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Civil society participation in Uganda's PRS process: opportunities and dilemmas

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Introduction

This paper briefly examines how the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) process started in Uganda, and then focuses on how civil society (CS) has participated in its revision processes, and in its monitoring, evaluation and implementation. It examines the challenges of civil society organisation (CSO) involvement and provides some suggestions for more meaningful participation that can bring about change in the policy and implementation arena of Uganda.

Civil society participation in the PEAP formulation and revision process

CSOs in Uganda had minor involvement in the development of the original PEAP, but were active in its revision. To enhance country ownership of the process, and for Uganda to have an acceptable Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), the involvement of CSOs was required. In 1998, a few CSOs were invited by the government to participate in Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) under the Uganda Participatory Poverty Process (UPPAP), a mechanism to collect poor people's views on poverty to inform policy formulation and design (see Ssewakiryanga, this issue).

Civil society involvement stemmed from an early PPA conducted by the Community Development Resource Network

(CDRN) in 1995–6 and funded by three international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in Uganda (NOVIB, ActionAid and OXFAM).¹ This entailed research in seven districts, with a number of local NGOs as 'partner organisations', its agenda included both the gathering of 'first generation PPA' information, as well as an attempt to feed this data into existing policy.² 'First generation PPA' was carried out by the World Bank and was quantitative in nature and was essentially to shape the Country Assistance Strategies.

The 1997 PEAP was formulated through a consultative process that included donors, civil society and the private sector. A number of factors made CS's engagement in this process particularly challenging. For instance, in 1997 the CSO sector was small and a majority of NGOs were engaged in service delivery, supplementing the government's efforts to improve the quality of life of the poor. Few organisations had the interest, exposure and expertise to engage with the government on policy issues. Despite this scenario, the government, under donor pressure, brought CSOs on board to discuss policy issues. The CSOs saw this move as recognition by the government for the work that they were doing and they went ahead and participated in the meetings and workshops, albeit with minimal contributions. Despite these minimal contribu-

¹ Community Development Resource Network (CDRN) is a local non-profit-making organisation with a mission to promote civil society's efforts to reduce poverty among women, men and children in Uganda through organisational and institutional strengthening. CDRN is a member of Uganda Debt Network (UDN).

² See Norton, 2001.

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tions, their engagement was described as ‘participation’.

In 2000, the first PEAP was revised. This revision was also described as consultative. CSOs instituted a CSO task force to coordinate their participation in the revision process. This task force was comprised of ten members including national and international NGOs, research and academic institutions. The task force undertook consultations with the wider civil society by holding 12 regional meetings. The country was divided into zones, which enabled 42 (75%) districts and 644 (405 men and 239 women) to participate in regional meetings. They prepared media insertions, leaflets, television and radio programmes describing the PEAP revision process and its contents.

The objectives of the regional consultations included:

- to ensure that a large section of civil society and in particular, the majority poor, were involved in the review and analysis of policies to develop an effective poverty eradication strategy;
- to ensure that the grassroots were mobilised and sensitised on the PEAP; and
- to establish a mechanism for dialogue between policy planners, civil society and other stakeholders to ensure ownership of such plans.

Consultative meetings between NGOs, donors and government were carried out regarding CSO inputs into the PEAP revision. The task force was then invited to the national steering committee meetings where they actively participated in leading discussions on three out of the four PEAP goals. The task force was also invited to be a member of the poverty-monitoring network in the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MoFPED). This exercise demonstrated the feasibility of a CSO-government partnership on poverty reduction efforts. This was the beginning of a relatively meaningful participation in the PRSP process.

This was then followed by the 2003 PEAP revision where CSOs had their own consultations that were organised in the

form of Sector Working Groups (SWGs). There were at least 14 SWGs with each comprising five CSOs working around areas specific to that SWG. The SWGs included: the macro-economic framework, education, health, water, natural resources, social development, accountability, local government, agriculture, transport (works and communication), justice (law and order), security (peace-building and conflict resolution), and an enabling framework for private sector and HIV/AIDS. Each SWG compiled a report of what they felt needed to be included in the revised PEAP. Overall, a CSO report detailing what they desired to be included in the PEAP was handed over to the drafting team based at the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development for inclusion into a revised PEAP.

In the 1997 formulation process, the consultative process led by government was limited to meetings and workshops. However, between 1997 and 2000, many CSOs were being encouraged and supported by donors to take on policy advocacy. Practically, this prescribed function of engaging in policy advocacy meant that CSOs had to recruit new staff with skills or have an in-house expatriate providing such support in this area. This development was also accompanied by an attendant growth of the NGO sector between 1997–2000. This shift generated more CSO interest in lobbying and policy advocacy, and thus led to more effective participation in the review process.

Nonetheless, CSOs continued to face challenges in their engagement. CSOs would review policy documents and make comments, but there was little effort to follow up on how their recommendations and views were being incorporated. This limited follow-up was essentially due to a lack of focus on the part of many CSOs. The majority of CSOs did not know what it takes to sustain an advocacy initiative. At other times, deliberate denial of access to information by the government complicated the follow-up. Inaccessibility of information is either by a government official telling you outright that the information required is classified or that s/he needs to seek authority from ‘above’.

CSOs also perceived that the government’s PEAP drafting team hired a consultant to compile the policy document. At the time of dissemination of the first draft (March 2004), two chapters (on Public Expenditure and Monitoring and Evaluation) were missing. This was also perceived by CSOs as yet another attempt by government to exclude their input on these two important aspects of the revised PEAP. It is important to note that this was refuted by government officials who do not consider the consultant to have written the entire document. This discrepancy points to the issue of communication between the government and the CSOs in this ‘partnership’.

As noted earlier, prior to the advent of the PRSP, many Ugandan CSOs were involved in service delivery, supplementing government efforts to reduce poverty. Today a sizeable number of CSOs are still engaged in service delivery. CSO service delivery strategies are designed according to, and guided by the PEAP framework. These strategies are meant to enable them in one way or the other to realise PEAP targets.

Increasingly, the mechanism of subcontracting NGOs to undertake service delivery by the local government compromises their willingness and ability to hold the government accountable and to effectively participate in the monitoring and evaluation of PRS processes. This also has the negative effect that the NGOs start to account to the local governments who are the source of funds and not to the constituencies that they represent.

Politics of participation in the monitoring, evaluation and implementation of Uganda's PRS process

Before the PEAP process in Uganda, participation of various stakeholders in shaping policy decisions was very limited. Due to donor aid influence and conditionalities, participation is becoming central. It is also becoming increasingly fashionable for CSOs to describe the approach to their work as participatory. The scenario that has emerged especially between CSOs and government is best described as the **politics of participation**.

The Ugandan government always invites CSOs to take part in policy development and implementation. At both central and local government levels, policy spaces have been created for consultations and CSO participation in the implementation process. CSOs have participated in these spaces, but they invariably attend merely to listen to what government has to say. CSOs are called to these meetings at short notice and supplied with voluminous documents with complicated language to review. At the local level, the medium of communication in the meetings is English and yet many local CSO representatives are not able to express themselves clearly in that language. When they express themselves clearly in their local language, they are often not taken seriously. The end result of this phenomenon is that one goes to these invited spaces mainly to listen.

Poverty Action Fund Monitoring Committees

In approximately 17 districts, there are Poverty Action Fund (PAF) Monitoring Committees that are engaged in the monitoring and evaluating the government's service delivery and the utilisation of HIPC funds. The Uganda Debt Network (UDN), a local NGO involved in the Jubilee Campaign for debt relief, has been at the forefront of the setting-up of these PAF Monitoring Committees and training them in participatory monitoring

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methodologies. The PAF committees work closely with the Poverty Monitoring Unit (PMU) of the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MoFPED).

The PAF Monitoring Committees are at the level of the sub-county. They hold post-monitoring dialogues with the sub-county officials and other members of the public. The post-monitoring dialogues are intended to exchange views on the issues raised in the reports. These are synthesised and then included in a report to be presented at the district dialogue. These dialogues are a manifestation of a continued effort to empower grassroots people to demand for transparency and accountability among their leaders.

The main challenge facing the PAF monitoring committees is that they are mostly constituted by those who know how to read and write and therefore exclude the real poor in the communities who often times are illiterate. Also as one goes down from the district to the grassroots, one encounters increasing 'enmeshment' between the local council officials (the local councils form the lowest local government structure) and civil society. Local council officials are sometimes chairpersons of the community-based organisations (CBOs) that are engaged in developing community-based monitoring and evaluation systems. The 'enmeshment' can often create a conflict of interest during the monitoring and evaluation.

Challenges facing CSO advocacy influence

Some CSOs are participating in the monitoring of PEAP implementation both at national and local government level. However, information provided to government implementers seems not to influence any policy change. At the end of the PPA II and arising out of discontent with the 'UPPAP' partnership, NGOs involved in the UPPAP process organised a meeting of UPPAP researchers to highlight key issues that they uncovered, but which probably could not be included in the National Synthesis report.

Information collected and passed on to policy makers is usually shelved without being used. There have been some

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cases reported where locally agreed priorities were not selected for planning apparently because they did not fit sectoral visions of poverty-related issues. Exclusion of prioritisations which fall outside sectoral guidelines suggests a wider problem; that of a conflict between a top-down system, represented through mechanisms like the PEAP priority areas and the conditions of PAF funding, and the much discussed ‘bottom-up’ planning system. There is also a question of accountability. In Uganda, public accountability is an upward issue – towards the direction of where money is coming from. Local government officials account to the central government, the providers of funds. They see no reason to account to the local people because they do not have the ‘power’ – the money that they can give. This perception is also evident within the central government officials. They are quick to account to donors who give money to government, but not to the citizens.

Every now and then, in the name of participation, the government invites specific CSOs (these are usually based in the capital) to attend the consultation processes. They happily attend government meetings and workshops, dance to the tune of the government and even speak the same language as them. For this, the government is rated highly by donors as promoting participation in decision-making. But one wonders, what is the meaning of participation? Is it being invited for consultation without any ability to influence decisions taken? A few CSOs

have gone with an agenda of influencing decision-making but their views are never reflected in the implementation process. Yet some CSOs are increasingly occupying these ‘invited spaces’ – mainly to be seen as advancing their minimal agenda of influencing what is going on.

Another challenge encountered by civil society is their fragmented, fragile and ephemeral nature. This nature weakens them in their attempt to engage with a monolithic and well-resourced (with donor support) government. It is also worth noting that civil society in Uganda is quite young and many CSOs were formed after 1986 when the current regime came into power.

Recommendations and conclusion

Looking at the participation of civil society in the PRS process in Uganda, many loopholes have been discovered and many lessons learnt. It is evident that this ‘participation’ is inadequate and cannot be described as eventually leading to empowerment of the participants.

If participation is to be meaningful, it is important that the various stakeholders can access information that will enable them to make informed decisions and input into the policy-making arena. Closely related to this is the fact that it is important that there is good communication among the various stakeholders to avoid development of different perceptions on any one issue.

Meetings especially at the sub-county and district level should be conducted in a language fully understood by all participants to allow for full participation of all the stakeholders present in the invited space. The issue of language is particularly important if the poor are to be involved in the work of the PAF Committees.

For purposes of keeping their identity and autonomy, it is important that NGOs cautiously review the emerging subcontractual relationship with the local government. This will allow CSOs to be accountable to their constituencies and in turn be able to hold the government to account downwards.

Finally, participation needs to be seen as beyond merely consultation or sharing information, but as a continuous process in all policy decisions, leading to eventual empowerment of communities and individuals.

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