

Assessing Participation in PRSPs in sub-Saharan Africa

Executive Summary

'Assessing Participation' (IDS) examines the roles of various agents in the participatory processes of PRSPs, including their understandings of the principles behind participation. The report concludes that civil society participation can add considerable value to PRSP processes and policy processes more generally, and can contribute to more responsive behaviour on the part of donors and governments. However, it is not clear that the potential of CS participation has been adequately exploited, and much remains to be done to consolidate the gains made so far.

The report has some key implications for donors, including the following:

- Context is crucial – beware of reifying 'best practice' cases and recognise that the PRSP usually takes place in the context of an existing national policy process.
- Continue to disseminate among contacts in governments and civil society pointers for good participatory processes, with special attention to information-provision and participatory monitoring of PRS implementation.
- Facilitate multi-stakeholder groups where actors can meet on neutral ground, form alliances, deepen mutual understanding and develop common agendas.
- Work to get to know and form alliances with CS umbrella groups and coalitions; support them to define their role and to become interlocutors with government over the PRS and its implementation. Continue to support information dissemination initiatives by civil society.
- As donors, exercise with sensitivity the role of 'brokers of participation'. Avoid encroaching on national ownership by pooling efforts with government, other donors and civil society.
- Explore frankly the potential for civil society to be involved in and to influence macro-economic dialogue, with attention to capacity issues and issues of policy flexibility.
- Scrutinize the quality of PPAs which inform PRSPs, as well as the uses to which they are put. Provide government and CS actors with opportunities to learn from international debates on PPAs and policy research in general.

Methodology

1. This Synthesis Note is a summary of the full report 'Assessing Participation in PRSPs: a Desk-Based Synthesis of Experience in sub-Saharan Africa', Rosemary McGee with Josh Levene and Alexandra Hughes, IDS, January 2002.
2. The full report considered a variety of primary sources, including interviews with some key informants and the PRS documents themselves, and secondary sources, including the PRSP Institutionalisation Study (Booth et al, ODI, October 2001) and other relevant reports. Ten countries were profiled: Bolivia (to provide a comparison with Africa), Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia.

Caveats

3. Time was short and requests for information or interviews were not always met. In some cases, information is not readily available – for instance, civil society organisations seldom have capacity to document or publicise their experiences. Efforts were made to triangulate documents and information where possible, but certain questions remain unanswered.
4. In most countries there is more complete information available on the I-PRSP than the full PRSP, which tends to skew the findings somewhat. This is because I-PRSPs are not subject to the same requirement for a participatory process and often contain only a (vague) plan for such a process in formulating the full PRSP.

The principle and practice of participation in the PRSP context

Starting Points

5. Pre-dating the introduction of PRSPs in 1999, several understandings of participation were current among development actors around the globe. Some of these embodied specific expectations of what participatory processes can achieve in relation to poverty reduction or to policy-making. Some of these expectations were explicitly built into the PRSP framework, or at least the PRSP rhetoric. Others were projected onto the PRSP by variously-positioned actors, on the basis of their broader understanding of participation, when they were contemplating taking on the role of participants in PRSP processes. Some actors have understood PRSPs to promote participation by civil society alone, and others to promote parliamentary participation as well.

How have agents interpreted the principle of participation?

6. The concept of participation has attracted various understandings in relation to the PRSP process.
 - **IFIs** – The IFIs expect that participation will deliver a sense of broad-based national ownership (leading to successful policy implementation) and will strengthen democratic governance and accountability.
 - **NGOs** – Some NGOs conceive of participation as a right. They hold that creation of a space for poor people to have a voice inherently reduces their poverty. Some bilateral donors also fall into this category. Conceiving of participation as an end in itself contrasts with the IFIs' instrumentalist approach.
 - **Governments** – Government interpretations of the participation principle vary widely.
 - Some Governments appear to have started the PRSP process with no particular understanding of participation as a principle, nor expectations of it beyond satisfying the IFIs' requirements (as has been seen in Ghana).

- Some perceive it as a challenge which they have limited capacity to meet (the Gambia).
- Others juxtapose the dominant IFI approach to civil society participation with longstanding national traditions of participation, and in some cases find significant differences between the two (Mozambique).
- Others still consider themselves ahead of the IFIs in promoting a participatory approach to policy-making (Uganda).
- A few view participation as a way to achieve key national aims beyond the HIPC/PRSP framework (Rwanda).

All governments, however, treat participation as consultation – in some cases due to capacity constraints rather than unwillingness to go further. Almost everywhere parliamentary participation has been slight.

What roles have agents played in translating the principle into practice?

7. Various actors have taken very different roles in the participatory process.
 - IFIs – The IMF has scarcely been involved in the participatory process. The Bank has adopted different roles in different countries ranging from mediation between government and CSOs to holding its own dialogue with CSOs. In Zambia and Kenya, for instance, the IFIs have facilitated CSO access to documentation that Government is not willing to provide.
 - Bilaterals – Information on the engagement of most bilaterals was not forthcoming for this study. However, DFID has sought to mediate and support the engagement of CS and governments, and has worked to promote donor coordination.
 - UN System – The study could not amass comprehensive country-level information on UN support to PRSPs, but in 2001 UNDP determined that its focus in PRSP countries would be on improving participatory and consultative practices. Such support is evident in Lesotho.
 - CSOs – Umbrella groups have participated in government-led processes and have also established parallel participatory or consultative processes, the outputs of which are then fed into official deliberations through lobbying and other means.

What does participation look like in practice?

8. Most governments have designed and implemented strategies that are essentially **consultative** rather than participatory. There has been ample attention to the flaws of these processes (well-documented elsewhere), but how far this is a cause for concern varies according to the broader context in which the consultation occurs. For instance, in some cases a consultation exercise may be heavily informed by earlier PPAs, or may be acknowledged as a short-term expedient awaiting future capacity growth in government or CS. In other cases, governments may see more participatory approaches as unacceptable, or may be developing a participatory approach to monitoring and implementation rather than policy formulation.

In Bolivia, the legal framework for participation has proved a useful backdrop. The earlier Law on Popular Participation and the decentralisation legislation have been reinforced by the introduction of the Dialogue Law.

What methods and approaches have been adopted?

9. The usual approach by governments is to hold a series of **consultations** at national level (sometimes organised thematically or sectorally) and regionally (usually focussed on the locality). PPAs, not all equally participatory, have been carried out in several countries. The sharing of relevant

information with CSOs and the public has been patchy, and CSOs sometimes take on this role when they consider government efforts inadequate.

In Tanzania, a local CSO with support from DFID produced a 'Plain Language Guide to the PRSP' – it explains actual PRSP targets in context, provides an overview of the history of policymaking in Tanzania, and ends with a glossary of key terms.

10. CSOs are usually invited to contribute inputs to analysing poverty and prioritising public actions (sometimes on the basis of a draft PRSP), and are sometimes contracted to facilitate the consultations themselves. In some cases, clear channels are established for the outputs of these exercises to filter into government deliberations, but participants often perceive that their inputs disappear into a 'black box'.

11. Umbrella or network NGOs are usually most active due to capacity constraints amongst smaller bodies. However, there remain questions about the nature of CSO representation of the poor that must be addressed.

Rwanda's PRS process has consciously built on local participatory traditions and norms, and is expected to contribute to reconciliation in the peace-building process.

What value has civil society participation added?

Impact on the PRSP process

12. Civil society participation has had some **positive impacts** on the PRSP process:

Main achievement	Examples
Information sharing – including raising public awareness and awareness among other CSOs.	Malawi – Main CSO pushed for media advertisements explaining the PRSP and for Government reports on progress
Inclusion of CSO participants in official task forces (this has happened in every country to different degrees)	Uganda and Malawi – Representatives on task forces were nominated by CSOs
Time extensions to the PRSP process	Zambia and Malawi – CSOs campaigned successfully for time extensions
Broadening the poverty analysis and policy range	Kenya – CSOs successfully lobbied for a gender-aware process
Involvement in monitoring PRSP implementation	Uganda - Main CSO instigated CS Monitoring Committees to monitor expenditure of Poverty Action Fund (debt relief monies)

However, capacity and time constraints have meant that in some countries (Rwanda) only international NGOs have worked to influence the process. In other countries, CSOs have failed to substantially impact on the PRSP process whether they participated in official consultations (Ghana) or established their own parallel process in addition to the official consultations (Tanzania, Bolivia).

Impact on PRSP content

13. CS participation, both through advocacy and through participation in PPAs, has resulted in a broader and more disaggregated **analysis of poverty**. This is sometimes followed through with specific policy measures, though not always. Various countries have also seen the addition of some sensitive issues, such as corruption and accountability, to the PRSP agenda. In a number of cases (Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique), PRSPs include measures to address these.

There are cases where specific lobbying by CSOs has affected the policies in the PRSP. For instance, **Kenya's** PRSP contains policies that take account of the needs of pastoralists due to the efforts of the Pastoralist Strategy Group.

However, the opposite is also true, as in **Tanzania**. Some GoT sources claim that the PRSP contains no significant shifts with respect to earlier strategies, whether arising from CSO demands or not. CSO advocacy for the abolition of user fees for a range of social services was not considered successful by CSOs themselves.

14. CS groups and NGOs have been unable to influence **macroeconomic policy** or even engage governments in dialogue about it, although private sector groups and academic institutions have done so in some cases. This is in part due to lack of capacity among most CSOs to engage in advocacy in general (but particularly with respect to macroeconomic policy), as well as reluctance on the part of governments to extend consultations to this area. However, governments are occasionally releasing more macroeconomic and budget information, due at least in part to advocacy by CSOs.

Impact on government-donor dialogue

15. There is evidence that the process conditionality of the PRSP framework has sometimes cast donors and IFIs in the role of 'brokers of participation', and mediators or catalysts of dialogue between governments and CSOs. This implies a shift to a **persuasive**, rather than directive, attitude on the part of donors, as has been seen in Ghana and Malawi. However, this widening of the donor mandate may also signify an increased influence of donors over southern governments, contrary to ownership rhetoric.

16. In some countries (Bolivia, Mozambique) there are no great divergences between government views and donor/IFI views more generally, and as such the participatory process has not affected the government's negotiating position vis-à-vis donors.

17. In other countries, the strengthening of CS-government relations has lent greater **legitimacy** to the government in the eyes of the donors. There is little evidence that governments feel threatened by strengthened relations between donors and CSOs.

Uganda's good track record on participation is one factor that has strengthened its negotiating position with donors to the extent of drawing up a strategy document on good donor behaviour around the PEAP.

Impact on poverty discourse

18. There is evidence that poverty is increasingly recognised to be a **multidimensional** phenomenon that includes elements of powerlessness, voicelessness, and vulnerability. For instance, vulnerability appears to have entered the poverty discourse with regards to particular livelihood groups in Uganda and the Gambia. In some cases this recognition is largely due to PPA work around the PRSP, and this is expected to appear in more cases as more PPAs are conducted. It is likely that participation has assisted in the formation of more nationally-based discourses than has hitherto been the case.

Impact on broader policy processes

19. In several cases participation has resulted in a broadening and diversifying of the policy community and a more **collaborative** relationship between government and CSOs. Increased transparency on the part of some governments is also evidence of a more general recognition of the benefits of a participatory approach. Rwanda is a particular example where the PRSP has been seen by all stakeholders as an opportunity for profound change.

Kenya's Collaborative Centre for Gender and Development has built on links developed with the officials involved in the MTEF process. Maintaining and strengthening these links will be an important element of its future success.

20. **Capacities** appear to have been increased in several respects including government capacity to engage in policy dialogue with non-governmental actors and to facilitate consultations; and civil society capacity to conduct policy analysis, advocacy, networking and participatory approaches at a range of levels.

21. Some **participatory structures** have survived the PRSP formulation stage, including local CSO networks, CSO links with international partners, and official institutional structures. The mere presence of an official institution does not, however, ensure the political will to take note of its outputs, and some countries have reportedly returned to 'business as usual' after PRSP formulation (Ghana, Tanzania).

In Zambia, Civil Society for Poverty Reduction continues with a new focus on PRSP monitoring. CSOs are also involved in monitoring PRSP implementation in Bolivia, Malawi, Mozambique, and Uganda.

22. There is much evidence that PRSP processes have helped to link participatory approaches and **governance** issues. This is manifested in:

- Moves towards greater transparency and accountability in government processes.
- Heightened attention to resource targeting for poverty reduction purposes.
- In some contexts the inception of participatory budgeting initiatives.
- Focus on the importance of bringing government closer to people.

Conclusions

23. The desk review suggests that on balance civil society participation can add considerable value to PRSP processes. It can help to transform policy environments in ways which are beneficial to the poor, and is supportive of better governance. Participation can also lead to more responsive behaviour by governments and donor institutions. Indeed, in all countries included in the review (except possibly Ghana) there was at least the beginning of a relationship between civil society and government and an awareness by government that participation might not only satisfy donors and IFIs but might enhance country processes and lead to some benefits as well as costs.
24. However, while participation can add value, the review does not demonstrate conclusively that in all countries significant value has been added to date, nor that as much has been added as could be with better-quality participatory processes. Much remains to be done to consolidate and sustain the advances made so far, particularly with respect to countries that have yet to formulate their first full PRSP, but also in implementation-stage countries and in second-round PRSPs.
25. In general, flaws in consultation practices must be addressed and furthermore, practices must go beyond consultation to genuine participation. Government responsiveness to participants must also increase.
26. CS may take a role in monitoring PRSP implementation in some countries – this may allow more time for preparation and more scope for setting independent goals than was the case with involvement in PRSP formulation. Such involvement is expected to contribute to increased transparency and accountability, which may in turn contribute to greater empowerment.
27. Unrealistic expectations must be revised downwards to prevent CSOs withdrawing from the PRSP process out of frustration. The most that can be hoped for in the short term is that CSO capacity to analyse and make policy proposals will increase to the point where they can assess continuities and changes in their countries' policies and can conduct rigorous impact analyses with which to challenge governments and IFIs in cases where they allege that policies threaten to harm the poor.

Key implications for donor action

The following have been identified as key areas for donor engagement in support of participatory practices.

- Context is crucial – beware of reifying 'best practice' cases and recognise that the PRSP usually takes place in the context of an existing national policy process.
- Work with partner governments to deepen their understanding of possible participatory processes, using lessons from other partner governments where possible.
- Press for governments to clarify and publicise the channels through which they intend to gather in views of participants or consulted groups and integrate these into policy debates.
- Continue to disseminate among contacts in governments and civil society pointers for good participatory processes, with special attention to information-provision and participatory monitoring of PRS implementation.
- Facilitate multi-stakeholder groups, at national or international level, wherein actors can meet on neutral ground, form alliances, deepen mutual understanding and develop common agendas.
- Continue to work to identify what capacity gaps exist among government and civil society and to fill them. Donors should work to create demand amongst governments for capacity building assistance, and avoid undermining ownership by facilitating cross-fertilization amongst partner governments.

- Work to get to know and form alliances with CS umbrella groups and coalitions, fragile as some of these are; and support them to define their role and to become interlocutors with government over the PRS and its implementation. Continue to support information dissemination initiatives by civil society.
- At the same time, challenge and support these umbrella organizations to attend to internal issues of representativity and participatory practices and attitudes.
- As donors, exercise with sensitivity the role of 'brokers of participation'. Avoid encroaching on national ownership by pooling efforts with government, other donors and civil society
- Explore frankly the potential for civil society to be involved in and to influence macro-economic dialogue, with attention to capacity issues and issues of policy flexibility.
- Scrutinise the quality of PPAs which inform PRSPs, as well as the uses to which they are put. Provide government and CS actors with opportunities to learn from international debates on PPAs and policy research in general.
- Respond positively to changes in attitude that occur among donor agencies and reward beneficial changes in donor-government relations.
- Consider commissioning further research to explore those issues which could not be covered adequately in this desk review (these are listed in the executive summary of the full report).

Appendix 1 – Previous Synthesis Notes

The PRSP Monitoring and Synthesis Project has also produced the following Synthesis Notes:

- Synthesis Note 1: **Key findings with PRSPs to date (September 2001)**
- Synthesis Note 2: **DFID's engagement with PRSPs – draft (December 2001)**

Appendix 2

- The full report of 'Assessing Participation' is available on the DFID intranet at <http://insight/prspproject/synthesis/participation.doc>
- The full report of the study will be published by IDS in February 2002 as IDS Research Report 52, available from the IDS Publications Office <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop>