



THE AFRICAN CAPACITY
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CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE FORMULATION
OF MALAWI'S POVERTY REDUCTION
STRATEGY PAPER: A LONG WALK TO
PARTICIPATION

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Civil Society in the Formulation of Malawi's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper: A Long Walk to Participation¹

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CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE FORMULATION OF MALAWI'S POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY PAPER: A LONG WALK TO PARTICIPATION

RICK JAMES AND WISEMAN CHIRWA

I. INTRODUCTION

'We must never stop reminding ourselves that it is up to government and its people to decide what their priorities should be. We should never stop reminding ourselves that we cannot and should not impose development by fiat from above' James Wolfensohn, President World Bank (Aycrigg 1998:1)

The last six years has witnessed a remarkable shift in the thinking and approach of the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as illustrated by the quote above. They have attempted to replace the much-maligned and imposed conditionalities of Structural Adjustment Policies by the concept of a 'country-owned' Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) as the framework for future concessional lending to aid-dependent countries and for debt relief. The view of the World Bank is that this enhanced framework for poverty reduction will ensure a robust link between debt relief and poverty reduction by making debt relief an integral part of the broader efforts to implement outcome-oriented poverty reduction strategies (see McGee and Norton 2001). A key element of this 'country-ownership' is that it is not simply government-owned, but developed in co-operation with other stakeholders, and particularly those directly affected by or working to address poverty. In this way, policy and planning processes should be open to extensive participation by ordinary people and civil society groups. Civil society involvement in the PRSP is in fact part of a much wider and shifting debate about the relationship between civil society, state and the market (Beauclerk and Heap 2001).

II. HOW HAS CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATED IN THE MPRSP?

Broad and popular participation is one of the key conditions the Bank uses for endorsing the preparation of the national PRSP. The reasoning is that 'broad-based participation of civil society in the adoption and monitoring of the poverty reduction strategy tailored to country circumstances will enhance its sustained implementation' (IMF website). A participatory approach is also conducive to building national ownership of the poverty reduction strategy, which should help implementation in a sustained and effective manner.

Malawian civil society groups joined the PRSP formulation process, rather than set up a parallel initiative as occurred in some other countries. They participated in the MPRSP at various stages:

1. Initial Entry Points: Interim PRSP (I-PRSP) and Launch of PRSP
2. Analysis, Diagnosis and Strategy Formulation in Thematic Working Groups
3. District Consultations
4. Technical Committee Drafting Process

(a) Process Indicators

Much of the initial MPRSP work was done towards the end of the year 2000 by a very small group of government employees, mostly economists from the Ministry of Finance (MoFEP) and the National Economic Council (NEC). Available documents suggest that in its initial phase, the I-PRSP was 'extremely unconsultative', characterised by almost complete exclusion of civil society, and some bi-lateral donors. Recent reviews of the process (see Chirwa and Nyirenda 2002 and Jenkins and Tsoka 2001) have observed that the initial diagnostic work was criticised for its reliance on previous policy framework papers that had been fairly crudely assembled into an I-PRSP under the direction of a small group of Government officials working with World Bank staff members. The I-PRSP therefore did not constitute an entry point for civil society participation in the process.

Only four CSOs were invited to the launch of the PRSP consultation process in January 2001. At this stage civil society's involvement was envisaged as a series of one-day workshops to which various sectors of civil society would be invited so that they could voice their views. The PRSP consultation and drafting process was scheduled to take little more than two months. Intense lobbying with government and donors by a nascent network of CSOs, the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN), changed civil society engagement in the process considerably. MEJN managed to get the PRSP consultation time frame extended from April 2001 to September 2001 in order to allow more in-depth participation of civil society. MEJN also managed to convince the Technical Committee of the PRSP of the value of having civil society representatives in each of the Thematic Working Groups (TWG).

(b) Developmental Indicators

The most important fora for the direct engagement between CSOs, Government and donors, especially bi-lateral donors, were the TWGs. From just four CSO invitees in January 2001, there were an estimated 101 CSO representatives on the 18 PRSP working groups by April 2001. It was here that civil society had the greatest opportunity to influence both the process and the decisions. Government invited some CSOs, while others were suggested by MEJN to the Government. The quality of civil society participation in the TWGs, however, varied considerably between groups.

(c) Outcome/Impact Indicators

At the district level, the important participation fora for civil society as a whole were the district workshops. The Technical Committee and the National Steering Committee of the PRSP planned these, and three teams of four people were sent out to the 31 districts. Most of the people that were supposed to attend the district workshops were invited and an attempt was made to include the special groups such as the business women's groups, and the disabled. Few members of local CSOs, however, were involved in the consultations in their respective districts.

(d) Technical Committee Drafting Process

The drafting of the PRSP was done by the Technical Committee. Although MEJN was too late to secure an initial seat on this committee, it ensured that there were three civil society representatives out of the 25-30 on the drafting team, despite Government resistance. Although some civil society nominations were refused by Government, having any civil society representation at all in such a sensitive process is a remarkable achievement. Few other countries have allowed civil society in at this 'end-game' stage.

III. WHAT WAS THE QUALITY OF CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION?

To assess the quality of participation, one must first define 'quality'. A useful framework has been put forward by Morrissey (2000 quoted by McGee and Norton 2000: 68) in which he suggests three levels at which to assess the 'quality of participation':

1. **Process indicators** (who participates, at what level and with what capacity?)
2. **Developmental indicators** (how have different capacities and relationships been built by the participation?)
3. **Impact indicators** (how has the participation impacted the PRSP document itself?)

In assessing quality, it is important to accept both the 'relative' and the 'interpretive' nature of the term. Quality is relative because it depends to a large extent on the starting point. Recent analysis of these particular cultural, historical, social, economic and political forces in Malawi have revealed a context where civil society participation in decision-making processes is far from the norm. The study concluded that:

- People are not used to challenging authority
- Government is not used to being constructively challenged - a climate of mistrust prevails
- Accusations of partisanship and politicking are very close to the surface
- There is limited analytical capacity of CSO sector
- CSOs are not used to working together and tend to be very disorganised
- CSOs have limited time to give to advocacy work (James 2001: 5).

Overall, civil society participation in the MPRSP compared favourably with both previous experience in policy formulation exercises in Malawi as well as with civil society experiences in other countries. The recently departing World Bank Res. Rep. Robert Liebenthal asserted that one of the highlights of his stay in Malawi had been that: 'Civil society groups have played a significant role in influencing the time-table and the method of consultation, as well as the evolving content of the strategy.' (*Weekend Nation* Newspaper 15.9.01). The analysis of the MPRSP by the Overseas Development Institute concluded that the MPRSP was 'one of the most participatory exercises in the country's brief history of democratic policy-making. The inclusion of CSOs in the functioning of sectoral working groups allowed the process to move from simple consultation to more substantive participation.' (Jenkins and Tsoka 2001: 6).

(a) Process Indicators

Who Participated?

Involving all stakeholders at every stage of the PRSP is neither feasible nor desirable. 'Decisions as to who participates, when, and how, are therefore crucial. These decisions need to be made transparently, and in a way that commands the respect of civil society organisations and the broader public' (IDS 2000:4). An important dimension to the quality of civil society participation is therefore answered by the questions: Who participated? How representative were they? How inclusive were they?

In the **thematic working groups** (TWGs) there was a broad range of CSOs involved in the different groups, though it was not clear from the different stakeholders what criteria were used in selecting the civil society participants. This affected the quality of participation in the sense that in most cases the participants were not chosen based on their individual or institutional expertise and niches. The selection process (read invitations) answered the question of quantity, rather than quality. Another issue was the erratic attendance of some CSOs at their TWGs, leading to one civil society member to lament that: 'I was disappointed with our participation in the meetings of the thematic working groups. We cry for opportunities to participate in important national policy planning processes. When the opportunity comes we do not effectively make use of it'. The main reasons given for this by CSOs included lack of resources and lack of advance warning of meetings.

In terms of representation, the CSOs involved in the TWGs were definitely representative of the CSO sector. A broad range of organisations were involved, even if some key CSOs, such as the Malawi Congress of Trades Unions were left out by Government. But there was not any evidence of explicit attempts by CSOs to consult with their constituents on PRSP issues. This is a major issue in terms of the PRSP attempts to improve quality by integrating the voice and priorities of the poor.

The **district consultations** were certainly a much better opportunity to do this direct consultation with the poor. Field interview data (see Chirwa and Nyirenda 2002) show, however, that while attempts were made to include special categories such as women's groups, business people and the disabled, generally the participants of the district

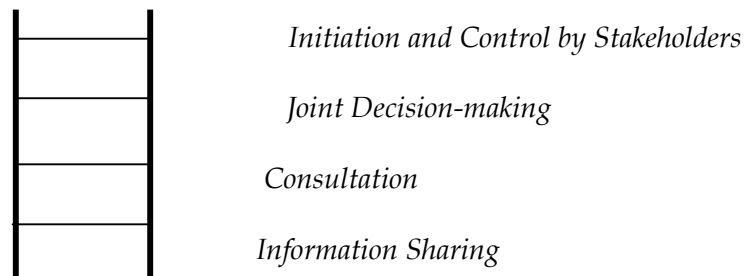
workshops were not representative of the population. The meetings were dominated by elected local officials and 'other influential people within the districts' (Jenkins and Tsoka 2001). CSO representation was minimal, consisting in most cases of two or three NGOs.

In terms of who participated in the **final drafting team**, it has already been pointed out that civil society inclusion at such a sensitive stage is very rare internationally. In the MPRSP, however, three members of civil society were included. Of the names suggested by MEJN, however, only two were accepted as the MEJN Co-ordinator was rejected for being 'too critical'. The Government appointed the third representative from an international NGO donor without any consultation.

Most Government officials felt that gender was taken care of by the inclusion of a cross-cutting TWG on gender. In terms of participation, however, the gender balance in all these processes has been weak, illustrated by one woman councillor complaining that, 'I was the only woman at the meeting'. In the drafting team, all CSO representatives have been male.

At What Level?

Another key dimension of quality participation is the level of participation. A commonly-used ladder of participation differentiates between:



Source: McGee and Norton 2000 – see definition of terms Section 1.6.

Although some of the district consultations remained at the more superficial level of information sharing, most of the civil society participation in the PRSP can be placed at the level of consultation. Some can even be placed at the level of joint decision-making, such as with Government's acceptance of civil society's demand to extend the formulation process. Unsatisfied with the time frame and the level of involvement of civil society, MEJN proposed an 'alternative process' based on appraising working group discussions; continuing the PRSP process beyond the presentation of the annual budget; and drawing up clear targets and monitoring mechanisms for the HIPC funds, much of which has been taken on to some extent.

For the most part, however, the term 'consultation' best describes the nature of civil society participation, as consultation does not imply any obligation to incorporate into the final product the perspectives expressed by civil society. For MEJN this was

frustrating as they argued, 'it was not a question of being consulted; it was a question of participating'. A self-assessment of the process by MEJN members indicated that the opportunity to participate in the PRSP process was not maximised. Members felt that they had taken a ride and failed to drive the process. Part of the blame should be attributed to the civil society participants themselves. Some of them did not possess the technical acumen for the exercise. The result is that they were sometimes more **representatives** than **participants**.

With What Capacity?

CSOs themselves are the first to admit that they did not bring adequate capacity to participate in the process. They accept that most members of civil society did not properly comprehend what they were going through. For quite a few of them, especially those from smaller NGOs, the exercise was too technical for them. It took time for them to start appreciating the purposes and benefits of the PRSP process. The poor quality of understanding led to poor quality participation. Problems of understanding and lack of familiarity with the process also contributed to the erratic attendance at the meetings and the actual participation in the entire process. Admittedly, the quality of understanding has improved over time, thanks to the efforts and activities of MEJN.

CSOs have had limited capacity to participate effectively in the PRSP for a number of other reasons. As most CSOs exist at subsistence level, they have very little spare time and money to invest in such policy advocacy work, particularly when few have managed to mainstream their advocacy work into their programme budgets. The short-term demands for individual survival often took precedence over medium-term collective success of the PRSP. Education levels and analytical skills amongst CSO staff are limited. Few CSO staff have reached Masters level and as a result there is sometimes not a very deep understanding of the complexities of the issues they are fighting for.

(b) Developmental Indicators

While a successful Doha would mitigate the trade diversion of the global trade towards regionalism, a number of potentially discriminatory aspects of regionalism could possibly be included in the Doha agreement. This raises the issue of the relative benefits of regionalism as compared to the global trading system, and its inherent "coherence" in terms of the OECD development goals. Does regionalism support unilateral/multilateral reform goals, or does the discrimination inherent to a trade block lead to a "second best" outcome at best, or an inward-looking one at worst? In the case of the latter outcome, the trend could be highly detrimental to African development prospects.

As well as these process indicators, an assessment of the quality of participation must also include how different civil society capacities and relationships have been built by the process – developmental indicators. From a long-term perspective, these may be the most important for Malawi, and were certainly the area of peak achievement.

Improved Capacity of Civil Society

Probably the greatest impact on civil society of the PRSP process has been the encouragement to work more closely together. Given the contextual starting point this is no mean feat and has been about 'breaking new ground' (James 2001). The most obvious indicator of this has been the birth of MEJN. As Jenkins and Tsoka state, 'the coming together of a civil society network to engage with government and donors on economic policy is perhaps the most promising development to have emerged from Malawi's PRSP process (2001: 38)'.

In turn, the work of MEJN has improved capacity at the level of the individual CSO. The MEJN meetings, workshops, newsletters and briefing papers have considerably improved economic literacy within CSOs in Malawi. It has also challenged some of the cultural inhibitions, as one respondent noted, 'it is very strange for Malawians to fight Government as they have at MEJN'.

Civil Society and Government Relations

Government relations with civil society have been up and down during the PRSP formulation process. At one time, relations were extremely strained when MEJN described the MPRSP as 'a joke' – a soundbite that was widely publicised in the international community (Bretton Woods Project Update 2001). Certainly, over time there was undoubtedly increased dialogue and communication between CSOs and Government, with better sharing of information and invitations to meetings. It has become the norm for civil society to receive invitations, whereas it used to be the exception. Despite the problems, the Government appreciates the participation of civil society in the PRSP formulation process.

(c) Outcome/Impact Indicators

The most obvious indicator of quality participation by civil society is the difference it made to the PRSP itself. Participation is largely meaningless, if it does not lead to actual change. There do appear to be a number of areas where civil society can claim to have had a direct input into the current draft:

- Civil society has been accorded a role in the monitoring and evaluation section at their insistence
- CSO representatives largely wrote the chapter on Safety Nets as the TWG never met' according to some informants
- CSOs gave considerable input into pro-poor agricultural strategies that focus on small-holder farmers; issues of access in health and education; and the sections on HIV/AIDS and gender

IV. CONCLUSION

Overall, the PRSP in Malawi was a watershed in civil society participation in policy formulation. Despite a history which discourages such processes, for the first time there was a degree of civil society involvement at many different levels. This was also considerably better than many countries where, according to a DFID survey, civil society in the PRSP process has been 'limited and superficial' (SGTS and Associates 2001 'Strengthening CS Participation in PRSPs report to DFID': 3, quoted by Christian Aid 2001). Civil society has done much more in Malawi than merely witness the process, due largely to the lobbying of MEJN. The level of participation may not be as deep as civil society would ideally like, best described as 'consultation', rather than 'joint decision-making', and the impact of civil society on the final PRSP draft uncertain, but it is participation all the same.

Importantly too, the major achievement of this participation may have knock-on effects by building the capacity of Government and civil society to participate in the future. Of particular note has been the emergence of MEJN, as well as increased awareness by CSOs of their role in advocacy and holding Government to account. Government is now also more used to the idea and practice of involving CSOs in policy formulation. This is a big step forward in civil society participation, but it is a 'Long Walk'. There are many obstacles along this path. These obstacles can be seen in the understanding and expectations of all stakeholders of the concept and importance of civil society participation; limited logistical, financial and technical capacity by Government and civil society to engage with each other; and the ultimate question of political will by Government and donors. It is much easier to address issues of understanding and capacity than it is to address these sensitive issues of political will, which may be affected more by personal incentives to resist change than organisational ones to shift.

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THE ACBF WORKING PAPER SERIES

Overview: The ACBF Working Paper Series (AWPS) was launched in October 2004 as one of the instruments for disseminating findings of ongoing research and policy analysis works designed to stimulate discussion and elicit comments on issues relating to capacity building and development management in Africa. A product of the Knowledge Management and Program Support Department of the African Capacity Building Foundation, a Working Paper very often ends up as an Occasional Paper, a book or some other form of publication produced by the Foundation after a thorough review of its contents. It offers a means by which the Foundation seeks to highlight lessons of experience, best practices, pitfalls and new thinking in strategies, policies and programs in the field of capacity building based on its operations and those of other institutions with capacity building mandates. AWPS also addresses substantive development issues that fall within the remit of the Foundation's six core competence areas as well as the role and contribution of knowledge management in the development process.

Objectives: AWPS is published with a view to achieving a couple of objectives. Fundamental among these are the following:

- To bridge knowledge gaps in the field of capacity building and development management within the African context.
- To provide analytical rigor and experiential content to issues in capacity building and the management of development in Africa.
- To highlight best practices and document pitfalls in capacity building, the design, implementation and management of development policies and programs in Africa.
- To systematically review, critique and add value to strategies, policies and programs for national and regional economic development, bringing to the fore pressing development issues and exploring means for resolving them.

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 - Public Administration and Management.
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 - Professionalization of the Voices of the Private Sector and Civil Society.
- Engendering of development
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