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Civil Society Participation Under the New Aid Approach

Pluralist prescriptions for pro-poor interests?

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CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION UNDER THE NEW AID

APPROACH:

Pluralist prescriptions for pro-poor interests?

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Discussion Paper for UNRISD

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Abstract

One of the most remarkable issues in the new aid approach is the place and role of civil society participation. It is mandatory and governments will have to prove that they undertook a genuine effort to involve civil society stakeholders in the drafting of the document. It is expected that civil society will monitor implementation of the PRSP and that they can provide valuable inputs back into the policy cycle. By now, a lot has been written on the wrongs and rights of introducing participation as a mandatory element in the PRSPs. In terms of assessing these participatory exercises, the aid paradox seems to strike again: it works where it isn't really needed, and where it is needed most, it doesn't work. In the words of Driscoll & Evans (2005), PRS processes have most clearly succeeded where they tended to coincide with a national project for poverty reduction (articulated by political leaders and widely shared by citizens). Notwithstanding the disillusionment with the results and impact of the processes, there are also positive sounds. In many countries, the PRS processes created political space for civil society, especially for NGOs, and it contributed to broadening the debate over economic and social policies (Curran 2004:5; IMF/World Bank 2006:26). The participation exercise also gave an impetus to civil society organisations engaging in networks, forming umbrella organisations and strategic alliances (Actionaid & Care 2006; Eberlei 2007a:5). The results are thus, at best, mixed and the huge number of assessments have led to an equally long and impressive list of recommendations: discussions on macro-economic issues should be opened up to civil society stakeholders, capacity building initiatives should prepare the poor for participation, participation of mass organisations and social movements should be stimulated so

¹ This paper draws to some extent on insights gathered during a joint research project with Robrecht Renard.

as to increase the legitimacy of the processes, participation should be institutionalised so as to ensure more control over the whole policy cycle process, from agenda-setting to policy formulation, decision making and implementation. The paper argues that most of the wrongs and rights of these participation processes can be linked back to a theoretical discussion on how the state should relate to society, and which model is more effective to ensure policy influencing. We will, in this paper, look into both the corporatist and the pluralist schools and see that the PRSP in design is closely related to the pluralist interpretation of participation. Most of the criticisms voiced around the actual shortcomings of these processes, on the other hand, are closely linked to the corporatist school. We will see that there are huge problems with the pluralist assumptions, and we will discover that literature seems to suggest that (neo-)corporatist models lend themselves better for deeper forms of participation, including on macro-economic issues (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith 2003:687). If we then take a closer look at some cases, it seems that reality is quite complex: corporatism has its own set of shortcomings, and more conditions are needed for the corporatist model to work effectively under a PRSP setting. We will take a closer look at four countries: Viet Nam, Uganda, Bolivia and Senegal². The aspects we highlight in these cases show that both corporatist and pluralist interaction patterns are imperfect and neither of them offer sufficient guarantees to ensure pro-poor participation³, yet at the same time both hold promising potentials.

² Important to mention is that this paper does not aim at giving a full account of what the participation processes in these countries entailed and what their impact has been. We zoom in on some events or remarkable moments which illustrate the tension between form and nature.

³ It is important to clarify that pro-poor participation and participation of the poor are two different things. According to some, achieving poverty reduction may be better served by supporting alliances and coalitions around a pro-poor agenda than by poor people participating. They underline a well-known fact that poor people often participate in politics on bases that objectively have little to do with their interest in poverty reduction, or that may be counterproductive to any goal of poverty reduction.

1. PRSP's and participation: where do we stand today?

The new aid approach was given birth by the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), which in turn were launched by the World Bank in 1999. Governments in low-income countries wishing to receive debt relief and/or concessional assistance from the International Financial Institutions, and more aid from the larger donor community were expected to produce a national strategy on how they would use aid to combat poverty⁴. Although nowadays the PRSP as a concept has lost momentum⁵, its principles and procedures linger on and have dictated to a large extent quite fundamental changes in the aid architecture. The principles upon which the PRSP-format hinges indicated a desire to move away from donor driven development, in order to give more room to home-grown, government led and nationally owned strategies.

Today, more than 60 countries have produced PRSPs. Most of these countries are implementing their second PRSP and some countries (like Uganda) are already shaping their third generation of PRSPs. Important to mention is the dynamic character of the PRSPs. In terms of content, the first generation of PRSPs was very closely linked to debt relief. They were, in general, very strongly marked by focusing on service delivery and social sectors. Some critical CSOs even referred to the PRSP as 'poverty reduction by access to services' (Curran 2004:6). Donors have been in part responsible for this bias given the commitment to and the urge to realize the Millennium Development Goals which are marked by a relative dominance of social sector targets (Driscoll & Evans 2005:12). The second generation PRSPs – learning from the shortcomings of the first generation – already gives more emphasis to the sustainability of poverty reduction by focusing somewhat more on growth issues. And although second generation PRSPs often introduced the concept of 'growth' in their name, at the same time it was noticed that MDG targets are increasingly used as poverty reduction targets in the documents, which still emphasizes the access to services as a strategy to reduce poverty.

⁴ PRSPs were introduced as the basis for the provision of debt relief under the enhanced HIPC (Highly Indebted Poor Countries) Initiative in 1999, but is now a requirement for all low-income countries wishing to receive concessional assistance from the World Bank and the IMF. For more information on the formal requirements with regards to HIPC and PRSP: www.worldbank.org.

⁵ The PRSP as a denominator has had its best time. Nowadays most countries refer to their PRSP with localized names, and more often than not the PRSP concept is replaced by 'national development strategies'. The underlying principles however remain the same.

One of the most remarkable issues in the new aid approach is the place and role of civil society participation⁶. In the formulation of the PRSP, civil society participation is mandatory, and ideally participation will give rise to the institutionalisation of civil society involvement, amongst others in the monitoring and evaluation of the PRSP. Governments should hold consultations on the first draft of the PRSP and a description of this participation process is included in the final PRSP document. The PRSP is then sent to Washington where it is assessed by the World Bank and the IMF. The participation process in itself however is not strictly evaluated or screened as such because the World Bank and IMF staffs are not allowed to make political assessments. Yet governments have to prove that they undertook a genuine effort to involve civil society in the drafting process⁷. In spite of this lack of evaluation criteria, it is seen as a crucial component of the new approach, and references to it abound in donor institutions and documents (World Bank 2004, IMF 2004, Global Monitoring Report 2006)⁸. Also in the Paris Declaration, several commitments are made in which civil society is recognised as an important stakeholder in the process. In Commitment 48, for example, it is stated that partners will "Reinforce participatory approaches by systematically involving a broad range of development partners when formulating and assessing progress in implementing national development strategies" (OECD/DAC 2005).

When the participation conditionality was launched in 1999, it went hand in hand with high expectations. Through participation pro-poor concerns would be addressed more adequately, ownership would be broadened, accountability and transparency would improve (World Bank 2002:240). Participation would thus not only be linked to better poverty reduction and development, it would also have democracy enhancing effects.

By now, a lot has been written on the wrongs and rights of introducing participation as a mandatory element in the PRSPs. With regards to the impact of participation on the pro-poor and developmental aspects of the PRSP, the picture is bleak. Although from a technocratic point of view most authors on the topic agree that participation of civil society has played a huge role in the setting up of poverty diagnostics, in providing supplementary information and using participatory approaches, which deepened the understanding of the multidimensional character of poverty (Worldbank 2002:3, Thornton & Cox 2005:10; Driscoll & Evans 2004:3;

⁶ The World Bank proposes a very open definition of civil society and it makes no distinction between profit and non-profit organisations. As such it includes the private sector as part of civil society. In this paper we will use the concepts of civil society and private sector separately.

⁷ In every PRSP one can find a very brief description on the organisation of the process. There are however no guidelines on reporting on the process, the number and the quality of participants, nor their contributions or if and how the contributions have influenced the final content of the PRSP.

⁸ Although the Paris Declaration did not involve civil society as a signing stakeholder, the declaration does mention the importance of civil society as a partner in development

Cidse 2004), there is a general consensus that contributions did not impact the final document. Added to that the pro-poor nature of stakeholders was often questioned, and capacities were often weak or insufficient. As Lazarus boldly argues (2008:1207) *"No change in macroeconomic policies – the stark similarity in the macroeconomic policy components of PRSPs worldwide has led to conclusions that the standard neoliberal macroeconomic policies at the core of every PRSP remain non-negotiable. [...] Participation is, at best, consultation [...]. Overall most supposedly participatory PRSPs have arguable done little more than produce a 'standard IMF package with a larger social protection budget."* A couple of other things are also remarkable in this PRSP-era: first of all very few PRSPs are engendered (McGee et al 2002; Zuckerman & Garrett 2003), and secondly, ethnic minorities and indigenous groups are remarkably absent, both as stakeholders in the participation process and as target groups in the PRSP document itself (Tomei 2005). On the other hand Driscoll & Evans (2005) state that PRS processes have most clearly succeeded where they tended to coincide with a national project for poverty reduction (articulated by political leaders and widely shared by citizens).

Interestingly enough however some scholars agree that with regards to state-society interaction, PRSP participation has produced important gains⁹ (McGee & Norton 2000:18). *"Relative to their starting points, in most countries the PRS approach has opened space for stakeholders to engage in a national dialogue on poverty reduction"* (op cit. IMF/World Bank 2006:26). In many countries, the PRS processes created political space for civil society, especially for NGOs, and it contributed to broadening the debate over economic and social policies (Curran 2004:5; IMF/World Bank 2006:26). The participation exercise also gave an impetus to civil society organisations engaging in networks, forming umbrella organisations and strategic alliances (Actionaid & Care 2006; Eberlei 2007a:5). On the downside it seems that most PRS processes have been dominated by NGOs, including many with strong links to INGOs and donor agencies (Driscoll & Evans 2005). This is considered problematic because there are serious concerns about the nature of NGOs: they often do not reach the poorest, they are often unaccountable to their target groups and other stakeholders, they are not always efficient, effective, flexible and innovative, they have trouble proving that policy changes can be attributed to their efforts. Added to that it is not clear to what extent (and if) these

⁹ Involving parliament or political parties did not form part of the mandatory participation conditionality, hence in quite some countries these institutions were not involved in the drafting or approval of the final PRSP document. Some observers therefore argue that in fact the participation conditionality undermined the democratic institutions rather than strengthening them. On the other hand however most LICs are characterised by the fact that these political institutions are extremely weak and mostly dysfunctional, yet their exclusion had led to somewhat more dynamic around these institutions: today more and more parliamentary involvement in PRSP can be noted and donors are re-discovering the importance of supporting this institution in its role. As such the PRSP process can be said to have worked in both ways: in its initial stage undermining these institutions, yet furtheron these institutions gain importance and attention due to their initial exclusion.

NGOs have links to grass-roots organisations. They may be even disconnected from the poor sectors they claim to represent (e.g. Hickey & Bracking 2005; Boussard 2002; Fowler 2000, Edwards & Hulme 1997). The relative absence of more traditional, member based organisations (like trade unions, peasant organisations, producer organisations), in most PRS processes is considered problematic, especially because some of these organisations seem to have very clear links to the poor, and given their membership based constitution, they also seem to enjoy more legitimacy (Driscoll & Evans 2005:13). Finally, most of these participation processes were not institutionalised but remained rather ad hoc. The same goes for monitoring and evaluation, it remains weak and participation is often not institutionalised (Eberlei 2003).

More often than not inventories of problems, like the one above, have led to a string of recommendations: discussions on macro-economic issues should be opened up to civil society stakeholders, capacity building initiatives should prepare the poor for participation, participation of mass organisations and social movements should be stimulated so as to increase the legitimacy of the processes, the private sector, business should be more involved, participation should be institutionalised so as to ensure more control over the whole policy cycle process, from agenda-setting to policy formulation, decision making and implementation.

The paper argues that most of the wrongs and rights of these participation processes can be linked back to a theoretical discussion on how the state should relate to society, and which model is more effective to ensure policy influencing. We will, in this paper, look into both the corporatist and the pluralist schools and see that the PRSP in design is closely related to the pluralist interpretation of participation. Most of the criticisms voiced around the actual shortcomings of these processes, on the other hand, are closely linked to the corporatist school. We will see that there are huge problems with the pluralist assumptions, and we will

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