

# Marginalisation and poverty

Opening address to the conference 'Partners in Research: Setting an Agenda for Norwegian Poverty Research in Collaboration with Researchers from the South', Oslo, 28-29 August 2000.

By Professor Stein Tønnesson,  
Chair of the programme committee for 'Globalisation and marginalisation: Multi- and interdisciplinary research on development paths in the South', The Norwegian Research Council, Environment and Development Division.

Dear participants,

As chair of the steering committee for the research programme 'Globalisation and marginalisation: Multi- and interdisciplinary research on development paths in the South' it is my pleasure to open this conference. This is the first Norwegian national conference on poverty research, organised by the Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (CROP) at the University of Bergen. It is also the first of a series of national conferences within the research programme 'Development Paths in the South'.

The plan for the programme, which was endorsed and published by the Norwegian Research Council in April 1998, established the relationship between globalisation and marginalisation as the running theme of the programme as a whole. Within this perspective poverty was

defined as the first priority area. The central, introductory question, said the programme plan, was whether globalisation reinforces or weakens countries, communities or groups who live in a more or less permanent state of poverty. Does globalisation allow them to get out of their poverty, or at least reduce it? Or is marginalisation just the other side of the globalising coin? Is the global system of communications, trade and investments organised in a way that constantly produces both winners and losers, and also expands the difference between them? Or does it create opportunities for everyone to improve their basic conditions if they just organise themselves in a proper way?

When I think of globalisation I see before my inner eye a frightening, but also strangely attractive big metallic toy which used to be set up in every playground of this country. The idea behind it, I believe, was to teach us how to be fit for survival. In Norwegian the toy is called *karusell*, in English a *merry-go-round*. I cannot remember it as always having been merry. Chicken-hearted girls from the best families would sit nicely in the middle where the radius was so small that they avoided the dizziness which rose incrementally the further out you were in the margins. I've learned later, from historical studies, that those girls were the daughters or grand-daughters of rent-seeking landowners and shareholders. Outside of them there were masculine smiles and shouts. Well-dressed boys stood smiling over their shoulders to the pretty creatures in the centre, if they were not busy shouting to the runners outside: Faster! Faster! Faster! These shouters were the sons of entrepreneurs, aspiring to move in with the girls, but depending on the willingness of the more marginal boys and girls to keep up their running. The runners would jump on board only once-in-a-while, but were repeatedly caught by nausea.

Sometimes girls and boys would change places, take their turns so-to-speak. This was in democratic playgrounds. Democracy was normally instituted from the outside: An adult stood watching and ordered us to take alternate turns. I also remember one occasion when the change of positions was negotiated with the leaders in the centre after the runners had decided that enough was enough and simply stopped running. When the merry-go-round did not go round, the merriness would certainly end, even for those in the middle. Ever so often, when it did go round, it happened that someone fell off, bruising his or her knees. This mainly happened if too many kids tried to mount the platform at the same time. The knees I saw in my childhood were always full of scars.

When delving further into my memory, I also discover images of the least fortunate children, those who rarely took part in the game at all. Some of them had alternative ways of making fun of their lives, either alone or together in little out-groups. Some had access to other kinds of toys, some also to cigarettes, while others would always just stand watching, either because they did not dare to jump on board or because they were pushed away when they made their attempts. Among those outside there were also the helpful obedient pushers: Girls who never stepped up on the platform, but stood along the ridge, pushing the *karusell* with their hands when the runners needed some rest and the entrepreneurs shouted 'push' instead of 'run'.

This is the image I always get when I hear the word globalisation. I don't want to impose my image on you. I know it is of limited value as an analytical tool. But I mention it in order to convey one particular message: Globalisation and marginalisation are inter-connected. At least to some extent they are aspects of the same process. One conditions the other. I don't want to say that it must always be so. I don't want to

postulate that globalisation by necessity produces poverty. But the way globalisation happens today, it extends and accelerates a competitive game where hundreds of millions are left poor and powerless in the margins. In the past, most of them did not know. They had their own societies. But now, through television, they are made aware of what is going on among the merry nations and classes.

It is no coincidence that, after very serious discussions, the committee who wrote the plan for our research programme decided to adopt the title 'Globalisation *and* marginalisation'. We wanted studies that could look at both in combination. We wanted theorising about marginalisation as much as theorising about globalisation, and we wanted attempts to combine these theories into a comprehensive understanding of post-socialist global capitalism. For the first time in more than a century there has not in the last decade existed any general alternative to the capitalist system, only some remaining pockets of difference in marginal places. When all countries, all ethnic groups, both sexes and all social classes try to get onto the global *karusell* of seeking profits from production, trade and investments, while at the same time its speed gets faster and faster, it goes without saying that many people fall off. Some will be in the centre, notably those who are already there, and others will work hard in the margins. There will be some movement in and out. Nations change places on the Human Development Index and in the World Development Indicators. Countries in the South grow rich, and countries in the North dismantle socialism, thus drastically increasing poverty. Thus the north-south and east-west divides lose sense, but the *karusell* keeps spinning, and it remains much easier to retain a good position than to move in from the periphery.

There are many competing definitions of globalisation. This year's Human Development Report on poverty refers to it as 'a world

increasingly knit together through capital, trade, and technology flows' (Consultation draft, p. 2.20). The report also sometimes uses the term 'marginalization', but does not define it. We should discuss how to define marginalisation. Let me make a first try. Marginalisation could be defined as 'processes by which some groups of people are being pushed or kept out of the global system of communications, trade and investments, or being maintained in a peripheral, disadvantaged position within that system.'

We need to study such processes. We need research that sees globalisation and marginalisation in combination in a quest to understand today's basic economic, social and political mechanisms. We must also look for ways to mobilise protest movements, change power relations, share goods as well as burdens, make it easier for people in the margins to join the world economy and take advantage of globalisation, while also making sur that life can be tolerable and enjoyable also for those who cannot or will not participate in the globalising game.

A distinction will need to be made between involuntary and voluntary marginalisation. There are groups, both poor and rich, who prefer to remain outside the global system. They want to preserve or create some little sanctuaries where they can shield themselves from the materialistic values of the standardised, global market place. Some such voluntary attempts at marginalisation, like the one going on in Afghanistan, are in such violent conflict with universal human rights principles that at least some aspects of them must be generally rejected, but others could be tolerated. I have noted a tendency among aid workers to tolerate the relatively benevolent despotic kingdom of Bhutan, where the Internet made its entry before the King finally decided to tolerate television. The main focus of research on marginalisation within our programme must be on involuntary marginalisation, leading to

unacceptable kinds of poverty, but there is also a paragraph in the programme plan that encourages research on alternative paths of development. No such project has received funding yet, but in the steering committee we are open to considering projects concerning attempts to establish alternative kinds of society within, or on the margins, of our globalising world.

Among the research projects we have already decided to fund, many concentrate on economic globalisation: the patterns of trade and investment flows, and the developmental effects of foreign direct investments. Next year there will be a conference within the programme, I hope, focussing on the political economy of globalisation. We got few applications last year that specifically addressed processes of marginalisation, but I'm extremely happy that we were able to provide some funding for establishing a national network on poverty research, connected with the broad international Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (CROP), led by Professor Else Øyen in Bergen. Among the sixty applications we have received for new research projects this year, no less than thirty-four address questions related to poverty. It is entirely in the spirit of our research programme that the first national conference within the programme should address poverty, and I think the national network node on poverty, as well as CROP, will be further strengthened in the coming year when we start up our next round of projects.

Now it only remains for me to wish that we shall have a fruitful conference. I look forward to learning from all of you, in particular our invited speakers, ~~Professor Ellen Bortei-Doku Areetey~~ and Dr. Nazneen Kanji, <sup>and Dr. Stuart Jeary</sup> and I would like to thank Professor Else Øyen in particular for inviting me to open the conference.