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A Review of the second Carnegie Commission of enquiry into poverty in South Africa

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW
4.00pm JULY 1985

Title: A Review of the Second Carnegie Commission of Enquiry into Poverty in South Africa.

by: Francis Wilson

No. 175

DISCUSSION: NOT FOR PUBLICATION

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR AFRICAN STUDIES SEMINAR.

What follows is the barest outline of some of the major issues emerging from the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development. I intend to flesh out these bones in the seminar in the hope of provoking critical discussion.

This seminar will focus on poverty and the processes of impoverishment in Southern Africa, and on the second Carnegie Inquiry, which has been going on over the past five years.

Background, and introduction.

Purpose of the Inquiry not just to document poverty, but to engage in policy-oriented research: research to assist the society to develop strategies to move away from poverty.

First of all, the problems of definition. We decided not to start with any specific definition of poverty, nor with any approach which would reduce it to a single number (such as income level) [cf. Stephen J Gould]. We went off into all parts of southern Africa and commissioned people to go out into the communities and invite anybody who was interested to participate, hoping that in the process, we would arrive

at a multi-dimensional appreciation of poverty. There are various indicators which emerged, and which have increased our awareness of the nature of poverty as endured by people in this country. Some of these are indicators common to other parts of the world; some are specific to our political -economic context. Wilfred Beckerman's approach proved helpful - poverty is like an illness. One has to diagnose its different manifestations. This meant being open to exploration of all the components, and contributing factors.

In the process, after the conference had drawn together all the findings of the research done, we came up with over twenty faces of poverty. For the purposes of this talk (given the time constraints), I shall highlight six or seven. These include: Hunger, Water, Fuel, Privacy, Human Dignity, Illiteracy, and Income.

In terms of the macro picture, we attempted to address the question, Is poverty increasing or decreasing? and by how much? There is some statistical analysis - from Simkins and McGrath, which helps tackle these questions.

In the debate about causes of poverty we found ourselves again moving away from the idea of the single answer. We found in reality a web of causation: a set of interlocking vulnerabilities and interacting forces which push people into poverty and then keep them there. Analysis so far has

focussed on identifying specific areas of vulnerability, such as children between 2 and 5 years of age, and households whose head is within 5 years of retirement. Other forces in the cobweb include natural disasters both on a small and a large scale, and man-made disasters such as resettlement or retrenchment; administrative and legislative action; the public allocation of resources; the misuse of private resources; the effects of population growth; the macro political consequences of capital accumulation at the core with impoverishment at the periphery; and the pattern of political power.

Turning now to strategies which will effect some change in the lives of the poor by empowering the powerless, what seems to have emerged from the papers and from the discussion are three types of strategies; the individual; the short run and long run. There are various strategies for immediate survival, most of which involve breaking the law. There are also short run strategies which even within the existing political circumstances can help to break the vicious spiral of poverty, through community action. Then there are the long run strategies, worked out on the assumption of political flexibility. These include public works and employment schemes; land reform; abolition of influx control; and other fundamental changes in the structures of the economy.

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