LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES? COMMUNITY SELF-HELP BETWEEN ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT AND NEOLIBERALISM

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Abstract

It is now widely agreed that the poor are not passive in the development process. Participation, once radical and controversial, is now mainstream management theory. Harnessing self-help potential is the order of the day. Properly ‘empowered’ or at least ‘enabled’, the poor are assumed to be able to overcome deficits of infrastructure and services and exhaust their tremendous entrepreneurial potential. Without altogether denying the validity of the self-help approach, the paper scrutinizes both its practical assumptions and ideological underpinnings. Does it work for all urban poor communities, and critically, for all people in such communities? And is it its efficiency, or rather the implicit justification of cutting subsidies and transfers, which make it so popular with governments and international financial institutions?

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Left to their own devices? Community self-help between alternative development and neoliberalism

Erhard Berner and Benedict Phillips

…If you teach a poor man how to fish you will feed him for a lifetime. (But who will make sure that he has access to waters? And how many poor people cannot fish, anyway?)

Introduction: From participation to self-help

It is now widely agreed that the poor are not passive in the development process. Participation, once radical and controversial, has become mainstream management theory. Together with the related concepts of decentralization, good governance and empowerment it has become the buzzword in the development debate. Phillips (2000, pp. 10f.) has summarized the main assumptions that underlie participatory approaches: Compared to professionals, beneficiaries have important and complementary information on their needs and capacities, are competent, and reliable. These three factors become causes of improved effectiveness of participatory projects, the more so if participation goes beyond ‘listening to beneficiaries’ towards their active role in decision making. That legitimacy and acceptance of interventions is enhanced by the process is a welcome side effect. Participation is argued for on three further grounds:

As an end in itself. According to Sen’s work (most pronounced 1999) the freedom to make meaningful choices between various options is the essence of development and a precondition for personal well-being.

• As a means to ensure quality, appropriateness and durability of improvements. The key word here is ownership: By being involved in the design and production of facilities poor people would feel (more) responsible for their maintenance.

• As a means to increase efficiency and cut costs by mobilizing communities’ own contributions in terms of time, effort, and often money.

All three rationales, most obviously the last, make tough additional assumptions about both underutilized resources and capacities of the poor, and skills and capacities of intervening agencies. Little attention is paid to the requirements and costs of organizing, itself a precondition of community participation. 1 Considerable time is required to reach a consensus on issues vital to a community, and time in turn is the most scarce and precious asset for poor people, especially women. Critics have long argued that there is little willingness on the part of development agencies to really share decision making power, and that the cost-cutting effect is the real reason for the popularity of participation (Cleaver, 1999; Mayo and Craig, 1995). Indeed the donors’ and policymakers’ frame of reference (fixed timeframe, tangible results, output indicators known in advance) is not well compatible with any real influence of

1 That even in the best case a community organization can hardly claim to represent all residents is discussed in a later section of this paper.
beneficiaries on relevant decisions. In Indonesia for instance, *partisipasi* is generally known to signify a burden in terms of extracted labour.

Self-help, finally, can be seen as participation squared. The poor have completed their journey from being recipients, via beneficiaries and stakeholders, to become champions of development. In the process the focus has shifted from *deficiencies* (that would require some redistribution as a remedy) to *obstacles* (that can be removed without others having to sacrifice). The best-known protagonist of this line of thinking, Hernando de Soto, has gained tremendous influence on the thinking of international development institutions, notably the World Bank. De Soto identifies state action as the crucial *cause* (not potential remedy) of poverty. In ‘The other path’ (1989) he portrayed the poor’s eternal struggle against incompetent and predatory governments. Now he offers nothing less than a solution to the ‘mystery of capital’ (2000): By simply legalizing assets worth trillions and allegedly under the factual control of the poor, markets can be made to work in the interests of all according to de Soto.

The shift towards self-help can be seen as a masking defence against calls for redistribution. Without altogether denying the validity of the self-help approach, our paper scrutinizes both its practical assumptions and ideological underpinnings. Does it work for all poor communities, and critically, for all people in such communities? And is it its efficiency, or rather the implicit justification of cutting subsidies and transfers, which make it so popular with the international financial institutions? While we focus on urban communities and habitat issues in particular, we believe that the findings are relevant for all policies aiming at community development.

**The case for community self-help: A focus on habitat**

Community self-help as such is of course nothing new but rather the default strategy of the poor. As documented by their very survival, poor people are experts in making the most of scarce resources under adverse circumstances, and have always used institutions of mutual support and risk-sharing in order to do so. To acknowledge and attempt to strengthen these capacities and institutions is a both obvious and sensible approach to community development. In their review of seven successful programmes of urban poverty alleviation, Anzorena et al. sum up the rationale: By ‘rooting the initiative on the capacities, skills and knowledge of low-income communities’ it is possible to reduce dependency and outside control, fine-tune policies according to people’s needs, reduce costs and improve cost recovery (1998, pp. 171f.). Particular attention is paid to credit as a non-redistributive means of making capital available for poor people to invest in housing, infrastructure and productive ventures. Another strategy – though stressed in rhetoric far more often than put into practice – is the reform of unrealistic standards and cumbersome procedures that force small entrepreneurs underground, increase their transaction costs and deny them the protection of the law; de Soto is right at least so far.

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2 The latest World Development Report on poverty is a case in point. While having a lot to say about empowerment as a precondition of poverty reduction, the Bank still dismisses redistribution as usually ‘leading to political upheaval and violent conflict’ (World Bank, 2000, p. 56f.), ignoring the findings of consulted experts who had stated that growth with some redistribution has the largest impact on poverty.
Self-help capacity of the poor is nowhere as clearly to be seen as in the field of housing. It is estimated that between 30% and 70% of urban populations live in ‘irregular’ settlements, with a growing tendency (Durand-Lasserve and Royston, 2002, p. 3); according to UNCHS (1996, p. 200), 64% of the housing stock in low-income countries, and up to 85% of newly produced housing, is unauthorized. In the last two decades, self-help housing (vulgo squatting) is increasingly recognized as the only means available to fulfil the immense demand for mass housing, and thus a solution rather than a problem. John Turner’s influential book ‘Housing by people’ (1976) and the first Habitat conference in Vancouver 1976 are markers of this paradigm shift towards an ‘enabling approach’. Recent literature on urban housing (e.g., the contributions in Habitat International 24(2); Durand-Lasserve and Royston, 2002) widely agrees that self-help housing is still the only ‘architecture that works’ (Turner, 1968) in sheltering the poor. On a cautionary note, Berner insists that policy makers still fail to understand the functioning of informal housing markets, and consequently ‘little progress has been made in translating the new paradigm into practical policies’ (2001, p. 292). The crucial issue is whether it is indeed just ‘proper guidance and encouragement’ (Abatena, 1995, p. 5) without a net transfer of resources that poor communities need to improve their situation; and whether governments and development agencies are well equipped to provide such guidance.

At least in rhetoric what was visionary in Turner’s time is now standard: Slum clearance is no longer defended but is condemned (rightly) as ‘plain mass deportation’ (Berner, 2000, p. 2); ‘top-down solutions to housing’ are said to have ‘contributed as much to the problem as the solution’ (Aldrich and Sandhu, 1995, p. 21); the ‘ways, plans, designs and building materials’ of the poor are said to be ‘often far better suited to local needs, local incomes, local climatic conditions, and local resources than the official, legal standards demanded by governments’ (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1989, p. 16). Government solutions have often been inappropriate – incompetent, mis-targeted, insouciant and even brutal. The strategies of the poor have often been imaginative and cost-effective. Nevertheless, there is a risk that the current ‘autonomous development’ orthodoxy may fail to adequately serve the needs of the poor, succumbing to a neo-liberal wolf dressed up as a populist sheep. Autonomy must be distinguished from autarky. Most notably, the community self-help paradigm needs to be refined by a recognition that the poor cannot be self-sufficient in escaping poverty, that ‘communities’ are systems of conflict as well as co-operation, and that the social, political and economic macro-structure cannot be side-stepped.

**Poverty and self-sufficiency**

If history is a fair judge, the case against government and market led solutions is a strong one. Slum clearances of the 1970s were so severe that UN officials estimated that governments were destroying more low-income housing than they were building, in a decade when the urban population in developing countries increased by 70% (Werlin, 1999, p. 1524). Just as governments have a poor record, market solutions too have systematically failed to serve the needs of the poor (Baken and van der Linden, 1993; Jones, 1996, p. 248). In addition, Berner points out, self-help solutions have the advantage of building on the already considerable investment that poor residents have put into their dwellings – ‘probably the largest investment they have ever made’ (2000, p. 2). To be mistrustful of those who have so frequently failed, and to seek to build on rather than waste considerable sunk costs seems a sensible approach. It is, however, an approach born of necessity, and attempts to turn its strategy of ‘do-it-yourself’ into its chief virtue and selling point are severely flawed, both ethically and practically.
The case for self-sufficient solutions is too often infused with a Reaganite rhetoric concerning redistribution: ‘The less subsidy a poverty reduction programme provides, and the more cost recovery it generates, the less it is seen to be a ‘welfare’ or ‘charity’ programme’ (Anzorena et al., 1998, p. 172). Transfers of resources are degrading, goes the argument, so let’s boost the self-esteem of the poor by ‘letting’ them take care of themselves. Anzorena et al. claim that their model projects ‘achieved partial or total cost recovery for some (or all) of their interventions’ (1998, p. 167). Siddiqui and Khan declare proudly that the Hyderabad Incremental Development Scheme is ‘fully self-financing, without any element of subsidy on the government’s part… Speed and standard of development depend on payment of deposits’ (1994, p. 281). ‘The approaches that work,’ argues Werlin, ‘are generally “tough-minded” … in Lusaka water is supplied to groups of households on the understanding that, after a given level of default, supply will be cut off for the entire group’ (1999, p. 1530). And what if some cannot pay?

The self-help campaign risks being transformed from a survival strategy in the face of government unconcern into a defence of such unconcern. Seeking to avoid this trap, Marilyn Taylor points to an important distinction in asking how to ‘release people’s energies without exploiting and exhausting them’ (1995, p. 108). For purposes of comparison, it is interesting to note in this regard that not even the middle-classes live the ‘independent’ lives being advocated – in fact, they benefit disproportionately from subsidies (Anzorena et al., 1998, p. 171; Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1989, p. 20).

Anzorena et al. admit that it ‘seems unfair to seek the least-cost solutions for poorer groups’ but insist that ‘there are important reasons’ for doing so (1998, p. 171). Thus, in the rhetoric of the new orthodoxy, the supposedly hard realism of the seasoned practitioners is contrasted with what is portrayed as the soft moralism of the naïve welfarists. In fact, however, the extreme self-help ethic of some of the new populists may not even be practical. Cleaver’s reprimand is simply put and very apt:

> Development practitioners excel in perpetuating the myth that communities are capable of anything, that all is required is sufficient mobilisation and the latent and unlimited capacities of the community will be unleashed in the interests of development… [In fact, however,] there is significant evidence of very real structural and resource constraints operational on communities, most severely impacting on those who may need development the most (1999, p. 604).

Aldrich and Sandhu point out that the common shortcoming in all policy approaches to housing – from relocation, to sites-and-services, to ‘autonomous housing’ – is that none have been ‘substantial enough, i.e., … supported with enough resources and time to rehouse entire populations’ (1995, p. 28). Earlier, overly interventionist, approaches may have been doomed to fail for expecting too much from governments. Self-help campaigners may be making the opposite mistake. Community-led development may be a cheaper option but it is not a costless one, and the rhetoric of ‘no subsidy’ may prevent the securing of necessary resources

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3 Middle-class ‘free-riding’ exacerbates this inequity. As Werlin concedes: ‘Only about half of the estimated value of Jakarta’s property taxes, 8% of sanitation fees and 1% of parking fees are collected. Inasmuch as the wealthy avoid paying for services, how can the poor be required to do so?’ (1999: 1528).
to reach the poorest of the poor. Programmes and projects that aim at full cost recovery have to exclude the poorest either deliberately or implicitly; mechanisms include self-selection in group-credit schemes; incentives for well-endowed people in entrepreneurship development; and benefits for homeowners in upgrading.

The Community Mortgage Programme in the Philippines, points out Berner, works only because squatters’ occupation of land and ‘potential or actual resistance against displacement’ reduces the value of the land by around 80 to 85% (2000, p. 10). The concept of market price, in this sense, is fictitious. In addition, cheap loans act as an effective subsidy: the programme isn’t really ‘paying for itself’. Nevertheless, the CMP still excludes a substantial proportion of the squatter population, perhaps one third, and ‘serves mainly a middle-class squatter elite and even worsens the situation of poorer squatters and renters’ (2000, p. 13). To go for a pure ‘no subsidy’ approach would, says Berner, ‘only aggravate this unintended consequence; and accompanying measures, e.g. livelihood projects, should be systematically included to mitigate the impact of the CMP on poor community members’ (2000, p. 13). Would such ‘livelihood projects’ themselves be self-funding? Anzorena et al. point out some of the obstacles to successful employment creation: There is limited demand for the goods produced, and there is established and well-equipped competition in any significant market niche (1998, p. 169). It would also be a mistake to assume that those poor in income are rich in spare time: ‘In many of the lowest-income households all men and women work such long hours that they are unable to commit themselves to projects that involve a lot of self-help’ (1998, p. 175). Tackling poverty generally requires some form of redistribution, and the seductiveness of cost-free poverty reduction should make us suspicious. Community participation itself, admit Pathirana and Sheng, ‘brings additional costs, in particular overhead costs, and is time-consuming… [it is not] a short-cut to successful project implementation but needs to be embedded in other supporting activities’ (1992, p. 13).

The self-help approach recognizes, rightly, that many of the best strategies in tackling poverty come from members of poor communities. This should not mean, however, that outsiders should withdraw to a minimal role. Although Turner’s skepticism against governmental activities was well-founded, his plea for a minimalist state has not stood the test of time (Werlin, 1999). Governments and NGOs need to make themselves responsive to, not absent from, poorer communities, and especially the poorest of the poor. They need to encourage initiative not by walking away but by offering stable, long-term, targeted financial and technical support. Such support should increase people’s security, widen their opportunities, and strengthen their demand-making power vis-à-vis other, wealthier, groups. To misquote Marx: the point is not to escape from society; the point is to change it. Self-sufficiency, the idea that ‘left to their own devices’ (and their current resources) poor communities would lift themselves out from poverty just fine, makes for an attractive myth but a regressive policy.

**Communities and co-operation**

The concept of ‘the’ community is fashionable to the point of ubiquity, but remains deeply problematic. It merges the administrative, the spatial and the social, it oversimplifies reality, and it can act as an obstacle to the proper examination of local power systems. When NGO activists and social scientists talk of how ‘a community’ lobbied local government, built a well, borrowed money, or decided on a development strategy, who are they talking about? Do they mean *everyone* in the community, or just the majority, or just the older ones, just the richer ones, just the men? Is the will of ‘the community’ the same as the will of the community leadership?
The organisers of the Hyderabad Development Authority found that ‘self-styled leaders have posed the most serious problem to the execution of the Incremental Development Scheme’ (Siddiqui and Khan, 1994, p. 285). Even elected block representatives exploited their position to cancel plots ‘mainly for financial gain’ (1994, p. 287). Slum leaders tend to seek vertical links with politicians, administrators and other power brokers to ‘position themselves for patronage’ (Friedmann, 1993, p. 29): ‘The peculiar dynamics of informal settlements often lend themselves to an autocratic style of leadership based on patronage, which reinforce the prevailing inequality of the existing social structure’ (Botes and van Rensburg, 2000, p. 49; cf. Nientied et al., 1990, p. 45). In addition to issues of outright corruption, most projects have also found significant inequalities along gender and other lines (Pathirana and Sheng, 1992, p. 8). Community solidarity cannot be automatically assumed: ‘In Seevaleepura, the community contracts were successful, because an NGO undertook community development work for several years’ (1992, p. 13, emphasis added).

It is not just an issue of the development techniques, however. There may be structural obstacles to community co-operation, based not on ‘false consciousness’ or petty snobbery but on real divergent interests. Rural development strategists have been more cognisant of this than some of their urban counterparts. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, having failed to establish an all-embracing rural community organisation, realised that there was a need for separate groups to represent the divergent interests of landless and landed. So too, it has long been recognised, those living upstream and those living downstream will have different interests in water usage (Korten, 1983, p. 193). Comparable issues arise in tackling urban housing poverty, yet most policy approaches have not yet been properly adjusted to deal with this. The Community Mortgage Programme in the Philippines, for example, requires beneficiaries ‘to be organised as the land titles are transferred to associations rather than individuals’ (Berner, 2000, p. 9). It treats the neighbourhood association as synonymous with the community, and yet ‘by agreeing to a selling price acceptable to the landowner, the association [and thus the CMP] willingly or unwillingly excludes a substantial part of the residents’ (2000, p. 12). The CMP ‘leads to – or rather uncovers – divisions and conflicts among the apparently homogenous group of the urban poor’ (2000, p. 2).

Ironically, the community idealism so beloved by the new populists is a creation of outsiders. Only outsiders would see homogeneity and harmony where there is complexity and conflict. Bottom-up approaches to development need to start from the recognition that exploitation and marginalization also take place inside the slum. Including structurally disadvantaged groups – be they women, children, ethnic or religious minorities, disabled people, renters, or the poorest of the poor – requires NGOs and governments to actively reach out for them: ‘Selective participatory practices can be avoided when development workers seek out various sets of interests, rather than listening only to a few community leaders and prominent figures’ (Botes and van Rensburg, 2000, p. 53).

**Local solutions and macro structures**

The prevailing de-politicization of self-help approaches for reasons of apparent pragmatism (cf. Harriss, 2001) is expressed by Siddiqui and Khan in an exemplary way:

> The [Hyderabad Incremental Development] scheme has shown that even without bringing about basic changes in society’s power structure, without changing the unequal relationship between the government and the *katchi abadi* dwellers, and even without any definite political programmes in favour of the poor, development authorities can
successfully assume the role of informal subdividers and partially follow their strategies (1994, p. 289).\(^4\)

The notion that those seeking to tackle poverty can ignore the very power systems that generate and perpetuate poverty is an attractive one. It would make things much easier. It is, however, ultimately unsustainable. No development strategy can ‘opt out’ of the realities of power. Thus the developers of the Sri Lankan Community Contract System had to deal with opposition from government departments: ‘The Finance Department objected to the payment of money to communities without the guarantee that they would spend it correctly. The Engineering Department questioned the ability of communities to construct infrastructure of acceptable quality’ (Pathirana and Sheng, 1992, p. 5). Even the least confrontational approaches need to deal with macro power issues sooner or later.

Let us say that all a programme asked from the government was for land, for which the government would be paid in full. Such a programme, inadequate as it would clearly be for serving the needs of the poor, would still have problems if that government was corrupt or cronyist – as far too many still are, to the detriment of housing programmes in Indonesia, Pakistan and elsewhere (Werlin, 1999, p. 1528; Siddiqui and Khan, 1994, p. 290). Let us then say that the government was neither corrupt nor cronyist. Even then, they would still suffer from what Allende’s former Secretary to the Ministry of Justice called ‘the contradiction between government programmes which aim to improve the living conditions of poorer groups but which must operate within a legislative structure designed to serve the interests of middle and upper groups’ (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1989, p. 24). The failure of states to grant legal recognition to community organisations (like the Sri Lankan CDCs), or even to women’s rights to property, hinders the effectiveness of programmes to tackle housing poverty. In addition, housing rules inherited from the colonial powers serve to criminalize the autonomous solutions of the poor. And this is only to talk of legal and administrative systems – economic structures can represent an even more formidable constraint to policies to increase the power of the poor.

There are some problems, too, that are too big for anyone except governments to solve. A 1989 survey found that about 40% of Jakarta’s population depended on groundwater, and that 93% of the city’s shallow wells appeared to be fecally contaminated (Werlin, 1999, p. 1525). Issues like this lead Werlin to call for ‘a very powerful as well as humanistic bureaucracy’ (1999, p. 1526), ‘a strong administration to combine “development from above” with “development from below”’ (1999, p. 1533). A positive role for civil society, note Mayo and Craig in somewhat softer language than Werlin’s, ‘necessitates positive support and resourcing from the public sector’ (1995, p. 9). Self-help should not mean ‘don’t help’.

No community is an island, and macro systems act to structure local choices. Anzorena et al. may insist on the importance of ‘addressing dependency’ (1998, p. 172), but we are all interdependent – and Berner (2000, 2001), Hardoy and Satterthwaite (1989), and Aldrich and Sandhu (1995) all note the important role of squatting as an essential subsidy for the urban economy. Those calling for ‘autonomous development’ make a mistake if they start by accepting hugely inequitable wealth distributions as God-given, if they privilege a pseudo-

\(^4\) The ‘success’ of the scheme needs to be qualified: Bureaucrats, slumlords and developers did fail to stop the pilot project despite determined and sometimes violent efforts, but effective blocked any replication on a larger scale (Berner, 2001: 302).
independence for the ‘respectable poor’ over a changed social structure. The big issue in urban housing poverty, note Hardoy and Satterthwaite, is that ‘governments refuse to recognise that they [squatters] are citizens with rights and needs for government services’ (1989, p. 15). On a similar line, Vandergeest (1991) calls for public support for self-help efforts as a ‘democratic right’ rather than a ‘gift’ which can be discontinued at will. Even Anzorena et al., despite much of their ‘autonomous development’ romanticism, accept that ‘in most instances, external agencies would be far more effective in reducing poverty in urban areas if their actions strengthened the capacity of low-income groups to negotiate with local authorities and to reach agreement on partnerships to address poverty’ (1998, p. 176, emphasis added). The purpose of empowerment is not make beneficiaries ‘independent’ but to make them more powerful. The new populists are right to be critical of mere social inclusion (the poor are already included – just on bad terms), but voluntary exclusion as a ‘solution’ is equally problematic. Empowerment means changing the relationship between rich and poor, not the false option of ‘breaking’ it.

Self-help can be part of a movement for empowerment – by, for example, improving the negotiating strength of the poor – but it can also be a mere cost-cutting and socially regressive approach. Strengthening the power of the poor requires the targeted use of co-operation with wealthy ‘allies’ and confrontation with wealthy ‘opponents’: either way, macro structures cannot be avoided. Self-help can be an excellent tool – and collective (or ‘community’) self-help can be an effective (if imperfect) way of pooling resources for mutual benefit. It should, however, be the start, not the end, of a co-ordinated movement to tackle urban poverty. Empowerment cannot be depoliticized.

Conclusion

The self-help debate does have its merits in creating respect for poor people’s capability and creativity, and modesty on the side of development ‘experts’. Evidence on the futility of top-down interventions is overwhelming, and a return to government-led development would not help the poor. The opposite extreme, namely relying completely on their own latent capacities, will likely prove to be just as futile. The idea that poor communities can ‘develop themselves’ – if it means that they require no redistribution of resources, if it means that heterogeneity and inequity within communities can be glossed over, if it means that the macro structures of wealth and power distribution can be ignored – is flawed to the point of being harmful. It harms calls for realistic levels of funding for tackling poverty; it blurs the divergent needs of the heterogeneous poor, and masks those of the poorest; and it risks legitimising inequity, reinforcing the complacent view that the poor are poor because they have not helped themselves. To knock all resource transfers as ‘welfare’ or ‘charity’ is to accept unquestioningly the current distribution of wealth as both optimal and fair. The powerful, Gramsci taught us, maintain their power not just through force and wealth but through ideological hegemony too. In recognising, as the populists do, the capabilities of poor people to act as ‘agents’ in their own empowerment, we should not fall into the neo-liberal trap of seeing as all assistance to that process as both undeserved and demeaning.

To expect poor people to lead the autonomous lives unattained by the middle-classes is both cruel and unrealistic. To expect ‘communities’ to be havens of co-operation is utterly naïve; to treat them as homogeneous will further marginalize those most in need. Poverty and wealth are opposite sides of the same coin. The wealthy cannot withdraw from the lives of the poor, and the poor cannot withdraw from the lives of the wealthy – sustainable solutions will require either partnership or confrontation. Self-help approaches can and should be part of
strategies to tackle exploitation and marginalization, but should considered as complements, not as alternatives, to accessible public services and the redistribution of income and wealth. If and where poverty will be reduced is a question of the poor’s own demand-making power. If and where powerholders have no price to pay for neglecting the needs of the poor, they will very likely do precisely that.
Bibliography


