

## Organizing Participation

**N**ongovernmental organizations (NGOs), interdisciplinary research groups, universities, unions, lobbying groups, and other civil society entities can play various roles in monitoring the implementation of a poverty reduction strategy (PRS). They may be suppliers of information and carry out certain monitoring activities. They may also be important users of the information and analysis, which allow them to participate in the policy debate. Civil society participation is therefore a design principle that should be incorporated in all aspects of a PRS monitoring system.

In many countries, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper has represented the first attempt at a participatory approach to development policy, and, for many observers, the widening of the political space that has resulted has been as important as the strategy itself. However, participation has a tendency to taper off once a PRS is adopted. Incorporating participatory elements into the monitoring system is a way of sustaining participation.

Among the countries under study, the nature and extent of civil society participation in PRS monitoring and the policy process more generally vary widely depending on the political dynamics. In the Latin American cases, civil society mobilized strongly around debt reduction campaigns during the 1990s and continues to be active in the scrutiny of expenditures related to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. Participation in these cases is focused closely on public accountability. Governments have come under pressure to formalize and even mandate the participation of civil society in the policy-making process, often through quite elaborate mechanisms, in order to sustain popular legitimacy. In

Uganda, there is a high level of civil society participation in the policy process. This has been attributed to the need of the single-party system to sustain its legitimacy in the face of pressures for democratization and has led to a relationship between civil society actors and the government that is considered too close by some (Brock, Cornwall, and Gaventa 2001). In other cases, such as Albania, the Kyrgyz Republic, Malawi, and Niger, where there is a limited tradition of civil society engagement in policy making, it may take considerable time for national NGOs to develop the skills and interest to participate actively in the PRS process.

The challenges of organizing participation are therefore very different in each case. A well-designed PRS monitoring system may, however, help provide civil society with the information it needs to take part in the policy process. The system may also place the relationship between civil society and government on a more constructive basis.

Among the countries under study, it is possible to distinguish different forms of civil society participation in PRS monitoring systems, as follows:

1. *Carrying out monitoring activities.* Civil society may have a comparative advantage in certain monitoring activities, including participatory poverty assessments, service-delivery satisfaction surveys, and citizen report cards. Civil society organizations (CSOs) have also made useful contributions in budget monitoring and analysis and in public expenditure tracking. International NGOs have been active in training and organizing their local counterparts to carry out these activities. It is important to make a distinction between monitoring activities commissioned as part of a PRS monitoring system (as in the case of the subcontract for the participatory poverty assessment that went to Oxfam in Uganda) and those carried out by CSOs on their own initiative, which are more common. Thus, a PRS monitoring system may not explicitly plan for civil society monitoring activities, but may nonetheless draw on the independent contributions of CSOs in the elaboration of annual progress reports and other monitoring outputs.
2. *Participation in PRS monitoring system institutional structures.* In most of the countries under study, civil society representatives are included as members of committees and working groups of the PRS monitoring systems. These representatives are thus given the opportunity to contribute to debates on priorities, indicators, and targets and help in the preparation of sectoral and thematic reports. The value of this form of participation depends on the effectiveness of the committee system.

Organizations with very different interests, agendas, and knowledge may not always coalesce into effective committees and working groups. Active secretariats that prepare meetings well and ensure timely flows of information are key to effective participation. If membership on a committee becomes onerous and does not deliver clear benefits, the interest of civil society in the work is likely to taper off.

3. *Analysis and policy advice.* In some of the countries, independent research institutes, located at universities or NGOs, have become sources of analysis and policy advice for governments. Given the shortage of in-house analytical capacity in many government departments, this may sometimes be a key role for civil society. It is an area in which diversity is recognized as a value. The Tanzanian PRS monitoring system recognizes the dangers involved in investing the full ownership and control of research and analysis within a single or lead agency model. Hence, a conscious choice has been made for a more pluralistic and dynamic engagement in research focused on poverty.
4. *Information flows.* Civil society may also have a comparative advantage in turning monitoring information into products that are suitable for domestic audiences (a role that began in many countries with the production of simplified Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers in local languages). In some cases, civil society is preparing media campaigns and raising public awareness about PRS implementation, including through the creation of local information centers.
5. *Action-oriented monitoring.* Local NGOs may prefer action-oriented monitoring, which can directly feed into concrete improvements, rather than analysis aimed at dealing with broader issues of prioritization and policy design. For example, some NGOs monitor the implementation of selected projects at the local level in order to identify obstacles, and then they attempt to resolve the obstacles through interventions. This is often seen as less confrontational than broad analysis and assessment of government programs, particularly in closed political environments.

Interactions between civil society and governments have become institutionalized most notably in the Latin American cases. For example, *Bolivia* passed a Law on National Dialogue mandating CSO participation in determining, monitoring, and evaluating national poverty reduction policies and programs. The law requires large national conferences to be held every three years. A technical secretariat for national dialogue organized the participatory process. An umbrella group of 53 NGOs created the

“social control mechanism,” which operates at various levels, is represented on government agencies, and scrutinizes the use of HIPC funds.

Honduras has established a system of social audits, which are community-based accountability mechanisms for development programs. Local communities appoint a commission to monitor the use of HIPC funds by local authorities, and the results are posted in local schools and community centers.

Nicaragua has created a National Council for Social and Economic Planning, which is a communications channel between civil society and the government on development issues. It is mainly a user of PRS monitoring information, but also participates in the dissemination of PRS information and analysis. With donor support, it produced an independent, civil society critique of Nicaragua’s first annual progress report.

NGOs do not always wish to play an institutionalized role in poverty monitoring for fear that they will be co-opted and become controlled by government, particularly if they accept government financing for their activities. Many prefer to retain an independent voice, collecting their own information and preparing their own analysis.

A related problem concerns representation and legitimacy. Whenever civil society is invited to participate in public agencies and processes, this raises questions as to how the civil society representatives are selected and whose interests they represent. If the representatives are chosen by government (as in Mauritania), this may undermine their legitimacy. If CSOs and their representatives are selected on the basis of capacity, visibility, or ability to lobby, they may not truly represent the overall population, given that minorities and the poor typically have less voice and capacity to organize. In Honduras, representatives are appointed by a national CSO council, which can improve the legitimacy of the CSOs, assuming the council itself provides space for representative CSOs. There may be tactical advantages if CSOs form networks to pursue shared advocacy strategies, as is the case in Malawi. However, some of the Latin American country studies raise the question of whether it is appropriate to seek a unified voice in civil society or, in contrast, whether CSO networks should be designed to accommodate greater diversity.