

DEVELOPMENT SEMINAR

Don't let a good recession go to waste: How (not) to study the social impact of economic downturns

Ben White, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague

Thursday, April 30, 2.30-4.30 p.m.

Junior Common Room, Founders College
York University (Keele Campus), Toronto

Whatever research on development issues we do in the coming few years—even if the recession is not its main focus—global recession and its impacts will be an important part of the context. But how should we study the social impacts of, and responses to, economic downturns? The current global recession offers a great opportunity for research by social scientists, in almost any part of the world, and the coming years will see an explosion of 'recession studies', and endless comparisons with the 1930s. How do people experience turbulent economic times? To what extent do economic crises provoke, and in turn provide researchers with a window on, major societal reconfigurations? And how should we explore these questions through comparative research?

Most crisis studies, both quantitative and qualitative, are not based on an explicit model of crisis. They also tend to view recession's impact in 'before - after' terms, rather than as an extended process. Recessions' impacts should be understood not simply as products of a crisis, but as outcomes of the development model followed for decades prior to the crisis. Recessions may be seen as 'revelatory crises' (exposing latent contradictions in society), and as episodes of 'creative destruction' generating their own winners as well as losers in both economic and political arenas. Recessions generate, and responses to them are influenced by, specific constructions and contending discourses of crisis; they also provide fertile ground for heightened social criticism and radical political movements, both right and left.

This presentation will draw on a critical review of the many Indonesian recession studies published during 1998-2002 (in the wake of the 1997-98 'Asian financial crisis'), and the author's own study of the experience of the economic recessions of the 1930s, 1960s and late 1990s in the region of Yogyakarta in southern central Java.

Organizers

International Development Studies, York University
York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR)