Democratising Development: Deepening Social Accountability through PRSPs

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Summary for Session 1B: Human Rights and Poverty Reduction Strategies

Siddiq Osmani (Ulster University)

- UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) was asked in 2001 to develop substantive guidelines for the integration of human rights into poverty reduction strategies (PRS). These are operational guidelines for states, who are both responsible for human rights realization and the production of PRSs, but it is hoped the guidelines will be of use to other non-state actors such as civil society and international organisations.

- What is a human rights approach to PRS? Any PRS is not just a technical exercise but is explicitly or implicitly underpinned by norms and values. PRSs in the past have not been very successful in reducing poverty and it is asserted that this is because they are not informed by appropriate norms. The human rights framework however is a normative framework conducive to poverty reduction.

- A human rights approach empowers the poor in many ways: the concept of rights implies that there is an obligation on someone’s part to fulfill or realise rights. Looked at through a human rights lens, poverty is tantamount to the denial of certain rights (e.g. food, health, shelter). If someone has the obligation to fulfill these rights they can be held accountable. The human rights approach demands accountability mechanisms be put in place.

- Non-discrimination is a central precept for human rights which is immediately empowering to the poor as poverty is often caused or compounded by discrimination.

- Participation is also a crucial value and if this is respected in the production of PRSs, this is empowering.

- Human rights impose a primary obligation for fulfillment on the state but there is also a broader universal obligation on all states to work towards the fulfillment of human rights.

- The Draft Guidelines provide general guidance and principles to be applied in specific contexts. They have three parts: (i) basic principles of a human rights approach that should inform the process of devising a PRS (ii) how a human rights approach should inform content and (iii) human rights in the context of monitoring and holding governments accountable.

- They remain at this stage guidelines open for comments and will be piloted in the next year, with the final guidelines due to be completed by end 2003.

Jose Miguel Vivanco (Human Rights Watch Americas)

- Bank policy in recent years has taken a broader view of poverty, recognizing that discrimination, corruption and powerlessness all affect development outcomes. However the Bank has stopped short of taking human rights fully into account.
• The Bank has acknowledged the role of civil society in the formulation and implementation of PRSs but this cannot be meaningfully realized in countries where political rights and freedoms are lacking.

• The Bank recognizes that aid effectiveness is not just a technical issue but also one that needs to take account of the political context and incentive structures. However, human rights are not politics: they provide an objective framework of legal obligations that countries have signed up to. All PRSs should start with a human rights audit, overviewing the human rights instruments that a country has signed on to and assessing their current performance against these benchmarks.

• Gross inequities which are maintained by corrupt political systems undermine efforts of the Bank and other donors; providing aid in such contexts becomes a futile endeavor as the benefits of assistance are siphoned off by corrupt elites. The Bank needs to reach the conclusion that corruption makes PRSs almost impossible.

• Weakness of the judiciary in many states allows corruption to flourish. The Bank misses an opportunity in its legal reform programs by focusing primarily on civil and commercial litigation and should take on the issue of criminal justice.

• Freedom of expression is critical for development and poverty reduction: in China for example HIV/AIDS information campaigns have been hindered by lack of freedom of expression.

• Likewise, freedom of association is central to participation and poverty reduction. The Bank should extend the same principles that it has used in refusing to support projects that use child labor and refuse to fund activities that do not allow workers full freedom of association.

Mohammed El Hebja Lemrabott (Government of Mauritania)

• PRSPs aim to be a complete strategy looking at all aspects of poverty; to date, have perhaps only provided a partial analysis. More effort needs to be put into qualitative analysis and looking beyond economic rights.

• The PRSP in Mauritania starts with the finding that one cannot have poverty reduction without growth but growth needs to be of a certain type, and unleash the potential of the poor to engage in economic activity. The PRSP attempts to set out an environment where this could be achieved. In addition, the PRSP tries to show the synergies between various sectors but does not go into depth for each sector.

• The PRSP process represents a new way of doing business. There is a shift between past policies that were written often by IMF/WB and discussed in closed rooms to the openness and country ownership of PRSPs.

• PRSPs are empowering: they seek to involve citizens in dialogue and monitoring, and it is important to give people the means to participate effectively. For example, in Mauritania a Capacity Building Foundation has established a centre for policy analysis which helps bring NGOs to the table. During the drafting of the recent progress report it was notable that there were many groups asking what had happened to specific policy commitments contained in the PRSP.

• The PRSP both in terms of content and process is a tool to promote human rights. However, there are other processes at work in a country such as democratisation, environmental awareness, judicial reform which also aim to fulfill human rights. One should be wary of...
loading all onto the PRSP; the PRSP may operate as a framework to harmonise various initiatives but should not be over-loaded

Elizabeth Gibbons (UNICEF)

- UNICEF adopted a rights based approach (RBA) to its programming and other wok in 1996; what this has meant in practice has evolved over the years and still remains a learning process

- UNICEF’s RBA rests on several key principles that have operational implications: universality and indivisibility of rights means that there are no priority or target groups for UNICEF, just children; non-discrimination in practice means that UNICEF strives to help all marginalised groups no matter how small; working in the best interests of the child ensures UNICEF look beyond the purview of family law and consider issues such as budgetary allocations and poverty; and participation is seen as both a process and an outcome

- Although a RBA may have different starting points in different countries it pushes one to analyse problems at a structural level and to ask where are the accountability failures? In addition, it demands an integrated program response so UNICEF is increasingly moving away from health and education programs for example towards supporting institutional reform, decentralization and participatory government

- Development targets are seen only as interim milestones to the achievement of universal realization of rights

- UNICEF formerly focused more on the supply of government services; now a RBA has redirected efforts to robust empowerment strategies which enable people to demand for themselves services etc.

- However, there are still resource constraints and tradeoffs to be made. When everyone deserves the fulfillment of their rights how should one direct ones scarce resources? UNICEF thinks of universal realization as a long term goal and plans long term. In addition, funds should be directed at attacking the root causes of poverty

- Synergies exist between the PRSP and a RBA: both start with poverty analysis; both demand broad participation; both encourage a multi-sectoral integrated approach

- However, there are also tensions: a PRSP starts with a macro framework and then works out what can be afforded; in addition, they take a relatively short term view of 3-4 years. Participation has tended to drop off as the PRSP is implemented.

- Recommendations include: poverty analysis should look at accountability failures; participation levels should be maintained as PRSPs enter the implementation phase; PRSPs should seek to decentralize and thereby empower communities; and PRSPs should be seen as part of a longer term workplan

Discussion

Questions and comments

- Human rights are the most basic framework for considering poverty reduction and one of the key campaigns many NGOs have been involved with in recent years is that of debt relief and sustainability. Debt sustainability is decided on certain criteria such as exports and budget
allocations but is there scope to bring human rights into the debt sustainability issue? Is there the possibility of overcoming the methodological problems of “monitorizing” rights?

- Looking at the content of the PRSPs one sees that reference to international human rights instruments is very limited and perhaps this is indicative of a central tension: many PRSPs have adopted the Washington Consensus which is in many ways diametrically opposed to the notion of a state having a redistributive or regulatory role and this is one reason why there is a gap between PRSPs and human rights.

- PRSPs have something to offer a RBA: in particular, their focus on tradeoffs and where one can achieve the highest marginal utility could potentially guide human rights thinking. In addition, the focus on country ownership places the state centre stage as the guarantor of core rights.

- Measuring poverty is challenging and finding and instrument that truly reflects the multidimensionality of poverty is especially difficult. Given that any measurement tool should be operational and explanatory as opposed to theoretical and descriptive, can they panel make suggestions for how a measurement instrument could include human rights?

- Values are fundamentally at the heart of the RBA and is there not a conflict between the Bank and the Fund and groups that want to achieve poverty reduction and see this as the overarching goal? In particular, the PRSP sourcebook chapter on macro policy seems disconnected from poverty reduction.

- Participation has come to mean dialogue and discussion but not the involvement of poor people and their representatives in decision making. How can we move towards greater involvement of the poor in decisions?

**Responses**

**Siddiq Osmani**

- Response to a comment that the poor have to take the initiative: poor people take the initiative every day in order to ensure their survival. The problem is that there are structural reasons why their initiatives do not bear fruit and therefore it is important to address these obstacles. For example, lack of access to justice and information hinder people’s best efforts to improve their lives. To shift responsibility onto the poor is convenient but dishonest.

**Jose Miguel Vivanco**

- Using rights language is no guarantee that rights are respected.

- It is in the best interests of the Bank in the context of the PRSP to ensure that human rights principles are included in the process and if serious gaps are discovered between human rights obligations and state practice there should be clear and feasible benchmarks included in the PRSP to monitor improvements in behaviour. Corruption is usually the other side of the coin of human rights abuses.

- In order to increase civil society participation one must look at the enabling environment and ensure that there are the political freedoms in place to allow people to fully contribute to policy dialogue.
Mohammed El Hebya Lemrabott

- PRSPs are for some governments the first time they have had a debate with their populations on policy issues. However, if PRSPs encode the notion of country ownership, and as donors move towards budget support, is it consistent to ask the World Bank and the IMF to advocate for a human rights approach; in other words, why should a country listen to the IFIs demands for a human rights approach when they themselves are supposed to be in the driver’s seat?

Elizabeth Gibbons

- Difficult work to reconcile two different approaches but there is some progress being made. For example, in response to the question on measurement, UNICEF has recently prepared a proposal to explore just this but it is harder to “monitorise” and the include in the budget certain rights compared to others. for example, the right to food and certain standards of nutrition depends on external factors such as commodity prices as well as household factors such as cooking practice and so for a government to be able to develop a fully costed program to achieve this right is very tricky. Other rights such as education are more amenable to this treatment

- How to move from soft to hard participation? This is very challenging especially given the dispersal of views in civil society. One suggestion is for civil society to try and develop common positions as far as possible

Jeni Klugman (World Bank)

- Bank and Fund staff increasingly recognize that need to be cognizant of governance and corruption in societies and that this limits development effectiveness

- Low income countries are committed to market based approach but this does not mean governments do not have a role to play and thus the distinction between a RBA and the Washington Consensus is in many senses a false dichotomy

- There is a basic tension: PRSPs are a pragmatic approach recognizing country ownership is key but also focusing on budget constraints and realism of if targets. This doesn’t fit particularly easily with a human rights approach and therefore important to be honest about this and look for value added in each approach

- Measurement: number of dimensions which can be quite well measured but on empowerment and governance side is much harder