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# **Participation in PRSP processes**

## Conditions for Pro Poor Effectiveness

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## Conditions for Pro Poor Effectiveness<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The mandatory participation of civil society in the PRSP is hardly ever questioned. It is on the contrary generally applauded by the experts inside and outside of the aid business. If only there could be more of it, things would even be better than they already are, but any start, however modest, is to be welcomed. But is participation, no matter at what stage, where and with whom, always so precious or relevant? In this paper a more cautionary approach is proposed. A four level readiness assessment framework is being offered to guide donors in deciding when, if at all, such participation must be encouraged.

## RÉSUMÉ

La participation obligatoire de la société civile dans le DSRP n'est presque jamais mise en question. Au contraire, elle est généralement applaudie sur les bancs des experts, aussi bien à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur des organisations impliquées dans la fourniture d'aide. Si seulement on pouvait avoir encore plus de participation, les choses iraient encore mieux, mais il faut commencer quelque part, et tout début, aussi modeste qu'il soit, doit être accueilli avec enthousiasme. Mais la participation est-elle vraiment tellement précieuse et pertinente, à n'importe quel stade, à n'importe quel endroit et avec n'importe qui? Dans ce texte, nous proposons une approche plus prudente. Un cadre d'appréciation composé de quatre niveaux est proposé pour guider les bailleurs quand ils décident si oui ou non la participation de la société civile doit être encouragée.

Key words: PRSP, participation, civil society





## INTRODUCTION

Participation has become fashionable among donors. And it is no longer just about involving people in implementing local projects or in assessing local service delivery systems. Donors aim at higher and broader forms of participation. Policy-debate at the macro level is what is now being promoted (Cornwall & Gaventa 1999). And aggressively so: donors do not hesitate to impose consultations with civil society on governments as a condition for continued aid. Civil society is thus invited to meetings with governments, to sit in advisory commissions, to consult with bilateral and multilateral donors, to discuss development strategies, to advise on service delivery systems, and the like.

Such macro-level, donor-driven participation figures prominently in the PRSP approach<sup>4</sup>. The PRSP was first introduced as the basis for the provision of debt relief under the enhanced HIPC Initiative, has been subsequently broadened and is now a requirement for all low-income countries wishing to receive concessional assistance from the World Bank (through the International Development Association–IDA) and the IMF (through the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility–PRGF). Some 60 low-income countries are engaged in the PRSP process<sup>5</sup>. Civil society participation is mandatory, from the preparation stage up to the supervision and implementation of the PRSP, and recipient countries are assessed on their respect of this conditionality. Joint Staff Assessments (JSA/JSAN) routinely comment on the participation process, but World Bank and IMF staff are not allowed to make any political statements, and the participation process is not as thoroughly screened or assessed as other components of the PRSP. Yet all in all participation is a crucial component of the new approach, and references to it abound in the internal debate in donor institutions and in official evaluations (World Bank 2004, IMF 2004).

In the Sourcebook, produced by the World Bank to assist countries in preparing the PRSP, a whole chapter is devoted to participation. The authors of the chapter hold a grand view of participation which they describe as “the process by which stakeholders influence and share control over priority setting, policy making, resource allocations, and/or program implementation” (Tikare et al. 2001:237). According to the Sourcebook, the focus of the PRSP is poverty alleviation, hence the expected impact of participation is effective development and poverty reduction strategies and actions. Participation is expected to contribute to the outcomes of accountable, transparent, and efficient processes for economic decision making, resource allocation, expenditures and service delivery, to increased equity in development policies, goals, and outcomes, and to a shared long-term vision among all stakeholders for development (Tikare et al. 2001:239). Summarizing, participation ought to contribute to three objectives: (broad-based) ownership<sup>6</sup>, accountability, and pro-poor effectiveness. These in turn can be considered

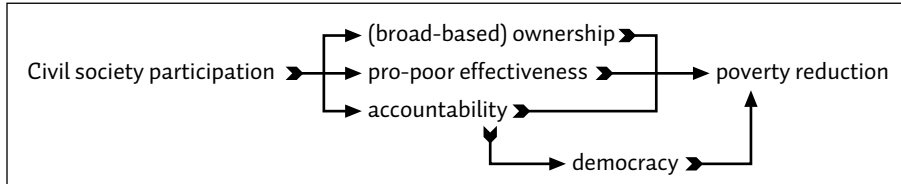
<sup>4</sup> The Millennium Challenge Account of the US, a ‘competing’ approach, also requires civil society participation at the macro level. And the European Union, through the Cotonou convention, also makes it a mandatory part of its cycle of aid procedures.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank website, data based on overview Country Papers and JSANs/JSAs dated April 1, 2005

<sup>6</sup> The ownership that civil society can contribute to is country ownership, which is broader than government ownership, or even state ownership (OED 2004:11) With respect to the government, the emphasis has recently shifted from the ownership concept towards the commitment concept, in recognition of the fact that the real locus of initiative is mostly external. The inference is that even if this is the case, the government can nevertheless be highly committed, which is after all what matters.

intermediate objectives that contribute to the two ultimate goals of poverty reduction and democracy. This leads to the following reasoning:

**Figure 1: civil society causality chain**



The arrows in figure 1 represent cause-to-effects links. It is our understanding of the donor discourse that all of them must be interpreted as unambiguously positive and significant. To take just one of the branches: higher civil society participation leads to higher accountability, and this in turn leads to more poverty reduction, and also to higher democracy, which generates some extra poverty reduction. This interpretation reflects the widespread view among donors that, for both principled and practical reasons, participation cannot go wrong. Democracy figures in the chain both as a final objective and as an instrument. The former expresses the conviction that participation is an exercise in political freedom, and thus an onset, however timid, of democratic practices. This link imparts intrinsic merit to civil society participation. Yet it is also instrumental in reducing poverty, and this just reinforces its importance. Turning to the intermediary goals of ownership, pro-poor effectiveness and accountability, surely there will be chances to also contribute to these and hence to the other ultimate goal of poverty reduction, if NGOs and other civil society actors sensitive to the plight of the poor are brought to the table. From figure 1 participation emerges as an unmitigated good, and presumably it cannot come in high enough doses, nor can it come early enough. Donor participatory approaches have thus become overtly voluntaristic in considering any form of participation as an improvement over past practices (Hickey & Mohan 2005:238).

This donor view on participation can be criticized as being simplistic and naïve, either too optimistic (as a positive analysis of how things work) or alternatively too ambitious (as a normative prescription about how they should work), and in some respects just plainly wrong. To start with, the concepts of participation and civil society are very loosely defined. The question for example of whether broad-based ownership might need a different kind of participation, involving a different type of civil society actors than pro-poor effectiveness, is not addressed. The arrow pointing to broad-based ownership further hints that civil society participation will somehow contribute to consensus. But how much of the deeply embedded poverty problems in society can be fixed through consensual participation? Reducing poverty often implies a deep shift of power relations in a society and a corresponding restructuring of assets and resources (Hickey & Bracking 2005:851, van de

Walle 2005:34). Also, the optimistic reading of the causality chain precludes the possibility that civil society participation might not be a cost-effective way of increasing ownership, pro-poor effectiveness or accountability, if certain pre-conditions are not fulfilled. A fortiori, the possibility that participation might have a negative effect on ownership, pro-poor effectiveness and accountability is not considered. Finally, given the interpretation of the arrows, democracy and poverty reduction necessarily reinforce each other, suggesting that there are no trade-offs between both goals.

Such a good-news show is remarkable if we consider the political features of PRSP countries that emerge from some well-know indicators that donors frequently use. Of the 30 PRSP countries situated in Sub-Saharan Africa for instance, not less than 11 are listed as countries under stress (LICUS<sup>7</sup>), 15 are listed under the Freedom House index as partly free, and 8 as not free. What can realistically be expected from a participation conditionality in these circumstances? In this paper we approach the issue differently. First of all we focus exclusively on how participation may affect the objective of poverty reduction, rather than taking both democracy and poverty reduction on board. We do this for two reasons. First of all the technocratic PRSP logic developed by World Bank and IMF experts treats poverty reduction as the most important objective. The reason is simple: the Bretton Woods institutions cannot take democracy as an explicit objective for their interventions. Bilateral donors can and do, but to our understanding they set poverty reduction first. If not, they would not be particularly coherent in the pursuit of democracy through the PRSP. If they really wish to pursue the democracy goal as much as poverty reduction, should they not work to strengthen the role of parliament and to improve the political framework, rather than just bringing civil society to the political table? Secondly, democracy and poverty reduction are not as complementary as donors pretend in their policy documents. There is widespread recognition in the political science literature that a considerable trade-off between democracy and poverty reduction may emerge during several stages in the development process, although experts probably disagree on how this should be translated in a logical chain model. We agree with Hickey & Mohan (2005:238) that participation can only result in transformation if it is attached to a specific set of values and objectives, a specific approach to development. In other words connecting participation to two different objectives is linking it to two different sets of values and objectives which at given times might be synergetic, but in other instances contradictory. We therefore focus in this paper on the role of participation for poverty reduction, via its effect on ownership, accountability, and pro-poor effectiveness. This is not to say that the link with democracy is completely disregarded, as will become clear. The political dimension is very present, because civil society participation at the macro-level is a political issue, whatever the ultimate goal that is pursued with it.

<sup>7</sup>LICUS are characterized by very weak governance capacity due to armed conflict, internal repression, heavily patronage-based political systems, international sanctions, major political transitions and chronically weak or unstable institutions (Thornton & Cox 2005).

Having clarified the problem we wish to address, even if it is at some loss of generality in the argument, we turn the donor approach around. Rather than postulating civil society participation as a universal answer, we present it as one possible instrument among others used by donors in the pursuit of aid effectiveness. We also do not find it fair to expect CSOs to affect poverty outcomes on a par with governments and donors. If we thus seek a more modest role for civil society, we do not intend to be dismissive. On the contrary: it is donors who, by expecting too much from civil society, are being unfair to it, unreasonable and immodest (Drabek 1992 cited by Fowler 2000:12-13). We thus bring government and donors, and their responsibilities, fully into the equation, in recognition of the fact that they jointly set the stage for civil society involvement.

So a general question might be the following: what conditions should be in place for participation to make a meaningful contribution to the PRSP? Aren't there certain institutional and political features needed which create an enabling environment open to debate, proposals and policy alternatives? Let us not forget that participation in the PRSP implies a shift from micro to more political forms of influencing which are closely related to governance issues (Cornwall & Gaventa 1999:3). Which of those conditions are mainly created or influenced by government, and which can be taken up by donors? And can we find a civil society that is up to this novel task? It does matter which organizations are sitting around the table, whom they represent, and how well-prepared they are. To challenge the government on sometimes highly technical matters requires considerable analytical skills and studious preparation. Only specialized CSOs such as advocacy groups and lobbying platforms that form the pinnacle of a well-organized civil society can play this role.

We argue in this paper that participation makes a lot of sense, but under restrictive conditions. If these conditions are not or not sufficiently fulfilled, participation may not make any meaningful contribution or be positively harmful. We group the conditions in four sets which, taken together may be used as a **readiness assessment**. It will become obvious that the four sets of conditions form a natural sequence: the first set of conditions has to be met before it makes sense to tackle the next, etcetera. Although the idea of sequencing is familiar in donor conditionalities in the field of for instance Public Finance Management or governance, it is absent when donors try to involve civil society in the PRSP. The checklist proposed in this paper is an attempt to fill the gap. The two first sets of conditions together form the basis for a "PRSP readiness assessment" that should logically be performed **before** the PRSP process is launched. The first set draws out a number of *selectivity criteria*. We argue, admittedly somewhat bluntly, that in some countries the PRSP is not suitable, and donors were mistaken to embark on it. The second contains a number of "PRSP issues to be tackled" that can be improved during the PRSP process, but to which civil society as such cannot significantly con-

tribute – in other words: issues that have to be dealt with mainly by government and donors. Even if a country is ready for the PRSP, this does not mean that it is ready for the kind of participation that is being proposed. We therefore imagine the possibility of a successful PRSP process without direct civil society participation. We propose a “*Participation readiness assessment*” that combines our third and fourth set of conditions. Countries can only be ready for participation if certain “*participation prerequisites*” are in place. Without these conditions participation probably does not make sense. Where these conditions are in place, there are still some “*participation issues to be tackled*” throughout the PRSP-process in order to guarantee the long term effectiveness of participation and the PRSP.

## 1. PRSP READINESS ASSESSMENT

### 1.1. PRSP pre-requisites

**Table 1: PRSP pre-requisites**

	Pro-poor effectiveness	Ownership/commitment	Accountability
Government	Is there sufficient institutional quality to implement the PRSP?	Is there political commitment to poverty reduction or public sector reform?	

Table 1, as all the subsequent tables, provides in three columns the objectives to which civil society participation is supposed to contribute: ‘ownership’ (in case government ownership is meant, we think ‘commitment’ is clearer), ‘accountability’, and most importantly, ‘pro-poor effectiveness’. The cells created by the intersection with the rows - one for each actor - contain the conditions. In table 1, all the conditions relate to government. As can be seen from the table, we argue that there are two pre-requisites before the PRSP approach makes any sense from a donor perspective: a strong government commitment to poverty reduction and a minimum institutional capacity to make good use of aid money flowing through the budget.

In “*Assessing Aid: What Works, What Doesn’t and Why?*” (World Bank 1998), arguably the most influential book on aid of the last decade, the authors come to a forceful conclusion: aid is only effective if the recipient government is committed (ownership), and if the policies/reforms are of good quality. The Comprehensive Development Framework, which served as another precursor to the PRSP approach, suggested the same: lack of ownership presages failure. Ownership of course must be combined with a minimum institutional capacity to formulate and especially implement good policies<sup>8</sup>. Although these conditions are independent, low political commitment to poverty reduction and public sector reform often go hand in hand with low institutional quality and capacity (Booth 2003). And poorly managed states, or states with governments that are uncommitted to pro-poor development and only respond to the needs of a minority often suffer from corruption, the non respect of the rule of law, the privatization of power and ‘low-intensity citizenship’ (Huber 1995 cited in Grugel 2004:1122).

The donor-led PRSP process cannot in and by itself change this vicious cycle. It advises donors to abandon their micro-managed aid approach and to hand over responsibility to the recipient government, to let the government design its own comprehensive development strategy and infer from this the necessary structural reforms. Without a government genuinely committed to development and capable of carrying out the structural reforms needed, including at all levels of public finance management, the provision of budget aid, the preferred new aid instrument, would expose donors to very high fiduciary risks. It is believed in some donor circles that commitment and ownership emerges from democratic political institutions (Borner,

<sup>8</sup> For more information see the World Bank website on Comprehensive Development Framework. See also the CPIA scores produced and used by the World Bank to rank recipient countries on the quality of their policies, and to decide on the aid envelope allocated to each of them.

Bodmer & Kobler 2004:49); which would add yet another positive arrow in figure 1 above. However it is easy to list countries where strong government commitment and institutional capacity coexist with an undemocratic form of government (Vietnam), just as weak government commitment can perfectly coexist with democratic institutions (Nicaragua, Senegal).

Do the 60 countries under PRSP have committed governments and minimum institutional capacity? The simple answer is that the PRSP has become the new standard approach for all low-income countries, and that selectivity has been thrown overboard in deciding whether the PRSP is the appropriate approach. Some selectivity is used in deciding how much aid a country receives, but that is another issue. What matters here is that the broad principles underlying the PRSP, in particular that the government is the trusted partner in charge of setting priorities and implementing policies with donor monies, apply to all countries. By way of illustration, Cameroon became one of the first recipients of debt relief in 1999, yet at the same time, it was also the most corrupt country in the world according to Transparency International (van de Walle 2005: 41, 46). The list of African PRSP countries and their CPIA governance scores seems to confirm this (see table 2).

**Table 2: CPIA scores, conflict affectedness,  
Freedom House scores for SSA PRSP countries<sup>9</sup>**

PRSP countries Africa	CPIA overall rating (2003)	CPIA governance rating (2003)	Fragile states (based on WB & International crisisgroup)	FreedomHouse (2005)
Benin	2	1		free
Burkina Faso	2	2		partly free
Burundi	5	4	LICUS	pf
Cameroon	3	4		nf
Cape Verde	1	1		f
Central African Republic	5	5	LICUS	nf
Chad	4	4	LICUS	nf
Democratic Republic of the Congo	4	4	LICUS	nf
Republic of the Congo	4	4	LICUS	pf
Cote d'Ivoire	4	4	LICUS	nf
Ethiopia	3	2		pf
The Gambia	4	3	LICUS	pf
Ghana	2	1		f
Guinea	4	4	LICUS	nf
Guinea-Bissau	4	4	LICUS	pf
Kenya	3	2		pf
Lesotho	3	3		f
Madagascar	2	1		pf
Malawi	3	2		pf
Mali	2	3		f
Mauritania	1	1		nf
Mozambique	3	2		pf
Niger	4	4	LICUS	pf
Rwanda	2	1		nf
Sao Tome and Principe	5	3		f
Senegal	1	2		f
Sierra Leone	4	3	LICUS	Pf
Tanzania	1	1		Pf
Uganda	1	1		Pf
Zambia	3	3		Pf

<sup>9</sup>CPIA scores and information on LICUS (Low Income Countries Under Stress) can be found on the website of the World Bank ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)). The Freedom House scores can be obtained through the internet [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)

The CPIA scores in the table are quintile ranks. A large group of PRSP countries score rather badly. If we consider the countries in quintile 1 and 2 (for instance Ghana or Tanzania) as good performers, and quintile 4 and 5 as bad performers (for instance DR Congo or Sierra Leone) – leaving quintile three as ‘in-betweens’ – then not less than 10 countries are bad performers,



while 15 are good performers. Under the 'selectivity logic' a lot of the bad performers would not be considered eligible for the PRSP. The World Bank, consistent with its attitude that the PRSP is the solution everywhere, claims that even in the worst of circumstances – with failed, collapsed, fragile, conflict ridden states – the PRS can be introduced. *"In countries where the government is unwilling to embark on a PRSP, or where domestic institutions are too unstable, PRS practices can be introduced gradually [...]. However, preparing a PRSP should remain the preferred option, wherever there is a government willing and able to lead the process. There need be no other institutional prerequisites, as the PRS approach itself is the best means of developing the required institutional capacity"* (Thornton & Cox 2005:i). The quote suggests that the PRSP is the best way ahead and the whole report in fact suggests that the PRSP approach is even suitable for Low Income Countries Under Stress (LICUS). And indeed, donors eagerly try to introduce the PRSP approach in conflict-ridden contexts, or collapsed/failed/fragile states like Congo and Sierra Leone (Rombouts 2006). The more skeptical view is that the way in which the PRSP approach is being promoted all over the world, making abstraction of contexts and track records with regards to commitment and institutional capacity, contradicts the accumulated lessons drawn from aid failures of the past, and may undermine its success. The odds of the PRSP making a difference are thus smaller than expected, notwithstanding the potentially transformative character of the approach.

Other evidence stems from donor behaviour. Even if they push for PRSPs in all low-income countries, there are only a limited number where donors trust the recipient government enough to provide substantial amounts of aid without strict strings attached. Indeed, at a rough estimate, less than 20 out of 60 countries involved in the PRSP process at some stage or another, received general budget support for more than 2% of their GDP in 2004 or 2005. Given the fact that many of these countries are highly aid-dependent and receive 10% or more of aid as share of their GDP, this says something about real donor confidence in their own discourse. Yet another piece of evidence comes from an unusually frank World Bank assessment of the quality of national development strategies. The following criteria are mentioned as being used in the assessment: coherent long-term vision; medium-term strategy derived from the above; country-specific development targets; holistic, balanced, well-sequenced strategy; and capacity and resources for implementation. Of the 55 countries surveyed, only 5 of the countries are judged to have operational development strategies of sufficient quality (DAC 2005: 9). If this assessment is in any way representative, and it was explicitly meant to be so, then it can be inferred that the overwhelming majority of the PRSPs formally endorsed by the World Bank are just not convincing. We would hypothesize that most of the failures are due to a lack of genuine political commitment linked to insufficient minimum institutional capacity.

So what might be the effect of pushing for participation when the PRSP prerequisites are not fulfilled? The optimists probably admit that initially it might generate more frustration than results for the organizations involved, but then they would argue that this is not so bad, as this experience will raise awareness among civil society actors, set them thinking, provide an impetus for strengthening umbrella organizations, and may be the beginning of a chain of events the outcome of which cannot be measured in advance, but is surely positive and worth the effort. To this we would reply that participation in these circumstances is a cynical waste of scarce resources. Lack of government commitment leads to poor implementation. Just imagine all the efforts that civil society organizations put in organizing consultations, prepare comments and amendments, and then seeing these proposals being brushed off and/or seeing that the PRSP remains without implementation. The most dangerous evolution from the political standpoint is that ultimately these empty participation exercises will lead to participation fatigue and heighten the already high levels of distrust existing between the state and wider society in those contexts. A more insidious risk to civil society organizations is that of cooptation by government and/or donors. And not to forget, creating wide debate within civil society, with the prospect of becoming an interlocutor for the donor community and the government, can wet the appetite of ambitious civil society entrepreneurs, resulting in clashes of interest, both ideological and material, among poorly organized and often autocratically managed pressure groups, NGOs, trade unions, human rights groups, and the like.

To conclude on this point: the prerequisites mentioned in table 1 are, from our point of view, vital elements for the effectiveness of the PRSP. Without them, the PRSP approach does not make a lot of sense. Throwing in some participation, just in case it might do some good eventually, is no way to treat civil society. Without government commitment and without sufficient institutional capacity, we would rather heed the advice of 'Assessing Aid': do not provide large sums of aid money through government systems. Limited aid can be provided through non-state channels, much of it through CSOs, grant some student scholarships, provide humanitarian aid when needed, and keep channels of information open, eventually using the minimum of aid to the public sector that justifies donor presence.

Let us now proceed to the next level in our assessment. For the sake of the argument, assume that the prerequisites of table 1 are well enough fulfilled in a given country: there is political commitment to poverty reduction, a genuine willingness and minimum capacity to undertake the necessary institutional changes/reforms needed to enact pro-poor policies. Is this enough as a basis to launch a nation-wide participation process? No. The next section argues that there are important issues that have to be taken into account before participation can make a meaningful contribution to the PRSP.

## 1.2. PRSP issues to be addressed

**Table 3: PRSP issues to be addressed**

	Pro-poor effectiveness	Ownership/commitment	Accountability
<b>Government</b>	Good quality poverty diagnostic	Technocratic ownership Bureaucratic ownership	Public sector monitoring and auditing
<b>Donors</b>	Pro poor policies Donor-coordination	Acceptance of government priorities Alignment of aid	Effective accountability requested

Table 3 is structured the same way as table 1. We discuss the conditions row-wise.

A solid poverty diagnosis is the basis for a good PRSP. Data collection and processing on poverty issues requires a fair amount of institutional and technocratic quality. Secondly the results from the poverty diagnostic must be translated into sound policies. This doesn't only take political will at the highest level as explained in table 1, but also technocratic ownership. The translation from political choices into implementation requires technocratic expertise within government to write, reformulate, amend the strategy, in close interaction with government policy makers. This same technocratic expertise and ownership is needed for organizing the participation process: the planning and timing of the process, the choice for certain participatory techniques, a clear and transparent process, a good communication strategy, all this requires specialized skills.

Many low-income countries may not have this expertise at hand. This is not necessarily a major stumbling block because donors readily support the creation of this expertise through technical assistance. In some cases, when it comes to 'participation expertise' International NGOs (INGOs) have been involved as subcontractors to help organize the (often participatory) poverty diagnostic. If the PRSP is to become effective its contents and objectives must be known, accepted and put into practice at all levels of government: horizontally from the central level towards the line ministries, and vertically towards the decentralized entities down to the local level. This is what we call bureaucratic ownership: a state apparatus penetrated by the goals and objectives of the PRSP, willing to implement it and accepting its priorities on a long-term basis. One of the big problems with bureaucratic ownership lies in the lack of information and capacity: lower levels do not know about or understand the PRSP logic and the way it relates to public finance reform. Donors however can and will assist. There is also a more intricate and political angle to bureaucratic ownership: the PRSP approach as propagated by donors strengthens the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry where the central planning function is located, if it is not the same. Line ministries understandably resent the loss of autonomy they used to have when they could negoti-

ate directly with donors without any tutelage from the top. For the PRSP to be effective, institutional mechanisms of control must be in place that help promote a correct and transparent use of budgetary resources. Public sector monitoring and auditing are indispensable. Donors do play an important role by requesting more accountability. Although this is often framed in technical terms of effectiveness and the role of M&E in assuring this effectiveness, essentially accountability is a highly political issue. Among others, it makes it possible for end user complaints to be channelled to decision makers by civil society.

Let us now turn to the donor side part of the story. If donors, who in aid-dependent countries finance a huge part of public spending, are not themselves genuinely committed to pro-poor policies, for instance because they have other agendas (geopolitics, fighting drugs, commercial interests, etc) then of course the whole PRSP exercise becomes very shallow. The situation becomes especially dangerous when donors pay lip service to coordination rather than practice it. Donor harmonization is part of the PRSP contract, but most donors are very slow in enacting it. Similarly, donor willingness to increasingly use government systems is an essential ingredient, but most donors are fairly reluctant to put this in practice. This is to some extent understandable, in light of what we argued above: that in a considerable number of PRSP countries the government is not really committed to pro-poor policies, and does not have the institutional capacity to guarantee that donor funds will be reasonably well utilized and accounted for. Consequently, the trust that should form the basis of the new 'partnership' relationship that is supposed to replace top-down donor-recipient relationship, is not there, and the PRSP is just an empty phraseology (World Bank 2004: xv). Importantly, donors also have a role to play as watchdogs. Whether they like it or not, they must ensure that the government is serious about what it has promised and deliver good value with their aid monies. One of the major weaknesses of donors is their softness. Whether this is because they lack the courage to criticize the government, because they do not wish to draw attention to failures in the use of their own aid money, or because as spending bureaucracies they have an in-built bias to spend, donors are performing this function poorly. Yet what they are trying to achieve with the PRSP requires clear conditions, scrupulously verified, and credible sanctions that are effectively applied. Only then is there any hope that the in many respects revolutionary political and institutional changes they are hoping to bring about are going to be even partly fulfilled.

We think it is fair to state that the conditions in table 3 are nowhere fully in place in PRSP countries. The points we made are generally well accepted, not really controversial, and we do not claim any novelty in presenting them. The reason that we bring them up in this context is to make clear that whereas civil society participation can indeed contribute to the three objectives of accountability, ownership and pro-poor effectiveness, so

can a myriad of other actions by both government and donors. In terms of efficiency, it may well be that some of these other actions give better value for money. It would be helpful if donors would cease to treat civil society participation as mandatory. It would be a more rational attitude if it were to be assessed just as one among several lines of actions, its potential contributions studied and compared to other possible courses of action, all the while acknowledging the costs for all the actors involved. The underlying thrust of the argument is not that we expect that a more skeptical approach will lead donors to abandon participation altogether, but rather that they will realize that it is an instrument that requires the mobilization of scarce resources by all parties concerned and thus must be used judiciously. There are many important decisions to be made about what type of participation to go for, of what depth, with whom, in what sequence, and in which combination with other actions. It is crucial to our argument that all the conditions discussed in these first two tables are beyond the reach of civil society actors. They cannot contribute to them, or only very marginally so. If donors expect civil society actors to do their PRSP homework, then they themselves and the government should do theirs too, and first. It would be unfair to expect from civil society actors that they make things happen when donors and government are not addressing flaws in the whole setup for which they and they alone bear responsibility. If for instance donors disagree, without openly admitting so much, with government priorities and keep pushing for their own pet ideas, how then could civil society participation broaden the ownership that even the government is not allow to possess? Or if donor field representatives yield to official pressure and funding continues - no tough questions asked - to a government that is blatantly unwilling to justify the use of funds or react to charges of corruption, why do they expect civil society actors to act as effective watchdogs and constitute a countervailing power, in a political environment of ruthless repression of dissent?

## 2. PARTICIPATION READINESS ASSESSMENT

Moving to the next level, we now assume that all what we discussed above is reasonably being taken care of. We are in a country where the government is genuinely committed to pro-poor policies and has the institutional capacity and willingness to bring about the reforms that are required. The government also has increasing technocratic and bureaucratic ownership, the underlying poverty diagnosis was sound and frank, and public sector monitoring and auditing systems are being improved. Donors on their part subscribe to government policies, harmonize amongst themselves, and increasingly align their aid by using recipient systems. They also insist that the government honors its engagements and accounts for the results that were negotiated, and they are especially vigilant in the area of governance. Is the stage now set for civil society participation in a way that guarantees its successful contribution to the three stated objectives of ownership/commitment, accountability and pro-poor effectiveness? No, not necessarily. There are yet other conditions that have to be in place, enabling conditions that are specifically related to the viability of participation. Without the fulfillment of these, participation may not have all of the intended effects, or under-perform to the point that it may not be worth the bother.

### 2.1. Participation pre-requisites

**Table 4: Participation pre-requisites**

	Pro-poor effectiveness	Ownership/ commitment	Accountability
Government			Is there sufficient political room for CS to contribute to the PRSP?
Civil society	Is civil society close to the poor?		

Ideally the PRSP carries broad support in civil society on how to tackle poverty and how to shape the country's development in economic, social, human terms. This is achieved by involving all relevant stakeholders and taking their contributions into account in the design of the strategy for poverty reduction. But the role of civil society goes well beyond this. It should be able to openly discuss the government achievements, voice its criticism and force new issues onto the political agenda. This is the downward accountability donors are so eager to see. Also, civil society involvement should be organized in such a way as to act as a force in favor of the poor. Which pre-requisites have to be in place for participation to have all these effects? Indeed, are all these expectations not to some extent contradictory?

In table 4 the main conditions are set out in the familiar tabular form. The first row, relating to government, asks just one question: whether there is sufficient political room for civil society to contribute to the PRSP. Why is this so important? First of all, civil society participation at the macro level is about comparing alternatives scenarios and selecting priorities. This involves comparing the impact on different groups in society, now and in the future. As argued before, this kind of participation has politics written all over. So the fundamental question is whether civil society can engage in these debates without running the risk of being persecuted, repressed, or harassed?

The second row presents another killing assumption. If the organizations that are going to be involved in the PRSP participation process are not close to the poor, then participation cannot be expected to contribute significantly to the pro-poor effectiveness of the PRSP. This is not to say that participation will not have any effects at all. It may for instance help in creating space for democratic experimentation. It all depends on the kind of organizations that are invited, or otherwise manage their way into the process. Essentially what we are arguing here is that a pro-poor outcome of participation may require a biased selection of stakeholders. Given the desire to achieve pro-poor outcomes it is both necessary and legitimate to steer the participation from above. For instance, technical expertise from research institutes may be more effective than the rhetoric of some populist NGO in fostering the interests of the poor. To put this differently, there could be a tension between representative participation where the not so poor usually dominate, and effective pro-poor lobbying.

What about reality? Our own field research and many documents from NGOs suggest that in many cases both participation prerequisites remain on the slippery slope. Let us first turn to the issue of political space. Table 2 provides for African PRSP countries the overall score published by Freedom House (free – partly free – not free). It also indicates whether a country is on the LICUS-list published by the World Bank. Only 7 out of 30 countries are rated as free, whereas in the rest that freedom is seriously compromised. In the group of partly free or not free countries, not less than 11 are LICUS. This can hardly be considered an enabling environment for the kind of participation we are talking about here. What in effect can we expect from an externally imposed but loosely supervised participation exercise in (semi-) authoritarian regimes, more often than not, allergic to free opinion, and marked by correspondingly high levels of state intolerance, intimidation and repression, where public policy debate is typically stifled and any uncensored search for creative solutions to development problems and poverty reduction is regarded as subversive (Harber 2002:270)? Optimists will most probably argue that through the PRSP participation exercise, governments have become more open toward civil society, and that even flawed participation processes have broadened governments' understanding of poverty (Thornton & Cox 2005:10). In Rwanda for instance, the definition of poverty

was successfully challenged by civil society participants and the gender dimension was pushed into the PRPS. In Vietnam, government has become more tolerant toward the timid blossoming of NGOs. Another important and positive element is that in a lot of these contexts INGOs have played an important role in protecting, coaching, helping, financially supporting, or organizing local civil society organizations throughout the process. Because of their international status and good relations with influential donors, INGOs could take more risks in playing the participation game while at the same time opening up more space for their local partners.

Some exceptions notwithstanding, we argue that the willingness of government to engage in the type of dialogue with civil society that donors have in mind will most probably be very limited. Even in pseudo-democracies where the executive will try to keep a fixed control over policies and decision making processes. Therefore, donors will get a semblance of what they say they want, but, with government controlling and manipulating the participative process and blocking off any road that they perceive as threatening. Information is not made available/accessible on time, critical/dissent organizations/groups are bypassed in favor of 'friendly' organizations, eventually set up for the purpose, debate on macroeconomic scenarios are studiously avoided or at best transformed into micro-level consultations on what to do with the extra money, politically sensitive issues are banned from the agenda, and contributions from civil society are listened to but not included in final policy documents. Such 'tactics' deployed by government to retain control over the participation process and the final results of that process have been identified by researchers and consultants evaluating PRSP participation processes ex post (Painter 2002; Eberlei 2001; Whaites 2000; McGee & Norton 2001). In Rwanda for example, the regime clamped down on dissent organizations while at the same time local consultations were taking place (Renard & Molenaers 2003). Another case in point is Bolivia: while the PRSP consultations were going on, peasant and indigenous movements – organizations not involved in the process – organized street protests which the military reacted very repressively against. About 33 people were killed (Molenaers & Renard 2003). This shows that a superficial, well-advertised but strictly orchestrated consultation is fairly innocuous for the government. It is clawless, easily manipulated, it satisfies donors and as a bonus it provides a seal of societal approval to government policies. In other words it serves as a legitimizing gimmick. Maybe this is one of the reasons why so many repressive regimes have happily complied with this donor conditionality.

And then there is civil society itself. We know that in most low-income countries civil society is weakly organized and embryonic (van de Walle 2005). It is unclear to what extent organizations in the South represent the interest of the poor. That most of the evaluation reports mention the absence of the poor in the participation process (World Bank 2002) only confirms the generally acknowledged fact that poor people tend to be poorly or-



ganized (Putnam 1993; Inglehart 1997). What abounds in PRSP processes are development NGOs, but these are mainly urban, professional, donor-bred entities, with unclear links to grass-roots organizations, and maybe even disconnected from the sectors they claim to represent (Boussard 2002, Hickey & Bracking 2005, Fowler 2000, Edwards & Hulme 1997). There is thus no automatic guarantee that civil society participation will bring the interests of the poor to the negotiation table.

The question is how donors deal with these ambiguous situations. Either donors can insist on genuine participation, with all its revolutionary potential, and make this a breaking point, just as they might do in, say, public finance reform. This first course of action would mean applying the PRSP participation rationale, but getting serious about it. That may be the correct answers in some cases, but surely not always, and it should be carefully argued. Or they can take a second course of action and decide that there are maybe good reasons not to push the government too far on this issue, and thus drop this conditionality in its present form, for the time being. What they should definitely not do is to do is to continue with the third option: keep the conditionality nominally, but let it degenerate. Let us present a configuration where the second course of action, to drop conditionality, is worth considering. This concerns the case where a trade-off exists between government ownership and broad-based ownership. Politics in many countries is quite partisan. Development plans and strategies are not owned by the opposition, or by civil society, or by Parliament, they are in fact the government's property. Governments govern, opposition parties oppose and wait for their turn to take power, and civil society may in certain situations mainly oppose. If civil society is politicized, as is for instance the case in Nicaragua, then pushing for participation is changing the nature of the political game. This is of course not an ideal situation, but the idea that a PRSP, as a long-term strategy document, must carry a broad, country-wide consensus, is all very beautiful, but it does not always work that way in practice. An external push for participation can be seen by the political elite as a threat to its hold on power. If that government is also very committed to poverty reduction, it may then be better to leave things as they are. Maybe donors can promote more dialogue in the country, try to open up debate, but there are many other ways of doing this than to formally link this to the PRSP<sup>10</sup>.

Let us finally imagine that in a given PRSP country the conditions from the three levels discussed so far are being reasonably satisfied, and move to the final level. There are indeed some other important conditions that should be taken into account. In their absence participation might not have the intended effects on the PRSP.

<sup>10</sup> van de Walle (2005) makes a similar point about the tension between government ownership and broad-based ownership.

## 2.2. Participation issues to be tackled

**Table 5: participation issues**

	Pro-poor effectiveness	Broad-based Ownership	Accountability
<b>Civil society</b>	Capacity to assess micro needs of the poor  Capacity to engage in macro policy debate	Representativeness  Autonomy from the state	Capacity to monitor and evaluate gvt policies  Capacity to form umbrella-organizations  Democratic goals and structures  Voice
<b>Donors</b>			Pressure for more room for CSOs  Advice and support to CSOs to play macro functions

Even in a country that has passed the PRSP readiness assessment, and where the political opportunity structure allows for policy debate and pro-poor stakeholders are given a say in the process, civil society participation may still be futile. To contribute to the effective functioning of the PRSP – envisaged as a long-term process – a civil society is needed that is prepared for the arduous task of pushing government to better performance, both in socio-economic and political terms. This last set of participation issues identifies desirably features of civil society in a setting where governments are committed, where institutions are becoming more effective, where there is political space for civil society to engage in all kinds of activities. It is important to mention that some of these conditions can be tackled relatively easily, especially with donors providing a helping hand, while others raise issues about the nature of civil society that in some countries cannot be overcome that easily.

Let us turn to the first row of conditions. The conditions mentioned in the intersection with the first column relate to the capacities of civil society. Organizations that work at grassroot level may be familiar with the poor, but even so it must not be taken for granted that they can identify and rank the needs of the poor accurately. And if they are to contribute to making policies more pro-poor, a solid grasp of economics, law and public sector administration may be required. At the intersection with the third column the attention is drawn to the need for civil society to be able to constructively contribute to monitoring and evaluating the PRSP, and thus increase government accountability, which in turn will have a pro-poor effect. To do so they must be able to read and analyze budgets, understand how the decision making chain of planning, budgeting, implementing functions and how one can

influence this chain in a pro-poor sense. From the constructivist point of view it seems that building these skills and capacities is a manageable challenge, and that official donors and INGOs should invest in supporting civil society organizations. Donors in fact do invest in all sorts of training in order to prepare organizations for these new skills. But problems do not end there. There are also some structural and organizational issues that are not so easily dealt with. The highly technical matters of pro-poor policies cannot be discussed at the national level with hundreds of people and organizations around the table. This is why it is important that the different civil society sectors organize themselves in umbrella-organizations with a highly professional and technocratic staff, specialized in lobbying and advocacy. This kind of functional specialization will however only have the intended pro-poor, ownership and accountability effects if the umbrella organizations are accountable themselves and if the member organizations are in turn accountable to their members or beneficiaries. Put simply: demanding accountability requires being accountable. Pushing for transparent and democratic governance implies that one is transparent and democratic oneself. Lastly, it is important that organizations have voice. Mobilizing people or influencing public opinion is the ultimate weapon for civil society organizations to channel discontent, and to put government under pressure if all other strategies fail.

The middle column refers to two other important elements with regards to civil society. Without autonomy from the state, participation in the PRSP will not contribute to extend ownership beyond the public sector. On the basis of our own research in Vietnam and Rwanda, where we found this to be an important issue, we would argue that this lack of autonomy does not prevent organizations from making good contributions to the PRSP, so this might not pose a problem with respect to pro-poor effectiveness, but in the long run it might form a threat to broad-based ownership. The same goes for the representativeness of the organizations involved. Although a lack of representativeness does not necessarily pose a threat to pro-poor effectiveness, it might in the long run impair broad based ownership.

Turning to the second row, it is imperative that donors push governments to open up space for participation, and that such political pressure is combined with actively supporting civil society organizations in taking up this new policy dialogue task. It is not an accident that civil society participation is a condition unilaterally imposed by donors. Donors and not governments have 'ownership' over this part of the process, and official donors and INGOs have a shared responsibility in these tasks.

What about reality? When it comes to supporting capacity building and developing skills, donors are fairly active. With the right amount of resources, serious advancement can be booked in this respect. But other more structural/organizational elements pose more serious long-term challenges to civil society and donors in PRSP countries. We have already

discussed the weaknesses of civil society in low-income countries. Erecting a top (an umbrella or a platform) on an already shaky pyramid (the organizations themselves) could undermine the safety of the whole structure. Will strengthening what exists effectively contribute to a civil society that is capable to push government to better performance? If most of the PRSP involved organizations are to a large extent artificial, donor-bred and fed, top-down managed by urban professionals... this might cause some trouble further down the road. Not that these organizations cannot be good watchdogs, or experts in contributing to the pro-poor dimension of the PRSP. Of course they can. But probably other things will be needed in the long run. If these kinds of participative processes in which negotiation is important will become a 'governance-instrument', this will sooner or later raise questions in the wider public. Who is sitting around the table? What is their legitimacy? Are they transparent and accountable? Who has given them the mandate to take a seat around the negotiation table? This is why donors should pay attention to the internal structure of organizations they financially support: do they undertake efforts to be accountable, to be transparent, to respect the fundamental principles of 'good governance' themselves. Mass movements or other organizations that do have members (like trade unions, peasant organizations) are often outnumbered by the sheer quantity of NGOs and mostly not much involved in PRSP processes<sup>11</sup>. Sometimes because of self-selection, sometimes because they were not invited. But even if these organizations due to their structure hold the potential of being more transparent and democratic and accountable, it is in reality unclear to what extent they are constructed upon the uncivic mechanisms of clientelism and patronage (Vilas, 1996; Howell and Pearce, 2000:77; Woolcock 1998; Putnam, 1993). And we haven't even mentioned the un-catalogued variety of small or medium scale, local associational initiatives that might fall under the civil society definition, or maybe not. Clearly our image of what civil society is in a stable and prosperous democracy does not match the heterogeneous reality of formal and informal ways of organizing in a developing context. The mismatch between prescription and description is so overwhelming that one can seriously doubt the feasibility of 'socially engineering' this 'third sector' with any precision. How can one even start to strengthen a civil society whose sociological, cultural and political dynamics are so poorly understood? Today, considerable sums of aid are channeled to and through civil society organizations. Yet it is unclear what exactly is being strengthened, or maybe weakened, institutionalized or unwittingly changed. It is therefore important that donors gain more insight in the organizational mechanisms and decision-making processes of the organizations they wish to support. Where in the short run a strong focus on pro-poor dimensions might be a good enough reason to support and advise certain organizations, in the long run other elements –like democratic structures and goals - should be taken on board. With regards to the role of INGOs it is worth mentioning that the relation with national organizations is not always an harmonious one. During our field research national organizations in several countries mentioned that they felt threatened

<sup>11</sup> By way of illustration: In Bolivia, there is a sharp contrast between 'modern' urban based NGOs and 'traditional' trade unions and peasant organizations. The leaders of the traditional mass movements, including Evo Morales, who won the presidential elections of December 2005, were very much against the PRSP and the process it entails, in part because the agenda of the consultations did not include important socio-economic topics like coca-production or the public control over natural resources. They did not participate and the government did not bother to get them involved or to listen to their demands. Today, the social movements have taken revenge through the ballot box. It is ironical that in a country where the PRSP participation process has been enthusiastically applauded and hailed as a best practice case (Molenaers & Renard 2003) the very civil society organizations that did not participate and that were so generally ostracized by both the government, the donors, and international and national NGOs, manage to mobilize the poor to elect one of them into the highest office.

by INGOs. INGOs tend to be bigger, stronger, with more technical skills, they have more resources and better access to donors, yet they sometimes compete with smaller local organizations over financial and human resources. Local experts are absorbed by INGOs in ways that often weaken local organizational capacity. The relation between INGOs and national organizations is very complex and thorny, and fierce competition and conflict of interests are never faraway.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Important and positive is that the PRSP in design very much incorporates political and economic elements as important for poverty reduction and development. New is the acknowledgment that recipient countries have to be supported in their institutional functioning if sustainable development is to be reached. Revolutionary is the task assigned to civil society to make the system more performant.

However, translating these insights into clear, well-defined and realistic actions seems to be a daunting task. Especially with regards to participation, the goals that have to be reached are too ambitious, too simplistic, too naïve. Strongly believing in the rationale of the PRSP, we therefore proposed an assessment tool in this paper. This tool is meticulously built on the internal PRSP logic and its focus on pro-poor effectiveness, in order to bring some structure and sequencing into the donors' engagement with local civil society. Essentially this assessment tool advances a much more cautious and reticent position towards participation. To donors this translates into: do no harm! Easy to manipulate, and in itself a possible source of endangering the pro-poor orientation of the PRSP, participation can only be pushed if the conditions are right. And these conditions represent a fairly long list. Not only to be fulfilled by the state, but also by the donors and finally civil society itself.

The assessment tool brings out the trade-offs and contradictions that exist between democracy and pro-poor effectiveness, rather than assuming that both are intertwined goals that constantly reinforce one another. Highlighting the trade-offs indicates the need for priority-setting when actions have to be undertaken. As such one might consider the trade-off between strong government ownership over the PRSP and maybe the loss of that ownership (hence effectiveness) when 'non-friendly' organizations and movements strongly begin to influence the process. Focusing on pro-poor effectiveness helps to overcome these action dilemmas.

It also brings out the importance of sequencing. Governments with bad commitment and implementation track records, where crisis and conflicts regularly break out, should not necessarily receive the PRSP treatment. In such circumstances, civil society may have a role to play and donors may have to help them in this, but the PRSP blueprint is of not much use in deciding what should be done and how. Selectivity should be maintained as an option. In all cases sequencing remains the most important lesson to be learned. We suggest that when there is no political space for real participation, donors should not push for it and then applaud the cynical manipulations of the government. In those circumstances donors should put more pressure on the government to change the constitution, to push for the rule of law, for more freedom of speech, freedom of association, more respect for human rights... It is only after the legal framework allows for participation and the elites are accepting dissident voices that a participation process

makes sense. But even when these legal and institutional prerequisites are in place, civil society might not be up to the task. A whole myriad of elements can actually undermine the supposedly positive contributions of participation to the PRSP.

The good news of such a readiness assessment thus is that it organizes and structures, it brings out trade-offs and points to the importance of sequencing. The bad news is that it seems to suggest that in reality most of the PRSP countries should not have gotten into the PRSP and certainly not into the participation exercise. But what is there to do for donors when a country just doesn't display the 'good enough governance' conditions? Is it possible today not to play the PRSP game? When moving in donor circles, this doesn't seem to be an option. PRSP, and especially the aid modalities linked to it are all over the place. And donors who consider themselves important appear to be caught and imprisoned by the new paradigm. The mere thought of returning to project financing would be perceived as a leap back into the Middle Ages, at least in terms of current donor thinking. By way of conclusion however we would like to follow Radelet (2005) and plead for opening up the aid modality horizon. He rightly argues that countries differ in their governance situation and that these differences should be reflected not only in aidflows but also modalities. He thus strongly emphasizes the importance of selectivity. Programme aid (like budget and sector support) should only be given to good governance countries. Ownership is an appropriate concept in such a context, given it responds to the pro-poor orientation as projected by the PRSP approach. And thus donors can play a facilitating role in supporting the good stuff that already exists. This is however not the case in very weakly governed countries. Countries that are on a constant verge of instability, conflict and underperformance should be considered a high risk environment, hence these countries should receive less aid than good governance countries and donors should not go beyond humanitarian relief and basic services for the poor. But then of course there is this very large 'middle group' of countries that seem to fall between the poor and the good governance category. According to Radelet (2005) these should receive more funding than poor performers, but less than the good performers. The recipient government here should play an active role in setting priorities and designing programmes and projects, but donors should keep a very close watch and only give very limited programme and sector support. It is especially in this middle group category of countries where the assessment matrix could be useful to donors. Assuming the minimum standard of ownership and institutional capacity are there, the PRSP approach can be increasingly pursued by donors if the action scenario is inscribed in a clear poverty reduction agenda leading to a "first things first" sequential way of planning interventions.

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