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# Bringing the poor into advocacy: a look at Ghana HIPC Watch

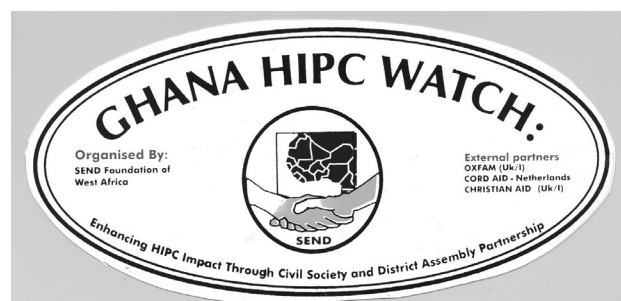
by SIAPHA KAMARA with HARRIET YEBOAH

## Introduction

An important challenge confronting the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS) is how to engage pro-poor and grassroots-based civil society organisations (CSOs) in facilitating the genuine participation and effective ownership by the poor of socio-economic development in their local communities. This article shares the experience of the Social Enterprise Development Foundation of West Africa (SEND Foundation) in building the capacity of civil society groups and local government officials in resource-poor northern Ghana to engage meaningfully with the GPRS. The focus of capacity building has been two-fold: increasing knowledge and understanding of the GPRS within civil society; and developing participatory monitoring and evaluation skills.

## Objectives

- Build awareness of civil society organisations on the GPRS. This is part of a process of mobilising them to actively participate in and contribute towards policy-making on poverty reduction strategies and programmes.
- Establish and strengthen the participatory monitoring capacity of 25 development NGOs and faith-based organisations so that they can collaborate with SEND to carry out participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) of the



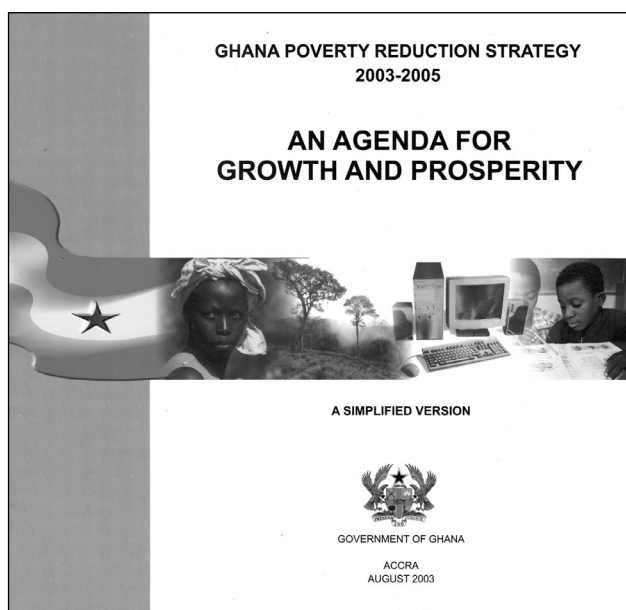
impact of the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) debt relief initiative on the poor in 25 districts in northern Ghana.<sup>1</sup>

- Strengthen District Assemblies (DAs) and CSOs partnership in the implementation of the GPRS in 25 districts in northern Ghana.

## GPRS education and awareness building framework

The GPRS educational process started in 2001 with a concept paper prepared by SEND Foundation. The paper proposed the establishment of a project to monitor and evaluate the impact of the country joining the HIPC debt relief initiative

<sup>1</sup> The World Bank and IMF's Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative was launched in 1996. At that time, it was a radical departure from previous approaches to 'debt relief' for the poorest countries. The most important aspect of HIPC is that for the first time in their 50-year history, the debts of the World Bank and the IMF ('preferred creditors' to whom debts have always to be repaid first) were included for write-off under the scheme.



**The GPRS – a simplified version. This is a simplified form, prepared by the NDPC, of the comprehensive document, which maps out the government of Ghana's strategy for promoting growth and reducing poverty. This, together with the two-page version also available, aims to ensure that as many people as possible are aware of the decisions the government has made.**

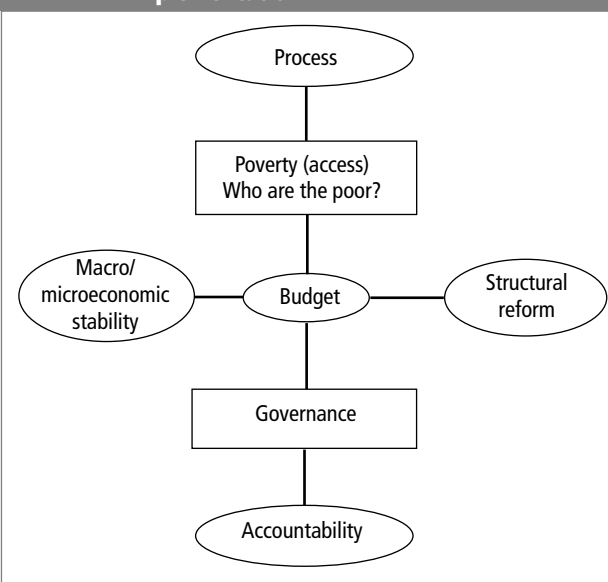
on the poor in Ghana. This paper targeted mainly district-based development NGOs, faith-based organisations, women's groups, youth groups, farmers and people with disabilities in northern Ghana. Thirty CSOs discussed the paper. They confirmed their interest in partnering with SEND Foundation to develop and implement the Ghana HIPC Watch (GHW) but expressed reservations about the political implications; i.e. whether the government could tolerate any critical questioning of national policies and programmes. The majority of them indicated that they were unfamiliar with most government policies and had very limited skills and experience in policy dialogue with state functionaries.

Guided by the above insights, SEND developed a GPRS Education and Awareness-Building Framework and organised workshops whose main purpose was to facilitate civil society's understanding and engagement with the GPRS. The workshop involved the Ghana National Development Planning Commission (NDPC), pro-poor civil society organisations (i.e. workshop participants) and SEND Foundation.<sup>2</sup>

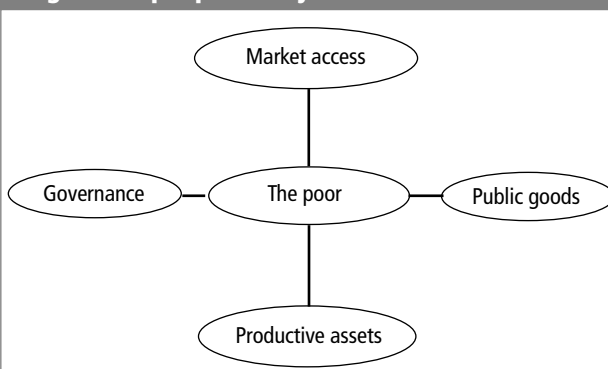
The diagrams below summarise the contents of the presentations at the workshops.

<sup>2</sup> The NDPC is the state institution responsible for the development, dissemination, monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the GPRS.

**Diagram 1: GPRS framework for designing and implementation<sup>3</sup>**



**Diagram 2: A pro-poor analytical framework of the GPRS**



The first diagram highlights the underlying principles of the GPRS, for example, participation of the poor in planning and implementation, mainstreaming of good governance, and accountability and poverty reduction among small-scale food crop farmers, women, youth, and people with disability. Concepts such as inflation, privatisation, budget deficit, devaluation, trade liberalisation and balance of payments that underpin the macro-economic strategy of the GPRS are also discussed.

Diagram two is used to establish whether the GPRS is an

<sup>3</sup> SEND is grateful to Charles Abugre, Executive Director of the Social Development Centre (ISODEC) who facilitated the first GPRS educational and awareness-building workshop, which developed this diagram.

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**“The participatory monitoring and evaluation framework is informed by a number of core principles. These principles, among others, emphasise information gathering through interacting and engaging with diverging interest groups in an open atmosphere”**

effective policy instrument for poverty reduction. It analyses whether the poor have access to good governance (i.e. participation in decision-making, an effective parliament system, effective rule of laws and independent electioneering system), public goods (education, water, healthcare systems, and roads), productive assets (affordable credit, fertile farmland, communications, irrigation) and market access (good price, storage and processing facilities).

A self-assessment by Ghana HIPC Watch of more than 30 GPRS educational workshops revealed very low participation of women, youth and disabled people in all workshops. To address this situation, GHW initiated GPRS Focused Group Educational Workshops (GFGWEW) for women and people with disability.

These GHW-GPRS workshops were important. More than 95% of the participants (245 CSOs and 25 DAs) had access to information and were able to contribute to the GPRS for the first time. Nearly all the workshop resolutions emphasised the need for GHW to follow up and sustain the educational process by providing them with policy documents and training on advocacy. A senior Planning Officer of the NDPC, describing how a GHW-GPRS educational workshop had impacted on NDPC, had this to say:

*...participating in the workshops has given me access to people at the grassroots that NDPC could never have reached; it is an effective mechanism for disseminating and getting objective feedback on the GPRS... we need to strengthen the collaboration between the GHW and NDPC...*

#### **The participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) framework**

The GPRS educational process described earlier set the stage for work to start on the implementation of the second objective of the project, i.e. PM&E of HIPC-funded programmes. The participatory monitoring and evaluation framework is informed by a number of core principles. These principles, among others, emphasise information gathering through

#### **Box 1: GPRS education and awareness-building workshops**

During all educational workshops a top government official is invited to open the workshop. There is then a presentation of the GPRS by NDPC and a presentation by the regional planning officer focusing on the regional development priorities. SEND Foundation also makes a presentation on the pro-poor analytical perspective of the GPRS. This presentation is aimed at equipping participants with critical understanding and analytical skills to interrogate the GPRS with a focus on whether or not it is truly poverty reduction-friendly. The presentations are discussed in plenary, with participants sharing their insights on the GPRS and seeking clarifications from the government officials. Participants then discuss in-depth thematic areas (such as education, health, agriculture) in small groups and present their findings in plenary, out of which pressing issues are identified and presented to the public as a press statement.

interacting and engaging with diverging interest groups in an open atmosphere. The resultant key findings and recommendations will be ploughed back into policy-making and the implementation process through lobbying, publications and workshops. Guided by these principles, a GHW-PM&E manual was developed in consultation with focal NGOs, District Assemblies and donor agencies.

#### **Key actors involved in GHW-PM&E**

A training workshop on how to use the manual was then organised for the 25 district-based focal NGOs, who were identified and approved by the District Assemblies. CSOs that volunteered to be district focal NGOs were accepted only if they had development programmes in the district and a good working relationship with the district assembly. That is to say that the NGOs are known and their activities are not shrouded in secrecy. At a GPRS educational workshop planned and conducted by the district focal NGO, 15 of the participants were elected to constitute the District HIPC Monitoring Committee (DHMC) and were officially inaugurated by either the District Chief Executive or the Coordinating Director. The DHMC is made up of women, youth, farmers, people with disabilities, faith-based organisations, development NGOs, and representatives of the district assembly.

#### **Four operational stages in the GHW-PM&E Framework**

The first key operational stage is information and data collection and analysis, where the DHMC uses the monitoring manual to conduct interviews and focus group meetings, particularly with relevant officials of the district and community, opinion leaders and beneficiaries. They also review project documents. Secondly, the DHMC discusses and analyses information gathered in order to agree on key findings

Launch of one of the communication tools for information dissemination 'The HIPC Watch Update'

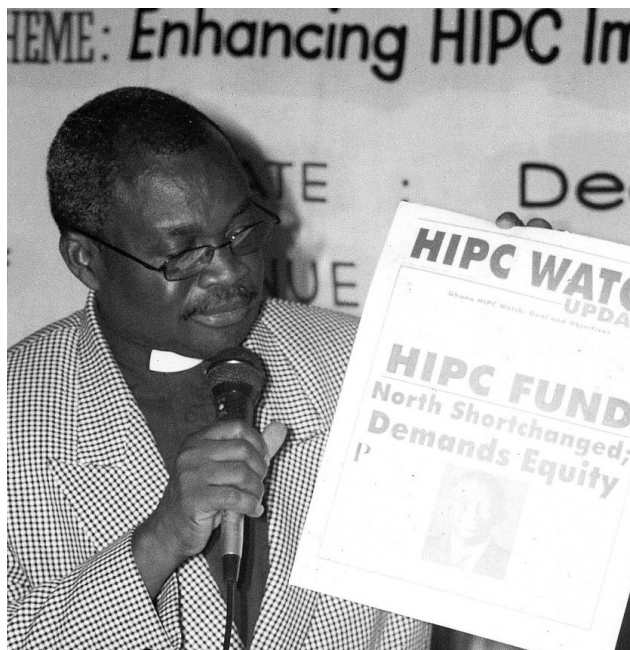


Photo: SEND Foundation

**"Based on the GPRS and in consultation with the focal NGOs and District Assemblies, it was agreed that participatory monitoring and evaluation be guided by three key broad indicators: good governance, accountability and equity"**

and District Assemblies, it was agreed that participatory monitoring and evaluation be guided by three key broad indicators: **good governance, accountability and equity**. The initial stages of information gathering proved difficult. But after a joint training session for focal NGOs, DHMC and government officials, the trend changed. The table opposite highlights the key indicators and monitoring findings.

As a result of inadequate information flow from the central government and sector ministries to the District Assemblies, and from the District Assemblies to the communities, participation in planning, implementation and monitoring is rather low. Beneficiaries thus have a very low sense of ownership for the projects, which in the long run affects the maintenance of such projects.

Accountability is a problem area. Though rules and regulations regarding the opening of accounts and signatories to it have been adhered to, the multiple or parallel sources of fund transfers to the district make accountability very difficult. For instance, a particular district could receive funds from the Ministry of Women and Children **and** the Senior Minister's office as micro-credit for women's groups. Most districts are also not able to track funds that are transferred from their district to another, as in the case of the Tamale municipality, where funds were transferred to Kumasi. Thus transparency and openness of the entire system is compromised.

Geographical equity has been adhered to. However, one wonders whether the heavy emphasis on infrastructure addresses the needs of the poor. Facilities will be closer to the poor but as to whether they have the means to access them is another problem. Little attention is paid to agriculture from which the majority of the poor earn their livelihood. The situation is worsened by the inadequate personnel who will provide services to the poor in the various facilities, such as education and health.

### Lessons learnt

The process of monitoring and evaluating HIPC-funded projects has been an exciting and rewarding experience, but not

and generate appropriate policy recommendations.

The second stage information sharing with the District Assembly is aimed at promoting discussions within the District Assembly on the findings and recommendations of the DHMCs. Efforts are made to disseminate the findings and recommendations to the wider public of the district, using means such as a district HIPC Notice Board, churches, mosques, radio and others.

The Quarterly Review Meeting is the third operational stage. At this stage the 25 DHMCs, represented by their focal NGO, share, analyse and synthesise the findings and policy recommendations. They also identify and agree on advocacy issues. National lobbying and advocacy is the fourth stage. Its purpose is to use the findings and recommendations to engage policy-making institutions, processes and events and key players, such as ministers and parliamentarians. Various instruments have been developed to support and sustain the advocacy activities. They include Ghana HIPC Update Newspaper, a lobbying team, posters, stickers, t-shirts, workshop reports and the SEND website.<sup>45</sup>

### The three monitoring and evaluation indicators

Based on the GPRS and in consultation with the focal NGOs

<sup>4</sup> The Ghana HIPC Update is published each quarter to disseminate the main findings and recommendations of FNGOs discussed and agreed on at the Quarterly Review Meeting.

<sup>5</sup> [www.sendfoundation.org](http://www.sendfoundation.org)



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Copies of HIPC Watch Update, newsletter of the SEND Foundation



Table 1:

Key indicators	Key monitoring and evaluation findings
<p><b>Good governance</b> focuses on assessing the quality of people's participation in developing and implementing HIPC-funded projects. This is assessed by the nature and quality of interactions between district assembly officials and project beneficiaries.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extremely low participation of project beneficiary communities in decision-making.</li> <li>Very little consultation by district officials with project beneficiary communities during the identification and implementation of HIPC projects.</li> <li>Consultations between the DA leadership and National Ministries during planning and execution of HIPC-funded projects have been extremely weak.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Accountability</b> has three broad dimensions: governance, financial and expenditure accountability. Governance assesses the extent to which officials of the District Assembly responsible for HIPC-funded projects are open and transparent with citizens, in particular the beneficiaries. On financial accountability, the focus is on compliance with rules, procedures and regulations in the use and management of HIPC funds. Expenditure accountability emphasises feedback to the citizens on how HIPC funds are spent.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Bank of Ghana opened accounts for the DA without consulting them; some districts had their accounts located outside their region and very far away.</li> <li>Funds are transferred into accounts without information about what they are intended for.</li> <li>The DA are directed to transfer funds from HIPC accounts into different accounts without proper explanation.</li> <li>Weak contract management capacity at the district. In some instances the contractors are imposed on them by National Ministries.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Equity</b> has four dimensions: spatial, social, occupational and gender. Spatial equity focuses on geographical distribution. Social equity focuses on different groups such as women, youth, people living with Aids, ethnic minorities, physically challenged and low-income salaried workers. Occupational groups refer to, for example, farmers, fisher folks and petty traders. The gender dimension of equity assesses the extent to which HIPC-funded projects are sensitive to the different needs, roles and responsibilities of women and men, boys and girls.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The allocations of projects have taken into account the ethnic mix of the district. In northern Ghana this is definitely contributing to building harmony and reconciliation among the various ethnic groups.</li> <li>School, water and health infrastructure are the main projects; there are very few agricultural projects devoted to small-scale food crops farmers.</li> <li>Most projects do not take into account the special needs of people with disability. School buildings for instance do not have special places for wheelchairs and so far no DHMC has reported a project that is devoted solely to people with disability, for example the rehabilitation of schools for the blind and dumb.</li> <li>Women's needs are reduced to micro-credit. Issues of unequal opportunities for boys and girls to education, reproductive rights and quality healthcare services and political power are not catered for.</li> </ul>

**Members of the focal NGO and District HIPC Monitoring Committee at a participatory monitoring and evaluation training workshop**



**Photo: SEND Foundation**

## A new school built with HIPC funds in the Wa District of the Upper West Region of Ghana



photo: SEND Foundation

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without problems. GHW have over the past two years built strong structures for engaging policy makers on national issues. More importantly, the CSOs are seeing the need to demand accountability from government officials at the district level and are also drawing their attention to issues that need immediate attention. The establishment of the DHMCs and their training in PM&E has developed capacity and a framework for effective engagement of district-based development actors.

Increasingly, the perception of GHW as a faultfinding mission is being erased. The mainstreaming of government officials' participation at national, regional and district levels in GHW activities has helped to overcome suspicion within government bureaucracy and among politicians of GHW. It is helping to build alliances with District Assemblies against the Accra-based top-down approach of planning and implementing HIPC-funded programmes.

The emphasis on GRPS 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. It has also inspired confidence in and is mobilising them to engage with the GPRS, especially at the district level.

A wealth of information generated from the PM&E process makes it imperative to involve the media in order to give the right reportage on findings to influence decisions at both the local and national level.

## Challenges

The above notwithstanding, access to information, especially at the national level, has not been forthcoming with some sector ministries. As many as between eight to ten visits are made before information is sometimes released. In one of the

ministries where information was being sought, several letters had to be submitted because every letter seemed to 'get lost on its journey to the sector Minister's office'. Others were frank in saying that the information being sought is not classified but they are not obliged to release it. Invariably it affects the timely usage of information and sets back monitoring.

GHW faces the challenge of making government ministries more willing to provide information and data on HIPC funds disbursed to them by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning. It also must work to ensure that GHW's findings and recommendations are taken seriously by government and used to improve poverty reduction strategies, policies, programmes and projects. More so GHW must effectively inform, engage and influence the work of parliament with its findings and recommendations.

Further interaction is necessary to overcome the mistrust of CSOs by state actors, the reason behind government officials' and bureaucrats' reluctance to give information about projects. CSOs, especially those involved in policy work that is critical of the government, are viewed as part of the political opposition. State actors are not used to critical questioning of their actions and therefore perceive those who do so as being opposed to them. Consequently GHW will strengthen the negotiating and dialoguing skills of CSOs to enable them to engage effectively with actors. CSOs are not used to partnering with the state sector, especially when developing policies. However, pressure is brought to bear on the sustainability of the District HIPC Monitoring Committees; membership is voluntary but there is pressure for financial incentive, which will make the scheme very costly to maintain.

GHW will also use the different media effectively to communicate and disseminate the findings and recommendations to the general public.

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**Group brainstorming on good governance at the participatory monitoring and evaluation training workshop**



**Photo: SEND Foundation**

### Conclusion

Based on these challenges, GHW advocacy activities have focused on promoting the participation of District Assemblies in decision-making at the national level. At the district level, project beneficiaries' involvement in project identification and implementation systems, particularly in monitoring and evaluation, has been identified as an important issue. On accountability, the focus is on promoting the decentralisation of HIPC accounts and making them district-based so as to reduce transaction costs as well as to make them easily accessible to administrators, contractors and project beneficiaries. Regarding equity, the targeting of disabled people with specific interventions, for example rehabilitation of training institutions and addressing the needs of women in a holistic manner, are two important themes. For instance, micro-credit provision must be accompanied by funding for organisational development for women, and reproductive rights education and training, especially for young girls. In resource-poor northern Ghana,

HIPC funds should be devoted to supporting the education of girls up to the completion of secondary school.

Ghana HIPC Watch is a pilot project, which since inception has promised to be an effective mechanism through which grassroots development-based CSOs can engage efficiently in policy monitoring and evaluation to enhance the impact of policies on the poor in society. Through effective capacity-building for CSOs and district level government officials, a very strong partnership has evolved. This has enhanced the gathering and sharing of information. It has also increased citizens' interest in governance at the district level. More people are calling for the extension of monitoring to other sectors of the economy such as the district assembly and the parliament common fund. Though faced with human and financial resource constraints, GHW will focus on deepening the partnership it has built, find a means of strengthening weaker partnerships, and build new ones to ensure a responsible citizenry that participates in and contributes to the development of the country.

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