



RAPID Task Order 1 (Policy and Design) Activity

Civil Society Capacity: Summary Report

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I. Introduction

This paper summarizes reports and other workshop materials from the DFID workshop on Opportunities and Alliances for Poverty Reduction in Southern Africa: Building State-Civil Society Sector Capacity and Accountability in Poverty Reduction (July 18-19; papers and workshop materials available at RCSA) and materials provided by Ozias Tungwarara from SAHRIT Workshop on the Role of Civil Society in Anti-Corruption (August 19-20).

II. Civil Society and Poverty Reduction in Southern Africa

In its regional programming DFID is seeking to understand the socio-political context in Southern Africa better, including what forces are at play, where the space for engagement lies and for whom, and what opportunities and alliances exist for positively impacting on poverty reduction in individual countries and across the region of Southern Africa. Towards this end, DFID commissioned a paper from the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) to provide an analytical overview of the political economy of the civil society sector in Southern Africa with regard to the poverty reduction agenda. Through engaging with and building on the findings of the work that was conducted by the CPS, the aim of the workshop on Opportunities and Alliances for Poverty Reduction in Southern Africa was to critically analyze political space, forces at play, opportunities and alliances for poverty reduction in Southern Africa.

The following section reviews poverty reduction agendas of the governments in the region and their attempted implementation to determine whether they do reflect the voices of the poor or create openings for them to be expressed. It will then summarize civil society activity relevant to poverty reduction – the degree to which it does express or create avenues for the expression of the needs of the poor. It then identifies the pressures for and against effective poverty reduction reflecting the voice of the poor in civil society. This section is followed by conclusions and recommendations for a program to strengthen the poverty reduction agenda in civil society in Southern Africa.

A. Official Poverty Reduction Agendas

In varying degrees, all the countries in Southern Africa have a form of official poverty reduction agenda. Also of possible relevance are supra-national plans to reduce poverty – the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which is meant to reflect the commitment of all the continent's states, and declarations of the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

National Agendas. The poverty reduction agendas in the various Southern African countries are of relevance for two reasons. First, they might give some indication of the degree to which the needs and concerns of the poor are reflected in government strategies. And equally important, they provide some indicator of the extent of governments' commitment to poverty reduction. This might indicate whether civil society organizations which raise the concerns of the poor are likely to be taken seriously – and, where they are not, whether the official agenda as a lever

which may be used to induce governments disinclined to pursue vigorous poverty reduction to change. Inevitably, the ostensible priority given to poverty varied between countries in the region. But in all, there was some expressed government concern at poverty which may provide an important lever for civil society organizations seeking to place the needs of the poor on the agenda. This positive point, however, is often diluted by the often vague nature of official agendas, weak implementation, and clear evidence that programs designed for the poor are not reaching them – or are misreading their needs and likely responses to government intervention.

Supra-National Plans. The official poverty reduction agendas in the region are also affected, in principle at least, by both continental and regional poverty reduction initiatives. On the first score, African poverty reduction plans are meant to be encapsulated in the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which was adopted by the Organization of African Unity. NEPAD projects itself as an anti-poverty program and references to poverty reduction are repeated regularly throughout it. It commits itself to halving poverty between 1990 and 2015 and many of its development goals envisage a significant extension of services and facilities to the poor – among the targets are universal primary education by 2015, access to electricity for 35% of the continent's population in twenty years, and a doubling of teledensity by 2005 in a broader attempt to “bridge the digital divide.” It insists that economic growth rates are not enough to eradicate poverty and that institutions, infrastructure and human capital are also important. Poverty reduction is prioritized in all NEPAD programs. Social attention is to be paid to the circumstances of women and HIV/AIDS is a priority for intervention. The political dimension of poverty is also acknowledged: NEPAD commits itself to participatory decision-making and to peace, security, democracy, good governance and human rights.

However, as with many of the official poverty reduction agendas in the region, NEPAD's identification of many of the causes of poverty is not accompanied by a detailed plan for its reduction. NEPAD therefore consists of a set of planned programs which have the potential to advance a poverty reduction agenda but has yet to spell out in detail how programs would be implemented in ways which advanced it.

B. Civil Society and the Poverty Reduction Agenda

The research papers find significant civil society activity in support of poverty reduction in the region, not only as providers of services to the poor but also as advocates for policy change. At times this entails energetic attempts to influence the poverty reduction agenda. Faith based organizations, community based networks, women's coalitions and national or provincial coalitions of NGOs are often key actors, as are trade unions, where they are a significant presence. Nevertheless, CSOs in the region lack the capacity to undertake a long-term, sustained and coordinated campaign against poverty. In most cases this finding reflects not only the financial and technical capacity constraints which usually dominate discussions of civil society weaknesses, but the reality that they are not embedded enough in the constituencies for whom they purport to speak: while many CSOs insisted that they regularly consulted their constituencies, few could demonstrate the influence of the poor in the poverty reduction agenda.

Organizations and Activities. A general point about civil society activity in the region is that civil society organizations are able to unite around key issues and to campaign successfully for common goals but that this activism is rarely if ever applied to the anti-poverty agenda.

Horizontal Relations: Relations between CSOs. A key source of effectiveness in any society in which CSO activity is permitted is not only the ability to engage with other interests, but also capacity to form alliances and coalitions. The reports noted that no single interest can frame the implementation of a workable poverty reduction agenda. A key test of pro-poor CSOs' capacity to impact on policy-making and implementation is, therefore, the extent of cooperation within civil society. An approach which fails to recognize the advantages of cooperation between CSOs is an important obstacle to an effective poverty reduction agenda.

Regional Civil Society. Civil society relevant to the poverty reduction agenda also has a potentially important regional dimension: while country specifics often shape the poverty reduction agenda, there are also important regional commonalities which CSOs may address through regional action against poverty across country borders. An example would be the SADC NGO coalition, which could provide an important source of influence in support of poverty reduction. CSOs will only be able to play this role if their participants develop far stronger roots among the poor and far more capacity to ensure more effective poverty reduction in their countries.

The "Invisibles". The reports note a level of "invisible" associations below those who routinely participate in policy processes. These groups are not formed to exercise citizenship rights and to lobby for policy but tend to immediate needs of their members – whether these are for economic survival strategies, designed to meet intangible needs for cultural expression or entertainment or civic duty. They include associations ranging from township youth clubs through savings clubs and cooperatives to church mothers' unions. They may at times exercise citizenship rights by, for example, asserting the rights of grassroots parents to control over their children's education. While this remains an exception, it indicates that it is possible for "invisible" organizations to engage in activities which seek to influence policy on behalf of constituents. It is therefore conceivable that a voice for poor constituencies may emerge through the strengthening and coalescing of "invisibles" rather than the deepening of visible associations.

A Sectoral Analysis. A number of sectors of civil society currently dominate the shaping of the anti-poverty agenda. These include trade unions, the church, the women's movement, the media, and professional associations.

C. Government, Democracy and the Civil Society Poverty Reduction Agenda

Theories of civil society have long pointed out that it does not exist in isolation from government. On the contrary, it exists in relation to government which decides whether and how associations have the right to organize and whether it is open to their influence. At the very least, civil society requires freedom to organize – and a political system which is at least open to influence. The reports found a significant correlation between democratic political environments and civil society freedom to organize the poverty reduction agenda. The research also provide

supporting evidence for the proposition that civil society influence, on poverty as well as issues, tends to grow in democratic societies.

Law and Reality. There is no country in the region in which civil society association is formally suppressed or subjected to onerous legal restrictions which sharply impair its functioning – although in some, legislation does restrict the options of CSOs: an example is a proposed stipulation that NGOs be compelled to join the national umbrella body, which the government recognizes, or new laws which limit the freedom of CSOs, including provisions on how they can source funding. But it is more common for CSOs’ right to organize be guaranteed by the constitution.

Forums and their Limits. A pattern of some significance is the penchant of those governments who do engage with the entire range of visible civil society to seek to do so through formalized channels. CSOs may be invited to serve on official forums, from advisory committees, either permanent or to address a particular issue, or statutory forums created to promote broad participation on social and economic issues. In several countries in the region, this had occurred. Some countries found that their participation had ensured that the tone of statements and declarations were rhetorically more pro-poor. But there is no evidence that they had significantly altered the poverty reduction agenda.

Representation and the Poor. The reports stress the degree to which elected legislatures are not representative of the poor and not accessible to them. The reports also suggest that a significant part of the solution lies in strengthening local government and in the assignment of far more of the anti-poverty agenda to it. Decentralization to local government may be an important part of a program to make democratic institutions more accessible to the poor. In addition, a redesign of parliamentary institutions to enhance opportunities for access by civil society in general and the poor in particular might be a crucial ingredient. A change of political culture in which representatives take the need to connect with their constituents far more seriously and government officials commit themselves to informing citizens of their choices and then taking them seriously when they choose to exercise them may also be crucial.

Independent Institutions. In several countries in the region, a potential opening for the poor in the governance system is the relatively recent establishment of independent institutions or offices to protect citizens’ rights and interests. These include anti-corruption commissions and Ombudman’s offices, which are fairly common. In some cases, these institutions have been able to act independently and vigorously to protect the interest of citizens in general. While the introduction of these institutions is an advance in principle in many countries in the region, they are not yet strong enough or sufficiently entrenched in their governance systems to offer an effective source of protection for poor people.

A Philanthropic Base. A final task was to suggest ways in which a domestic philanthropic base may be established which will ensure that civil society is not dependent on external donors. Unfortunately, most of the reports on countries in the region are at pains to stress that a domestic business base capable of generating the required philanthropic base does not exist. Therefore, the only viable alternative is to use foreign resources channeled through local institutions.

III. Conclusions

The following key observations and findings can be extracted from research reports and other workshop materials:

- Continued poverty in the region is not a result of technical or administrative failures, but the poor lacking a voice in public policy. Were poor people to be able to organize effectively so that their voice was heard, a poverty reduction agenda consistent with the needs and circumstances of the poor, and thus capable of reducing poverty, could emerge. All the countries studied have official poverty reduction strategies, which offer a climate that is potentially hospitable to civil society action to reduce poverty.

The poor often have not played a role in framing or implementing official poverty reduction agendas in Southern Africa. Civil society organizations could redress this problem, provided existing strategies and initiatives are built on.

- Significant civil society activity occurs in support of poverty reduction in the region, but civil society organizations lack the capacity to undertake a long-term, sustained and coordinated campaign against poverty. Apart from financial and technical capacity constraints, many CSOs are not embedded enough in their constituencies, in particular the poor.
- Most civil society mobilization in the region is devoted to welfare rather than advocacy for policy change.
- A key weakness is failure to cooperate sufficiently within civil society to sustain a workable poverty reduction campaign and to engage business and government through open, democratic politics.
- There is a positive correlation between democracy and civil society action for poverty reduction: the more democratic the society, the more likely is it that civil society organizations will be able to press for a democratic poverty reduction agenda. However, formal democratic institutions, where they exist, are not yet responsive to the poor.

IV. Recommendations

The reports recommend:

- Development of a strategy devoted to enhance poverty reduction through strengthening existing capacities and building links between activity and poverty reduction goals. The key is contact between the actors relevant to a poverty reduction agenda to open opportunities for cooperation and to expose social actors to ideas and information that might enhance poverty reduction work.

- Cooperation does not mean eliminated differences or even tensions, but building links through open democratic dialog of ideas and values.
- The ability of civil society organizations to advance the poverty reduction agenda depends on stronger roots among the poor and their capacity to articulate the needs and concerns of their constituency; coherent and practical strategy formulation; winning support for that agenda; alliances; and monitoring of poverty reduction programs.