

➔ ETHIOPIA: A PRSP ENCOUNTERS THE CONSTRAINTS AND PROMISES OF PARTICIPATION

In a Nutshell

The preparation of PRSPs offers interesting experiences in civic engagement in policy-making. While participatory policy formulation is highly desirable, its design has proven hard to fashion and continues to be dogged by flaws related to quality and depth, conditionality and ownership of the change process.

The preparation of Ethiopia's recent PRSP demonstrated all of these issues. While it built on lessons learned from earlier papers to attempt more genuine participation, large capacity gaps, government foot-dragging and donors' occasional undue influence all imposed constraints. Nevertheless, the paper has yielded a number of promising results. The government's leadership in moving from an interim to a full PRSP as well as the efforts of independent civil society think-tanks to capture the public mood and develop capacity for participation must count as highlights.

The Story

Nearly half of Ethiopia's population lives in poverty, and a chronic drought has persisted for many years, both factors that have countered reasonably robust economic performance. Against this backdrop, an interim PRSP (I-PRSP) paper was prepared in September 2000 outlining an agenda for policy reform and institutional change to reduce poverty. Observations and comments for improvements were provided by independent institutions of civil society, including the Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA), Forum for Social Studies (FSS), the InterAfrica Group (IAG), the Ethiopian Economic Policy Research Institute (EEPRI) and the donor community.

The I-PRSP was subsequently presented for nationwide discussion in early 2002. Through regional and federal steering committees and consultative forums, government departments garnered an array of public perspectives. In particular, 6,000 people joined *woreda* (district council) consultations (in 117 out of 550 rural and urban *woredas*) to debate poverty. The participation of women was relatively high due to the efforts of the regional technical secretariat and sector bureaux.

Regional consultations followed among some 2,000 people. Parallel meetings with representatives from pastoral communities and discussions at the Ethio-Forum, organized by the Ethiopian Social Relief and Development Fund (ESRDF), provided vital inputs, while other civil society institutions organized their own independent forums. Eventually, a federal PRSP consultation brought together

450 persons representing different governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, following which the government officially released the full PRSP.

More than anything else, the PRSP exercise provided an opportunity for civil society to engage in the public policy process, making it more transparent. Public participation in the national conference revolved mainly around the nature of agenda and priority setting, as stakeholders attempted to persuade the government to include their concerns, and lobbied for allocations of sufficient resources within the PRSP framework. This helped make the PRSP more representative of the interests of a cross-section of society.

Another key feature was that organizations like IAG set about developing capacities for participation at the district and regional levels. This included training of facilitators and rapporteurs, encouraging the media to raise public awareness of the PRSP, and working to sensitize parliamentarians. The FSS, an independent policy research institute, ran a programme of public debates and consultations involving government policy makers, civil society, representatives from the private sector, and the poor themselves for nearly two years. The key policy issues discussed were submitted in the form of the *Consolidated Report of FSS' Public Debates and Consultation* to aid the PRSP process. FSS also provided a forum for the poor to tell their own story to the public.

The final PRSP was quite an improvement over the I-PRSP. It incorporates the divergent views of many segments of civil society and the donor community. Offering a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of the poverty situation in the country along social and spatial dimensions, it probes incidence, depth and severity along gender, age, and rural and urban dimensions, based on reliable empirical data. Further, the policy recommendations and action plans have originated from rigorous assessments that include the suggestions forwarded by the different stakeholders

Ethiopia's PRSP subsequently inspired the preparation of a strategy paper for a Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Programme (SDPRP), in which the government has expressed its commitment to linking poverty with fast, broad-based, equitable and sustainable growth. The SDPRP identifies four core policies and strategies as building blocks for poverty reduction: industrialization led by agricultural development, judicial and civil service reform, decentralization, and empowerment and capacity building.

Some 12 bilateral agencies, as well as UNDP and the European Union, pledged \$50,000 each towards the PRSP process between July 2001 and July 2002. The World Bank, IDA and the government of Japan provided \$825,977, most of which was in the form of technical cooperation, while the African Development Bank offered \$300,000. With these commitments, donors signalled their belief in the PRSP's potential to serve as a channel for more effective relationships among development partners in the country. They have now proposed a regular joint forum for monitoring and managing the paper, so that multi-stakeholder forums can be sustained.

It is anticipated that through a continuous and constructive engagement with the government of Ethiopia, the donor community will find it more appropriate to channel assistance through national processes, especially in the form of budget support.

Results and Critical Factors

PRSPs have been among the more debated innovations in the development discourse in recent times. Envisaged as instruments of consultative policy-making, they have had a mixed track record, from donor-dominated processes in Cambodia and Senegal to more genuinely participatory ones in Bolivia and Ethiopia. While the intent of the PRSP methodology is sound, criticism stems from the issue of “genuine” participation – in terms of coverage, time allowed for discussion, acceptance of divergent views and capacity gaps among the participants. Additionally, the “who leads” questions are central, as are the conditionalities. Ethiopia confronted these concerns, even as it clearly made progress. Some of the following issues were apparent:

- A strong coalition of civil society and the donor community helped formulate a broad-based PRSP. Despite their notable contributions, however, many civil society organizations had limited capacity to engage in rigorous socioeconomic research to the extent of influencing the economic policy-making process and outcomes.
- The government’s commitment to a participatory policy process was the key to success. Initially, it did not embrace subjecting the I-PRSP to wider public discussion and consultation. However, this attitude was gradually but surely turned around.
- Civil society institutions that were involved in the consultations used innovative methods to influence the PRSP. The training of these organizations to participate was also a step forward.
- Best practices and experiences from other African countries helped improve participation. An examination of initiatives in East Africa yielded models for how to engage civil society. In particular, a round table discussion of the experiences of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda imparted specific lessons on civil society organizations and PRSP design.
- A substantive outcome of the PRSP was the formulation of the SDPRP – a key policy document for Ethiopian society and the economy.

Further information

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