

Progress in poverty reduction is constrained by many factors, one of which is the way in which poverty is represented within international development. Green (p; 1116) states that “If poverty as a state and status is the manifestation of social relations it is also a category of representation through which social agents classify and act upon the world”. Anthropologists find themselves in the core or middle of this poverty conundrum and studying inherently the categorization and conceptualization of poverty is a first step towards discussing possible solutions to the macabre poverty problem. However central to our discussion on poverty and its representation is whether the burden of poverty or its responsibility can be attributed to one party only? From an ethical standpoint, can the representations of poverty brought forward through dominant discourses from the North be justified? It is therefore very evident from our analysis that the content, categorization, and conceptualization of poverty cannot be specific or peculiar to one approach or school of thought, as well as laying the entire blame and criticizing discourses that continue to entwine poverty in the South in a vicious web of complex outlets and outcomes. This thus offers innovative avenues for Anthropologists to dissect and rethink the poverty debate and prioritize social processes so as to better understand the genealogy of poverty and its integration with knowledge discourses that will shape concomitantly the process of seeking solutions reflective of the realities in the South.

This is so because the tendency to use measurement led conceptualizations of poverty as evidenced by the World Bank approach is not purely holistic because it generalizes on the economic determinants of poverty rather than the social and cultural relations that shape human interactions in various communities as evidenced in Villier’s account on the pastoralist communities in Nairobi. I contend that the emphasis on poverty as the problem and the *received wisdom* on which it is based overlooks the social outcomes and relations which reproduce that same poverty, and create inequalities amongst people while increasing the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged. As Cameron & Hanstra suggests, the key issue here for Anthropologists is to carefully consider the ways in which representations of poverty and development shape the global understanding of the phenomenon, and thus mediate and produce relations between North and South.

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## Biography

Franklin Forzo Titang received his BSc (Political Science) degree from the University of Buea, Cameroon and an MSc (Cultural Anthropology & Development Studies) degree from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. In 2013, he received a Postgraduate Diploma (Education) from the University of Bamenda where he currently serves as Associate Lecturer of Business Communication at the Department of Administrative Techniques. With over 7 years of teaching experience and 7 years professional experience in community development and humanitarian work, Franklin is passionate about topics on sustainable development, anthropology, social and public policy, ethnography, human rights, socio-cultural behaviours, etc.