

Do PRSPs empower poor countries and disempower the World Bank, or is it the other way round?

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I. Introduction

Policy reforms imposed on developing countries through conditionality have greatly weakened the autonomy of recipient countries. The vast majority of poor countries in Africa, and many in Latin America and Asia, have been subject to a series of IMF and World Bank adjustment packages, especially over the last twenty years. These reforms cover all the major economic decisions – budgets, tax and expenditure policies, exchange rates, trade and tariff policies, price policies, privatisation, credit policies – such that countries subject to them have very little control over their economic policies. Moreover, sectoral adjustment policies additionally expand the scope of conditionalities – including education and health policies for example. The Comprehensive Development Strategy of the World Bank further extends the realm of potential conditionality into the law and matters of governance. Conditionality thus has been a major source of disempowerment whether or not the policy reforms are in the recipient countries longer-term interests.

A lack of local enthusiasm for what appeared to be agency imposed-programmes was widely believed to be due to limited country ‘ownership’ of the programmes, leading to delays or failures in implementation. Consequently, the agencies began to argue the case for greater ownership. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) are the most concrete and widespread manifestation of IMF/WB efforts to increase country ownership. The question we aim to address in this paper is whether and to what extent PRSPs have effectively empowered poor countries, or whether, as some have suggested¹ they are ‘window dressing’ which in reality empower neither poor countries nor poor people, but rather enforce the power of the international agencies by giving the appearance of ownership without the reality.

PRSPs explicitly incorporate participation into the IMF/WB lending framework for poor countries. They follow a long history of concern with participation in the development community, spanning nearly four decades. Starting with a series of high-level declarations of support for ‘popular participation’ by international development organisations in the 1970s, to the re-orientation of bilateral aid projects towards ‘customer focus’ and ‘stakeholder participation’ in the 1990s, the concept of participation has increasingly been mainstreamed in the policy dialogue.²

The International Financial Institutions (IFIs) claim that PRSPs are country driven and nationally owned:

‘Country ownership is the guiding principle...the process and content [of PRSPs] must be designed nationally to suit local circumstances and capacities, and should be useful to the country, *not only* external donors’ (Klugman 2003, our italics)

Moreover, ‘participation’ of civil society is regarded as essential to achieving the principle of national ownership:

Poverty Reduction Strategies should be country-driven, promoting national ownership of strategies *by involving broad-based participation by civil society* (IMF 2002b, our ital.)

PRSPs were first introduced in 1999, and 78 have been produced. Therefore we now have some evidence to permit us to make a preliminary assessment of them, although because of their short history it is only possible to analyse the process and content of the PRSPs, not their impact when implemented. Our concern here is the extent to which they have increased national ownership of programmes, and thereby have empowered the countries. This is a difficult question to answer not least because ‘national ownership’ is not an unproblematic concept, nor is ‘empowerment’.

The term ‘ownership’ is borrowed from the realm of private property over goods or land, where it generally has a well-defined legal meaning, but also involves a psychological aspect, a perception of possession. When transferred to policy programmes, the legal aspect, which underpins the concept in its normal use,

¹ For example, 39 organizations and regional networks in 15 African countries agreed at a meeting in Kampala, May 2001, that PRSPs ‘were simply window dressing’. See Bretton Woods Project (2001).

disappears, and we are left with the psychological aspect. This psychological aspect could be just a matter of perceptions, without any change in underlying realities – i.e. that governments/local people are induced to believe they have ownership of what are essentially unchanged reality, by changing processes, such as the PRSP might bring about. But a genuine change in the underlying reality is likely to be needed to bring about a lasting change in perceptions. This would require that the national contribution to the design of policy programmes substantially increases, even if it does not become exclusive. There is also a question of what *national* ownership implies: is it a matter of governments' increased contributions to policy design and consequently changed perceptions, or that of civil society, or some combination? From the point of view of the democratic legitimacy of the process, any democratically elected government must be involved; in such cases, the role of civil society is more questionable – it certainly has an important role in helping form and check on government policy, but it does not necessarily have an independent right to determine policy,³ where democracy is limited, or non-existent, however, there is a special need to involve civil society to ensure popular participation in the process. In general, including civil society in the process is likely to be important – in both democracies and non-democracies – if perceptions of national ownership are to be enforced, and if implementation, which, of course, involves both government and civil society, is to be improved.

While national ownership can be increased just by changing perceptions, national empowerment cannot. National empowerment means that national actors (government and civil society) have a greater say in the design of policies. Hence we are concerned in this paper with whether PRSPs bring about a genuine and substantial change towards greater national contribution to the design of policy programmes. We are not so much concerned here with whether PRSPs particularly empower the poor, which is also one of their objectives – not because this is unimportant, but because it is not necessarily relevant to the general issue of national empowerment.

² Cornwall (2000) provides a useful survey of the participatory trends in development policy since the 1970s.

³ See Whitehead (2002) for a subtle overview of the ways the complex relationships between

While the PRSP process assumes that participation will increase national ownership, how far it does so must depend on who participates, whether participation actually affects the design of the programmes, or merely provides endorsement to externally designed programmes, as well as the scope and coverage of the PRSP process. It would be possible to have genuine and effective participation (i.e. participation which changes the nature of the programmes), yet to achieve little national empowerment because the arena over which the PRSP rules represents only a small part of the decision-making affected by outside agencies.

Specifically, to shed light on these issues we aim to explore:

- who is involved in the PRSP process
- how far programmes change as a result
- what proportion of IFI-affected decision-making is covered by the PRSPs.

The remainder of the paper will investigate these questions adopting two perspectives – first, examining the *process* through which countries have developed PRSPs; and second, examining the policies contained in the documents, aiming to assess whether the process has brought about a change in the content of policies, and also the coverage of the programmes. The sources consulted consist of countries' completed documents, as well as some primary and secondary contributions.

The next section first provides a brief overview of PRSPs. Sections III and IV present a general discussion of the meaning of participation and examine the available experience with drafting PRSPs, looking at who has been consulted and in what manner. Section V then asks whether or not participation appears to have had an impact on the policy content of PRSP documents. Section VI examines the importance of PRSPs in the wider realm of IFI decision making, while Section VII concludes.

II. Overview of PRSPs

PRSPs now form the basis for all multilateral lending to the poorest developing countries. They are policy documents produced by borrower countries outlining the economic, social and structural programmes to reduce poverty to be implemented

over a three-year period. They were developed as the main vehicle to implement the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) – the World Bank’s new long-term, holistic approach to lending practices which claims to place poverty reduction at the fore and to allow recipient countries to own and direct their development agendas.

Since 1999 recipients of debt relief under the enhanced ‘Heavily indebted poor countries’ initiative (HIPC), as well as concessional IDA lending and the IMF’s Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF), have been required to produce a PRSP. Finished documents must receive endorsement from the Boards of both the Bank and Fund, part of which, in principle, is based upon an acceptable participatory process.⁴ Following one year’s implementation, countries which qualify for HIPC relief receive the full cancellation of their agreed-upon debt, the so-called ‘completion point’. Countries can access temporary (‘decision point’) debt relief before completing a full PRSP by producing an interim document (I-PRSP) outlining strategies to be employed in the final document.

Nearly all low-income and highly in-debted countries have produced, or are in the process of producing, a PRSP. As of January 2003, the number totalled 77, roughly a third of which (28) have submitted a full PRSP, with the remainder an I-PRSP (24), or in the process of producing an I-PRSP (26) (Table 1). Of the 28 countries that have submitted a final PRSP, 23 have received approval from the Boards of the Bank and Fund, and eight have been implementing programmes for more than a year (Albania, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Honduras, Mauritania, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Tanzania, Uganda). In terms of geographic distribution, the majority of countries involved are in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (39), with the remaining distributed fairly evenly across East Asia & Pacific (11), Europe & Central Asia (11); Latin America & Caribbean (9), and South Asia (7). The PRSP process is furthest underway in the SSA and Europe & Central Asian regions, with most countries possessing either a completed PRSP or I-PRSP (with SSA leading the way in implementation of programmes), and have made least progress in the East Asian and South Asian regions, with the majority of countries still in the process of producing an I-PRSP.

⁴ The Bank has not specified what constitutes an acceptable participatory process, arguing that the great

Table 1 *Countries in the PRSP Process (early 2003)*

FULL	INTERIM	FORTHCOMING
Albania	Armenia	Afghanistan
Azerbaijan	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Angola
Benin	Cameroon	Bangladesh
Bolivia	Cape Verde	Bhutan
Burkina Faso	Central African Republic	Burundi
Cambodia	Chad	Comoros
Ethiopia	Cote d'Ivoire	Congo
Gambia	D.R. Congo	Dominica
Ghana	Djibouti	East Timor
Guinea	Georgia	Eritrea
Guyana	Guinea Bissau	Grenada
Honduras	Kenya	Haiti
Kyrgyzstan	Lao	Indonesia
Malawi	Lesotho	Kiribati
Mauritania	Macedonia	Maldives
Mozambique	Madagascar	Nepal
Nicaragua	Moldova	Nigeria
Niger	Mongolia	Samoa
Rwanda	Pakistan	Solomon Islands
Senegal	Sao Tome and Principe	St Lucia
Sri Lanka	Sierra Leone	St Vincent
Tajikstan	Togo	Sudan
Tanzania	Yugoslavia	Tonga
Uganda		Uzbekistan
Vietnam		Vanuatu
Yemen		Zimbabwe
Zambia		
Mali		

Source: World Bank website.

III. The Meaning of Participation

Participation has been used to mean different things in different contexts. One important distinction is whether it is interpreted to involve 'empowerment', implying some control over decision-making, or whether it simply means rudimentary levels of consultation, where little decision-making powers are delegated (Nelson and Wright 1995). Another distinction is between whether it is viewed as a means or an end (Goulet 1989). An instrumental approach views participation as a means to

improving implementation, efficiency and equity, while an empowerment approach values the process of increasing participation as an important end in itself.

At a minimum, participation requires that individuals and groups are involved in some way in the decision making process. This engagement can assume any of a number of points along the spectrum. The World Bank (1996) and others (McGee 2000; Narayan et al 2000) have classified participation according to four levels of intensities: (1) information-sharing (2) consultation (3) joint decision-making and (4) initiation and control by stakeholders. At one end lies 'information sharing', which involves very limited decision making powers but potentially important knowledge transfer and generation. At the other lies 'initiation and control', which implies a high degree of citizen control over decision-making. In between, 'consultation' exists when participants are able to express opinions, but are not guaranteed their perspectives will be incorporated into the final product. 'Joint decision-making', on the other hand, allows participants the shared right to negotiate the content of strategy. The boundaries of these different classifications are of course not clear-cut, and the type of participation involved varies with different stages of the policy-making process (e.g., early stages might involve more information-sharing, while later stages more consultation and joint-decision making).

Assessing participation critically requires a consideration of 'who' participates. Many previous exercises in participation were concerned with development projects, and in this context participation is intended to cover those affected by the projects. Another type of participation is Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs), which are aimed to ascertain what the poor themselves believe about their condition.⁵ In this case, it is poor people who participate. But the PRSPs are different from both these approaches, being centrally concerned with policy. The selection of groups, how representatives are chosen and how capable they are constitute important factors influencing the legitimacy as well as the effectiveness of the process. The extent of national ownership and empowerment will be greatly affected by these considerations. Groups affected by the policies form one important constituency. In addition, the government itself (central and local) has an important stake in policy. Moreover, if

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democratically elected, the government, in principle, is the legitimate representative of the people, more so than some random collection of civil society groups. Hence for national empowerment through PRSPs the government must be among those participating.

Finally, an important consideration relevant to ownership and empowerment lies in the manner and level in which participants are involved. Issues here are (1) whether the mechanisms for participation (e.g., conferences, voting procedures) are conducive to generating broad-based participation – for example, the timing and location of events can significantly impact the character of participants; (2) whether information is widely available; and (3) the policy-areas and stages of the decision making process in which participation occurs. Equally important is the level at which participation takes place, whether it is confined to the national stage, or whether it involves regional and local levels as well.

These considerations suggest that participatory processes can be judged on both the intensity of participants' engagement (e.g., information-sharing, consultation or joint decision making) and the degree of inclusion or exclusion of various groups, allowing participation to be assessed in terms of its 'depth' and 'breadth' (Farrington and Bebbington 1993). Participation can be 'deep' if it involves a considerable amount of decision-making power. Yet, it can remain 'narrow' if only a handful of people, or particular interest groups, are involved. Similarly, broad-based processes involving a range of participants could be considered 'wide', but if their impact were limited to information sharing or consultation, then their participation would remain 'shallow'. In theory a 'deep' and 'wide' participatory process would be best, but difficult to achieve in practice, while a 'shallow' and 'narrow' process would be sub-optimal in terms of generating the potential benefits of participation, either instrumentally or from the perspective of empowerment. However, processes which appear 'deep' and 'wide' can differ in the role and power of different actors, with different implications for who is empowered, as well as for perceptions of ownership. The role of external actors are particularly relevant here – both official (bilateral and multilateral) and non-governmental; and among non-governmental local actors, the relative role of the private sector, NGOs, and community organisations is likely to affect perceptions of ownership across different groups, the legitimacy of the process from a democratic

perspective, and the nature of the programmes, including their distributional implications. Hence just stating that particular PRSPs are deep and wide is itself rather uninformative.

From the perspective of identifying whether PRSPs are genuinely nationally empowering, the participatory process therefore must:

- be towards the initiation and control end of the spectrum;
- be an objective, not merely instrumental;
- give democratically elected governments⁶ a central role;
- incorporate a wide range of non-governmental stakeholders, and each should have capable and representative participation.
- give a much reduced role to *external* actors, official and NGO.

The World Bank's Definition of Participation

In its *Source Book for Poverty Reduction Strategies* (2002), the World Bank defines participation as:

‘the process by which stakeholders influence and share control over priority setting, policymaking, resource allocations, and/or program implementation’
(237).

The Sourcebook expects the following groups to participate (Box 7.6, p. 250):

- (1) The general public, particularly the poor and vulnerable groups;
- (2) The government, including parliament, local government, line and central ministries;
- (3) Civil Society Organisations such as NGOs, community-based organisations; trade unions and guilds, academic institutions;
- (4) Private sector actors such as professional associations;
- (5) Donors, both bilateral and multilateral.

From these statements, it would appear that the World Bank envisages participation in PRSPs to be a ‘deep’ process – participants should be able to ‘influence’ and ‘control’ policymaking and agenda-setting, as well as budgeting and implementation. The

World Bank's vision of the participation also suggests a 'wide' and inclusive process, encompassing extremely broad sectors of domestic society and international stakeholders, not only marginalized individuals, but also relevant representative institutions and umbrella groups. In terms of the matrix discussed earlier, the World Bank's definition of participation conforms closely to the ideal of a 'deep' and 'wide' process. However, we should note that the involvement of donors (bilateral and multilateral) in the participatory process weakens the national ownership/empowerment consequences. In order for this involvement not to negate any national empowerment effects, it will be important that they don't dominate the process, by setting the agenda, by their articulateness in discussions, and by their implicit financial clout.

In the next two sections, we will examine whether the reality of the PRSP participatory process has lived up to the claims of generating national ownership. In assessing participation in PRSPs, we limit ourselves to examining participation only in the policy making process, not in either budgeting or implementation. We will assess participation along two lines: (1) first in terms of the 'process' of policy formation, assessing the degree of inclusion, that is, the 'breadth' of participation, and asking 'who' has participated, in 'what' manner they have participated, and the issues in which they have participated; and (2) in terms of the content of PRSPs, assessing the 'depth' of the participatory process, and asking whether participation has affected the policy content of the final documents.

IV. The Process of Formulating PRSPs

(a) Who Participates?

It is difficult to generalise about the range of actors consulted in PRSPs given the diversity of country experiences. In some cases, there has been broad involvement across all the categories outlined in the World Bank's Sourcebook. Uganda, Rwanda and Vietnam have been acknowledged both by civil society and donors alike as

⁶ This is an easy condition to state, but 'democracy' is not at all straightforward to define (see Whitehead, 2002), and, almost however defined, in relatively newly established 'democracies' full

having fostered such comprehensive participation.⁷ In Uganda, broad-based participation was achieved first through Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs), which paved the way for constructive consultations between Government and civil society for the PRSP. Participation in the final document was widespread with the Government ensuring heavy public and NGO input through a large scale and high profile media campaign and regional consultation workshops that made concerted efforts to include stakeholders beyond the capital (McGee 2002, p.70). The creation of an umbrella organisation to channel civil society efforts ensured wide civil society participation in the debate over the final document.

In Rwanda, broad participation was achieved by incorporating existing indigenous participatory practices known as *Ubedehe* into the PRSP process. This involved a bottom-up approach to participatory design, the government targeting 9,000 *cellules* to produce public action priority rankings and community development plans, as well as a PPA and Policy Relevance Test to collect poor peoples' opinions on the relevance of sectoral policies (Bugingo 2002). Participation appears to have been largely home-grown as a result, with broad consensus that there was grassroots participation at most stages, which has helped in the post-conflict reconciliation and peace-building process.

Vietnam is another case of robust participation. Both donors and civil society observers agree that Vietnam's participatory process involved a broad range of actors, largely the result of good pre-existing relations between government structures and Vietnamese NGOs, particularly at the local level (SGTS et al 2000, p. 23). The government has involved local NGOs directly in its formal discussions with international donors. In other cases, local NGOs were able to express their perspectives in national policy dialogues through partnerships with international NGOs and donors.

In other countries, particular categories of participants were more engaged than others, while some were left out. For example, the private sector was particularly active in Mozambique (McGee and Taimo 2001), while it was notably absent in

⁷ For Uganda see Gariyo (2001); Robb and Scott (2001); and Worodofa (2002). For Vietnam see STGS

Rwanda (Mutebi et al 2003, p. 260). Religious organisations were quite important in Bolivia and Nicaragua but were missing in other countries.

There has been substantial government involvement in almost all countries, with high-level political authority guiding and managing the process of participation, though the breadth of involvement has been variable, with some (e.g., Kenya) exhibiting participation across different levels of government as well as different Ministries, while in others the process was led principally by the finance or planning ministry and concentrated at the national level (e.g., Mali and Malawi).⁸

Donors, including IFI representatives, have also displayed differing levels of engagement. In terms of designing the participatory process, it is reported that most have taken a relatively ‘hands-off’ approach, allowing national government greater room than before in conducting national and regional consultations (e.g., see Booth 2001, p. 27). Donor involvement has ranged from assuming an observatory role to organising and financing consultations directly. When it comes to more substantive issues surrounding policy design, the record is less clear as to whether significant changes have occurred. In some countries such as Ghana, Killick and Abugre (2001) report that IFI representatives specifically avoided excessive involvement in drafting the PRSP (p. 13). But there are reports of heavy IFI involvement in the drafting of Tanzania’s IPRSP (Evans 2003), and little improvement in the transparency of negotiations with IFI officials in Malawi’s PRSP (Jenkins and Tsoka 2003). The role of external actors appears even less changed with regard to lending facilities outside the PRSP process, as we will discuss further below. These issues have critical bearing for national ownership and empowerment and will be discussed further in Sections V and VI.

Despite the variety of experiences several key categories of participants have been excluded from the participatory process consistently across a number of countries. We summarize them briefly:

et al (2000). For Rwanda, see references in McGee (2002); Bugingo (2002); Mutebi (2003).

⁸ For Kenya see Hanmer et al (2003); Mali see Dante et al (2003); Malawi see Jenkins and Tsoka

Groups Missing from Consultations

- *Parliamentarians*: In a number of countries, the role of national Parliaments in formulating PRSPs has been minimal, particularly in Africa (Booth 2001), although it has also been a problem in Latin America (see Trocaire 2002). In some cases this has resulted from a lack of capacity to become actively involved, in others, because they have been left out of the process. In Malawi, for example, ‘only 5 MPS were involved in the process’ (cited in Eurodad 2001, p.9). In Kenya, less than 10 percent of MPs attended consultations (Panos Institute 2002, p. 25). In Senegal and Mali parliamentarians were only officially included in the final ratification of the PRSP (Phillips 2002; Dante et al 2003). Only six of the 83 MPs in Benin participated in meetings (Biershenk et al 2003). In general, it appears that in most African countries there is a tendency for PRSPs to be seen as ‘technical planning processes that are properly the affair of the government, and not a subject for party-political debate’ (Booth 2001, p 41).⁹
- *Trade Unions*: The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (IFCTU) reports that trade unions were not systematically consulted in many early PRSP processes. Although trade unions can in some cases represent narrow sectional interests, from a participatory perspective their exclusion in many countries is problematic. In Tanzania and Uganda national trade unions were told they could participate in the PRSP process only after the PRSP had already been completed and endorsed by the IFIs (ICFTU 2002). In Mali, neither trade unions and nor the important Cotton Producers’ Association participated at all (Dante et al 2003). There has been some evidence however of trade unions enjoying substantive participation in transition countries where as a result of the Soviet legacy there have been traditionally close relations between governments and trade unions (ODI 2003b).

⁹It must be acknowledged however that effectiveness of parliamentarians in articulating local priorities depends on the quality and general importance of parliamentary institutions in countries. In some, they do not exist (e.g., Rwanda and Uganda), while in others they are sub-ordinate to the executive or to existing patronage systems (e.g., Ghana and Kenya). As such the lack of parliamentary involvement in some countries may not have made much difference.

- *Women:* In a number of countries, participation of women's groups appear to be weak (World Bank 2001). In Senegal, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) (2001) found 'Civil Society organisations were ignored, especially women'. Zuckerman (2001) reports that in both Tanzania and Bolivia, consultations with women's groups were very limited (p.10). McGee (2002) reports that very few women's groups were made aware of consultations in Malawi. But there are reports that some countries made special efforts to include women. In Kenya, the Centre for Gender and Development was instrumental in lobbying for a gender-aware process (ODI 2002, 4), while in Lesotho, a survey found that a majority of communities felt that efforts had been made in the PRSP process to encourage women's participation (Panos Institute 2002, p. 43).
- *Marginalised Groups:* Many CSOs have been critical of national processes for leaving out the poor in consultations. Action Aid (2002) reports that at least five of its country programmes have complained that there has been little direct involvement of associations of the poor in PRSP deliberations. Critics of the process in Bolivia also report that organisations representing certain groups – such as homesteaders, peasants, and indigenous peoples – did not themselves attend and were represented by local authorities who were only weakly connected to the poor, particularly indigenous groups (Uriona et al 2002).

In many cases, participation has been selective, for example in Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, Bolivia, Tanzania, Honduras. Groups out of favour with the government have often not been invited. In Ghana, for example, members of the trade union movement reported that 'the Government preferred to consult with more sympathetic institutions, like the Civil Servants Union (which is not a member of the TUC), than with bodies which carry real weight within civil society' (Quoted in SGTS et al 2000, p.19). Christian Aid (2001) reports that in Bolivia, civil society participants felt that the government's selection of participants for the 'National Dialogue' was not impartial or representative of society (p.14). In Cameroon, the Catholic Relief Services (2001) reports that the government had invited participants in civil society

consultations, bypassing important civil society institutions such as the Catholic Church which were key campaigners for debt relief (p. 10). In Tanzania, the process for selecting civil society representatives was never made public or transparent (McGee 2002, p. 66).

In other cases, NGO participation was limited to international NGOs, or NGOs in the capital area. Smaller and rural NGOs, precisely those with the most contact with the poor, were excluded from the process in some cases. In Bolivia, for example, only one NGO outside La Paz was invited to initial consultations, while one of the most prominent local NGOs in La Paz was not invited (World Development Movement 2001). In Senegal, smaller CSOs, expressed the view that the PRSP process seemed more geared toward large NGOs (Phillips 2002, p. 56).

Even where a broad range of NGOs have participated, it is not always clear they were necessarily representative of broader societal concerns, while foreign NGOs frequently play an important role. This is particularly a concern in fractionalised communities, where local elite interests may dominate (Hoddinott 2002). Even in fairly homogeneous and united communities, the ability of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to be fully representative of the constituencies they claim to represent is often limited by constraints on their outreach capacity; or because they are dominated by urban professionals with little 'natural' constituency among poor communities; or by interest groups more interested in pressing their own case. For example, Killick and Abugre (2001) report that the non-state actors involved in drafting Ghana's PRSP were donor-driven and not representative of pro-poor constituencies (p. 32).¹⁰

¹⁰ Nonetheless, there are examples of attempts to ensure that the CSOs are representative. In Uganda, for example, the composition of the task force charged with representing CSOs was determined

(b) In What manner?

Countries have employed a variety of strategies for consultation and information dissemination, both formal and informal. These have included national and regional conferences to discuss PRSP drafts and proposals, where representative groups from civil society, sometimes identified by the government or CSOs at the government's behest, were invited to contribute inputs for the analysis of poverty and prioritising public actions. In some cases national consultations have been general in scope, and in others organised along thematic or sectoral lines. In several countries (e.g., Nicaragua and Bolivia) they built upon participatory mechanisms that had already been enshrined in national legislation (ODI 2003a). Other methods have included local surveys asking villagers for inputs into prioritising public action and resource allocation, as well as media campaigns ranging from TV, radio and newspaper announcements (e.g., Malawi, Tanzania, Rwanda and Kenya). PPAs have taken place in some countries (e.g., Uganda, Vietnam and Rwanda) to inform the poverty analysis that underpins the PRSP, and have included problem or solution ranking designed to inform policy prioritisation and budget allocations. However, there have been problems with the design and implementation of participatory processes, including the timeframe, information sharing and level of consultations.

Time Frame

Because debt relief is conditional on producing PRSPs, there is a strong incentive for countries to complete their PRSP processes as soon as possible in order to lock-in debt relief (Adam and Bevan 2001). Considerable evidence suggests this link has compromised the quality of participation. The Mozambique Debt group (2001) reports that 'the consultation process was driven inordinately by a deadline for the completion of the PRSP, which even with good faith on the part of the government, provided inadequate time to carry out a comprehensive consultation process' (quoted in Christian Aid 2001, p.33). In Ethiopia, the government attempted consultations in over 100 districts in just three days (Muwonge et al 2002). In many cases, CSOs were not given sufficient time to prepare for consultation. From a review of its country

programmes in six countries in Africa and Latin America, Action Aid (2002) reports that there was

a lack of adequate prior notice regarding meetings and consultations. Many were informed only 2 or 3 days in advance, and in the case of Nepal, 24-hour prior notice was given on one occasion...nearly all country programs felt such last minute notification prevented them from preparing adequately for PRS consultations; lengthy reports and documents could not be commented upon and the views of community partners could not be sought (p. 7).

In Bolivia, Honduras, and Cameroon, the Catholic Relief Service (2001) also complained of being given only a day's notice before consultations, with insufficient preparatory information or material (p. 22). The frequency of participation also appears to have been negatively affected by the PRSP's time frame. In many cases, there have been reports of local consultation workshops taking place only once over the course of a day without any further possibilities for participation at the local level (e.g., Honduras and Cameroon) (Save the Children 2001). This was particularly the case in Tanzania, which had one of the most compressed PRSP timeframes (six months from initiation to cabinet approval) and where the only local consultations took place over the course of a single day (Evans 2003).

Information Availability

In general, the consensus has been that access to drafts and final versions of PRSPs and I-PRSPs has been relatively good in most countries. However, there have been a number of cases where the availability of information has been hampered by:

- *Access:* Many CSOs have complained about a lack of access to core World Bank and IMF documents. In Nicaragua, the draft interim PRSP was available in English in Washington before it was available in Managua (ODI 2003a). In a survey of eight PRSP countries McGee (2002) found that the sharing of information with CSOs who take an active part in PRSP processes has been patchy. Governments have often appeared reluctant to share early drafts of PRSPs or budgetary information, which would be pertinent in consultative prioritisation exercises...In general, information seems not to have reached rural populations in time to encourage broad and well-informed participation in consultations; civil society has sometimes taken over the task of information dissemination when they consider governments' efforts or plans inadequate (Mozambique) (p. 9).

It has been reported that in Haiti, civil society groups have had trouble in obtaining even basic information such as which government ministry is leading the process and the timeline for its formulation (Christian Aid 2001, 14). In Senegal, civil society groups were expected to comment on initial drafts without having received it beforehand, although this appears to have been rectified at later stages of the process (Phillips 2002, p. 56). In Bolivia, although civil society participants had been promised the opportunity to view and approve the final PRSP at the end of the 'National Dialogue', this opportunity never materialised (Christian Aid, 2001, 33). Zambian NGOs also expressed concern that they did not receive all key documents and information necessary for effective participation in PRSP formulation, even basic information such as the amount of interim debt reduction (CRS 2001, 21).

More generally, although many have heard about them, knowledge of exactly what PRSPs involve appears to have been scarce amongst the populace in many of the first PRSP countries. In a survey of Africa's experience with developing PRSPs, Booth (2001) finds:

there is a tendency for the facts of the PRSP initiative to be fully grasped only by a small core of government personnel who have been directly responsible for carrying it forward. In some cases, a similar level of understanding is shared by a small number of academics or civil-society representatives...the availability of even quite elementary information on the subject declines quite steeply as one moves away from these central points. (p. 20)

- *Language:* The choice of language in several cases has limited civil society participation. For example, Cambodia's PRSP was only made available in Khmer in the final version and not in earlier drafts (NGO Forum on Cambodia 2001). In Bolivia some PRSP documents were initially only produced in English (Christian Aid 2001, p.13). A Spanish version followed but documents were never translated into local languages such as Aymara, Quechwa or Guarani (ibid.).

Level of Consultations

In some countries, consultations were held mainly in urban areas which limited the participation of rural actors. The IFCTU (2001) reports that consultation has been particularly deficient in rural areas in Africa, despite poverty being most acute there. In Mozambique rural communities and northern districts were far less involved in the consultation process than Maputo-based organisations (Christian Aid 2001, 33). The limited scope of consultations manifested itself in low awareness of the PRSP among civil society outside Maputo (Falck et al 2003). In other countries, consultations were limited to the national level, with few attempts to involve participants at the local level. Tanzanian officials and the PRSP itself state that the poor at the village level were not adequately consulted at the formulation stage (McGee 2002, p.6). It is precisely the lack of local level consultation that has prompted a number of CSOs to undertake their own grassroots consultations through parallel, civil-society run PRSP processes (e.g., Mozambique, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Honduras, Zambia, Malawi).

(c) About What?

Exclusion from the PRSP drafting process

A recurrent complaint in almost all countries has been that governments have come to discussions with pre-prepared drafts frameworks for PRSPs; CSOs have rarely been able to engage in the design of frameworks. CRS (2001) claims this has been the case in Zambia, Honduras and Bolivia:

In Bolivia, citizen participation in the PRSP drafting process was severely limited. Instead, a small circle of government economists undertook drafting of the PRSP plan for more than four months without including or even informing civil society organizations that had participated in the National Dialogue. Bolivian organizations tried repeatedly to pressure the government to be more inclusive, even appealing to international donors and the World Bank and IMF, but to no avail.' (p.10).

That the PRSP in Bolivia was drafted in a non-transparent manner is indicated by the fact that the final PRSP was received by CSOs through the German Ministry of International Development (IBIS 2001, 124). In Senegal, a main concern of civil society groups has been that when the PRSP process was launched in June 2001, the

government appeared with its analysis already prepared (Phillips 2003, p.56). In Zambia, CSOs have been denied representation on the Technical Committee for drafting the PRSP, despite a large and active coalition of groups organised to co-ordinate input into the PRSP (CRS 2001, p.11). A UNDP assessment of Lesotho's PRSP found that the procedures were designed to conduct the participatory process *after* the PRSP draft was already prepared instead of before (cited in McGee 2002, p. 66).

(d) Summary

While the inclusive nature of participatory processes in some countries has been 'wide', involving a comprehensive group of actors and interests, other processes have been less conducive to broad-based participation. Key sections of civil society (e.g., women, religious organisations, workers' movements, rural groups) and government (e.g., line ministries and parliament) have been missing from the process or insufficiently represented. In some cases, this has been because the design of participation has specifically excluded or neglected particular groups. In other cases, participation has been narrowed by rushed timeframes, a lack of information, poor dissemination in appropriate languages, and consultation processes which failed to reach local and rural communities. In almost no cases did civil society participate in the drafting the framework for initial PRSPs. Most were presented with drafts formulated by small teams of external consultants or central ministry staff. From the perspective of ownership, these limitations to the participatory process have constrained the perception that programmes were popularly owned.

We should note that in all these cases, the complaint is that civil society was not fully involved in the process, which was initiated by governments. However, from our perspective a strong involvement of governments would involve national empowerment, even if not the empowerment of civil society or the poor. A fundamental issue then is how far the national governments were independent of the IFIs and able to part from the IFI script. This is difficult to ascertain from a process perspective without detailed anthropological enquiry, but we can come to tentative conclusions on the basis of the contents of the programmes – which we turn to next.

V. The Content of PRSPs

This section examines whether countries appear to be empowered from the perspective of policy-making. Earlier adjustment programmes were criticised for their ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to policy design, and the resulting uniformity of reform packages across different countries. If PRSPs are genuinely country owned we would expect to see considerable variation across country programmes reflecting different national priorities and inputs from participation, and for policies to diverge from standard orthodox packages.

Has participation by civil society affected the design of programmes?

Participation has had its greatest impact in improving the quality and broadening the scope of poverty diagnostics. In many countries, the official definition of poverty has become much more multi-dimensional in character in the PPA work around the PRSP.¹¹ ActionAid Vietnam reports that ‘PPAs and other consultative exercises...have created a lot of opportunities for government participants to learn more about the causes of poverty. This has led to national plans becoming more ‘people-centred and pro-poor’ (quoted in Zaman, 2002, p.7). Uganda, Tanzania and The Gambia’s PRSPs have all broadened their definition and analysis of poverty to include such dimensions as security, vulnerability and powerlessness (Robb and Scott 2001, p 6). However, we should note that a move towards a multidimensional approach to poverty has formed an important element in the recent international poverty agenda – for example in the World Bank’s *World Development Report on Poverty* (2000/1) and in the Bank-initiated *Voices of the Poor*. On the World Bank webpage the introduction to poverty states:

What is poverty?

Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not being able to go to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a

¹¹ There have been, however, critiques of the poverty analysis in PRSPs, notably regarding the lack of clarity between characteristics of poverty and its causes, as well as a lack of disaggregation of categories of the poor and considerations of categories of those vulnerable to poverty. See Thin et al (2001) and

time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom.

The three major elements of poverty identified in the WDR 200/1 -- opportunity, empowerment, security -- are similar to those emerging from the PRSPs - so the broader identification of poverty in the PRSPs can be seen as part of the international poverty agenda, rather than as a sign of national ownership of the PRSPs.

Better poverty diagnostics, in turn, has led to a stronger focus on sectoral policies in most countries. All PRSPs emphasise the importance of increasing spending on basic services for the poor. All strategies also aim to increase the access of the poor to education, health and clean water, in terms of both coverage and quality. Vietnam's PRSP, for example, commits itself to ensuring the 20/20 initiative is implemented – 20 percent of aid and 20 percent of government expenditure is to be spend on basic social services (Vietnam 2002). Similarly, Nicaragua's PRSP aims to make additional investment in water and sanitation (Nicaragua 2001), while Bolivia's PRSP has allocated social spending according to positive discrimination criteria for the first time, favouring the poorest municipalities (Bolivia 2001). All these changes are very much in line with the international poverty agenda.

A more significant indication of some genuine contribution made by PRSPs is evidence that specific elements of civil society have been effective in lobbying national government to incorporate affirmative action policies. In Kenya, ODI (2002) reports that Pastoralist Groups successfully lobbied to have their concerns over access to productive assets, natural resource management and extension services for livestock to be included in the final PRSP document. They also managed to secure higher-than-average funding for education bursaries in pastoralist areas (McGee 2002 p.42). Women's groups have also been successful in bringing gender concerns into Kenya's final PRSP and influencing budget allocations (McGee 2002, p. 43). Action Aid country offices similarly report that HIV/AIDS groups in Malawi and rural peasant producers in Rwanda and Vietnam have been influential in shaping sectoral policies (Zaman 2002).

By and large, however, it appears that participation has had limited impact on the wider content of PSRPs. The perception among many civil society participants and third party observers has been that the recommendations made during consultations have largely not been incorporated in final documents.¹² In Bolivia, civil society participants felt the initial draft bore little relation to the recommendations resulting from the 'National Dialogue' (Christian Aid 2002). Only after mass demonstrations did the policy content shift, but still remained largely void of civil society recommendations for a wider approach to address poverty beyond social expenditure, such as land reform and political issues (Bendana 2001). Leading NGO groups were so frustrated with the lack of impact that they lobbied Washington for Bolivia's final document not to be approved (ODI 2003a). The recommendations from parallel PRSP processes initiated and conducted by civil society in Honduras and Nicaragua were also effectively ignored in the final PRSP (IBIS 2001). With respect to Ghana, Killick and Abugre (2001) report that 'it appears that the results of the community consultations did not feed into the analyses and recommendations of the Teams [i.e., core teams for drafting PRSP chapters]' (p.31). In a survey of civil society recommendations in seven countries, Zaman (2002) found that, while in some countries the adoption of inputs appeared to be good (Rwanda, Vietnam), in most, civil society proposals were generally not incorporated, particularly in areas of tax reform, budget-making, and civil service reforms (p. 8). The general lack of tangible impact on policies would appear to corroborate the complaint from many civil society participants that their involvement was limited to information-dissemination and consultation exercises at initial stages of policy design, and that they were excluded from decision making at the latter stages. Indeed very few countries had any civil society representation on teams preparing the drafts following consultations, an exception being Malawi where strong civil society complaint led to their inclusion.

The inability of civil society participation to impact policy is even more evident when it comes to structural reform issues. Most CSOs report that they were barred from

¹² It must be acknowledged, though, that in some cases this resulted because the recommendations from

participating in macro-economic and structural policy discussions.¹³ In a survey of eight countries, McGee (2002) reports that

There is broad consensus among our civil society sources in Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Bolivia that NGOs and their coalitions have been totally unable to influence macro-economic policy or even engage governments in dialogue about it. (p. 13)

In Bolivia, the umbrella NGO organisation, CEDLA, complained that the economic model was ‘a given’ and they were only permitted to tinker around the edges (Christian Aid 2001, 11). Honduran NGOs also complain of being excluded from workshops on the macroeconomic chapter of the PRSP, which was included in the final document without ever having been circulated to CSOs or parliamentarians for discussion and input (ODI 2003a, p12). Robb and Scott (2002) report that in six African PRSP and I-PRSPs policy discussions and workshops rarely discussed sequencing or alternative policies and trade-offs, and only in only one (Uganda) was there discussion on the impact of structural adjustment (p. 30).

Although national governments have been the agents of this exclusion, it appears they may have been equally constrained in influencing the macro-economic framework. The Honduran NGO network, *Interforos*, was told by government officials that ‘the Fund’s position with regard to macro-economic policies were not negotiable’ (Knoke and Morazan 2002, p.16, fn.2). In Kenya, the Finance Minister was reportedly sacked after a series of public statements that alleged the IMF and the World Bank were forcing the Government to undertake unwanted changes in its PRSP (Zaman 2002, 12). In some countries, there has been the perception among government officials that altering the macro-economic framework would prevent endorsement from the Boards of the IFIs, leading to ‘self-censorship’. A Finance Minister in a country developing a PRSP is quoted as saying: ‘We do not want to second guess the Fund. We prefer to pre-empt them by giving them what they want before they start lecturing us about this and that. By doing so, we send a clear message that we know what we are doing – i.e., we believe in structural adjustment.’ (Quoted in Cheru 2001). In their study of Ghana’s PRSP process, Killick and Abugre (2001) similarly describe

a strong reported tendency towards self-censorship on the part of the Ghanaian authorities, writing into the GPRS drafts wording designed to meet the anticipated

¹³ We should note that this does not apply to the private sector which appears to have influenced macroeconomic and investment policy in some cases where NGOs have been unable. See McGee and

demands of the IFIs...such second-guessing...does qualify the claim of Ghanaian ownership, which implies the GoG [Government of Ghana] was free to write what it wanted. (p. 14)

How far have programmes changed?

Probably, the most effective way to assess whether the PRSPs have empowered countries in decisions about policy-making is to explore how far they have altered the nature of reform programmes.

If programmes were truly nationally controlled, we would expect at least some PRSPs to exhibit strategies that differ from the standard policy prescriptions in the past. However, a striking feature of nearly all PRSPs is the consistency of their approaches to poverty reduction. All country programmes continue to give precedence to the importance of macro-economic growth and stability. Although this growth is described variously as 'pro-poor' (e.g., Cambodia), 'equity-based' (Burkina Faso) or 'broad-based' (Nicaragua), a general feature of all programmes is that they do not consider alternative approaches to poverty reduction, particularly those with an element of resource redistribution or that are rights-based (see Gerstner 2002). Even though in some cases strategies adopt the language of different approaches, the substance of the policies are still strongly focused on economic growth. For example, although land tenure reforms are discussed in a number of PRSPs (e.g., Kenya, Rwanda, Nicaragua, Honduras and Ethiopia) the focus of policies is more on consolidating property rights than on distribution per se (Marcus and Wilkinson 2002).

All final PRSPs also possess a set of core structural reforms that strongly resemble earlier adjustment programmes. All have a continued emphasis on:

- The reduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade, and a greater commitment to integration into the world economy through increased import liberalisation;
- The removal or reduction of price controls on such items as, gas, cotton, petroleum, transport, electricity, water, telecommunications, seeds, financial capital

- User-fees to recover costs in the provision of health and water services, as well as increased reliance of private sector provision of these services, although some PRSPs intend to cut user fees or strengthen exemptions (Uganda, Malawi, Mongolia);
- Privatisation of state owned enterprises and industries;
- Fiscal restraint to achieve macro-economic stability
- Governance issues and public sector reform, namely, civil service downsizing; anti-corruption policies; decentralisation of government services.

The purpose here is not to discuss the desirability of these policies but, rather, to highlight their similarity across countries, and to earlier structural adjustment programmes. The fact remains that there is very little variation among programmes, and many of the same adjustment instruments and targets have re-appeared in the context of the PRSPs. Both these trends suggest low national control over final documents.

Another aspect of PRSP policies that raises doubts over the level of ownership is the lack of explicit linkages between macro-economic policies and poverty reduction goals. In many countries' documents, poverty analysis and the macro-economic strategies are two independent sections of the PRSP with few explicit linkages between the two. Only in a handful of countries (e.g., Uganda, Burkina Faso) do strategies explicitly consider the impact of structural policies on poverty. The fact that most country papers do not contain these considerations, even though some of the reforms have been shown to be bad for poverty in earlier contexts and therefore possibly in conflict with poverty reduction (SAPRIN 2002), suggests that governments endorsed internationally designed programmes in most areas, in order to gain IFI approval.

Of course, who determines policy design is a difficult issue to assess definitively and the possibility exists that some governments have chosen policies that conform to earlier packages because they genuinely believe them to be the most effective in reducing poverty. Hence it is difficult to be certain that the counterfactual would prevail – i.e., if governments genuinely gained greater control their policies would have looked different. But the fact that so little variation in macro-policies exists

across an extremely broad range of countries, and that country programmes are conditional on IFI endorsement before qualifying for new lending, strongly suggests that governments were not empowered to any great degree in policy making. The lack of a coherent structure relating macro-policies to poverty reduction goals, and the minimal impact of participation on policies further support the view that governments' independence was greatly constrained.

VI. Ownership in the Wider Context of IFI Decision Making

The evidence assessed thus far is based on only a few years experience. The PRSP process is still evolving and following the high profile reviews undertaken by the Bank and Fund in January 2002 of countries' PRSP experiences, changes could be instituted increasing country empowerment. However, even if PRSPs were eventually to empower national governments and civil society, the fact remains they constitute only one of the programmes through which IFIs disburse funds. And at this stage it does not seem that the other lending instruments offer anything in the way of empowering national decision making.

The Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF) continues to play an important role in overall lending to countries. Administered solely by the IMF, they are credits to support monetary policy and fiscal reform. They are meant to be based on the PRSP and to integrate poverty reduction with macro-economic policies. Although the IMF states PRGFs should be 'open for public discussion' (IMF 2002a), they do not stipulate either participation or ownership as part of their requirements. Indeed, the available evidence suggests that little has changed in the style of negotiations – non-transparent and confined to a small number of policy actors – or in substance, with a close resemblance to ESAFs (see Adam and Bevan, 2001; Killick 2002). Although the number of structural conditions in PRGFs have so far been reduced by about a quarter, this has been very context-dependent, with large reductions in some programmes and no change in others (Adam and Bevan 2001). And while detailed structural conditionality appears to be diminishing, there has simultaneously been more emphasis given to governance and public expenditure management (e.g. in Kenya, Killick 2002). Whether or not structural conditionality outside the scope

areas' are being reduced or eliminated in PRGFs is also ambiguous. For example, Killick (2002) reports they have actually gone up in Zambia (p. 5), and similarly, a November 2001 stand-by agreement with Romania still included conditions on domestic energy prices, privatisation, and restructuring of state-owned enterprises (Randel and German 2002).

Moreover, while in theory PRGFs are meant to be based upon PRSPs, it appears in many cases the reverse is true (which may help to explain the lack of coherence between macro-policies and poverty goals). The majority of countries have negotiated PRGFs before formulating a PRSP, and in many cases, PRSP endorsement has been postponed as a result of countries' missing targets under PRGF agreements. In Kenya, the government negotiated a PRGF with some of the most restrictive set of conditionalities in its lending history just before finalising its PRSP (Hanmer et al. 2003, p. 184). In others (e.g., Bolivia, Ghana and Nicaragua) the targets set out in the PRGFs have gone on to form the bases for macro-economic benchmarks and performance targets (ICFTU 2002; Trocaire 2002). Thus, rather than supporting the PRSP, the PRGF appears to be taking the more dominant role in many cases, with macro-economic targets influencing poverty requirements rather than vice versa.¹⁴

Poverty Reduction Strategy Credits (PRSCs) are another lending instrument through which IFI conditionality may be imposed. Designed to provide budget support for countries to implement their PRSPs, the PRSC allows the Bank to attach extra conditions to countries' poverty reduction strategies through the Letter of Development Policy (LoDP) that accompanies it. The LoDP is not a public document, and as such extra policy details are not ordinarily available for public discussion. The few PRSCs that have been disbursed so far (Burkina Faso, Vietnam, Uganda) have allowed the World Bank to modify components of countries' PRSP and differ little from conventional structural adjustment programmes (Eurodad 2001; Killick 2002). Paradoxically, this 'back-door' policy specification undermines the principle of ownership PRSCs are meant to help operationalise.

¹⁴ Indeed, in connection with a recent review of PRGF experiences, the Fund itself admitted a tendency

Thus, although the Bank and Fund have adopted ownership as one of the pillars of the CDF, much of the lending outside of PRSPs still allow the IFIs to exert considerable policy conditionality. A more general concern remains whether the conditionality currently being relinquished by the Fund through its streamlining exercise will be taken up by the Bank and bilateral donors. There seems to be no official counterpart effort by the Bank to narrow the scope of its conditionality, leading to the possibility, already backed up by some evidence, that those conditionalities dropped by the Fund will resurface in World Bank credits, resulting in little net reduction. According to a Fund staff report on initial experiences with streamlining (quoted in Killick 2002 p. 19), the Bank is 'strengthening' its conditionality in areas such as privatisation, health system reform and public sector reform, from which the Fund is scaling back. In a number of cases, the report states, 'measures no longer covered by Fund conditionality were incorporated as conditions by the Bank, but in others this was not the case.' (Killick 2002, 20). Bilateral donors could compound the problem if they base their lending decisions on the presence of an on-track PRGF or PSRC as evidence of appropriate macro and social reforms, instead of longer-term development criteria.

VII. Conclusions

The limited experience with PRSPs so far would suggest that PRSPs have achieved little in the way of increasing national ownership/empowerment over programme design by national governments or civil society, though the process is at an early stage. This is not to say, however, that there have been no changes in the balance of power among stakeholders. In some very limited respects, civil society participants have been empowered compared to their earlier position by being formally included in the policy-making process. But while this inclusion has been quite 'wide' in some instances, involving broad sections of civil society, it has not made much difference, as participation in most countries has been 'shallow', limited to consultation rather than joint decision-making. Consequently, PRSPs have done little to empower civil society; and the evidence above suggests that where civil society has been empowered, it is often an assortment of NGOs (including foreign ones), not necessarily representative of society as a whole, or of the poor, in particular.

National governments appear to be playing a more prominent role in policy formation, by formally taking charge of the policy-making agenda. However, how far this has been empowering is doubtful. The similarity of the programmes to those that form part of the normal international agenda suggests this is more window dressing than empowerment even with respect to the sectoral or micro agenda, except in a few, usually marginal, instances. When it comes to macro-policies, there is no pretence of national empowerment through the PRSP process, beyond the (usually limited) national contribution to the formulation of macro-programmes that already exists. Moreover, government capacity, which generally was already weak, has been stretched even further with the need to undertake formal consultations and to develop lengthy policy papers.

Governments have also been constrained to involve more stakeholders in the policy process. Indeed, a cynical reading would see the exercise as weakening the legitimacy of national governments by engaging with groups other than governments in designing policy (e.g., Summers 2001). This criticism is particularly telling in the case of democratically elected governments. The insistence of civil society participation by the IFIs by-passes existing institutions and can potentially weaken elected governments. In non-democratic regimes, however, the situation is different and broadening participation may be particularly beneficial, contributing to the democratisation of decision-making. Of course, most political systems in very poor countries are in the process of democratisation – and a widening of consultation and strengthening of civil society may contribute to this process.

Donors' power, in contrast, while seemingly weakened by the relinquishment of policy design to national authorities and civil society participants, may not have changed much. The ultimate endorsement of PRSPs still lies with the Boards of the two institutions, which conditions the dynamics of the process from the start. IFIs exert a considerable indirect influence, as we have discussed in incidences of self-censorship in government design of policies. Moreover, the continued existence of many multilateral programmes outside the PRSP process and unaffected by it, still leaves the IFIs considerable control. Thus, the relative position of donors has not changed much through the PRSP process, and may even have been strengthened to a

degree by the veneer of legitimacy and perceptions of ownership that participation lends to the multilateral lending programmes.

On balance, then, it would appear that civil society has been marginally strengthened by PRSPs, while national governments may have come out somewhat weaker, while the position of donors is broadly unchanged.

To sum up, the PRSP process to date has not empowered developing countries and disempowered the World Bank. It may have changed perceptions and consequently national ownership from this perspective. If so it would appear to have actually helped empower the World Bank, by increasing the effectiveness of programmes through raising national enthusiasm for them. But this effect is likely to be short-lived unless control over programmes genuinely changes, because eventually perceptions tend to reflect reality.

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