theme section

CIVIL SOCIETY AND POVERTY REDUCTION

THEME SECTION

1 A critical look at civil societies' poverty reduction monitoring and evaluation experiences

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Introduction

This special issue of *Participatory Learning and Action* aims to capture the experiences of southern civil society organisations (CSOs) that are engaging in the monitoring, evaluation and implementation of poverty reduction strategy (PRS) processes.

In this publication, PRSPs refer specifically to documents prepared in-country as three-year 'national development strategies', upon which lending for low income countries and debt relief for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) is conditional (See Ndomo for a more detailed description of PRSPs). By Poverty Reduction Strategies, or PRSs, we include these, but also refer to a broader range of processes that generally aim to reduce poverty. Although such strategies are not necessarily linked to international financial assistance, it seems that most PRSs are introduced and driven by external development actors. This is the case for both Bulgaria and Somalia. We therefore focus on CSOs engagement in pro-poor policy formulation whether or not these are borne of, or lead to a World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) fostered PRSP.

In many countries CSO engagement in this particular stage of these strategies is just beginning. It is perhaps for this reason that although there has been much reflection on engagement by CSOs in the formulation of PRSs, there has been much less written about how they are being monitored and implemented. With respect to monitoring and evaluation, it is not clear how CSOs are working towards the articulation and realisation of poor people's rights and the accountability of governments and other powerful actors towards them.

Authors for this issue came together at a workshop on 12th–16th July 2004 in Nairobi, Kenya to discuss the contributions and to share their experiences in PRS processes.[1] At the gathering, a number of general issues shared by all authors were identified. These are briefly elaborated in the first section of this overview article, and include:

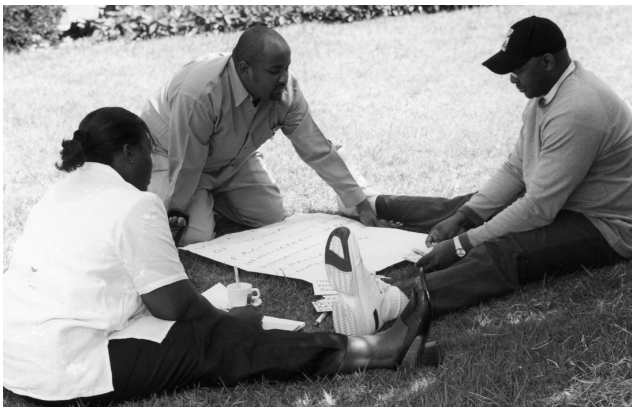
- the diverse nature of participating CSOs;
- the conditional nature of PRSs;
- the quality and degree of participation of CSOs; and
- the existing power dynamics that challenge effective monitoring of poverty reduction funds, and thus the implementation of poverty reduction policies.

(Who decides) who is civil society?

'Civil Society' means different things in different places. Civil societies and the organisations that work to represent them, CSOs, are (re)born and evolve according to a complex series of variables in different country and regional settings. CSO experiences of engaging with PRSs suggest a wide diversity with respect to capacities, nature, roles of, and relationships between civil society actors and governments. This diversity is not reflected by the assumptions made by the international

[1] This opportunity for learning exchange built upon the two previous learning exchanges that examined experiences in scaling up participation in the design of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). These exchanges were facilitated by the Participation Group (PG) at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and involved Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action (RCPLA) members travelling to Kenya and Uganda in March 2002 and to Bolivia in March 2003.

Writeshop participants break into a small discussion group. From left to right: Harriet Yeboah, Mohamud Faroole, Richard Ssewakiryanga



finance institutions (IFIs) and multilateral organisations, and which define PRS terms and conditions of practice.

Civil society experiences engaging in PRS processes suggest that in introducing the principal of and inviting civil society participation, IFIs have given little thought to the following questions:

- What is the working relationship (if indeed there is one) between government and civil society?
- What are CSOs' respective comparative advantages and capacities (or lack thereof) in this arena?
- Which CSOs are most effective at influencing and working with government in the context of poverty reduction?
- Who best represents the poor, and will work most effectively to empower them?

These questions might be worth considering more seriously. They raise critical doubts around these more powerful actors' authentic commitment to civil society's effective participation in PRSs. They also raise doubts about the criteria on which participating organisations are respected and legitimated by those who hold the purse strings. There are several factors to consider when inviting or supporting CSOs to participate in PRSs:

- explicitly taking into consideration the nature of CSOs' relationships with government;
- their respective comparative advantages and capacities;
- their potential influence; and
- their relationships of accountability to those they aspire to represent.

Understanding these factors can work towards the design of a more coordinated and strategic CSO alliance working towards poverty reduction. Seeing their participation in PRSs as a CSO capacity-building process and an empowering process for the poor might have longer-term benefits in the area of citizenship building, governance and democratisation, as well.

Box 1: Poverty Reduction Strategies: a part for the poor?

…[p]articipation can happen at various stages in the Poverty Reduction Strategy process, and to various degrees. It can range from simple information sharing, through to more extensive consultation and joint decision-making, and to situations where the relevant stakeholders take on responsibility for monitoring the process, and evaluating its success.

Source: *Poverty Reduction Strategies: a part for the poor?* IDS Policy Briefing, Issue 13, April 2000.

Conditional hope?

All authors involved in this publication were conscious of the externally driven nature of PRSs – albeit in different degrees and with different interpretations. As Ndomo points out, PRSP conditionalities are pinned to lending for low-income countries and to debt relief for HIPCs. The conditionalities and mechanisms for countries that do not fit into these categories vary and are less clear.

In Bulgaria, for instance, the government sees its fight against poverty as 'a priority area of intervention in the context of [European Union] EU accession' (Atanassova). Policy makers have adjusted the country's legislative and policy frameworks accordingly, promoting EU's anti-poverty objectives in their National Anti-Poverty Strategy and Plan of Action. EU accession will guarantee the country's access to more anti-poverty funds. The degree to which the adoption of EU objectives and priorities might be seen as a condition around which EU accession and increased support remains a matter of interpretation. So do predictions around its long-term consequences for Bulgarian citizens. The cases in this issue highlight different degrees of conditionalities, and diverse ways they have been interpreted.

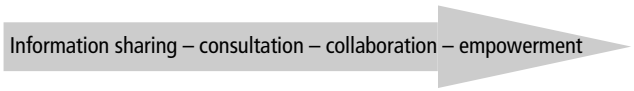
Here, it is important to note that conditions and conditionalities manifest themselves in different forms and with different consequences. Although conditionalities set by IFIs reflect the power these agencies have over national governments, it is a particular set of these that that have encouraged national governments to give priority (at least rhetorically) to poverty reduction and to cede space to CSOs in national policy formulation. It is important to distinguish between a condition that sets out a macro-economic policy that may have a dire impact on the poor, for instance, from one that supports and promotes the participation of CSOs in policy processes. Both are conditionalities, but the conditions themselves are very different as is the importance placed on these by lending agents.

In fact authors agreed that it is the potential these dialogues and negotiations have to shift deep-rooted politi-

cal and governance structures that continues to give many civil society actors the energy to continue their efforts. That said, the differences between rhetoric and reality when it comes to PRSs are many, and the sense that there is a lot of talk about something that is not changing continues to prevail among civil society actors involved in this publication process.

(Who decides) what is participation?

A useful framework that allows for a range of views on participation to be accommodated for is provided by Rifkin and Pridmore (2001)'s continuum. In it information sharing – professionals giving information to lay people – lies at one end, and empowerment – providing communities and experience to allow community people to be actively involved in the decision-making – sits at the other.



The authors' experiences suggest that 'participation' has a range of shades in practice and is an iterative process. Nonetheless, the authors often experienced frustration as a result of contested understandings of what participation should be. The tension between civil society and government around the degree of participation, and its actual influence on policy and practice prevails. On the one hand, the authors felt that CSOs should work towards participatory collaboration with poor citizens and empowerment of the poor through participatory processes. Meanwhile governments prided themselves on inviting participation that involved information sharing and selective consultation. Moreover, in many cases, CSOs interpreted their own influence as minimal. Despite the degree of participation, their views had limited impact on final policy documents, budget allocations and loan negotiations. Ndomo summarises limitations to meaningful participation in PRS processes in her contribution.

Turning rhetoric and policy into practice: challenges of participatory monitoring and evaluation

All authors in this issue consider that the challenge to effectively participate and influence poverty reduction through these policies increases in the post-policy formulation period when real power and resources become involved. It seems that challenges facing such actors in the **formulation** of policy are multiplied when they attempt to ensure that promises made on paper are **kept**.

Whose reality actually counts when it comes to monitoring resource allocation and implementation of poverty reduction initiatives remains a critical question. The practice of monitoring and evaluating PRSs explicitly challenges CSOs to provide evidence that will substantiate their claims and demands of accountability from government actors and donor organisations towards the citizens they aim to represent. This highlights the potential value of existing legal frameworks and the importance of citizens' rights to information and resources promised by governments. In so doing, CSO monitoring and evaluation efforts can serve to directly challenge existing power dynamics and accountability relationships within governance structures.

Emerging issues from country experiences

This special edition of *Participatory Learning and Action* is made up of ten articles written by authors working in or with CSOs in Bolivia, Bulgaria, Ghana, Kenya, Somalia, Vietnam, Uganda and Zambia. Nine of these articles draw upon experiences of direct engagement in PRS processes, and examine the successes and challenges they have faced along the way. Compiled, these pieces aim to be critical but constructive, and hope to convey their experiences in a way that is useful to readers and that contributes to a broader learning on how to engage (or not) more strategically and effectively in policy processes in the future.

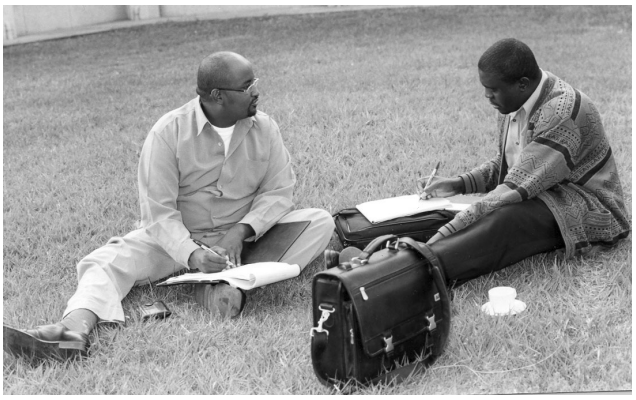
Only nine of the world's 34 PRSP experiences are captured (and from limited organisational and/or individual perspectives) in this issue. To complement this narrow geographical scope, Ndomo's article 'PRSP rhetoric: sugar-coated structural adjustment reality?' draws upon secondary literature to look at a broader range of country experiences. Her study clearly demonstrates that although there are some gains made in the area of effective civil society engagement in PRSPs, many inherent contradictions exist between the principles and the practices underlying these processes. Many of Ndomo's general observations are reiterated and elaborated upon in the other articles in this issue.

This section outlines the principal observations that came out of authors' experiences and have been grouped under the following thematic areas:

- country politics;
- politics of knowledge; and
- capacity-building (skills, partnerships and networks).

Country politics

Political contexts affect PRS processes, as well as the nature and role of civil society and the role of external actors in the processes, including international non-governmental organ-



Mohamud Faroole and Hudson Shiverenje discuss their papers in Nairobi

isations (INGOs), donors, and lending institutions.

Shiverenje points out how in Kenya, the transition in government meant a transformation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper into an Economic Recovery Strategy Paper (ERSP). A consolidation of the PRSP and the new government's successful campaign manifesto, the ERSP built upon its own image as well as the good image its predecessors had in building up through the consultative PRSP process. Meanwhile, its focus on economic recovery, enhanced governance, increased employment and poverty reduction was a response to the country's stagnating economy and unfavourable international image. Nonetheless while fragile relationships between Kenya's former government and the international community stagnated the implementation of the PRS, contributing partially to their loss in the 2002 elections, the new government's decision to 'revamp' the PRSP into an ERSP has been interpreted as a 'demonstration of a lack of accountability and political arrogance on the part of government…to wake up one morning and shift the focus of the strategy without adequate consultation with all those involved'. This, and the new strategies' lack of principle emphasis on poverty reduction are again threatening civil society and government relations.

Faroole's contribution to this volume points out how Somalia's lack of central government and 'non accrual' status with the IFIs mean that not only can it not qualify for a PRSP, but that in the absence of a Somali state, international actors have been developing and implementing poverty reduction and development strategies without local CSO involvement. This is despite a rhetoric that claims 'inclusive participation' and 'Somali ownership of the processes'. Faroole's article suggests that international lending institutions and development actors are not supporting the potential that 'a greater role for non-governmental forms of association in political and social life that go beyond the all-encompassing clan system' might hold for Somalia's development.

In Vietnam and Bulgaria, historically rooted politics have resulted in embryonic civil societies, and CSOs participating in the PRSs, and highlight the challenges associated with these. In Vietnam, as a consequence of its centrally-planned economy, the concept of 'civil society' is not yet formalised. Thanh notes that, during Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs), 'facilitators are often faced with the "we don't know" answer from the local participants' as a consequence of them not being comfortable talking about 'sensitive issues'. This may partially be attributed to a sense of dependence on government, and perhaps a lack of sense of 'separateness' from – or fear to offend or speak badly of – the state, its ruling party and its institutions.

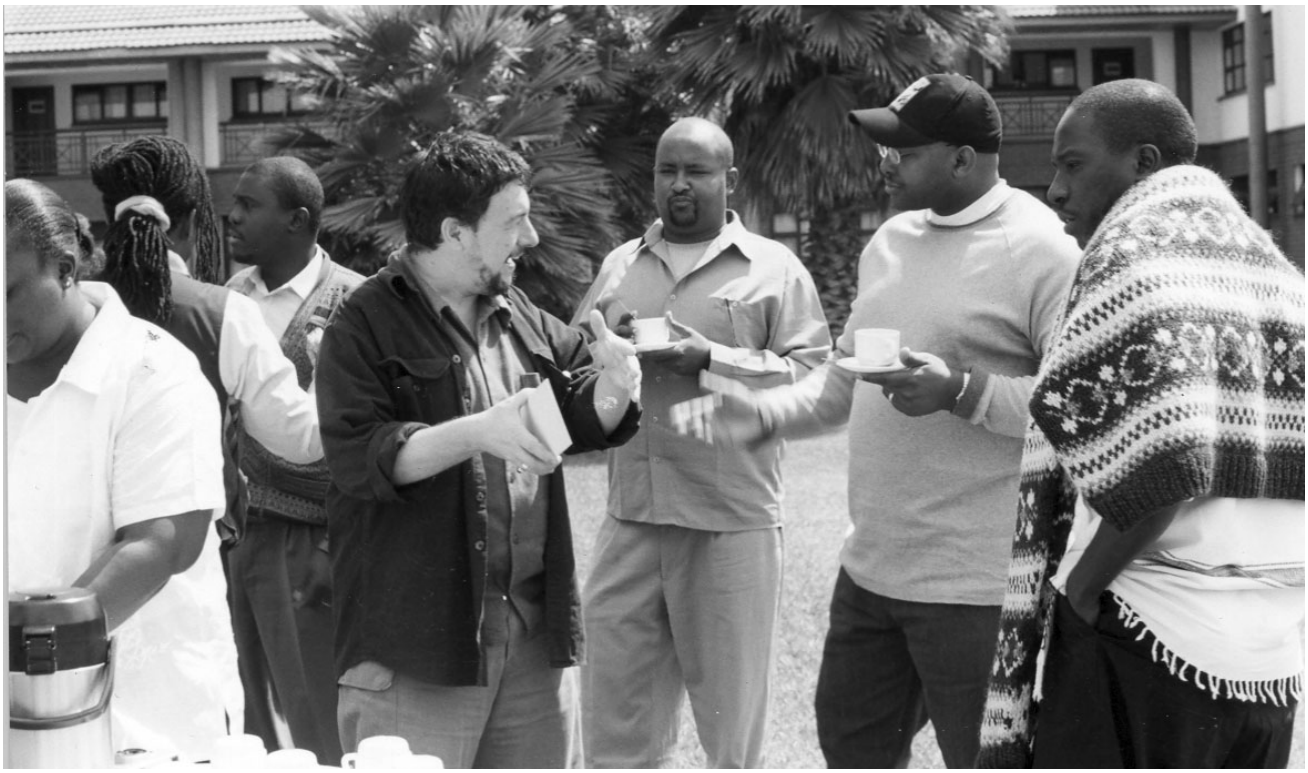
According to Athanassova, Bulgaria's socialist past has meant that the public counts on government resources and mechanisms to solve poverty-associated problems. Although NGOs are working effectively to deliver services and care to poor and vulnerable groups and are improving their capacity to manage poverty issues at the community level, they lack the structures and mechanisms to work at the policy level. Their efforts at the advocacy level are not consistent or consolidated, and consequently, their results are neither long lasting nor large in scale. This is also true with respect to their capacity to carry out quality social research and poverty assessments. There is a lack of consistent effort to convert research results into anti-poor advocacy actions.

Knowledge politics and coordination: Who is defining poverty? Challenges facing qualitative and experiential understandings of poverty

Understandings and definitions of poverty are contested. This issue is raised by Ndomo's question: who defines poverty? Her study suggests that the more influential poverty analyses are quantitative, with an over-emphasis on income figures, and fail to explore reasons why poverty exists or persists. A number of experiences in this issue reinforce this observation and emphasise the importance of qualitative poverty assessments in their efforts.

Ssewakiryanga's article points out a lack of coherence between the World Bank-led Poverty Reduction Support Credit (PRSC) monitoring initiative, and the Uganda government-led Poverty Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy (PMES) that involves a number of government and non-government actors, and that has been under discussion since 2000. He notes the lack of systematic procedures of inclusion of CSOs in the development of the Bank's PRSC indicators, suggesting an inconsistency in their involvement in the monitoring

Writeshop participants discuss over a tea break in Nairobi. From left to right: Harriet Yeboah, Atieno Ndomo, Hudson Shiverenje, Jordi Beneria Surkin, Mohamud Faroole, Richard Ssewakiryanga, Moses Isooba



and evaluation of Uganda's PRSP, the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP). He also points out that without proper harmonisation of these processes and their indicators, different understandings of the same poverty situations may emerge.

In Vietnam, qualitative findings emerging from Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs)

…helped deepen awareness of poor people's lives amongst government staff engaged in the process, and increased awareness of the process and principles of qualitative research. (Thanh, this issue).

Their findings were combined with the Vietnam Living Standard Survey, resulting in strong and effective triangulation of data (ibid). The author goes on to highlight the value added through local NGO's strong existing networks and experience working in participatory methodologies with the poor.

Zambia's Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (CSPR) network chose to monitor PRSP **outcomes** (e.g. access to and usage of service facilities) and **impacts** (e.g. poverty reduction, improvements of living standard indicators) to complement government monitoring systems that focus on **input** (e.g. public expenditure management) and **output** (physical quantities, e.g. schools, health centres). This decision was made on the basis that outcomes and impacts are best measured using qualitative data and specific project evaluation and that, in turn civil society is better situated and equipped to collect qualitative data, illuminating case studies, and to evaluate specific projects (Mpepo and Seshamani). In their work, CSPR also distinguishes between expenditure tracking and participatory poverty monitoring. They consider the latter to play a role in 'bring[ing] on board the poor in monitoring programmes that are supposed to improve their lives'. **Experiential** knowledge is considered to complement **expert** knowledge, and improve policy judgements.

In Ghana, based on the Ghanaian PRSP (GPRS) and in consultation with district assemblies and district-based NGOs that had previously undergone a CSO-led education and awareness building process, three indicators were defined to guide the GPRS' participatory monitoring and evaluation: **good governance**, **accountability** and **equity**. Findings based on these indicators are illuminating, and begin to address some possible reasons behind failed attempts at poverty reduction. For instance, although the infrastructure projects are allocated according to geographic equity criteria, whether the poor have access to quality services (given, among other factors, the weak quality of staff and services proved in the

education and health facilities) remains questionable (Kamara and Yeboah, this issue).

Empowering citizens

Effective use of quantitative and qualitative indicators, and the merging of findings is important, and appears to be on CSOs' agenda. How to develop these indicators in such a way that empowers poor citizens remains challenging, however.

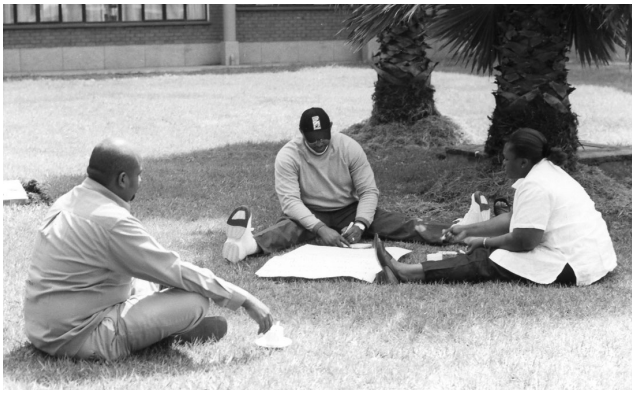
Bulgaria's Social Investment Fund carried out 'beneficiary assessments', a 'good practice' example from which poverty monitoring and evaluation systems can draw upon. These assessments involved gathering the opinions of beneficiaries from specific interventions that were subsequently fed into improving the interventions. Atanassova highlights the value of this experience and the need to integrate it into Bulgaria's broader monitoring and evaluation system. Questions around how to scale such a process up while ensuring citizens empowerment remain unanswered, however.

In Bolivia, the Law of Popular Participation established *Comites de Vigilancia* or Vigilance Committees as mechanisms made up of **civil society** representatives endowed with the legal authority to veto municipal budgets and promote accountability at the local level. However, in order to be effective these committees need to be able to analyse budgets and poverty indicators, as well as access and digest this information (see following section on capacity-building).

In Uganda, another civil society-run monitoring mechanism that has attempted to empower citizens to demand transparency and accountability from their leaders is facing certain problems. Poverty Action Fund (PAF) Monitoring Committees work at the sub-county level where they monitor and evaluate service delivery of government programmes and how HIPC funds are used. Although meant to include poor citizens, they are generally constituted by the more educated citizens who are often involved with local politics.[2] In his article, Isooba observes that this 'enmeshment' can often lead to a conflict of interest in community-run monitoring and evaluation work. This point is reinforced by Faroole's experience with Diakonia's Somalia office, where a report based on participatory work was rejected as its findings did not support clan-based relationships and interests.

Uganda's UPPAP experience led to a debate on Community Action Plans (CAPs) – small-scale NGO-funded initiatives to be implemented directly in response to PPA local findings. The decision was taken that the second round of PPAs would not include CAPs in Uganda. Does this imply that PPAs are better dedicated to solely influencing macro-policy rather than micro-programming or community empowerment?

Mohamud Faroole, Richard Ssewakiryanga and Harriet Yeboah break into a small discussion group



Contesting approaches and understandings on HOW to reduce poverty

These experiences and observations reiterate challenges facing CSOs to effectively use participation in an empowering way. They also point to struggles around understandings and approaches to effectively reduce poverty.

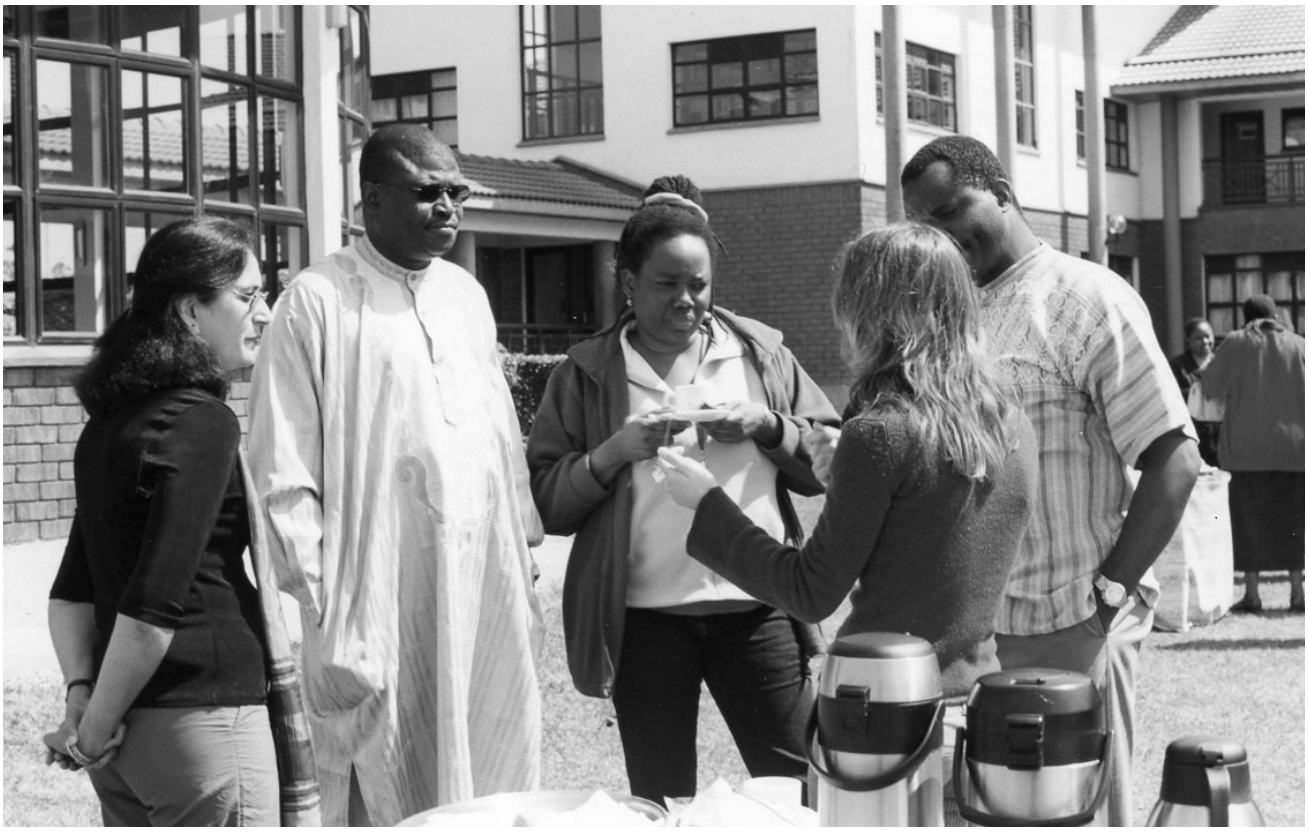
Ndomo notes that in addition to a quantitative approach to poverty reduction, public consultation on macro-economic policy remains limited. Poverty Reduction Support Credit (PRSC) and Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF) programmes often focus on the importance of unilateral trade liberalisation and privatisation of utilities, while ignoring structural roots of poverty such as land and credit access. The way the World Bank and IMF use country-monitoring mechanisms and related lending facilities that determine loans (i.e., Country Policy and Institutional Assessments (CPIAs), PRGF, PRSC) in relation to PRSPs, determines the relevance of the PRSP, and related CSO efforts to influence it.

Ndomo sees policy and process conditionality as effective tools that ensure poor countries' compliance towards lending agencies and to censor themselves in dialogue with them. She asserts that 'the idea of conditionality is actually contradictory to the principle of ownership, and underscores the mistrust and power that IFIs hold over borrower countries'. It is difficult to disagree with this observation – can a borrower negotiate on equal footing with a lender, especially when conditions for loans breach the boundaries of poverty reduction policies?

At another level it is important to ask what exactly debt relief (that is conditional on PRSPs) means for the real debt volume and thus expenditures of a poor country, and its citi-

[2] It is important to note that in Uganda, those on PAF Monitoring Committees are often also elected officials, because nearly everyone at the local level in Uganda who is educated and active in civil society also holds office.

Writeshop participants discuss over a tea break in Nairobi. From left to right: Jas Vaghadia, Nicholas Atampugre, Atieno Ndomo, Alexandra Hughes, Sammy Musyoki



zens? Certain CSOs contest this conditional relationship between the PRSP and borrowed funds. In Zambia, CSPR openly opposes the government's treatment of the PRSP as a tool of resource allocation and views 'the PRSP as an opportunity to begin redressing the plight of four fifths of its people that live in poverty… Civil society also does not think of HIPC funds as a solution to the country's debt crisis… Hence civil society organisations have been continuing their Jubilee Campaign for the total cancellation of Zambia's debt. They have also repeatedly called for a de-linkage between the PRSP and HIPC' (Mpepo and Seshamani). This is an issue that has increasingly been gaining more attention and support by important development actors.

Ssewakiryanga points out that actually 'putting your money where your mouth is' can lead to another set of problems. In the case of Uganda, government spending on poverty reduction has increased from 17% to 32%, as government earmarked HIPC savings and donor commitments against additional spending on the Poverty Action Fund budget lines. However, the additional donor commitments that accompany these funds led to growing debt volume. How can poor countries find innovative ways of spending more in poverty reduction areas without expanding the debt volume?

Here it is vital to point out that PRSPs might mean more debt. Despite debt relief being conditional on PRSPs, these strategies trigger new loans that are to be directed towards poverty reduction. The strength of the PRSP and its implementation determines the degree to which new credits will be targeted constructively. In many countries, weakly targeted PRSPs mean future debt and little poverty reduction. Again, the value of effective monitoring and evaluation on the part of autonomous and impartial development actors is key. It is equally important to examine and understand the differences between pre-PRSP and PRSP loans. How has the burden of servicing the debt changed vis-à-vis lending terms and conditions such as interest rates, for instance? It is also vital to understand the advantages and constraints that now exist under the HIPC initiative for HIPC countries. And perhaps more importantly, what alternatives are there to ensure a more sustainable form of financial support for poor countries? Many recent publications are beginning to explore this perverse dynamic

resulting from the conditional nature of PRS and the lack of negotiation space in the areas of macro-economics, including trade. See ActionAid (2004), Brock K. and R. McGee (2004) and Wood, A. (2004).

Tracking budgets and realising rights to information

At times, a discrepancy exists between PRS papers and the budgets they should be aligned to. Budget tracking in Zambia uncovered that the release of PRSP funds had little to do with poverty reduction and actually went to the Cabinet Office, State House, Office of the President, and Office of the Vice President. Departments and ministries such as that of Energy and Water Development, Health, and Agriculture received less than their approved allocations (Mpepo and Seshamani). This discovery raises serious questions of government priorities and how these are reflected in the allocation of resources and the spending of new credits which, as aforementioned are creating future debts.

Many authors witnessed or experienced challenges accessing information that would allow for effective monitoring and evaluation. For instance, despite significant advances, HIPC Watch in Ghana (Kamara and Yeboah) reports having to make eight to ten visits to certain sector ministries before information was released. This they partially blame on mistrust of CSOs by the government. Zambia also reports 'a lack of prompt and adequate relay of information to civil society from government on PRSP expenditures' (Mpepo and Seshamani).

Shifting accountability relationships

It is through exercising their right to information that CSOs can ensure a shift in relationships and directions of accountability. The need to alter accountability relationships is highlighted by Isooba who considers that the decision to exclude priorities identified that fall outside sectoral guidelines from the final PRSP document, as a consequence of conflicting top-down planning systems, represented through PEAP and PAF funding conditions, versus bottom-up planning rhetoric. Accountability goes upward, towards funding agents such as donors, and not towards poor citizens who leaders claim to represent and work for.

Compiled conditionality and the upward direction of accountability impacts on the nature of civil society-government partner-based working arrangements. These continue to be a challenge from both CSO and government perspectives. In Uganda, Isooba perceives many CSO-government 'partnerships' as subcontracting arrangements with local governments that can potentially put local NGOs in compromising situations. This can potentially result in a weakened 'willingness and ability to hold the government accountable and to effectively participate in monitoring and evaluation of PRS processes' as local CSOs begin to interact with local governments as a source of funding, and begin to consider the constituents they represent less.

To be at this end of the participation and partnership continuum seems quite a luxury when compared to the more extreme case of Somalia. There, speaking out against those who hold the purse strings – as Faroole does in his contribution – is actually considered a dangerous act that may threaten future funding. This reflects absolute dependency on those who ultimately and exclusively define development and poverty reduction policy there – the international financing community.

Capacity-building

Some sections of civil society view their involvement in policy processes as merely tokenistic. In response to this, in many countries CSOs have focused their energies on building capacity that will ensure more effective monitoring and evaluation skills. This includes increasing knowledge and understanding of PRSs, building capacity to access information and to strengthen advocacy skills. These efforts are complemented by significant progress made in building partnerships and strengthening networks, both between government and civil society, and among them. Capacity-building for and by CSOs was considered key to ensuring effective engagement in the monitoring, evaluation and implementation of PRSs by all authors.

In their article, Kamara and Yeboah describe how Ghana's Social Enterprise Development Foundation of West Africa (SEND Foundation)'s focus on capacity-building aims to increase CSOs' knowledge and understanding of the country's PRSP, and develop their participatory monitoring and evaluation skills. Education workshops focused on the underlying principles of Ghana's Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS), including the principle of participation of the poor, and macro-economic concepts that underpin the strategy. Following this process, a Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation manual was developed in consultation with local NGOs, district assemblies and donor organisations. A training workshop on how to use the manual was organised for local NGOs and a number of instruments were developed to support and sustain advocacy activities as well.

Zambian CSOs have been effective in using their monitoring findings in their advocacy work through press state-

ments, stakeholder round table meetings, television documentaries and radio programmes. It is now launching an advocacy campaign to create and strengthen mechanisms aimed at protecting resources in the budget meant for poverty reduction. This is in order to 'prevent the government from shifting resources from poverty reduction budget lines to non-priority programmes, as has been the case during the current PRSP implementation cycle' (Mpepo and Seshamani).

In Bolivia, the National Working Group for Participation (GNTP) has gone far in its work to build capacity and understanding in the area of participation. Their post-graduate diploma programme on participation and social change has taught the value of the poor's participation in policy processes and built students' (and their affiliated organisations') capacity to promote pro-poor participatory processes. It is important to note that some students have gone on to hold leadership positions, bridging the government-civil society divide around the understanding(s) of what participation is. GNTP's work in Valle Grande's Municipal Development Plan (PDM) also involved work with the municipal government towards more transparency and accountability (Surkin). In so doing, it has also contributed to the strengthening of partnerships and networks.

GNTP has also worked with other civil society actors and international agencies to increase CSOs' capacity to:

- advocate for participation in policy;
- generate a unified advocacy and lobbying platform; and
- carry out participatory monitoring and evaluation of their country's PRSP.

They have specifically responded to weak *Comites de Vigilancia* (CVs) capacity to monitor and evaluate the PRSP at municipal levels, and carried out training workshops responding to this vacuum.

Isooba's article mentions donors' support and encouragement to take on policy advocacy support to CSOs, leading to more effective participation in their Ugandan PRSP review process. Indeed, it would seem that donors' interest in building this capacity for more effective civil society engagement in PRSs provides an opportunity for many CSOs, particularly with respect to learning from local-level participatory monitoring and evaluation experiences and scaling these up in the context of PRSs.

Bridging the gaps: building partnerships and strengthening networks

While working to strengthen their ability to monitor, evaluate and advocate, CSOs are also working with governments in an effort to improve their working partnerships. Zambia's CSPR, for instance, responded to a lack of information flow from central to decentralised government bodies, through the creation of three pilot workshops that brought CSOs and government officials together, in an effort to partner a new approach that would ensure access to information. It is now 'holding sensitisation seminars on the budget, PRSP and other critical issues for Members of Parliament and top civil servants in order to encourage them to engage more proactively in development discussions and programmes' (Mpepo and Seshamani).

In Ghana, the emphasis on 'education and awareness building has helped to overcome the fear among pro-poor civil society organisations that their active participation in policy advocacy work would result in political confrontation' (Kamara and Yeboah). Concerted efforts to invite and involve top government officials in their educational workshops – in such a way that they engage with and respond to participants – appears to have been particularly successful. One Senior Planning Officer involved is quoted as having said: 'participating in the workshops has given me access to people at the grassroots that NDPC [National Department for Planning Commission] could never have reached; it is an effective mechanism for disseminating and getting objective feedback on the GPRS [Ghanaian Poverty Reduction Strategy]…'

It is important to note that Bolivia's aforementioned diploma programme resulted from lessons that came out of a previous learning exchange between southern CSOs – again reiterating the importance of learning networks and communities. Ssewakiryanga also points to the importance of learning from other country experiences, outlining how Uganda's PPA was informed by a Tanzanian PPA experience.

In fact, one principal lesson learnt from Tanzania was the importance of implementing a PPA using a 'partnership model'. The Ugandan PPA Process, or UPPAP, therefore placed an INGO, Oxfam UK, within the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development. As the coordinating agency, Oxfam UK had a twin reporting arrangement both to government and to CSOs. It worked with selected local and international CSOs, who contributed staff with skills in participatory research to conduct fieldwork and write up the PPA reports. Although the arrangement led to a number of concerns, it also yielded positive results for both civil society and government. Ssewakiryanga notes that through the UPPAP 'for the first time in the history of Uganda, there was system-

Box 2: A CSO 'to do' list

- Step back, reflect, strategise. Ask yourselves: Where do our strengths and weaknesses lie? What are the existing M&E mechanisms? How can we contribute to a better understanding of poverty and poverty reduction?
- Use qualitative and experience-based data.
- Be analytically rigorous.
- Build up your own capacities and the capacities of allies.
- Work towards building citizenship and creating a sense of government accountability.
- Empower citizens you work with.
- Share experiences with other CSOs; learn from one another and form alliances.

atic feedback to government on how it was delivering social services and what people felt about government institutions'. For many technocrats who were 'used to getting feedback from their own government machinery', this was a 'humbling experience'.

Reflections: looking around, looking inside and moving forward

Many southern CSOs have been active in their PRS monitoring and evaluation efforts. Despite concern around the dominance of quantitative measures on poverty, experiences from Bolivian, Ghanaian, Ugandan, Vietnamese, and Zambian CSOs demonstrate effective gathering and use of qualitative data (at different scales, and through different means and mechanisms) that has drawn upon their networks and access to more experience-based understandings of poverty. In certain cases, concerted efforts are even being made to empower citizens through the generation of qualitative poverty data. These steps forward can only be sustained and its influence ensured, if they are carried out with methodological and analytical rigour. Furthermore, its presentation to governments and the wider public is key in ensuring the legitimacy of these CSOs. This is where the value of effective partnership building and advocacy skills comes in.

Relationships between poor country governments and autonomous civil societies (or donors and civil society, as is conveyed in the Somalia article) vary, but in almost all cases the quality of the relationship can be strengthened. In order to improve their legitimacy while ensuring their independence and more equal terms of interaction, CSOs require significant capacity-building. Most authors' organisations are beginning to direct (or at least consider directing) their efforts to capacity-building of monitoring and evaluation skills. Many are beginning to place explicit focus in the area of advocacy. Many have also come to recognise the importance of strengthening partnerships with allies in the government (or with donors and INGOs, as is the case of Somalia). Awareness raising, education and 'sensitisation' seminars with government officials, including Members of Parliament in Bolivia, Ghana and Zambia have yielded positive results.

Partnerships and networks need not be limited by borders, however. Perhaps the most important key lesson that came out of the workshop is the value of reflecting and sharing for southern organisations engaging in the monitoring and evaluation of PRSs (and indeed any other development policies). Specifically, the space created by the workshop provided an opportunity for participants to step back and (re-)identify the country politics and fundamental power dynamics that define the limitations and opportunities in which they work.

The conditionality underpinning most PRSs combined with the way in which lending institutions and governments introduce and treat the concepts of civil society and participation are full of assumptions and challenges that can lead to perverse dynamics. The impact that PRSP conditionality and HIPC country dependence on IFIs has on PRS processes and on civil society influence merits significant attention. Southern CSOs are encouraged to carry out analyses of IFI-related policy processes and decision-making mechanisms with this focus; this might lead to interesting findings, including the identification of entry points and limitations of their involvement in **real and sustainable** poverty reducing action.

On a more optimistic note, the space (albeit limited) that IFIs have provided CSOs with to monitor and evaluate PRSs has been exploited such that it is introducing a push towards shifting relationships of accountability between citizens and governments, and to a lesser degree, between citizens and IFIs. CSOs are (perhaps unknowingly) building citizenships; encouraging the realisation of citizens' rights to information, to participation, and to resources. Empowering citizens and introducing the concept of civil responsibility among government officials and agencies may seem like a small step. However it is a step that can reverberate in a plethora of policy and development arenas in the future. Coupled with (if indeed it can be separated from) the importance that is being placed on good governance and democratisation in the world of development, it is indeed a small and initial step in the long struggle towards social justice and, as such, towards poverty reduction. For this southern CSOs must be congratulated.

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