

*DEVELOPING STRATEGIES FOR  
EFFECTIVE CIVIL SOCIETY  
INVOLVEMENT WITHIN THE PRSP  
PROCESSES: LESSONS FROM THE  
UGANDA EXPERIENCE*

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Abstract

A main area of civil society engagement with multilateral donors in poverty eradication strategies in recent year at the national level has been through the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process. PRSPs are an important space for civil society to influence public policy. The experience of Uganda illustrates how successful participation depends on country-specific contexts and strategies. By devising clear action strategies that took advantage of a relatively conducive political environment, Ugandan civil society organizations (CSOs) have been highly effective in their engagement. This paper examines the strategies devised and their relevance to future civil society engagement.

**Introduction**

Civil society organisations have become part of the mainstream in the development process. Because of their proximity to ordinary citizens and their highly developed social analysis and mobilization skills, key players in the development arena, such as the United Nations, Governments and Inter-Governmental organisations and the private sector, now accept the role and importance of the civil society involvement for successful development processes. CSOs represent the realities of the poor and marginalized men and women and amplify the voices of those often excluded. They assist

to build local ownership of public policy and improve the accountability of the development process and its outcomes.

This acceptance has translated into formal and informal multi-stakeholder partnerships, such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). Despite serious limitations, such as failure to address structural and political aspects of poverty, PRSP, the mechanism used by the World Bank and other development partners to provide support to highly indebted and low income countries, is arguably an important space and another site for development organizations to influence public policy. However, the extent to which CSOs have been effective in utilizing this space varies from country to country. Overall, such organizations deal with many challenges. They must organize coherent civil society input and minimize splits within civil society arising from a highly contentious process. They must also avoid cooption while gaining credibility before government, donors and other partners once at the policy table. To overcome these obstacles, carefully devised, clear and practical strategies are necessary. Ugandan CSOs have been exemplary in their involvement in the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP), the country's PRSP.

This article examines four of the strategies devised by Ugandan CSOs – **effective leadership; insider-outsider strategy; prioritizing policies and utilizing informal networks**- to make their participation effective. It also assesses the relevance of their strategies to future civil society engagement.

## The Process

Civil society involvement dates back to the process that started in 1995 when the formulation of Uganda's first PEAP was initiated, (culminating into the document that was launched in 1997). Some consider this to have been a result of relentless pressure on government and donors by CSOs to be allowed to participate. Others attribute it to a deliberate decision by the government to open up the policy space to broader participation, because someone within government had come to the conclusion that this would make the contentious reforms government was pursuing more easily accepted. Whatever the case, by 2000 when the PEAP was revised and turned into PRSP, CSOs were long recognized as partners in the policy formulation process<sup>1</sup>.

In the 2000 PEAP process, a Taskforce was formed, a lead agency selected and a technical team appointed to facilitate the process. CSOs mobilized their constituencies through workshops at national and sub-national levels, and sectoral meetings and media activities. In addition, they directly consulted people at the grassroots level and special interest groups (such as women, those in conflict areas, persons with disability and environmentalists) to collect views on how to strengthen the PEAP.

Since PEAP is reviewed every three years, during the 2003 review process, CSOs drew on the lessons of the previous two involvements (1997 and 2000) to deepen their input. For example, instead of using primary data generated from consultations with

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<sup>1</sup> Zie Gariyo, "Participatory Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers: The PRSP Process in Uganda," *Uganda Debt Network Discussion Paper No.5*, 2002.

purposefully selected stakeholders, they relied more on existing and specially commissioned CSO studies and poverty monitoring reports. They formed sector-working groups to generate and collate sector-specific material, set up a liaison office for effective coordination and formed a synthesis team comprising top CSO professionals.

As a result of careful implementation of these strategies, CSO input has progressively improved in quality and depth of analysis in the proposal for policy alternatives. For example, CSOs have increasingly confronted such official policies as indiscriminate liberalization (such as the opening up of water to increased private sector participation) and the imposition of funding caps that prevent the allocation of sufficient resources for financing health and agriculture services in order to maintain macroeconomic stability and safeguard private sector growth. For the first time CSOs have put a figure to the economic cost of the war in Northern Uganda and the contribution of pastoralism to the Ugandan economy where policies continue to be crop-centric. With these and other inputs, CSOs have introduced into the policy process a sense of urgency for the government to address structural issues, thereby provoking it into “thinking outside the box” if it is to get the country on to a new and more transformational development path.

## Strategies

### a) Effective leadership to steer the process

As in many other countries, civil society in Uganda is characterized by great diversity, fragmentation, competition and rivalries. Because of this a number of initiatives that started with gusto quickly ran out of steam only to stall before realizing their intended objectives. CSO strategists observed that undisputed leadership, the success story with HIV/AIDS being a case in point, largely drove policy reforms at the political, technical and local government levels and in the private sector. They concluded that while taskforces or steering committees and lead agencies were necessary to mobilize CSOs, they were not sufficient in leading them to the desired outcomes; there was a need for ‘drivers’ in the form of individuals to effectively steer the PEAP/PRSP process. Inevitably, the process of negotiating this leadership is a complex one, involving a degree of jostling and caucusing. However, a lot has depended on the initiative, vision, commitment, charisma, tenacity and availability of self-selected individuals.

### b) Insider-outsider strategy

So far civil society participation in policy processes has been by invitation to selected CSOs. For example, at the initial stages of PEAP formulation, labour unions were effectively sidelined. But this sidelining was so subtle that it was not noted until Lister and Nyamugasira established that the sidelining had indeed been deliberate, systematic and total in one of their studies<sup>2</sup>. They state that while there were serious internal problems within the labour movement, the real reason for not participating was that the views of its representatives on critical reforms such as privatization, retrenchment and labour flexibilization, collective bargaining and minimum wage

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Lister and Warren Nyamugasira, *A Study on the Involvement of Civil Society in Policy Dialogue and Advocacy, Lessons Learnt on their Engagement in Policy Advocacy*, April 2001.

regulation were considered incompatible with the very essence of the very reforms government was pursuing with the tacit support of the World Bank and the other 'development partners'.

On the other hand, not all who were invited chose to participate. In May 2001, the Uganda-based African Women's Economic Policy Network (AWEPON) organised an international conference in Kampala that brought together dozens of African CSOs comprising the Jubilee South Coalition of debt-cancellation activists and released a "Pan-African Declaration on PRSPs" which criticized the Papers on "representing nothing other than yet another attempt by the World Bank and the IMF to continue imposing their structural adjustment programmes on the poor of our countries..."<sup>3</sup>.

Very quickly, it became clear to CSO leaders steering the PEAP/PRSP process that participation had a real potential to split civil society. To keep civil society together, they adopted a strategy that would deliberately maintain strong links between those who chose to participate – the 'insiders' – and the un-invited and the self-excluded – the 'outsiders'. They did this by maintaining constant social and professional links between those inside and the others outside, like attending meetings organized by the latter. They also did this by bending the 'rules of the game' to ensure that those inside, such as the NGO Forum, DENIVA, Uganda Debt Network, Oxfam and Action Aid, also occasionally criticized the very process in which they participated. For example, DENIVA, a member of the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA) Steering Committee, the highest organ of the PMA, the vehicle by which PEAP is delivered, occasionally bought space in the media to publicize views highly critical of the official line of "not going against market principles". One such occasion took place after a meeting where the issue of overproduction of maize, which led to extremely low prices for farmers, had been discussed and Government refused to set price floors that could save farmers from total disaster.

Likewise organizations such as the Food Rights Alliance (a consortium of NGOs working on agriculture, livelihoods and food security), Council for Economic Empowerment of Women in Africa (Uganda chapter), and Action Aid, at one time or another expressed concerns about the policies resulting from a process in which they participated. The most scathing critique of PRSPs to come out of Uganda was co-authored by Warren Nyamugasira and Rick Rowden.<sup>4</sup> The former has been a key figure in the PEAP process since the process' inception.

By keeping one foot inside and the other outside, participating CSOs reduced the risk of being taken for granted and minimized the potential polarization that could have resulted from the involvement of some in and the rejection by others of the PEAP process. They could also justify their participation by highlighting the fact that they were under pressure by the 'outsiders' to abandon the process. This approach can work wonders as most governments and almost all donors are, for various reasons, desperate to work with civil society during development processes.

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<sup>3</sup>Warren Nyamugasira and R. Rowden, *Poverty Reduction Strategies and Coherency of Loan Conditions; Do the new World Bank and IMF loans support countries' poverty reduction goals? A Case of Uganda*, April 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Nyamugasira et al. Ibid.

### c) Prioritizing policy engagement

Following the debt relief campaign in which CSOs successfully teamed up with the government to campaign for reductions in external debts, and perhaps influenced by history (where an increasingly militarized state occupies the central position in Uganda's political economy), a number of Ugandan CSOs opted for a non-confrontational approach to policy engagement. They reached the conclusion that where space was available, however small, it was better to invest in exploiting and expanding it; they decided that by being at the policy table talking, listening, analyzing, reflecting and learning, as opposed to being on the streets demonstrating, they stood a better chance of increasing their influence through incremental gains. Without being overly ambitious about what they would achieve and by not taking on the entire super-structure that went beyond government to the more powerful and less open international institutions, interests and processes, they would eventually positively effect Ugandan development.

This decision partly arose out of pragmatism on the part of CSOs. A simple reality check made them realize that capacity deficits meant that they could never match government and the International Financial Institutions on macroeconomic framework issues. They also realized that time for them to out-source the much needed capacity was limited. However, through their long association with service delivery and campaigning for debt relief, they knew they had developed comparative advantage on understanding the social realities of the poor, which they could use to great effect by concentrating on social policy. Therefore, they chose to shelve the macroeconomic issue for handling at a later stage.

Consequently, the 2001 PEAP/PRSP clearly shows that CSOs concentrated more on such pillars as governance (mainly on issues of conflict), increasing incomes (agricultural services and micro-finance) and improving the quality of life of the poor (health and education privileges), which drew their funding from the Poverty Action Fund made up mainly of HIPC Debt Relief savings, and less on policies for macroeconomic stability such as fiscal, monetary or structural policies. However, there was order in these priorities as CSOs went for "biting off what they could chew" and shelving for later that which they could not influence due to limited technical capacity and time constraints.

Later revisions of PEAP and other policy fora (e.g. Sector Working Groups and Consultative Group meetings) demonstrate expanded involvement of CSOs on macroeconomic aspects. For example, during the 2002 Consultative Group meetings, CSOs raised the issue of funding caps, particularly as they constrained the realization of health and agricultural sector goals under the PEAP/PRSP and the Millennium Development Goals. More recently, CSOs have begun to challenge Medium Term Expenditure Framework premises by drawing on the expert advice of such people as Prof. Jeffrey Sachs and the WHO's report on "Macroeconomic and Health" to demonstrate how investing in health, as opposed to the assumption that health automatically improves as a result of economic growth, is critical for economic development to take place in poor countries. During the 2003 CG, CSOs ferociously attacked the government's way of handling deficit financing, illustrating with credible evidence, that policies meant to help the poor were hurting them instead. Some of their

arguments were based on data from researchers in quasi-official institutions such as the Economic Policy Research Centre, a fact that policy statements officially de-emphasized. As a result of CSO policy engagement, the funding ceilings for agriculture and health are to be increased.

#### **d) Utilizing informal networks to influence policy**

Experience has shown that key policy decisions are not always negotiated in formal spaces. CSOs discovered that the real discussion happened away from the formal spaces, in social gatherings, in caucuses, in corridors and coffee breaks at conferences and in donor technical meetings. By the time CSOs sat at the policy table, consensus had already been built among donors and between donors and government counterparts. It became vital for them to penetrate these informal spaces, to augment their 'know-how' with 'know-who', if they were to have a chance of influencing key policy decisions. They did this by drawing on the large pool of contemporaries in the political and technical arms of government – former schoolmates, drinking buddies, and the like. These informal networks made it easier for CSOs to increase influence on ordinarily contentious issues.

CSOs identified certain officials within the government and worked to turn them into allies. In particular they 'targeted' one middle-level official whom they knew to be highly influential in the Ministry of Finance, and succeeded in winning him over. He then helped to convince the rest of the ministry of the value-adding contribution of CSOs. This made it easier for CSOs to gain acceptance. CSOs reciprocated by increasing their respect for the spaces thus opened up by sending the right representation (in terms of seniority and technical expertise); by being better prepared and using evidence-based research and critical analysis that enhanced the credibility of their technical arguments; and by being more modest (accepting that they did not know all the answers), open-minded and flexible while remaining firm and consistent in some of their positions.

By drawing on the large pool of expatriate staff among international NGOs CSOs have been able to access decision-makers in the donor community and among the large number of Technical Advisors (TAs) employed in key government ministries. For example, CSOs realized that, at any one time, there were upwards of twenty Technical Advisors in the Ministry of Finance alone. Being the powerhouse ministry of government policy-making, these Technical Advisors, put there by lead donors such as DFID, actually make most of the technical policy decisions. Therefore penetrating their informal circles gave CSOs access to the most up-to-date information and thinking in the most important places. Likewise, getting access to the lead consultant drafting the PEAP made it easier to negotiate on some issues and language than did hours of arguing in the official meetings.

## Application

There is potential for application of these strategies to future Ugandan and wider civil society engagement, even beyond the context of PRSP. In Uganda, it has been established that effective leadership at whatever level is the number one factor for making things happen. CSOs now apply this strategy whenever they have a new initiative, such as the recent effort to initiate a Social Forum. The unintended risk is that "effective leaders" tend to be strong and self-assured individuals who dominate the process leaving others frustrated. This leads to resentment and diminished commitment on the part of other members. Furthermore, the syndrome of "the same old faces" can develop where partners get tired of seeing the same people. These backlashes have been minimized through a system of 'renew and rotate' that ensures continuity while changing faces.

Insider-outsider strategy perhaps has the greatest potential for application. For any contentious initiative that may split civil society, such as CSO alignment with political parties and participation in World Bank supported programmes, CSO leaders need to employ this strategy to minimize polarization within the sector. In Uganda the women's movement has successfully employed the strategy when participating in partisan politics – those who stay out support those who go in.

Prioritizing policy engagement is an important strategy based on pragmatism. All too often CSOs become overly ambitious about what they can change in a given timeframe and end up frustrated, stretched and overexposed. They need to identify their "comparative advantage", and utilize this to the full, as long as they do not lapse into uncritical acceptance of the dominant ideology underpinning the macro-economic model and worldview of PRSP, and the political nature of poverty.

Informal networking was a belated strategic discovery for Ugandan CSOs even if such an association is quite African in character. By drawing on the large pool of their contemporaries and other networks in the political, technical and legislative arms of government and among donors, CSOs can utilize this African way of doing business to great effectiveness. However, this strategy is one that should be employed with great caution as it borders on questionable ethical conduct and does not enhance the building of transparent and accountable institutions and systems that CSOs work so hard to achieve. Also it can easily lead to being compromised because among 'friends', there is a tendency to be lenient and accommodating.

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## **Biography**

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