

Abstract

Several ambiguities in the social exclusion literature – in both the fields of social policy and development studies – fuel the common criticism that the concept is redundant with respect to already existing poverty approaches, particularly more multidimensional and processual approaches, such as relative or capability poverty. In order to resolve these ambiguities and to derive value-added from the concept, social exclusion needs to be reconceptualised in a way that decisively opts for a processual definition, without reference to norms and/or poverty. Accordingly, a working definition of social exclusion is proposed as structural, institutional or agentive processes of repulsion or obstruction. This definition gives attention to processes occurring vertically throughout social hierarchies and opens up applications of the social exclusion approach to analyses of stratification, segregation and subordination in development studies, especially within contexts of high or rising inequality. Three strengths and applications include situations where exclusions lead to stratifying or impoverishing trajectories without any short-term poverty outcomes; where upward mobility of poor people is hindered by exclusions occurring among the non-poor; and situations of inequality-induced conflict.

Keywords: social exclusion, poverty, polarisation, stratification, conflict

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