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# Christian Aid policy briefing

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**Ignoring the experts:  
Poor people's exclusion from  
poverty reduction strategies**

*Prepared in partnership with INESC, Rede Brasil, Mozambique  
Debt Group, LINK, CEDLA, UNITAS*

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## Summary

*'We must never stop reminding ourselves that it is up to government and its people to decide what their priorities should be. We should never stop reminding ourselves that we cannot and should not impose development by fiat from above'*

James Wolfensohn, President, World Bank.

People's participation in decision making is in crisis. In both rich and poor countries, hundreds of thousands of people are taking to the streets to protest against policies set by global institutions and powerful governments. It is in poor countries in particular that millions of people, whose lives are affected most by these policies, have little voice.

While World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) officials discuss ways of opening up dialogue with poor people, large protests have taken place outside their meetings in recent years. Christian Aid believes the sentiments of many of those protestors echo those of people in poor countries who have to live with the impact of decisions made by global institutions.

Two years ago the World Bank and IMF introduced Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). Poor countries must now complete PRSPs in order to qualify for debt relief and further loans. In order to write their PRSPs, governments are required to consult with poor people.

The real picture of participation in PRSPs is now becoming clearer. Thirty seven countries have produced an interim PRSP, and five countries a full one. These have been endorsed by the boards of the World Bank and IMF. But research from Christian Aid, in consultation with partner organisations in poor countries, shows that the involvement of poor people in drawing up policies and writing PRSPs has been minimal and superficial.

- **The experts on poverty issues are still being ignored.** The overriding concern of many Christian Aid partners is that, in many cases, the PRSP is being put forward by governments as a *fait accompli*. Despite the rhetoric, poor people are still not being involved in decision making.
- **Poor people's views are invited on some things, but not on everything.** The PRSP has no influence on the broader package of economic reforms still being promoted by the World Bank and IMF. 'One size fits all' packages, which do not take full account of the poverty situation in each country, are still in evidence. At the same time, poor people or their representatives need to be supported in developing 'tools for participation', especially training about how they can inform choices in economic policy making.
- As a result, **poor people are being used to 'rubber stamp' PRSPs.** Many Christian Aid partners felt they had been brought in to add legitimacy to PRSPs that had already been decided upon. In many cases they were asked to support policies with which they fundamentally disagreed.
- **The rhetoric is not being backed up by the requisite support.** The World Bank and IMF are failing to provide countries with enough technical support to match the

complexity of the task. Moreover, they are failing to support local groups that have strong disagreements with the process and content of PRSPs.

- **English is the language of participation.** Christian Aid partner organisations in several countries have reported consultation papers being circulated in English only. Some have discovered they were not given access to all of the PRSP paperwork.

In their current review of PRSPs Christian Aid is urging the World Bank and IMF to:

- **Review the PRSP process in the light of research on participation.** Clearly many, including Christian Aid, believe efforts to consult poor people are failing because of lack of will on the part of both governments and the World Bank and IMF.
- **Involve poor people in discussions from the outset.** Poor people should not be considered an additional extra in the fight against poverty. They should be at the heart of the process, setting the priorities and the agenda for debate.
- **Invest in participation to ensure the transfer of ownership.** Adequate time and resources need to be set aside if the views of the experts are truly to be sought. True participation is a complex process. And local groups need support from the international financial institutions (IFIs) (the World Bank and IMF) when governments do not take their views into account.
- **Use PRSPs to inform a more flexible approach to poor countries.** There is little point in asking poor people for their views if they will not be listened to. The World Bank and IMF must abandon 'one size fits all' policies in favour of a flexible approach that is informed by PRSPs.

## 1. Introduction

It is clear that at both national and international levels people feel disenfranchised and excluded from systems of governance. The protests that have accompanied World Bank and other international meetings over the past two years demonstrate an increasing dissatisfaction with the way that decisions are being made by both international actors and governments. These protests have been mirrored by protests in developing countries. The international financial institutions (IFIs) stand accused of being unresponsive to the voices and interests of poor people, and favouring the demands of globalisation and big business.

Low levels of participation in recent national elections in Europe and the US suggest a growing apathy and loss of faith in traditional national governance and political parties. Non-traditional actors, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), command increasing voice and attention. The huge momentum behind global campaigns on debt, human rights and the environment are a powerful sign that people want a better, and more accountable, international system. In Birmingham, London, Cologne and Genoa, Christian Aid supporters peacefully mobilised in huge numbers to express their anger at the continuation of the international debt crisis. Many of these people had never before taken part in popular protest, but felt that this was the only way of getting their message across to governments and the IFIs.

Set within this broader governance context, this report will focus on national Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSPs) in developing countries. These are flagship examples of policy processes that, in theory, have people's participation and poverty reduction at their heart. Although PRSPs are national processes, they sit at the interface of national and international governance issues, making the need for popular participation all the more pertinent. Two years on from their launch, this report provides a critical view of how far PRSPs have facilitated real, empowering and policy-changing participation by the people affected by these policies. It is hoped that it will contribute to the review of PRSPs that the World Bank and IMF will be conducting at the end of 2001.

## 2. Why should poor people participate?

Christian Aid believes that participation is first and foremost a right. When effective, participation can also result in resource allocations that are more responsive to the needs and aspirations of poor people.

To these ends, poor people should be permitted a central role in decision-making on policies that affect them. Political systems must involve people at all levels and mechanisms are needed to ensure that leaders remain responsive to people's voices, in particular those of the most vulnerable groups. It is not sufficient for poor people to simply receive information about policies, nor to merely be consulted on proposals already formulated by government and other actors. Genuine participation must make poor people central to policy making – in choosing priorities, debating policy options, and in the articulation, implementation, monitoring and review of processes and policies.

It is not enough merely to seek the views of poor people: their views must also be taken seriously and permitted the authority to influence and shape emerging policies. Participation should open up space for power sharing. As such, it must be recognised that

participation is a political act. The empowerment of poor and marginalised groups means that other groups in society must relinquish some power. The term participation is frequently used as a bland and non-threatening term but, if carried through to its natural conclusion of shared decision making, it can be deeply challenging to vested interests.

Finally, poor people or their representatives need to be supported in acquiring the ‘tools of participation’, especially on the economic content of policy. Otherwise no effective dialogue on resource allocation in particular, or the best way to achieve sustained equitable growth, can be achieved.

An estimated one and a half billion people around the world are affected by PRSPs<sup>1</sup>. As poor people are those who are most vulnerable to the changes induced by new approaches to poverty reduction, it is they who are the primary stakeholders in PRSPs. However, these are also the people who are often most marginalized from political systems and whose voices are least likely to be heard in policy making arenas. Their voices must be proactively sought, therefore, if their right to representation is to be fulfilled. In the words of the UN Human Rights Commission: ‘...democracy is based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives’<sup>2</sup>. Not only does genuine participation by poor people in national policy making respect and protect this democratic right, but it should also improve the quality, appropriateness and sustainability of poverty eradication efforts. As the UN says:

‘...development can only be sustainable on a long-term basis if development policies are responsive to people’s needs and ensure people’s participation both in their design and implementation....the persistence of extreme poverty inhibits the full and effective enjoyment of human rights and participation of all citizens in the democratic processes in every society, and that the full participation of everyone in democratic societies fosters and enhances the struggle against poverty.’<sup>3</sup>

In this age of globalisation, decisions affecting a country’s policies are frequently made beyond its borders. Divisions between national and international forces are increasingly meaningless. The World Bank and IMF have been setting the parameters for development policies within poor countries for over five decades, despite the recent shift in rhetoric towards increasing country ownership of policy. Public debates in low-income countries continue to be usurped by decisions made between finance ministers and the IMF. These exclude civil society, parliamentary agencies, or even other government departments. This devalues and undermines any efforts to facilitate ordinary people’s involvement in governance processes<sup>4</sup>.

Despite their concern with ‘good governance’ at a national level, and their international influence over billions of people’s lives, the IFIs’ own institutional structures and cultures are scandalously undemocratic. Voting at the World Bank and IMF is proportional to share holding, meaning that the G7 countries, which have 12% of the world’s population, hold 57% of the votes<sup>5</sup>. Conversely, 43 African countries are represented by just two people with under 5% of the voting share. Despite the new efforts to broaden

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<sup>1</sup> WDM 2001: 5

<sup>2</sup> United Nations 2001a: 1

<sup>3</sup> United Nations 2001b: 1

<sup>4</sup> Jordan, L. 2000: 1

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, T. 2000: 2

participation by civil society many of the IFI's most important documents remain confidential and closed to public scrutiny<sup>6</sup>. And even with the shift towards PRSPs, the content of each paper is still audited jointly by the IFI boards.

Problems of participation and accountability also exist within countries. Many developing countries have recently strengthened democratic systems and moved away from those based on patronage – but these have yet to be entrenched. And, even here, poverty and inequality themselves act as barriers to participation. Genuine efforts need to be made to break this cycle, efforts to strengthen democratic systems, facilitate empowerment, and tackle poverty.

In order for policy making to become more democratic, decision making within the IFIs and within developing countries must be transformed, so that the people who are affected by their policies are able to shape them. The national and global levels of governance are fundamentally linked through the PRSP process and so neither should be dealt with in isolation.

### **3. PRSPs: an opportunity for participation?**

During the 1990s the World Bank talked increasingly about participation by civil society groups in national policy making. This has been set within the broader stated objectives of the Bank: national ownership, downward accountability, good governance, democratisation, and improving the quality, relevance and poverty focus of development co-operation. In his speech to the 1998 IFI Annual Meetings, World Bank President James Wolfensohn asserted:

but as the key to long-term sustainability and leverage. We must never stop reminding ourselves that it is up to the government and its people to decide what their priorities should be. We should never stop reminding ourselves that we cannot and should not impose development by fiat from above.<sup>7</sup>

Such words suggest a shift away from the 'one size fits all' approach of structural adjustment, where the same development model was imposed on countries despite their economic, social, governance and environmental peculiarities.

The Bank's own definition of participation clearly states that it should permit genuine influence by poor people: 'Participation is the process through which stakeholders influence and share control over the priority setting, policy-making, resource allocations and access to public goods and services.'<sup>8</sup>

Two years ago the World Bank and IMF formalised their approach to poverty and participation through the introduction of new instruments. Both organisations stated that they would henceforth place poverty reduction at the heart of their national programmes – and debt relief efforts – for the world's poorest countries. The IMF would replace traditional Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities (ESAF) with Poverty Reduction and Growth Facilities (PRGF), and the World Bank would support countries' Poverty

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<sup>6</sup> See Bank Information Centre 2001

<sup>7</sup> Aycrigg 1998: 1

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/strategies/chapters/particip/orgpart.htm>, accessed on 23/07/01

Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP). Cross-conditionality, and a joint assessment of the strategy and programme by the Boards of the IFIs would strengthen the link to poverty reduction. The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) process would also ensure that debt relief funds were focused on poor people's needs. Each of the countries hoping to access debt relief and concessional loans would have to produce a PRSP articulating how they intended to use these funds to target poverty.

The PRSP initiative was founded on the following stated principles:

- **Country-driven:** governments would lead the process and there would be broad-based participation in determining the content of the strategy;
- **Results-oriented:** desired outcomes and indicators would be clearly identified and agreed upon;
- **Comprehensive:** strategies would take a multi-dimensional view of poverty;
- **Long-term:** the depth and complexity of the required changes would necessitate long term commitment by donors and governments;
- **Based on partnership:** between governments and other actors in civil society, the private sector and the donor community.

Each national strategy was to be co-ordinated by government, but based on a broad participatory process involving a wide range of development actors. Civil society, the private sector and in particular the poor themselves were meant to fully participate in formulating the PRSP. The IMF publicly emphasised the importance of popular participation, stating that full PRSPs should 'reflect the outcomes of an open and participatory process involving governments, civil society and relevant international institutions and donors'<sup>9</sup>.

At first PRSPs appeared to some to be an exciting new development. Non-governmental groups in many countries were (in some cases for the first time) being offered the opportunity to influence national policy-making on both sectoral issues and the overarching development plan. Never before had the involvement of civil society groups in national policy making been formally legitimised in this way, nor had it been so high profile.

### **Learning from previous experiences: Country Assistance Strategies**

Prior to the introduction of PRSPs in September 1999 some progress had been made in opening up policy processes to civic actors, although since then the pace has accelerated and it has become far higher profile. However, the World Bank's Country Assistance Strategies (CAS) illustrate how hard it has been to open up policy discussions between governments and the World Bank to scrutiny by national populations. The benefits of broader participation in the CAS, more informed development priorities and better co-ordination of development co-operation efforts, have been recognised by some actors in the World Bank<sup>10</sup>. The Bank had also become increasingly proud of what it calls 'Participatory CASs'<sup>11</sup>. But civil society groups have still had to fight for CAS documents even to be made available in the national language.

<sup>9</sup> IMF 1999

<sup>10</sup> Aycrigg 1998

<sup>11</sup> A CAS is the World Bank's programmatic agreement with a national government, detailing loans and programmes to be provided. CAS's have traditionally been highly secretive, although in the light of recent demands for transparency and participation they are now sometimes published. See Bain, K. and E. Gacitua-

### ***Brazilian civil society wins access to the CAS***

*Although the IFIs and Brazilian government became more amenable to participation by civil society in socio-environmental projects during the 1990s, the same did not apply to structural adjustment programmes or infrastructure projects. The CAS in Brazil has been a secret document, only available to the Executive Director's office in the World Bank and a small group within the government's Executive Branch. Despite the fact that the document has a direct impact on the federal budget, and needed authorisation by the Senate, it was previously not made available to Senate representatives. Municipal and state level authorities had no access to the CAS either, despite the fact that it affects state level policies.*

*Civil society organisations tried repeatedly to gain access to the CAS during the 1990s with no success. The Brazilian government and the World Bank both passed responsibility for its authorisation to the other. In 1997 however, the civil society network on the IFIs, Rede Brasil<sup>12</sup>, managed to get hold of a copy, had it partially translated and distributed it to Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and legislators. Then, in April 1998, Rede Brasil published the CAS in Portuguese. It was the first CAS to be published. The Bank was furious and accused Rede Brasil of document theft in a national newspaper.*

*The 2000 CAS was then published and it seems that greater transparency has been established. Despite this progress, however, there are still no mechanisms through which people's groups are able to affect the content of the CAS prior to its finalisation, and there is still no obligation for a draft document to be sent for scrutiny to the Senate. Civil society groups are now calling for sub-national discussion of the CAS, public hearings by parliament, and proactive dissemination of the CAS throughout the country.*

*While advocating on the CAS, Brazilian CSOs collaborated with each other and worked closely with key Congress members in order to push for transparency from the World Bank and the Executive Branch of the Brazilian federal government. 'For the first time, a CAS was made public due to a national (not international) initiative, and legislators in a borrowing country searched for ways to control lending operations, setting precedents for similar processes elsewhere.'<sup>13</sup> The challenge for southern CSOs is to develop national constituencies to mobilise around international issues affecting their countries.*

The case of the Brazilian CAS is a good example of civil society groups and the Congress working together for greater transparency within government and IFI processes. But it is also a good example of how the practice of the IFIs has not caught up with their rhetoric on participation – something we are seeing again with the PRSPs.

## **4. What's really happening in PRSP processes?**

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Manio 1999, 'Promoting a Participatory Country Assistance Strategy: Lessons Learned from Colombia, El Salvador and Peru', in Piester, K. (ed.) **Thinking Out Loud: Innovative Case Studies on Participatory Instruments**, World Bank Group: Washington DC

<sup>12</sup> Rede Brasil is comprised of 56 organisations including NGOs, social movements and labour unions, which are concerned about the influence of the IFIs in Brazil. Rede Brasil is a partner organisation of Christian Aid.

<sup>13</sup> Vianna, A. 2000: 10

The reality of participation processes in PRSPs thus far has clearly not lived up to the optimistic rhetoric. Earlier this year, consultants to the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID), SGTS and Associates, identified that: 'In the majority of countries, participation by civil society in the PRSP has, as yet, been limited and superficial'<sup>14</sup>. Even where space has been provided for civil society groups to voice their opinions, these have not had an impact on resulting policies. The behaviour of both the IFIs and national governments is currently preventing the full potential of the PRSP process from being realised.

Some positive outcomes have resulted. PRSPs have begun to contribute to a shift in relationships between the IFIs, national governments and their peoples. In some countries new opportunities have emerged for citizens to at least voice an opinion on public policy, although this has rarely taken the form of genuine power sharing over decisions. Civil society groups have seized opportunities to engage with PRSP processes - diversifying and co-ordinating their activities, and developing their skills at a staggering rate. In the case of Rwanda, civil society organisations had previously rarely ventured into advocacy work, particularly on economic issues, but have now begun to do so around the PRSP.

Popular debate and media coverage has increased on economic, poverty reduction and participation issues in PRSP countries, in some places for the first time. Perhaps most importantly, networks have been established between government, the private sector and civil society, which could act as foundations for future dialogue. As the PRSPs are intended to be part of an iterative process, better networks could serve to strengthen civil society participation in future PRSP documents and policy formulation.

Despite these forward steps, many groups remain ill informed and are still not aware that they have the right to participate in policy making. Empowering people's participation in national policy processes undoubtedly takes time and practice to develop. Even in the world's oldest democracies popular participation in national policy-making is practically non-existent. In low-income PRSP countries the added limitations of restricted resources and capacity of both government and non-governmental actors has hindered effective participation. We outline below some of the main limitations to real participation in PRSPs so far.

It should be noted that, although the opportunities offered through PRSP processes are to be welcomed, progress in terms of real participation can only be limited through externally mandated processes. The power imbalance between the World Bank/IMF and country governments, and between these governments and poor people in their societies is an obstacle to genuine participation. Currently, development initiatives including the PRSP are devised and implemented in a top-down way. This needs to be transformed and turned on its head.

Fundamentally, pro-poor development must be owned and implemented by affected peoples themselves, and their initiatives should feed the thinking and policy development of governments and IFIs. PRSPs are a welcome entry point for broader participation, but their transforming impact can only be limited as long as they operate in this top-down manner.

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<sup>14</sup> SGTS and Associates 2001, 'Strengthening Civil Society Participation in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs)', report to DFID, page 3

## ***THE MAIN LIMITATIONS OF PRSPS***

### ***4.1 Rubber stamp ‘participation’***

It is clear that some governments consider civil society participation to be an external condition, which they have to fulfil merely to satisfy donors. Many of Christian Aid’s southern partners tell us that they have ‘participated’ in their national PRSP processes, but often this has only meant receiving information from government, or very superficial consultation. Participating groups frequently claim their involvement has been used to legitimise processes but that they have not been permitted to influence policy.

In the case of Mali, CSOs were not given sufficient time to prepare for meetings, and claim that they were invited to take part simply in order to legitimise the government’s process in the eyes of the World Bank. In Uganda, the Uganda Debt Network observed that participating civil society groups:

‘...complain that submissions made to government were used selectively, with key issues they raised ignored in the final document. This was in contrast to the...Government invitation...(and) has led some to wonder whether Civil Society Organisations are invited to the table simply to legitimise what the Government wants to write’<sup>15</sup>.

There is clearly a fundamental difference between civil society groups being invited to participate in the design of a poverty reduction strategy and simply being consulted on an already formulated proposed strategy. Too often consultation takes place once the draft PRSP document has already been produced by government (with the ‘advice’ of IMF and World Bank staff) and civil society participants are not able to influence the initial agenda or issue prioritisation. Participation is not real unless participants are free to affect policy outcomes, without being pre-empted.

‘The dilemma most agencies face is that different aspects of participation are both needed and feared. Agencies need people’s participation and support, but fear that their wider involvement is less controllable, less precise and so likely to slow down planning and control processes. ... Furthermore, good participation must challenge structures and systems that perpetuate poverty.... Those with too much power cannot engender participation without ceding some of that power.’ (Warren Nyamugasira, Uganda Debt Network<sup>16</sup>)

More recent attempts to pilot Social Impact Analyses should serve to share information on the poverty impact of prospective policies, which, in turn and through their involvement of civil society, may offer greater scope for influence. But the evidence from PRSPs so far demonstrates that the institutions involved are not willing for participation to challenge these structures and systems, nor even to open space for real policy influence.

### ***4.2 We invite your views, but not on everything ....***

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<sup>15</sup> Nyamugasira, W. 2001: 4

<sup>16</sup> Nyamugasira, W. 2001: 4

The issues on which civil society's views are sought have been selective. For example Angolan CSOs, who met in June 2001 to organise their input to the government's interim PRSP, have complained that government seemed reticent to organise a consultation and that the only workshop was confined to social matters:<sup>17</sup>

‘NGOs consistently report that there were two parallel processes, with ‘social’ issues discussed in the context of PRSP – with some participation – and ‘macro’ issues discussed in the context of PRGF – with no participation.’ (EURODAD <sup>18</sup>)

This has often meant that civil society ‘participants’ have been given no space in which to discuss the package of adjustment policies that still dominate their national PRSP and PRGF. In Bolivia CEDLA complained that the economic model was ‘a given’ and they were only permitted to tinker around the edges of a model with which they fundamentally disagreed and considered to be actually exacerbating poverty. They claim that the IMF representative stated that the recommendations of the alternative dialogue process, managed by the Catholic Church, would only be permitted to influence the allocation of HIPC debt funds. Macroeconomic targets and strategies were not open to change<sup>19</sup>.

This situation arises partly because of the perceived responsibilities of the Bank (PRSP) and Fund (PRGF) and the sporadic co-ordination between the two. It also arises because these are complex issues – it’s much easier for the IFIs not to open up a can of worms by beginning discussion of economic models. Limited economic literacy within poor communities means that conversations about national policy-making can be extremely difficult, and rarely move beyond being wish lists to become realistic alternative policy proposals. But the implications of these choices are so important that they must be brought out into the open. Closed options make a mockery of the stated importance of participation.

### ***4.3 .... which leads to the same policy packages***

One indicator of whether real participation is taking place should be the make-up of the policy packages reflected in the PRSP and PRGF. If diverse groups in a broad range of countries are influencing them and strategies are truly country owned, one would expect PRSPs to contain a variety of policies, evidenced by a movement away from the traditional policies seen under structural adjustment. At the very least one would expect a number of different emphases within some traditional policies – emphases that explicitly recognise who gains or loses out from each policy. But this is not happening. Christian Aid partners from a number of countries<sup>20</sup> identify that the old pattern of policy prescription by the IFIs is continuing under this first round of poverty reduction strategies. They include:

- policies of cost recovery in the provision of health and water services, which directly threaten countries’ ability to achieve the IDTs;
- indiscriminate privatisation policies without proper investigation of the long-term poverty impacts;

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<sup>17</sup> Thomet, N. 2001a

<sup>18</sup> EURODAD 2000: 1

<sup>19</sup> World Development Movement 2001

<sup>20</sup> For example, Tanzania, Zambia, Bolivia, Kenya, Mozambique and Lesotho

- measures of trade liberalisation which again are not based on an evaluation of the country specific poverty context.

Similarly, a survey of 12 southern civil society groups undertaken by the organisation Globalisation Challenge Initiative concludes that:

‘For many southern civil society organisations, the core problem lies in the obstacles to genuine national ownership of development plans when the IMF’s ‘seal of approval’ will, in all likelihood, remain conditional upon a country’s acceptance of a certain set of standard macroeconomic and structural adjustment policies’<sup>21</sup>.

It would be wrong to conclude that some of the aspirations of macroeconomic policy or reform are wrong in principle. Inflation tends to hurt poor people more than rich people because of the share of assets they hold in cash. But fiscal restraint in order to achieve macroeconomic stability and low inflation must not compromise the ability of a country to meet the basic needs and rights of its people, especially in the provision of basic services. This may also have implications for ceilings on the proportion of credit being diverted to the public sector – a traditional component of any IMF programme. A more pragmatic and flexible approach is sought to accommodate individual countries’ needs, and their peoples’ aspirations.

While it cannot be expected that all civil society contributions be incorporated as policy into final documents (not least because different actors within civil society hold different views), there is consistent evidence that civil society contributions have actually had very little impact on the documents. There is rarely any indication of diversity of opinion. As a result, civil society groups have already started to opt out of PRSP processes<sup>22</sup>.

#### **4.4 *Minority access***

At a workshop organised by Christian Aid and the Irish NGO Trocaire, with their Rwandan partner organisations in October 2000 – the same month as the country’s interim PRSP was published – only one out of 30 participants from leading national NGOs and churches had even heard of the PRSP. Christian Aid hears the same story from partners in many other countries. The problem is that involvement has been confined to national level NGOs. Even churches and other prominent civil society groups have generally had limited information on these policy processes. Genuine engagement of grassroots communities in the PRSP has been practically non-existent in most countries.

More effort needs to be made by those involved in the PRSP – including facilitation by the IFIs – to make sure that a broader and more representative group of citizens are invited to participate. More effort needs to be made to ensure that the voices of smaller and less powerful groups, who often live in rural areas, are heard as loudly as those who live in the capital. Part of this will mean support to smaller groups to build capacity to dialogue with state actors on national policy, but the location, format and atmosphere of meetings will also be crucial.

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.challengeglobalization.org/html/prsp\\_may2000.shtml](http://www.challengeglobalization.org/html/prsp_may2000.shtml) (accessed on 02/08/01)

<sup>22</sup> For example, see the Kampala declaration of Jubilee South

#### **4.5 *Hurried processes***

‘...in essence the speed with which Interim and full PRSPs have to be developed (for HIPC countries) militates against meaningful participation particularly by civil society actors’. (AFRODAD 2001: 2)

Developing a PRSP is the key condition for being able to access debt relief under the HIPC initiative. As governments of indebted countries are understandably keen to see debt relief implemented quickly, many are forced into unrealistically short time frames for developing their PRSP. In some countries there has been less than six months between the publication of the interim and full PRSP. In this time the following steps should ideally be followed: a full data collection process; the preparation of sectoral plans; consultations with all relevant line ministries and donors; the design and negotiation of economic models with the IFIs, as well as a thorough grassroots participatory process set up to debate the proposed policy options.

In the case of Ghana, Siapha Kamara of the SEND Foundation points out that: ‘Given the economic difficulties of the country the whole process is being fast-tracked to meet the timeline’<sup>23</sup>. The Tanzanian Coalition on Debt and Development also confirmed that the very restricted time frame resulting from the HIPC process was a serious constraint to the consultation process there.

In this context, the reality is that participation by CSOs and grassroots communities is often a low priority for government PRSP teams. And so it is afforded much less attention and effort than required, with the primary stakeholders losing out as a result. This has sometimes placed lobbying groups in a difficult position, as they have had to weigh up the danger of delaying debt relief against the importance of genuine participation. Malawian lobbyists, however, decided in April 2001 that it was more important to have a reasonable level of participation in the PRSP formulation, and so they successfully lobbied for an extension of the timeframe by six months<sup>24</sup>. But in Mozambique, faced with the same dilemma, civil society lobbyists opted to keep the proposed timetable and forgo a deep participation process in favour of quick debt relief. It seems that the link between HIPC and PRSPs has created an either-or situation.

#### **4.6 *Participatory processes – the basics***

How can we expect participation to work when sometimes even the basic building blocks are not in place? Often it is very simple things, such as the language in which the document is published, or the lack of information about what a PRSP is, that prevent real and effective involvement of local groups.

- Documents are often not produced in national, let alone local languages. In Bolivia some PRSP documents were initially only produced in English. A Spanish version followed but documents were never translated into local languages such as Aymara, Quechwa or Guaraní.
- Invitations to meetings and background papers are frequently only sent to civil society participants at the last minute.

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<sup>23</sup> E-mail communication with Siapha Kamara, SEND Foundation, Ghana, 31 May 2001

<sup>24</sup> See Malawi Economic Justice Network 2001, **The Malawi PRSP – Making the Case for a Genuine Process**

- Consultation meetings are frequently information-giving sessions rather than proactive efforts by government to elicit the views of CSOs. In Rwanda, for example, a national level meeting to discuss the Interim PRSP (including only international NGOs rather than Rwandan civil society groups) consisted of the government making a long presentation of its plans for the PRSP, rather than hearing the participants' views on the analysis and policies proposed.
- Agendas/ issues to be discussed are not formulated in a participatory way.
- The government selects civil society participants, so organisations more critical of current policies are less likely to be chosen. In the case of Bolivia, some civil society participants feel that the government's selection of participants for the National Dialogue was not completely neutral.
- After making their contributions to consultation meetings, CSOs often do not get feedback on which of their recommendations will and will not be included in PRSP documents. This can leave them feeling that their contributions have not been taken seriously.

The term 'participation' is frequently used in PRSP literature and very little distinction is made between different levels of involvement. It has been used too broadly to include events and processes that are mere consultations or information-sharing sessions, rather than permitting genuine influence by stakeholders. This has made it particularly difficult for civil society groups to be clear about the level of involvement that is expected from them. The Tanzanian Coalition on Debt and Development identified 'a lack of clarity on the side of government as to their understanding of what a consultative process entails, which has led to lack of access to relevant documents'<sup>25</sup>. Clearer parameters need to be set at the outset of participatory processes.

In some cases even information provision by government and IFIs has been inadequate. At a Christian Aid workshop on civil society participation in national development programming in April 2000, Mozambican and Bolivian representatives stated that in these countries even the minimal requirement of good information flows has not been met. In the case of Haiti civil society groups have struggled to elicit even the most basic information about the PRSP, such as which government ministry is leading the process and the timeline for its formulation. Also, the national budget is not publicly available in Haiti, which severely hinders any attempts to influence government policy.

#### ***4.7 Gender and women's representation***

The majority of the world's poor are women. Poor women often carry the additional burden of discrimination and oppressive cultures, which leave them even further disenfranchised. The model of participation articulated through PRSPs is currently failing to involve poor women and the specific measures needed to facilitate their involvement have not been implemented. This failure means that participation can potentially lead to a reinforcement of existing gender inequalities, as men are far more likely to be literate, in leadership positions, and have the confidence and cultural acceptability to speak out. Poor women therefore continue to be excluded. Not only is this a democratic failure, but it also means that PRSPs are less likely to bring a sustainable solution to poverty, as the poorest and most vulnerable groups are not involved in their formulation or implementation.

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<sup>25</sup> TCDD/PRSP Drafting Committee 2000: 2

In the hurry to co-ordinate and appear professional to government and IFIs, civil society groups have often tried to speak with one voice. Geraldine Terry of the Gender and Development Network (UK) points out the implications of this for women's organisations, which may be marginalized within civil society:

‘Male-dominated NGOs, trade unions or professional associations are unlikely to prioritise the gender interests of poor women. Instead, it is likely that ‘speaking with a single voice’ would mean subordinating women’s gender interests to men’s.’<sup>26</sup>

Unsurprisingly, PRSP documents have been largely silent on gender, apart from a few broad platitudes. Even where poverty assessments are separated under gender headings, and women are given particular mention in PRSP documents, there have been few efforts to tackle the root causes of gender disparities in development. Indeed many of the International Development Targets – which the international community and national governments have pledged to reach by 2015 – include explicit gender dimensions, and therefore need to be more strongly reflected in PRSP documents.

#### ***4.8 Support for participation from the IFIs***

The IFIs have taken a somewhat back-seat approach to supporting participation in PRSP countries. It is very convenient for them to point out that, in order for policies to be nationally owned, their role should be minimal. While this is true, it does not prevent them from providing the necessary support to make the rhetoric on participation real. As noted above, participation that works well, that enriches policy, and influences resource allocation is a difficult and long process. If the intention is that it does indeed work well, then governments and civil societies need to be able to access more resources to facilitate that participation, and develop skills and capacity among grassroots groups. Moreover they need to have ways of accessing that support through neutral third parties, to minimise the IFI's influence over national civil societies. The resources that are being provided so far do not match up to the complexity of the task. While the international rhetoric on the importance of participation is strong, it is not borne out by what happens on the ground.

- The IFIs should provide moral as well and financial support to participation processes.
- The World Bank and IMF should not lend against PRSPs that have not been truly participatory in nature.
- National civil society groups should be broadly satisfied with their involvement in and influence over PRSPs in order for them to be endorsed by the IFIs, and a stronger line should be taken when this is clearly not the case.
- Mechanisms for approving PRSPs should not solely depend on the capacity or interests of the Joint Staff Assessment, but rather incorporate the views of indigenous consultative groups.
- Finally, this consideration should override the incentives for maintaining or increasing loan portfolios, and be supported by staff management systems in the IFIs that reward progress towards poverty reduction outcomes.

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<sup>26</sup> Terry 2000: 18

### **Bolivia's Estrategia Boliviana de Reduccion de la Pobreza (EBRP/PRSP)**

Bolivia has frequently been cited as a progressive example of popular involvement in public policy making, and as such has been viewed in a good light by the IFIs<sup>27</sup>. It has a relatively numerous and well-organised civil society, with a long history of advocacy towards government. Efforts have been made to institutionalise participation, through the 1995 Law of Popular Participation – which aimed to bring the national budgeting process to the municipal level – and the 1997 National Dialogue. These were considered to have paved the way for a participative PRSP process following Bolivia's acceptance into the HIPC initiative in February 2000. The government then designed a further National Dialogue process focusing on the PRSP. This was to be conducted during July and August 2000 through municipal authorities and also involving civil society and the private sector.

The 2000 Dialogue took place, however, against a backdrop of national political crisis. There was gridlock between the main political parties, and widespread popular protests and strikes during April and September/October. This meant that government time and effort was distracted away from the National Dialogue, as they sought to resolve the crisis and placate the protesters. Consequently, some issues raised by civic participants in the National Dialogue process dropped off the public agenda and remain unresolved.

Many civil society actors were quite cynical even at the outset of the Bolivian National Dialogue process, due to their earlier experiences of government consultations. Previous efforts such as the Law of Popular Participation and the 1997 National Dialogue had been fraught with problems. As a result, the confederation of *campesinos* and the trade unions refused to take part in the government's 2000 Dialogue, which immediately weakened it. Also, the Catholic Church, while remaining engaged with the process, declined the government's invitation to sit on the co-ordinating committee of the Dialogue and continued with its own already planned process of community consultations around the country. NGO networks responded to the government's invitation to take part in the dialogue by articulating and publicising a number of conditions for their engagement, and only accepting the invitation once the government had agreed to these.

Despite these setbacks, some progress was made in terms of participation in the 2000 National Dialogue: a popular discussion of national policies and the budget took place in the media; Bolivia's non-governmental sector mobilised and co-ordinated well; some advocacy successes were won, in particular on the issue of social control of debt relief funds: multi-stakeholder committees have been established to monitor the use of funds and the majority will now be allocated to the poorest municipalities.

However, despite this progress, the Dialogue process has been heavily criticised by civil society groups on a number of fronts:

- consultations were frequently organised at the last minute;
- documents were initially only provided in English (meaning that most participants were unable to read them);
- CSOs were not permitted the same level of access to information as official actors (which put them at an immediate disadvantage);

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/participation/boliviacase.htm> (accessed 20/12/2000)

- the time frame was too short to permit genuine participation by poor, rural groups;
- participants were felt not to be fully representative of society<sup>28</sup>;
- while civil society participants had been promised the opportunity to view and approve the final PRSP at the end of the Dialogue, this opportunity never arose.

The social upheavals of September 2000 were felt to be an illustration of the Dialogue's failure to address the concerns of people's groups. CEDLA and UNITAS reported:

'The social outburst of September (2000) highlighted the limited participation of civil society in the preparation of the PRSP. The representation at the National Dialogue and the demands expressed during the event do not reflect the needs of the poor. All social sectors must be incorporated into the process with efficiency and transparency, so that all demands may be heard and priorities established.'<sup>29</sup>

CEDLA and UNITAS also argue that the dialogue process was top-down, operating as it did through government structures, and that it gave little regard to traditional forms of territory-based association. Hugo Fernandez of UNITAS claims that it was therefore more of a conversation between national and local government, rather than one which reached out to civil society organisations and poor communities.

Clearly in the case of Bolivia the internal political context was an obstacle to popular participation in the PRSP process. In such a poor country with a complex governance situation it is a difficult task to institutionalise participation, and in many respects Bolivia has made some brave attempts to do so. However the social protests of 2000 and the slow progress of the Law on Participation 'clearly show the difficulty of setting up democratic institutions that integrate the poor and excluded, and arrive at effective solutions to their basic problems'<sup>30</sup>.

Any progress that has been made in terms of broader participation has been compromised by the failure of the Dialogue process to support an open discussion of the macro-economic development model. Civil society actors were only invited to discuss social issues and the outcomes of the Dialogue were not permitted to influence the macro-economic policies. Consequently Bolivian NGOs have been very critical of the resulting PRSP document. Their analysis is that the PRSP was based on unrealistic assumptions (such as an annual growth rate of 5%, whereas the currently projected growth rate for 2001 is 1.6%)<sup>31</sup>, and it failed to address severe social and economic inequalities.

Furthermore, structural adjustment measures have been resurrected and given greater legitimacy through the PRSP, with the specific motivation of satisfying the IFIs.

More than 100 Bolivian civic organisations stated their dissatisfaction with the policy content of the final document, and appealed to the Executive Directors of the IFIs in May 2001 not to approve it<sup>32</sup>. Their letter claimed that: 'what has taken place in Bolivia does

<sup>28</sup> Aguirre and Luna (CEDLA-UNITAS) 2000

<sup>29</sup> Aguirre and Luna (CEDLA-UNITAS) 2000: 6

<sup>30</sup> Aguirre and Luna (CEDLA-UNITAS) 2000: 1

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Javier Gomez, CEDLA, 04/07/01

<sup>32</sup> The networks who signed up to this letter were the Defence League for the Environment (LIDEMA), Coordinator for Women, Association of Finance for Rural Development institutions (FINRURAL), Rural Secretariat, Association of Educational and Promotional Institutions (AIPE), Radio Schools of Bolivia (ERBOL), Jubilee 2000 Forum, Bolivian Chapter for Human Rights, Democracy and Development,

not reflect a genuine concern for reducing poverty by means of participatory plans, programs and policies,' and that: 'in sum, the multilateral co-operation representatives are indifferent whether the (Bolivian PRSP) drafting process has been participatory or not'. Despite this plea, however, the IFIs endorsed the Bolivian PRSP in May 2001.

### **Mozambique's Plano de Accao para a Reducao de Pobreza Absoluta (PARPA/PRSP)**

Mozambique is an enormous country with a dispersed rural population, and the capital city is more than 1,000 kilometres from its northern border. Communication is difficult and its infrastructure weak. It is also one of the poorest countries in the world and only emerged from a 26-year civil war in the early 1990s. In short, it is not the easiest place in the world to conduct an effective national consultation process.

Civil society's history of engaging with national government is very recent and is heavily dominated by NGOs and religious groups, with a much lesser role played by traditional authorities and community-based associations. The process of civic engagement is in its infancy and currently confronts a whole range of obstacles. Many groups do not see the relevance of national policy to their own activities and concerns, nor do they consider themselves to be crucial actors in it.

Mozambique became eligible for HIPC debt relief in 1996, but not until the introduction of HIPC II was it called upon to produce a PRSP document. Mozambique already had a poverty plan in the form of the Plano de Accao para a Reducao de Pobreza Absoluta (PARPA), for the period 2000-2004. The PARPA was only accepted as an Interim PRSP, though, as the IFIs felt it lacked sufficient adjustment measures and had not been designed through a broad participatory process. This obviously had direct implications for the 'ownership' of the participation process and understandably many in government viewed it as an imposition by the IFIs.

The Ministry of Planning and Finance led a series of provincial level seminars to discuss the draft PARPA, bringing together central government, provincial technicians, District Administrators, NGOs and other civil society actors. This process took place between April and December 2000 and included thematic meetings on sectoral issues at the national and regional level. The quality of these meetings varied between provinces. Civil society groups, such as the Mozambique Debt Group, organised additional multi-stakeholder meetings to discuss the PARPA, also including representatives from other African and Latin American countries to share their experiences of PRSPs. A number of NGOs made a proactive effort to raise awareness of the PARPA/PRSP and to facilitate their engagement in it by community groups.

The PARPA/PRSP process in Mozambique has the potential to increase participation in public management and policy making, to develop communication between government and civil society, and to increase transparency and accountability. Civil society groups broadly acknowledge that some progress has already been made, as new spaces have been opened up for dialogue on social and economic issues, and relationships between varied

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National Union of Institutions of Labour and Social Action (UNITAS), Coalition for the Defence of Water and Life, Federation of Irrigation District Unions (FEDECOR)

actors have been forged. They have also recognised that ‘lately the Government has shown itself to be more receptive to the concept of dialogue’<sup>33</sup>. However, the PRSP is not the only policy process through which participation can take place, and the lack of broad ownership of it creates a danger of distraction from indigenous approaches to participation<sup>34</sup>.

The PRSP process has however been criticised by civil society groups on a number of counts. Firstly, as it was co-ordinated centrally, rural communities and northern districts were far less involved than Maputo-based organisations. Secondly, as in the case of Bolivia, civil society organisations were often invited to consultation meetings at the last minute, documents were made available at short notice or not at all, and the technical language of documents and discussions often made it difficult for civil society representatives to follow. McGee and Taimo point out that many civil society participants felt the ‘process carried out by Government was not a consultation process but a...presentation of information’<sup>35</sup>. Civil society participants were not able to influence the identification or prioritisation of issues covered in the PRSP, as these had already been set out in the PARPA. CSOs were left feeling that they had been invited into the process simply in order to legitimise the PARPA document in the eyes of the IFIs, and not to actually contribute to its content.

The time constraint of the whole process compromised the quality of the participation: ‘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’<sup>36</sup>. The government also recognised ‘that the short duration of the PRSP preparation period has not left time for a high quality participatory process’<sup>37</sup>. Civil society advocates faced the dilemma of whether to call for an extension to the time frame and delay debt relief, or to accept a sub-standard participation process and preserve the original timeframe. The latter option was chosen. Clearly this situation arose as the direct result of the link between HIPC and PRSPs, as determined by the IFIs.

The Mozambique Debt Group believes that the final PARPA/PRSP document contains all the structural adjustment measures that have been in place in Mozambique since 1987. They claim that because the document was to be ratified by the IFIs, the government had no choice other than to formulate the PARPA/PRSP on the basis of an adjustment and growth-oriented model: ‘In this way the PRSP made the struggle against poverty of lesser importance than the objectives of macroeconomic stabilisation and structural adjustment’<sup>38</sup>.

The Mozambique Debt Group goes on to point out that the ‘restricted consultation process (has)...created a climate of despondency toward further participation by civil society, which had no wish to expend time and resources...with no guarantee that their contribution would affect a single line of the PRSP’<sup>39</sup>. Once again, the Mozambican case re-iterates the need for participation to permit real influence by participants, and for the

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<sup>33</sup> Mozambique Debt Group 2001: 8

<sup>34</sup> See McGee, R. and N. Taimo 2001

<sup>35</sup> McGee, R. and N. Taimo 2001: Executive Summary

<sup>36</sup> Bread for the World Institute 2001: 18

<sup>37</sup> McGee, R. and N. Taimo 2001, Executive Summary

<sup>38</sup> Mozambique Debt Group 2001: 3

<sup>39</sup> Mozambique Debt Group 2001: 8

IFIs to support genuine national design and ownership of the policies contained within PRSPs.

## 5. Conclusion and recommendations to the World Bank and IMF

Clearly a number of actors are involved in PRSP processes and each of these must bear some responsibility for the current failure to permit genuine participation by poor people. Civil society groups often lack the capacity or the will to fully engage. National governments have failed on many counts to run participation processes satisfactorily, to give up any measure of control to their people and to reach out to the most marginalized groups. However, Christian Aid believes that the IFIs, who designed and mandated PRSPs on a global level, must shoulder the greatest responsibility for the performance of the current system.

The pressure that arises from the linked HIPC / PRSP processes needs to be relieved in order to improve the quality of both processes, and to permit influence by poor people. Also, at the national level, World Bank and IMF practice often fails to live up to the ideals of the rhetoric from Washington. Christian Aid outlines here the fundamental improvements that need to be made in order for poor people and their representatives to genuinely participate in PRSP processes.

### 5.1 *Make participation real*

Participation needs to be brought back to basics:

*RECOMMENDATION 1: The concept of participation used in PRSP literature should be reformulated so that it really does enable poor people to be at the centre and to share control over decision-making on public policies and practice affecting their lives. The World Bank's concept of participation is currently very technocratic. The term is used in bland and neutral way, ignoring the politics of genuine participation.*

In order to permit empowerment by poor people, power must be given up by other interest groups. The politics needs to be put back into participation, otherwise it will remain a legitimising exercise, which further disenfranchises poor people.

Participation must be made real at all levels of decision-making and practice: at the national level through PRSPs, at the municipal and regional level, and at the global level, by substantial transformation of the way in which the IFIs and other global institutions currently operate. Accountability and transparency must be improved within the World Bank and IMF, and the voices of poor people listened to in a genuine and transforming way.

There are many examples of progressive efforts at broadening participation in policy which should be used to inform PRSP processes. Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPA) take as their foundation the need to include poor people in assessing what poverty means for them. These hold many useful lessons for PRSPs - in terms of policy analysis from a grassroots perspective, creating local capacity for popular engagement and

developing transferable participatory methodologies. In Mozambique, for example, the 1994-6 PPA was utilised during the PARPA/PRSP formulation process. Other interesting examples of pro-poor participatory planning are taking place at provincial, district and local levels in Mozambique beyond the PARPA/PRSP process. For example, the Conselho Cristiano Mo ambicano, a Christian Aid partner organisation, is working with communities and local government authorities in Malange District, Zambezia, to facilitate community influence over resource allocations.

Efforts to scale up participatory approaches have also met with some success in terms of their influence over policy. At the national level, the ‘Campana Terra’ mobilisation around Mozambique’s 1996 land policy was a good example of a populist campaign that was rooted in community consultations and involved a broad range of more than 150 civil rights organisations, farmer’s associations, women’s movements, church groups, trade unions and others. It achieved unprecedented success as a government consultation and in terms of policy change<sup>40</sup>.

In some cases participation has been successfully institutionalised, as in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where local budgeting has been participatory since 1989. In Uganda, the Uganda Debt Network sought to apply the learning from previous participatory processes, to the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (Uganda’s PRSP) through a series of regional consultations held in 42 of Uganda’s 45 districts during April and March 2000<sup>41</sup>. This exercise showed that, despite its still limited scope, it was possible to utilise grassroots consultation methods to enrich national level policy.

*RECOMMENDATION 2: People also need to have the tools to participate. Development is a complex process – not least in its political, institutional, and social dimensions – but also importantly in economic choices and implications. To enable participation in economic policy formation people need to have access to information and training to inform which policies they support and why. This in itself has implications. We could not expect every citizen to be informed about markets and processes that lead to equitable and sustained growth, jobs, and improved standards of living. And so participation in some forms of dialogue will be more limited. But this does not detract from the principle of poor people being able to articulate outcomes that are most important to them, and that they wish economic forces to serve.*

## **5.2 Release HIPC debt relief funds faster**

Many NGOs are currently calling for a de-linking of PRSPs and HIPC. While most are broadly supportive of the need for national poverty-focused strategies, the current system of making debt relief conditional on the completion of a PRSP has the double impact of delaying debt relief and lowering the quality of PRSPs. This has clearly been the case in Tanzania and Mozambique.

However, many of Christian Aid’s partners support the continuation of PRSPs as a condition of debt relief. They believe that if resources were to be freed up before appropriate mechanisms were in place to monitor how they were used, then they would not be used most effectively. The most important aspect of these mechanisms is to increase the involvement of local groups when determining what the PRSP might contain.

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<sup>40</sup> For further information on Mozambique’s ‘Campana Terra’ see McGee 2000: 51-52

<sup>41</sup> See Ugandan Civil Society Organisations Taskforce for PEAP Revision 2000

But participation by non-governmental actors requires far longer than the periods of between six months and a year that are currently permitted<sup>42</sup>. EURODAD estimates that to produce a PRSP through a comprehensive participation process will take more like five years or more<sup>43</sup>.

*RECOMMENDATION 3: Christian Aid therefore calls for faster tranches of debt relief to be granted from the time the interim PRSP is published. This has traditionally been used as the decision point where debt relief funds are committed but not provided. The interim strategy outlines how governments plan to draw local groups into the design and monitoring of the full PRSP.*

*Furthermore, Christian Aid believes that the mechanism for agreeing the size and release of tranches should include greater representation from civil society – not to block, but to provide an arena in which they can formally express their views about both process and content. This would reduce the likelihood of what happened in Bolivia: over 100 Bolivian civil society organisations wrote to the Executive Directors of the IFIs asking them not to approve the PRSP.*

### **5.3 Participation requires investment**

Adequate time and resources must be invested if people's participation is to really work. The lip service currently paid by the IFIs simply isn't enough. If the World Bank and IMF's emphasis on participation is to become more than rhetoric, it must be prepared to support southern governments and civil society groups to develop the required skills and capacity. It will take many years for appropriate and thorough mechanisms to be developed that successfully elicit the views of poor people and it will not happen without appropriate investment by all actors.

*RECOMMENDATION 4: Christian Aid calls for significant and additional grant resources to be made available to facilitate real participation by, and capacity building of, local groups in PRSP processes. The IFIs should also support national civil society groups by refusing to accept PRSP documents that have not been truly participatory in their design.*

*The Executive Boards should not simply rubber-stamp assessments made by joint teams of World Bank and IFI staff (Joint Staff Assessments – JSAs). JSAs should evaluate whether PRSPs contain sufficient recognition of the diversity of in-country debates, especially where they diverge from traditional World Bank or IMF policy. To enable this, the views of civil society as regards process and content should be published within the PRSP – either as an annexe or preface – so that the JSA team and boards are explicitly aware of any limitations in its formulation.*

### **5.4 Quality participation**

*RECOMMENDATION 5: To improve the quality of the participation process in the short-term by addressing the following key issues:*

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<sup>42</sup> For other perspectives on the call for de-linking HIPC and PRSPs see AFRODAD 2000, BIC 2000, WDM 2001, Christian Aid 2000.

<sup>43</sup> EURODAD 2000: 3

- *Participants should be involved in PRSP process from the outset – in setting policy priorities, the agenda for consultations and benchmarks by which these processes will be assessed – rather than simply being asked to comment on draft documents.*
- *Civil society participants should not be expected to be united and speak with one voice, but specific efforts made to maintain diversity.*
- *Proactive efforts are needed to reach out to marginalised and discriminated groups, paying particular attention to the rural perspective and gender issues.*
- *Participants should receive feedback on their contributions and explanations as to why they were or were not included in the final document.*
- *Multi-stakeholder committees should monitor the implementation of PRSPs and continue to influence their revision at a sectoral and an over-arching level: ‘...there is a need to institutionalise consultation and participation of CSOs in the decision-making process concerning macroeconomic policy and monitoring of debt and poverty at all levels’<sup>44</sup>.*
- *Any criticisms of the process and content which are stated by local groups should be published as a preface to the PRSP document.*

### **5.5 Genuine national ownership**

*RECOMMENDATION 6: Countries should have the freedom to articulate and implement whichever policies are required to reduce poverty in their specific context.*

The World Bank and the IMF’s commitment to popular participation is useless if it is not accompanied by a more flexible approach to policy. Hitherto the only policies that have been acceptable are those often found in the traditional package of adjustment and growth-oriented measures such as trade liberalisation, privatisation, and policies that create an amenable environment for the private sector. Each in their own right may contribute to making some groups better off in some circumstances. But Christian Aid’s experience is that in many countries these policies make large groups of people worse off – while failing to stimulate pro-poor economic growth overall.

If poor people and their representatives are genuinely allowed to ‘share control over the priority setting, policy-making, (and) resource allocations’<sup>45</sup> (as defined in the World Bank’s definition of participation) they may well not identify the same policy prescriptions as those favoured by the IFIs in their PRSP Sourcebook. At the very least they may choose to adopt different components at different times, with more safeguards for those who will be directly or indirectly affected.

## **Conclusion**

Participation processes must be improved, to genuinely involve grassroots communities in policy making and implementation. But this is a futile exercise unless they can have the power to actually influence the outcomes and shape the content of PRSPs. In order to be truly empowering, solutions to poverty must come from poor people themselves. And the poor must be supported in gaining the tools – especially in economic policy – that will enable them to participate. The limited opportunities opened up through PRSPs, are just

<sup>44</sup> Tanzanian Coalition on Debt and Development 2000: 15

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/strategies/chapters/particip/orgpart.htm>, accessed on 23/07/01

the very beginning and must not be allowed to compromise other more home-grown approaches.

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**Publisher's note:** Christian Aid links directly with people living in poverty through local organisations. It supports programmes with the aim of strengthening the poor towards self-sufficiency. Christian Aid also seeks to address the root causes of poverty by spending around 10 per cent of its income on development education and campaigning at home.

Christian Aid is the official relief and development agency of 40 British and Irish churches. It works where the need is greatest in 60 countries worldwide and helps communities of all religions and those with none.

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For more information please contact Seble Abera, Administrator at [sabera@christian-aid.org](mailto:sabera@christian-aid.org) or Mark Curtis, Head of Global Advocacy at [mcurtis@christian-aid.org](mailto:mcurtis@christian-aid.org) or visit Christian Aid website at: [www.christian-aid.org.uk](http://www.christian-aid.org.uk)