

A Literature Review on Asian CSO/NGO Experiences in the PRSP Processes

By **DR. CRISTINA M. LIAMZON**
Liaison Officer, Asian NGO Coalition

In 1999, the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) launched a new anti-poverty framework focusing around Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), intended to ensure that debt relief under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative would alleviate poverty in the poorest countries.

To obtain debt relief, countries were asked to prepare PRSPs that outline poverty reduction goals and objectives and define the plans to attain them.

The underlying principles of the PRSPs are the following:

- ❑ *Country-driven*: with governments leading the process and broad-based participation in the adoption and monitoring of the resulting strategy;
- ❑ *Results-oriented*: identifying desired outcomes and planning the way towards them;
- ❑ *Comprehensive*: taking account of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty;
- ❑ *Long-term in approach*: recognizing the depth and complexity of some of the changes needed; and
- ❑ *Based on partnership*: between governments and other actors in civil society, the private sector and the donor community.

Prior to the preparation of PRSPs, countries had to produce interim PRSPs or I-PRSPs. The

transition from an I-PRSP to a full PRSP generally took from 9 to 24 months. Both had to undergo an approval process by the donors, notably the IMF and WB. Countries are also required to submit Annual Progress reports on their PRS implementation. Revising the PRSPs could theoretically be done every two to five years, drawing on lessons learned from monitoring and evaluation of the implementation process.

The main elements required for the full PRSPs are:

- ❑ *Poverty analysis*: describing who and where the poor are, using both quantitative and qualitative data. An analysis of the macroeconomic, social, structural and institutional constraints to economic growth and poverty reduction then follows.
- ❑ *Participatory processes used*: describing the consultations that took place, including their number, format, location; a summary of the major issues raised; and role of civil society in future implementation and monitoring of the PRSP.

- ❑ *Macro-economic, structural and social policies:* defining what policies are needed for a comprehensive strategy to achieve poverty reduction, with priorities and costings to reach the targets set.
- ❑ *Targets, indicators and systems for monitoring progress:* defining the medium- and long-term goals for poverty reduction outcomes, including setting up indicators of progress, annual and medium-term targets; also, an assessment of the monitoring and evaluation systems of the country, incorporating participatory mechanisms wherever possible.

As of 2004, 49 so-called first generation PRSPs have been completed, half of which are from sub-Saharan Africa, and of which about half of the countries are also HIPC. Of these, 40 are in the implementation stage with four countries undertaking a second generation of poverty reduction strategies (Driscoll, 2004). Some countries have begun to submit annual progress reports on their implementation. Eventually, it is expected that about 70 low-income countries will prepare PRSPs (Levinsohn, 2003).

In Asia however where the PRSP process has been slow, Thin (2001) attributes this to the initial links of the PRSP process with the HIPC debt relief.

WORKING CONTEXT OF THIS LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2001, the Asian NGO Coalition (ANGOC) in partnership with NGOs in Cambodia and Vietnam undertook a review of stakeholders' roles and capacities in the PRSP processes in the two countries. This pilot initiative aimed at ensuring sustained participation by civil society groups in the PRSP processes in both countries. Findings from the project showed the need for CSOs/NGOs to be more actively and

systematically engaged in the monitoring of the PRSP implementation, and to focus on identifying the policy research and analysis that would be required to influence the next round of strategic planning.

Hence, in 2004, a follow up project was initiated again in Cambodia and Vietnam, this time focused on assisting CSOs/NGOs in the critical area of monitoring and evaluation of the PRSPs. More importantly, the project aimed at helping the CSOs/NGOs to build up a level of knowledge and capability to engage constructively in policy dialogue. The objective was to strengthen the capacities of CSOs/NGOs in their roles as "public monitors" and "policy advocates".

This literature review is one component of this second ANGOC project. It aims to provide an overall picture of the PRSP processes in various Asian countries that have adopted this anti-poverty framework, in order to increase the information and learning among CSOs/NGOs that can enhance their involvement in the PRSPs.

Objectives of the review

Specifically, this literature review aims to:

- ❑ present an overview of the PRSP processes in the various countries that have adopted the framework, particularly in Asia;
- ❑ describe the status of CSO/NGO participation and involvement in PRSP processes in Asian countries;
- ❑ provide an inventory and sampling of tools and approaches used by CSOs/NGOs in Asia and other regions with experiences in PRSP processes, particularly in implementation and monitoring/evaluation; and
- ❑ generate a set of recommendations for increasing the effectiveness of CSO/NGO

participation and engagement in the PRSP processes in Asian countries, especially in monitoring and advocacy.

Given the complexities of PRSP processes in the various countries, this literature review attempts to summarize the key issues that relate specially to the engagement and participation by CSOs/NGOs in these processes, or their lack of it. Further, it is hoped that this review may serve as a guide on ways to enhance the effectiveness of CSO/NGO participation and engagement in the PRSP processes.

OVERVIEW OF PRSPs IN ASIA

This section discusses the experiences of several countries in the preparation of their PRSPs, basically in South and Southeast Asia. The only country covered in Central Asia is Mongolia. *Table 1* summarizes those experiences and features of the PRSPs in the eight countries.

Descriptions include the following: date of completion of the PRSPs by governments, as well as the Joint Staff Assessments (JSAs) or Joint Staff Advisory Notes (JSANs) prepared by the IMF and the World Bank; the strategic thrusts of the papers; country ownership; and their links to national development plans and budgets. A separate section deals with the subject of CSO/NGO involvement in the PRSP processes in the Asian region.

Of the eight countries cited, Laos and Vietnam are also HIPC countries, while Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, and Nepal are in the UN's list of "Least Developed Countries".

Two countries, Nepal and Sri Lanka, are dealing with serious internal conflicts although Sri Lanka is currently negotiating a ceasefire agreement with the Tamil rebels. However, the links between the Sri Lankan government's

framework of Relief, Reconciliation and Reconstruction and its PRSP remain uncertain

Completion of PRSPs and JSAs

The PRSP process has been much more evident in sub-Saharan Africa compared to Latin America or Asia. In Asia, the PRSP process has been undertaken in around 10 countries. In eight of these, full PRSPs with JSAs and JSANs have been accomplished as well. These countries are: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Of these countries, Vietnam was the first to finish its PRSP in 2002; another four countries in 2003; and two in 2004. Bangladesh was the last to complete its PRSP in 2005. This delay was partly a result of the CSOs' successful campaign for an extension of the original deadline (PRSP Synthesis Note 8, 2004).

Thus, most of the countries covered have had at least 3 to 4 years of experience in implementation of the PRSPs. Three countries, namely, Cambodia, Mongolia, and Nepal have been able to submit their first annual progress reports, while Vietnam has already given its second annual report.³ None are involved as yet in the second round of the PRSP process, unlike some countries in Africa.

Indonesia started its process only recently and has only finished its I-PRSP in 2005. It has therefore not been included in this literature review as with Timor Leste. Both China and India have refused to undertake the preparation of PRSPs.

Nationalizing PRSPs

PRSPs carry different names or titles in most of the countries, as shown in Table 1, indicating a contextualization or link of the strategy to local country situations and conditions. In Bangladesh, for example, it is referred to as the

National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction (NSAPR); in Mongolia, it is entitled Economic Growth Support and Poverty Reduction Strategy (EGSPRS); while in Vietnam, it is called the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction Growth Strategy (CPRGS).

Although the PRSP calls for a redefining and re-focusing of plans and resources towards poverty reduction in the countries, the actual strategies for carrying these out vary, depending on the particular context in a country. However, the one seemingly overriding strategy for almost all countries is “sustaining broad-based economic growth.” For Mongolia, the PRSP highlights “strong sustainable economic growth” as its cornerstone. The Sri Lankan PRSP explicitly identifies “achieving economic growth led by the private sector” as its thrust.

“Enhancing human development” also appears as a common strategy or pillar for majority of the PRSPs. Cambodia and Nepal include “social inclusion” as well as “reducing vulnerability of the poor.” Likewise, several countries clearly define “improvement of governance” as a key element in the strategy, given the prevalence of corruption in many of the countries concerned. Only two countries, Laos and Vietnam explicitly focus on “equity” as a strategic thrust. This confirms an earlier finding that most PRSPs appear weak when it comes to a redistributive thrust (Marcus and Wilkinson).

Political and bureaucratic ownership

Political ownership by countries of the process and strategies is defined as one of the five principles of the PRSPs in contrast to previous donor-led and donor-driven macroeconomic and anti-poverty strategies. Hence, a common feature of PRSPs has been the creation of inter-ministerial, inter-agency groups and task forces to formulate and prepare the strategies. Most previous poverty plans have been largely drawn

up by ministries of social services or planning which are often disconnected from mainstream economic planning undertaken mostly by ministries of finance. For the PRSPs, more serious efforts have been placed seemingly on coordination among key agencies of government to spell out the strategy and its details.

One assessment made on the involvement of key line agencies in the process showed that Pakistan and Vietnam have brought in sub-national bodies in the drafting process. Pakistan, for example, required a draft PRS in each province while Vietnam initiated consultations with province and commune-level officials. This type of engagement with the bureaucracy at the more local level can have important consequences in the implementation of the strategies and meeting of targets (PRSP Synthesis No.8, 2004).

When it came to engagement by legislative bodies, the general assessment is that participation and consultations with parliaments tended to be minimal. Little debates took place on the PRSPs, if at all, in parliaments or national assemblies, as in Laos, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Thus, there was little ownership of the strategies by these bodies. It was only in Nepal where representatives of major political parties were consulted at various stages of the strategy.

Links of PRSPs to national development plans and budgets

The links of the PRSPs with other current development plans are crucial to the success of the implementation of the strategies. This would help to ensure consistency and coherence and prevent competition for human and material resources in carrying out the programs and projects under the PRSPs. The JSAs for Nepal and Vietnam have noted a high degree of consistency between the PRSP and the national

development plans in the two countries, although an ODI Study at the same time claims that the Vietnam CPRGS is weakly embedded in ministry and provincial planning cycles.

In Pakistan and Sri Lanka, greater attention is needed to ensure working links between national plans and the PRSPs. In Mongolia, the EGSPRS is viewed as isolated from other government strategic processes and is not used effectively to input into policy design and budgeting in the country (JSA, Mongolia). In an assessment report of the PRSP in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam, the Focus on the Global South (2002) argues that the I-PRSPs conflict with the existing Medium-Term Development Plans in these three countries.

Links between the PRSPs and national budgets and expenditures are likewise a critical test of country ownership of the strategy and for the eventual implementation of the plans. The interaction between the PRSP process and public finance management is crucial, so that the PRSP provides the enabling framework for poverty alleviation and the public finance management ensures that plans and priorities are carried out with transparency and accountability. In all the countries covered, however, the links between PRSPs and national budgets are generally weak and need to be improved. Countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka lack the Medium-Term Expenditure (Macroeconomic or Budget) Framework which was introduced to improve links between the budget and PRS-processes. This lack has made costings of targets difficult to do. On the other hand, the Nepal's PRS is relatively well-linked with the MTEF; Cambodia's NPRS and Vietnam's CPRGS are not. In both the latter countries, the links are not well-developed and some confusion exists over roles and relationships between the MTMF and the PRS which needs sorting out. Specifically, in Cambodia, the MTEF is not yet comprehensive and at present excludes essential parts of the

government's budget and Vietnam is working on introducing the MTEF in four priority sectors but much more needs to be done to put these MTEFs in place (Alonso, et al).

CSO/NGO INVOLVEMENT IN PRS PROCESSES IN ASIAN COUNTRIES

One of the guiding principles of the PRSPs is that the process should be based on a partnership between the government, civil society and donors. Participation by civil society organizations (CSOs) is therefore a key element in the whole process – from the drafting of the PRSPs, to their implementation and subsequent monitoring and evaluation.

The World Bank describes participation in its Poverty Reduction Source Book (Vol. 1, Dec 2001) as “the process through which stakeholders influence and share control over priority setting, policy-making, resource allocations and access to public goods and services.” The Bank also believes that “participation increases transparency of decision-making, promotes governmental accountability, and thereby increases overall economic and governance efficiency”. Norton and McGee (IDS Working Paper 109) note that participation in the PRSP is also understood to be “a more meaningful, pro-active and results-oriented engagement whose key elements should include information-sharing, consultation, joint decision-making, and lastly, initiation and control by shareholders”.⁴

Given this definition and elaboration of participation in the PRS process, this section attempts to describe and assess CSO/NGO involvement in the various stages of the PRSPs in two areas: (1) which CSOs/NGOs and other civil society actors are engaged or involved in the PRSP processes in the different countries; (2) how far CSOs and NGOs in the countries

covered have been able to achieve the key elements of a meaningful and results-oriented engagement by civil society actors, as cited by Norton and McGee.

Furthermore, there are other elements identified by the IMF and WB as important to achieve and sustain meaningful participation; these include institutionalized participation that can serve as a mechanism for encouraging strong accountability (IMF/WB PRSP Review, 2005). Strategic communications are also essential to help create demand for accountability and open space for increasing effective dialogue between government and civil society. Part of this is ensuring that relevant information is made easily accessible to different groups and stakeholders. For civil society actors who have been left out or neglected in earlier processes, there needs to be continued efforts to engage important stakeholders on a continuing basis. In previous PRSP experiences in many countries, it has been noted that parliamentarians, and definitely the poor and other marginalized groups have been generally left out of the processes. The IMF/WB Review also points out the need to open the space for debate on policy issues that require information, capacity and willingness. So far, opportunities have been limited for such types of debates that address alternative policy options in relation to macroeconomic frameworks and related structural reforms.

General assessment of gains made by civil society from engagement in PRSP processes

A number of CSOs/NGOs acknowledge that the PRSP process in many countries has generally been able to offer important opportunities; in some cases, it has helped to increase and enhance the levels of coordination among CSOs in order to sensitize and mobilize communities to poverty reduction strategy issues. R. Alonso, et al, contend that the PRSP

has enabled many stakeholders to influence the setting of priorities for poverty reduction. In some countries, the process has resulted specifically in the improvement of relations between governments and CSOs and an enhanced understanding by CSOs of the budget and expenditure issues of government at local and national levels. R. Driscoll, et al, (2004) point out that the fundamental innovation of the PRSP approach is that it challenges traditional roles and responsibilities of the main development agents – governments, donors and civil society. They argue that given this opening, NGOs and other civil society actors need to capitalize on this flexibility of roles and to help ensure that this benefits the poor.

Nevertheless, many other CSOs remain skeptical of the PRSP. They seriously question the motives of the donors in pursuing the PRSP process, given the historical roots of structural adjustment policies as espoused and endorsed by the donors specially by the IMF and World Bank, as these appear to be a common feature of most, if not all PRSPs. International NGOs such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Save the Children UK, and the European Network on Debt and Development (EURODAD) have raised serious concerns that while the PRSP has indeed opened more windows for civil society voices to be heard, civil society really does not have any impact on designing or effecting macroeconomic policies. CSOs/NGOs such as the Jubilee South, Focus on the Global South, AWEAPON, etc., are even more negative, concluding that the whole PRSP process is a fraud (Levinsohn, 2003).

CSO/NGO participation in PRS processes globally covers a whole range and degree of involvement, including the boycott of such processes, depending on their analysis of the usefulness of engagement. Some CSOs have decided not to participate in the PRSP arena at all, preferring to set up alternative fora to discuss

Table 1: Selected features and assessments of PRSPs in eight countries in Asia

Countries	Title of PRSP	Completion of PRSP, JSA/JSAN Progress Reports	Strategic Agenda	Ownership Bureaucratic/ Political	Links with National Dev't. Plans	Links with Budget
BANGLADESH	National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction (NSAPR)	PRSP: Oct. 2005 JSA: Dec. 2005	Policy triangle: • pro-poor growth • human development • governance Priority on agriculture/rural dev't.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consultation with MPs • gov't. has owned process, mostly managing/financing on its own • limited coordination among line agencies 	anchored in targeting MDGs as overall theme	committed to align NSAPR to MTBF
CAMBODIA	National Poverty Reduction Strategy (NPRS)	PRSP: Feb. 2003 JSA: Jan. 2003 Prog. report: Aug. 2004	Beyond growth including human development, improving governance and reducing vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inter-ministerial coordination - virtually all line agencies • linked to sectoral strategies of line agencies 	NPRs based on Development Plan (SEDP II)	weak in costing/prioritization
LAOS	National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES)	PRSP: Jun. 2004 JSA: Dec. 2004	3 pillars: • economic growth with equity • develop socio-econ infrastructure • enhance human resource dev't	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • members from key ministries/agencies • need stronger Parliament involvement 	builds on I-PRSP/ National Poverty Eradication Prog. 5-year plan	more work on developing MTEP
MONGOLIA	Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy (EGPRS)	PRSP: Jul. 2003 JSA: Aug. 2003 JSA: Sept. 2005 Prog. report: Nov. 2005	Strong sustainable economic growth - cornerstone of PRS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • government views strong • strong participation from sectoral ministries 	isolated from other government strategic processes	not used effectively to feed into political design/budget
NEPAL	Summary of the Tenth Five-Year Plan	PRSP: Nov. 2003 JSA: Oct. 2003 Prog. report: Jun. 2005	4 pillars: • broad-based economic growth • improved service delivery • social inclusion • improved governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wide consultation w/ major political parties, local gov't. 	Executive summary of Tenth Plan	based on MTEF which will help in prioritizing
PAKISTAN	Accelerating Economic Growth and Reducing Poverty: the Road Ahead	PRSP: Dec. 2003 JSA: Feb. 2004	Sustained economic growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • involved sectoral ministries/provincial gov'ts. 	built on I-PRSP	lack of MTEF so costing of targets difficult
SRI LANKA	Regaining Sri Lanka: Vision and Strategy for Accelerated Development	PRSP: Dec. 2002 JSA: Mar. 2003	Accelerate growth and reduce poverty through private sector-led development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • steering committees/task forces for continuing consultations/implementation needs Parliament endorsement 	integrated with Econ. Reform Prog. and connecting to growth: SL Poverty Reduction Strategy	lack of MTEF so costing of initiative difficult
VIETNAM	Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS)	PRSP: May 2002/ Nov. 2003 JSA: Jun. 2002/ Nov. 2003 JSA: Jul. 2005 Prog. report: Nov. 2003 Jul. 2005	Poverty reduction and social equity (Vietnam Development Goals)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inter-ministerial committees/task forces to coordinate inputs • provincial/local reps. in consultations 	links with Socio-EconDev Strategy (SEDS) (10-yr. plan) and Socio-Econ. Dev't. Plan (SEDP) (5-yr. plan)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not well developed • prioritization/costing somewhat confused

and point out the shortcomings of the PRSPs, particularly in relation to their continuing adherence to structural adjustment policies, which are generally left out of the mainstream consultations, discussions and debates. Nevertheless, critics have also noted that engagement in alternative or PRSP forums need not be an “either-or” imperative.

For example, ActionAid partners in different countries have varying degrees of participation in the PRSPs, ranging from a boycott of the processes in Pakistan and an increased involvement by its partners in Sierra Leone. ActionAid notes that one way to look at the alternative fora is to ask the important question: “How can alternative public fora serve to politically mobilize key sectors of society to push for meaningful development policy reforms in ways not currently possible within the limits of PRSP consultations?”

The organization recommends that in view of the limitations of CSOs to “invited” spaces wherein it is government and not they who set the agenda, and the alternative “created” spaces where CSOs can do so, the task is to partner with other members of civil society to work with parliamentarians and mass media to create the public spaces to discuss and debate issues that may not be possible within the formal PRSP processes and consultations. In this way, civil society takes the role of setting the agenda (ActionAid, 2002).

CSO/NGO experiences in PRSP processes in Asia

In general, little in-depth research has been done on the participation of CSOs and NGOs in Asian PRSPs. Also, more literature can be found in some countries than in others, e.g., for Vietnam, Cambodia and Bangladesh, in contrast to countries such as Laos and Mongolia.

Table 2 shows how CSOs and NGOs in Asia have manifested different responses to the PRSP processes. It can be noted here that, as in other regions, it is the larger NGOs/CSOs and international NGOs which have been most active. This was specially evident in countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia and Vietnam. Participation by CSOs/NGOs in the drafting of the PRSPs included giving comments on drafts and attending workshops and consultations linked to the process. In Cambodia, Pakistan and Vietnam, some CSOs/NGOs also became members of drafting committees. Despite the largely top-down approach of the PRSP in Vietnam, Conway (2004) claims that the process did draw new voices in policy-making among Vietnamese CSOs/NGOs. He cites new ways by which communities got involved in the process through the organization of Poverty Task Forces that organized consultations with the poor.

Vietnam. In Vietnam, a few INGOs were active in the PRSP as they recognized the opportunity of the CPRGS to enhance donor and government focus on poverty. These contributions consisted, among others, of: providing inputs for the poverty diagnostics through implementation of participatory poverty assessments (PPAs); membership in working groups; participation in consultation meetings organized by the government related to the PRS; organizing local consultations; conducting related researches and studies to back up support for policy formulation and planning; providing direct feedback on the documents; monitoring the implementation of some programs at local level in cooperation with local NGOs (LNGOs), mass organizations (MOs) and community based organizations (CBOs).

Local NGOs have had very limited involvement, as the government did not appear ready to

accept LNGOs as partners in policy discussions. The exercise however gave them the opportunity to work with donors and government and to have their relatively weak voices heard.

MOs, composed of workers' unions and farmers' unions, are official stakeholders for consultations including drafting of documents. However, no further involvement has been noted of MOs in the implementation and monitoring stages. CBOs did not participate in the formulation process, as their role as stakeholders in the process was not recognized.

At local level, some CSOs have undertaken monitoring of implementation of certain policies and development programs, but as Nguyen Thi Le Hoa (2006) notes, their engagement in policy advocacy based on their findings from their M&E activities has been very limited.

Mongolia. The JSA for Mongolia cites the consultation processes for the PRSP among various stakeholders and the institutional structure that has been put in place to engage different stakeholders in implementing and monitoring the PRSP.

Laos. For Laos, the JSAN noted the enhanced effort by the government to broaden the consultation with civil society groups and other stakeholders. Representatives from mass organizations participated in consultations as well as members from the academe and provincial representatives.

Nepal. The country claims to have organized regional workshops involving as many as 4,000 participants whose inputs and recommendations were incorporated into the PRSP documents. The JSA also noted however the limited description of how the poverty strategies had been modified to reflect those inputs and recommendations.

Efforts to increase participation of all stakeholders specially local people and to increase transparency and accountability in the PRSPs led to developing a communication strategy which included the translation of documents into the local language for ease of understanding by the local people.

Cambodia. In Cambodia, the JSA stated that a main strength of the NPRS was the extensive participation in the development of the strategy, including consultations with the poor. These local level consultations involved women's groups, ethnic groups, policy researchers, academics, private sector and trade unions. There has been ongoing support from NGOs who were invited to comment on the NPRS drafts and these have been relayed to the Advisory Group for incorporation into the NPRS. However, the JSA also commented that there was not much progress with broadening civil society participation despite awareness campaigns. Citizens' participation in the implementation and monitoring of the PRSPs was viewed to be limited, as channels for participation in these political processes remain few.

Sri Lanka. Other CSOs/NGOs in Asia have taken a more critical and skeptical position vis-a-vis the PRSPs. The PRSP Synthesis Note 8 (2004) cites the coalitions of CSOs/NGOs in Pakistan and Sri Lanka which have voiced strong complaints and criticisms of their PRSPs.

The Focus on the Global South in its paper "Links Between the PRSP and MDGs" (2002) describes the Sri Lankan CSO/NGO experience of the PRSP as a hurried process of preparation. Documents were inaccessible to most groups and were given at inappropriate times allowing insufficient time for study, discussion and debate. It was also perceived as undemocratic, with limited participation by the broad range of CSOs. On the other hand, the private sector

with business associations was more involved in the process.

In Sri Lanka, 125 CSOs in an Alliance for the Protection of Natural Resources and Human Rights in Sri Lanka protested against this inadequate consultation in the PRS process. In contrast, the JSA for Sri Lanka noted and commended the extent of consultations among all kinds of stakeholders that took place. The JSA in fact viewed this as a major strength of the document.

Pakistan. In December 2002, a letter from 35 CSOs/NGOs in Pakistan was sent to the PRSP Secretariat in the Pakistani Finance Ministry to express their rejection of the PRSP. They questioned the government claim that the I-PRSP supposedly undertook extensive consultations on the strategy as there were no evidences proving this. Neither political parties nor the broader group of CSOs including trade unions, people's movements, civic/professional organizations and academics were involved. The letter seriously questioned the government's simplistic concept of participation that posits that a handful of meetings involving some individuals and representatives of organizations constituted participation. The PRSP thus suffered from a lack of legitimacy among segments of the civil society. Furthermore, they noted that the I-PRSP was simply continuing decades of a failed policy paradigm focusing on growth and fiscal stabilization that has only resulted in increases in social, economic and environmental poverty (ActionAid, 2004).

Bangladesh. M. Karim's paper on CSOs and the PRSP Process in "Bangladesh: Lessons Learned" (2004) cited several weaknesses in the I-PRSP process in the country. Among these weaknesses in participation were: the exclusion of major civil society actors such as trade unions and farmers' organizations. Some CSOs in fact undertook alternative consultations where they

discussed producing an alternative PRSP (PRSP Synthesis 8, 2004). In a 2004 workshop jointly organized by two NGOs, the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) and the Nova Consultancy Bangla which brought together scholars, critics, campaigners and indigenous people's representatives, Prof. A. Muhammad noted that "the way the PRSP has emerged, it should not be called a national strategy. It is the global agencies with the WB and IMF in the forefront who want it. It is a shame that the first and second drafts of the PRSP go to the IMF and WB in the first place, but not to our national parliament."²⁵

Karim also stated, however, that CSOs/NGOs were fragmented and not organized sufficiently nor were efforts concerted to influence the PRSP process and to make an impact.

On the other hand, some NGOs were engaged in widening the information among civil society on the NSAPR. A network NGO translated the PRSP draft into the local Bangla version so that it could be popularized for the general public's consumption (PRSP Synthesis 8, 2004). Gender analysis and concerns in the NSAPR were incorporated into the strategy paper as a result of the establishment of the Gender Platform composed of government officials and CSO leaders (WB).

Constraints and factors for limited participation of CSOs/NGOs in PRSPs

Several literature reviewed present several causes on the limited involvement by CSOs/NGOs in regard to the PRSPs:

Political environment. Nguyen Thi Le Hoa (2006) cites the lack of a clear and supportive legal framework to enable the participation by CSOs/NGOs, as the current legal environment

does not allow much political space for CSOs and NGOs to contribute and participate. In fact, she points to the common observation by critics that CSOs in Vietnam are not really independent from government and to date, there is still no government policy stating whether or not CSOs/NGOs can actually participate in policy development or monitoring/evaluation of policy.

Thus, she concludes that there is neither incentive nor pressure for CSOs to participate in influencing the policy agenda. The lack of appreciation and recognition by government of civil society's potential contribution to the PRSP and similar processes is a common problem in many countries, as cited for example in the Cambodian experience.

CSO capacities. Another serious constraint that has been brought up by numerous CSOs/NGOs, including international NGOs is the lack of capacities by civil society groups, specially local groups, to undertake meaningful involvement in the PRSP processes. In the Vietnam case, Nguyen argues that local NGOs have little or no capacity to really represent the interests of the poor at the level of policy dialogue, even as they may be committed to their development work at the grassroots level. She cites the tendency of many CSOs of simply putting forward their criticisms without adequate arguments or evidence to back-up such statements, which tends to undermine their credibility in the long-run. Moreover, CSOs are generally unable to present concrete proposals to counter and respond to whatever criticisms they may have.

ActionAid's study (2002) in Vietnam also found that the PRSP process needed to be simplified to make it relevant and understandable to local CSO staff and the people. Vis-a-vis Nepal, the same study argued that the Nepal government lacked clarity on ways to link up with NGOs

that had close ties with rural communities and could have incorporated inputs from the grassroots into the PRSP.

Levinsohn (2003) posits that one reason why civil society is not having much impact on the economic policy is because CSOs do not have the sufficient training required in the complicated task of designing policies or more specifically, they are under-prepared to do "a careful evaluation of the PRSP approach or a convincing analysis of poverty dynamics or the distributional impact of government expenditures".

Mechanisms for participation. In Bangladesh, A. Rahman (2004) identifies the lack of proper mechanisms in carrying out participatory consultations among stakeholders. He cites the lack of an appropriate participatory framework that has led to widespread failure in achieving broad-based participation and to a poor quality of the process. Rushed time frames and schedules for consultations likewise undermined participatory processes. Rahman argues that the very way in which consultations and other forms of involvement were organized proved biased towards the participation of the private sector that allowed them to pursue private sector agendas.

Looking beyond engagement as a process: Criticisms of the PRSPs' underlying philosophy and content

Critics of the PRSPs in most countries including Asia strongly argue that the engagement by CSOs/NGOs has not been meaningful to a large extent (ActionAid, Focus on the Global South, World Vision). This criticism is anchored on the lack of openness on the part of governments (as with the IMF and the WB) to deal and debate on the issues that underpin the whole debate on the PRSPs, i.e., the de-facto continuation of structural adjustment policies

Countries	Civil Society Actors	Strategic Agenda
BANGLADESH	People's Empowerment Trust, Action Aid Bangladesh	Launched campaign to challenge the process
	Trade Unions, farmers' organizations	Not included in IPRSPs
	Campaign for Good Governance (SUPRO)	Informing/enhancing people's understanding on PRSP/ campaign
CAMBODIA	Women's organizations, ethnic groups	Local consultations
	policy researchers, academics, trade unions, private sector	
LAOS	Mass organizations, INGOs	
MONGOLIA	CSOs/NGOs	Consultations
NEPAL	CSOs/NGOs	Very limited involvement in preparation of final document; CSOs seen by government as development
	Action Aid with Alliance for Social Mobilization	Proposal for PRSP monitoring
	Trade Unions	TUs presented inputs for final PRSP
PAKISTAN	coalition of CSOs/NGOs, people's movements, civic/professional organizations	Sent letter to government rejecting PRSP
SRI LANKA	Alliance for the Protection of Natural Resources and Human Rights in Sri Lanka, (125 CSOs), includes peasants/fisherfolk, trade unions	Protested lack of consultation and limited participation of civil society; because of CSO opposition, PRSP timeline pushed back
	private sector	More active involvement
VIETNAM	INGOs, MOs, CBOs, LNGOs	Inputs for PPAs; membership in Working Groups; consultation meetings; organizing local consultations; related research studies; programs at local level

by the IMF and WB in the countries concerned, and their ongoing focus on economic growth with its concomitant strategies of trade liberalization, deregulation and privatization as the primary levers for poverty reduction and economic development of countries.

As was noted earlier, CSOs/NGOs in Pakistan rejected the PRSP outright precisely because they perceived it as merely serving as another mechanism for continuing the very same policies and prescriptions that they allege had in fact increased, and not reduced poverty in the country.

Among the key NGOs that are skeptical and unconvinced on the value of the PRSPs, the Focus on the Global South is particularly critical and scathing of the WB/IMF in using the PRSPs to pursue their agendas while providing

a semblance of ownership of the strategy by countries, and at the same time, still managing to keep the conditionality of donor approval of the PRSPs through the JSAs/JSANs, etc. In its report assessing PRS processes in Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam, Focus on the Global South criticizes the WB/IMF for failing to inform any of the three governments of the results of the Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative assessments on the impact of the SAPs in the countries.

MONITORING AND ADVOCACY OF THE PRSP: SELECTED CSO/NGO EXPERIENCES

Monitoring of PRSP implementation can provide CSOs/NGOs with opportunities to make governments accountable and transparent, particularly in regard to public finance

management and performance. However, only a few CSOs/NGOs in Asia have had experience so far in monitoring PRSP implementation in their countries. To date, much of the documentation that exists on PRSP monitoring by CSOs/NGOs comes from countries in sub-Saharan Africa such as in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania or from Latin American countries such as Bolivia and Brazil.

Monitoring by CSOs/NGOs is also fraught with difficulties that are caused not so much by shortcomings on the part of civil society groups. The monitoring of public expenditures, for example, is constrained by what Alonso, et al, explain as minimum public expenditure management “basics” which are in place in many countries. Functional and program classifications of budgets are incomplete and PRSP expenditures are not systematically nor consistently identified.

In Asia, Vietnam’s CPRGS clearly defines the government’s expectation to encourage the participation of state agencies as well as social organizations, including local Vietnamese CSOs/NGOs in the implementation and monitoring and evaluation of the strategy. Thus, the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA) established a local NGO (LNGO) network in the field of hunger eradication and poverty reduction (HEPR), called the Anti-Poverty Policies Study Group or APPS, to undertake monitoring and policy evaluation and advocacy.

The APPS also undertakes capacity building activities for LNGOs such as training courses on research methodology, gender concerns and policy analysis.

An inventory of tools used, e.g., Participatory Expenditure Tracking, Citizen Report Cards, Qualitative Impact Monitoring etc., is available in the internet for CSOs/NGOs that need to

expand and enhance their capacities in this critical area of monitoring and evaluation of PRSP implementation.

The following section lists a sampling of the different tools and approaches that are currently being used by CSOs/NGOs in their monitoring and evaluation of poverty reduction programs and projects.

Participatory public expenditure management/ budget work

□ Participatory Public Expenditure Management

- “Strengthening Participation in Public Expenditure Management: Policy Recommendations for Key Stakeholders” (OECD Development Center, Policy Brief No. 22, 2002).

□ Budgets and the Budget Process

- “A Guide to Budget Work for NGOs” (International Budget Project, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, November 2001)
- “A Taste of Success – Examples of the Budget Work of NGOs” (International Budget Project, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, November 2001)
- “Budget Analysis and Policy Advocacy, Report from a National Workshop on Budget Analysis and Policy Advocacy in India” (Ford Foundation)
- “A Guide to Participatory Budgeting” (Brian Wampler, October 2000)

Participatory monitoring and evaluation of the PRSP

□ Public Expenditure Tracking

- “Public Expenditure Tracking and Facility Surveys: A General Note on Methodology” (WB: Social Development Department)

□ Report Cards for Monitoring Public Service Delivery

- “A General Note on Methodology” (WB: Social Development Department)
- *Examples:* (a) “Citizen Report Cards on Public Services: Bangalore, India” (WB: Social Development Department, Empowerment Case Studies); (b) “Filipino Report Card on Pro-Poor Services” (WB: Social Development Department, Empowerment Case Studies).

Country example of PRSP monitoring and evaluation

□ Local Level Poverty Monitoring System

- Conceptual Issues and Indicators, Working Paper No. 2. (Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic and Adjustment Policies in Bangladesh Project, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies).

Media and advocacy on the PRSP

Media in a number of countries has provided some opportunities for public debate on issues as it was used to inform about the PRSP through advertisements and press articles. It has only been recently recognized that better use of media and other channels is needed in order to create a stronger sense of ownership and participation in the PRSPs (Panos Institute, 2002).

CAPACITY BUILDING OF CSOs/NGOs IN THE PRSP PROCESSES

CSOs invited to the consultation in connection with the IMF/WB 2005 PRSP Review have argued that, to enable civil society groups particularly the poor to participate meaningfully and effectively in the PRSP process, local

development actors particularly need to receive assistance in capacity building. There is need to empower actors with “more tools for analysis, research, monitoring and evaluation that can generate evidence-based advocacy”.

In fact, Panos Institute (2002) argues that “participation in the development of the PRSPs has been very demanding for the civil society community”. Few CSOs/NGOs have the actual experience and capacity of participating in economic planning processes. It is also noted that, in many countries, CSOs/NGOs with their differing views have not had much opportunities to work together, especially on a rather complicated exercise such as the PRSPs.

In Bangladesh, Rahman (2004) contends that civil society faces the main constraints of lack of knowledge and a lack of connection to the grassroots, among others. CSOs/NGOs do not have the capacity to do macroeconomic analysis, policy-making and have insufficient understanding of public expenditure management, which hinder their ability to provide valuable feedback and to recommend realistic pro-poor policy alternatives. This observation similarly holds true for most, if not all of the countries covered in this literature review.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, the available literature suggests that civil society groups have not been sufficiently engaged in the PRSP processes in Asian countries to be able to claim ownership of their process and content. Many CSOs/NGOs view PRSP processes in a similar way as they do with many other macroeconomic policies, strategies and programs put forward by donors and governments (e.g., SAPs) – that is, as a welcome opportunity to widen their political space vis-a-

vis governments and donors, including finding ways by which civil society can hold governments more accountable. This holds particularly true for smaller, local CSOs and NGOs who constantly seek ways to be engaged in related activities.

Other NGOs, especially international and national-level NGOs that are concerned with justice and advocacy issues, are more skeptical, as they consider PRSPs to be merely a continuation of previous structural reform programs or SAPs imposed by donors. These CSOs/NGOs see their role and engagement on the PRSPs as advocating their concerns to the donor community, with governments as well as the general public in various countries or globally. One aim is to be able to advocate for changes in some of the conditionalities connected with the PRSPs, by widening and mainstreaming the debate on the macroeconomic policies underpinning the PRSPs, or by finding ways to increase the level of CSO influence and impact on the PRSPs.

Recommendations for CSOs/NGOs

From the foregoing range of assessments, the following items focus on ways to improve the levels and degrees of CSO/NGO involvement in the PRSPs in their countries.

1. Capacity building in the area of monitoring of PRSP implementation among civil society groups, specially CBOs and other people's organizations needs to be enhanced. Some NGOs in Vietnam have already undertaken PPAs in certain areas in the country which serve as baseline data that can be used to monitor progress that will be made under the CPRGS. To a large extent however, CSOs/NGOs need to upgrade their capabilities in monitoring and eventually, evaluation of PRSPs and their impact on poverty reduction in the countries.
2. Capacity building in advocacy at the national level – inasmuch as the PRSP process allows for review and revision for the succeeding phases of the strategy, civil society groups must also improve their capacities to influence the changes that they see as critical in the re-formulation of the PRSPs. To do this, they need to have better skills in the design of policies and their translation into concrete programs and projects that can be integrated with development plans and budgets. Related to these skills are the capacity to negotiate and to mobilize support for their inputs and recommendations with other stakeholders and vis-a-vis the government agencies responsible for the PRSPs.
3. Continuing media and public campaigns to inform civil society and the general public on the PRSP and its various phases and ways that CSOs can be involved in these phases, such as through ongoing consultations, forums or media outreach.
4. Information sharing among CSOs/NGOs on methods and experiences in monitoring and advocacy work related to the PRSP process that may help to improve their involvement in their particular countries.
5. Strengthen links and networking with international CSOs/NGOs to do lobby and advocacy on critical areas related to the PRSPs vis-a-vis the donor community, especially the IMF and WB. The serious concern raised by many NGOs that the underlying philosophy of the PRSP is to ensure a continuation of the same structural adjustment policies that have worsened poverty conditions in many low-income countries needs to be continuously brought up in international (as well as national) arenas to ensure that this does not happen. Close monitoring by CSOs/NGOs in the

countries, the results of which fed to such networks and forums will provide the evidence to elaborate on the impact of the PRSPs. ■

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ This Literature Review does not cover all the documents submitted for the ANGOC Roundtable Discussion: NGO/CSO Experiences in PRSP Monitoring and Advocacy held 23-25 May 2006 at Seam Reap, Cambodia.
- ² Data on the PRSPs, JSAs, JSANs and Annual Progress Reports have been taken from the IMF and WB websites on the PRSPs.
- ³ Cited in Action Aid (2002) “Inclusive Circles Lost in Exclusive Cycles” – An Action Aid Contribution to the First Global Poverty Reduction Strategies Comprehensive Review.
- ⁴ From “Inter-sectoral Workshop Report on PRSP” (SEHD Report), 2004 held October 13, 2004.

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The PRSP and CSOs' Participation in Cambodia

NGO FORUM ON CAMBODIA

Since 1999, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have required poor countries to prepare Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) in exchange for concessional loans and, in some cases, debt relief. PRSPs are intended to be country-owned, and involve civil society organizations (CSOs) in their development. Cambodia produced its first Interim PRSP (I-PRSP) in the Year 2000. This was followed by a National Poverty Reduction Strategy (NPRS) for the period 2003-2005 and a National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) for the period 2006-2010.

Internationally, the imposition of the PRSP process followed many years of NGO lobbying to obtain debt relief for poor countries, and NGO criticism that the policy conditions imposed on poor countries by the World Bank and IMF were hampering national decision-making and ownership of development policies. Thus, the idea of country-owned Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers has generally been welcomed by NGOs, both in Cambodia and internationally. The PRSP process has opened up new possibilities for civil society input to national planning processes.

However, in Cambodia as elsewhere, the process has fallen short of the original high expectations. The PRSP has not been a panacea for the multiple problems that hamper national planning in Cambodia.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

In Cambodia, the PRSP process has been introduced into an institutional environment

with many historically-based constraints. These include the impact of the Khmer Rouge reign of terror between 1975 and 1979, the civil war throughout the 1980s and the ongoing conflict in some areas of the country up until the final collapse of the Khmer Rouge in 1998. The Khmer Rouge killed many of the educated class, and many others left the country in subsequent years. These impacts have further impoverished the country, reduced the available human and social capital, and reduced the efficiency of government. The public service, like that in many other poor countries, is characterized by weak governance, low salaries, endemic corruption, and poor management.

In 1993, UN-supervised elections led to a power sharing agreement between the main Cambodian factions, the end to civil war in most parts of the country, and the re-engagement of Western and ASEAN countries with Cambodia. The end of hostilities, new trade opportunities, and large foreign aid flows since 1993 have helped to reduce the national poverty headcount from an estimated 47 percent of the population

in 1994 to 35 percent in 2004.² During the same time, inequality and landlessness have rapidly increased.³

Cambodia is now highly aid-dependent, relying on foreign donors to finance more than half its annual budget. There is also a heavy reliance on technical assistance for planning and implementing development programs. Cambodia's planning process now resembles a kind of "alphabet soup" with many different planning instruments, each with an English-language acronym as follows.

Cambodia has a Financial Policy Framework Paper (FPFP), a Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), a Public Investment Program (PIP), a Governance Action Plan (GAP) and a large number of individual plans for specific ministries and sectors. At the time the PRSP was introduced, Cambodia already had a Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) that served much the same purpose as the PRSP. Cambodia also has a localized version of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Cambodia's current PRSP, now termed the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP), is based on the government's "Rectangular Strategy" (RS) and the CMDGs (Cambodian MDGs).

Through the usually annual⁴ Consultative Group (CG) meetings, the government has agreed with donors on a wide range of reforms. Since 2004, government and donors have agreed on a set of joint monitoring indicators (JMIs) covering 18 sectors, and have set up Technical Working Groups (TWGs) to coordinate government-donor cooperation in each of these sectors. These TWGs provide reports on the JMIs to Government-Donor Coordination Committee meetings, which are held monthly.

Despite the large efforts going into planning, there is still a strong disconnect between

planning and budgeting, between budgets and actual expenditures, and between expenditures and actual results. The reasons for this are both technical and political, and include inappropriate accounting systems, inter-ministerial rivalries, limited capacities, and lack of transparency. In recent years, some progress has been made in improving budget management, but faith in the ability of the official planning process to deliver changes on the ground is still low.

Important government decisions are often made outside of the formal planning processes. An example is the government's apparent decision to turn over large sections of agricultural land and forests to companies as economic land concessions. This controversial policy, hotly contested by groups representing farmers and forest users, is reflected neither in the government's Rectangular Strategy nor the NSDP. By contrast, an official plan to provide social land concessions to landless farmers, mentioned in both the Rectangular Strategy and the NSDP, has not yet been implemented.

Despite frequent mismatches between planning and implementation, it is generally agreed that the NSDP provides a good summary of Cambodia's poverty reduction challenges, strategies and plans. The NSDP has been accepted by the World Bank and IMF as meeting their requirements for a country-owned poverty reduction strategy. It cannot, however, be viewed in isolation from the other planning documents, ministry plans or agreements with donors that also exist and on which the NSDP is based.

NGOs wishing to ensure civil society participation in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of poverty reduction strategies in Cambodia need to engage not just with the NSDP, but also with all the related processes which together form Cambodia's approach to poverty reduction.

CIVIL SOCIETY CONTEXT

Cambodia's civil society may be characterized as lively and active, but narrowly based. The term "civil society" generally refers to the social sphere located between the state and the family, and is thus seen as being capable of representing the broader interests of the society and of being a check and balance to government.⁵ In Cambodia, non-government organizations (NGOs) are the dominant feature of Cambodia's civil society, and the terms *NGO* and *civil society* are often (usually erroneously) used interchangeably.

NGOs in Cambodia typically consist of a group of staff, and often but not always a governing board, whose purpose is to channel resources and technical expertise into some kind of development activity. NGOs in Cambodia are involved in delivering services such as health, education, agricultural extension, environmental protection, natural resources management, credit, community development, monitoring of human rights, and protection and promotion of women's rights. NGOs are also deeply involved in building capacity and leadership at the community level.

However, to date, Cambodia lacks mass organizations or associations that represent a broad membership, specially at the national level. The exception is the growing number of labor unions, although many of these tend to be closely associated with particular political parties and therefore lacking in independence. National associations representing groups such as organic farmers and community fishers are starting to emerge, but are still weak and heavily reliant on NGO support.

Throughout the 1980s, Cambodia had a socialist system of government that disallowed the formation of local organizations separate from the state. Mass organizations were formed as

part of the party apparatus, but were abandoned with the introduction of multi-party democracy in the early 1990s. International NGOs were allowed to work in Cambodia during the 1980s, but local NGOs were not allowed to form until 1992. Since 1992, there has been a rapid expansion of the local NGO sector, though this has been highly dependent on the support of international NGOs and international donors.

Government officials sometimes accuse NGOs of being a "self-appointed democracy" who have no right to advise the elected government. Nevertheless, both local and international NGOs are free to operate in Cambodia, and within government there is a growing acceptance of participatory processes. NGOs feel that their input is valid, as they have important grassroots knowledge and experience, which can inform planning and policy processes.

NGO PARTICIPATION IN THE PRSP PROCESS

This section describes the activities undertaken by NGOs to participate in the PRSP process, describes NGOs achievements in this process, and assesses the breadth and quality of civil society input to date. (For a mapping of NGOs involved in the PRSP process, see *Box 1*.) Documents produced by the NGO Forum during the PRSP process are listed in *Box 2*, and are available on the NGO Forum website.

NGO Activities

The NGO Forum on Cambodia has been recognized by government, donors and NGOs as the key NGO contact point for NGO participation in the PRSP process. The NGO Forum is a membership organization for international and local NGOs working in Cambodia. The NGO Forum exists to promote discussion and to represent the views of NGOs

on important issues affecting Cambodia's development. Facilitating and coordinating NGO input to the PRSP is one of the tasks of the NGO Forum's Development Policy Project.

The I-PRSP (Year 2000)

In the year 2000, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) prepared an Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy. The World Bank did not require civil society participation for the interim strategy, so the NGO Forum organized its own consultation process. An NGO Forum team conducted interviews and meetings in four provinces in order to obtain the input of NGOs and civil society representatives. This was followed by a national civil society workshop in Phnom Penh in which participants prioritized NGO recommendations for poverty reduction.

The SEDP (2001-2005) and NPRS (2003-2005)

In 2001, RGC began to develop the five-year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP). The NGO Forum brought together different NGO sectoral groups to provide comment on the draft sectoral plans. The NGO comments were compiled into a single document and forwarded to the Ministry of Planning. The NGO Forum also lobbied for more time to be given to preparation of both the SEDP and the NPRS, so that better participation and national ownership of the documents could be achieved.

The same year, with assistance from ANGOC, the NGO Forum released a report entitled "Rapid Assessment of the PRSP Process in Cambodia: Two Banks, Two Processes, Two Documents." This report criticized the fact that the World Bank was supporting the NPRS while the ADB was supporting the SEDP, with both documents purporting to be the national plan for poverty reduction. Government preference for a single document had been ignored,

resulting in lack of clarity and duplication of effort. The report recommended that Cambodia have a single five year plan, supported by better donor coordination.

In 2002, the Royal Government of Cambodia began work on the NPRS, recruited its own participation specialist, and organized a number of workshops to provide feedback during the drafting process. The NGO Forum encouraged NGOs to join the participatory process facilitated by the government in preference to creating any separate process. The majority of workshops were held in Phnom Penh making provincial participation difficult. The government managed to organize a number of provincial workshops, however, during the final phase of the drafting.

In early 2002, the NGOs decided that their annual NGO Statement to the Consultative Group (CG) meeting would focus on poverty reduction and that this statement would be the main source of NGO input to the NPRS. The NGO Statement was a collaborative effort between three NGO membership organizations, namely the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC), the NGO Forum on Cambodia, and the MEDiCAM association of NGOs working in health, together with contributions from many different NGO sectoral networks. The final document included a main statement followed by 22 sectoral and issues papers. When the NGO sectoral groups were invited to the 28-29 May PRSP workshops, they used their sectoral papers as the main written contribution to the small group discussions.

The NGO Statement was presented by NGO delegates at the Consultative Group meeting on 19-21 June 2002. The NGOs were invited to make plenary presentations and to be discussants at the NPRS workshops in May, August and November in Phnom Penh. They

Box 1: Mapping of NGOs involved in the PRSP process in Cambodia

Sectoral Groups

When compiling NGO input to the PRSP process, on the joint monitoring indicators, or for the NGO Statement to the CG Meeting, the NGO Forum has relied on a number of NGO sectoral groups or lead agencies who gather inputs from their sector. The following is a list of the sectoral groups or lead agencies which contributed to the past three NGO Statements to the CG Meeting. Not all those listed have contributed to all three documents:

SECTOR	LEAD AGENCY
Agriculture and Rural Development	Centre d'Étude et de Développement Agricole Cambodgien (CEDAC)
Child Rights	NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child (NGO CRC)
Decentralization & De-concentration	Commune Council Support Project (CCSP)
Disability and Rehabilitation	Disability Action Council (DAC)
Disarmament and Demobilization	Working Group on Weapons Reduction (WGWR)
Disaster Management	Humanitarian Accountability Network in Cambodia
Education	The NGO Education Partnership (NEP) & EDUCAM
Election Reform	Election Sectoral Group / COMFREL
Fisheries	Fisheries Action Coalition Team (FACT)
Forestry and Plantation Development	The NGO Forum on Cambodia (NGOF) – Forestry and Plantations Network
Gender in Poverty Reduction	The Gender and Development Network, Gender Forum of the NGO Forum
Governance and Transparency	The Center for Social Development (CSD)
Health	MEDiCAM
HIV/AIDS	HIV/AIDS Coordination Committee (HACC)
Humanitarian Mines Action	Cambodia Campaign to Ban Land Mines (CAMBAN)
Hydropower	NGO Forum on Cambodia (NGOF) – 3S Working Group
Indigenous Minority Affairs	The NGO Forum on Cambodia (NGOF) – Indigenous Rights Network
Industrial Zones	Star Kampuchea
Land Reform	The NGO Forum on Cambodia (NGOF) – Land Law Implementation Network
Landmines /UXOs	Cambodia Campaign to Ban Landmines (CCBL)
Mental Health	Mental Health Working Group
Microfinance	Credit Sector Working Group
Resettlement	The NGO Forum on Cambodia (NGOF) – Resettlement Action Network
Rights and Care of Older People	Help Age International
Rule of Law	Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee (CHRAC)
Small Arms Reduction and Management	Working Group on Weapons Reduction (WGWR)
Tourism	World Vision
Trade and Economic Development	The NGO Forum on Cambodia (NGOF), Oxfam GB, Women's Agenda for Change

NPRS Monitoring Field Survey Team

The following NGOs were involved in the NPRS village surveys in 2005. They were chosen by the local NGO networking organisations, Star Kampuchea and CNAC, from their own provincial networks:

1. CCPCR – Cambodian Center for the Protection Children's Rights
2. CDRCP – Cambodian Development and Relief Center for the Poor
3. CREDO – Cambodian Rural Economic Development Organization
4. CWARO – Organisation for Assistance of Children and Rural Women
5. PKFDA – Poor Khmer Families for Development Association
6. SEDOC – Socio-Economic Development Organization of Cambodia
7. SIT – Save Incapacity Teenagers
8. WOSO – Women's Service Organization

Box 1: Mapping of NGOs involved in the PRSP process in Cambodia (Continued)

Monitoring of CG Indicators

The lead agencies in the NGO Committee for the Monitoring of CG Indicators are:

1. ADHOC – Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association
2. CCC – Cooperation Committee for Cambodia
3. COMFREL – Committee for Free and Fair Elections
4. CHRAC – Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee
5. CSD – Center for Social Development
6. GAD/C – Gender and Development for Cambodia
7. MEDiCAM – association of NGOs in the health sector
8. NEP – NGO Education Partnership
9. NGO Forum – The NGO Forum on Cambodia
10. Pact Cambodia
11. STAR Kampuchea

Individual Initiatives

The following NGOs were involved in individual initiatives related to the PRSP:

1. Women for Prosperity – “Poverty Reduction for Women” forums, 2002.
2. CEDAC (Centre d’Etude et de Développement Agricole Cambodgien) and ActionAid – MDG survey 2005
3. CCSP (Commune Council Support Project) – Citizens Rating Reports at commune level, 2004-2005.

were also invited to send delegates to meetings of the General Secretariat of the Council for Social Development, which was tasked with compiling the NPRS.

Other activities of NGOs during the NPRS drafting included the “Poverty Reduction for Women” forums organized by the NGO Women for Prosperity together with NGOs like Amara, in Pailin, Battambang, Pursat, and Phnom Penh in June 2002 and later presented in a forum in Phnom Penh. The NGO Forum also facilitated a discussion between members of Cambodia’s parliament and representatives of the poor, including representatives of a trade union, a sex worker, a family afflicted by drugs, a family afflicted by drought, and fishing and forest community representatives.

The government approved the NPRS in late in 2002. In March 2003, the Prime Minister presided over the National Launching of the NPRS at the Chaktomuk National Theater. Later that month, the Ministry of Planning organized provincial launchings of the NPRS in the three provinces with the highest incidence of poverty, Banteay Meanchey, Siem Reap and Prey Veng. In order to encourage active

involvement, the NGO Forum organized a group of 18 facilitators from NGOs and development agencies to lead discussions during the NPRS provincial launching.

In March 2004, the NGO Forum released an “NGO Statement on the First Year of Implementation of the National Poverty Reduction Strategy.” A number of meetings were held with provincial and Phnom Penh-based NGOs to prepare this statement, and the opinions of NGOs were surveyed. The statement was widely used. The Center for Social Development used the statement in its public fora and in meetings with the National Assembly.

At the same time, the NGO Forum also compiled and published “NGO Sectoral and Issue Papers on Poverty Reduction and Development in Cambodia.” These papers were later updated and included in the NGO Statement to the 2004 Consultative Group Meeting on Cambodia. Three NGO representatives attended the Consultative Group meeting, in December 2004, to contribute to the discussion between government and donors regarding progress on poverty reduction. The

2004 Consultative Group Meeting set up specific indicators of progress in priority cross-cutting sectors, to be monitored by the re-organized government-donor Technical Working Groups (TWGs) and reported to the newly created Government-Donor Coordinating Committee (GDCC).

In 2005, ANGOC also funded an NPRS village survey, carried out by partners of the local NGO networks of Star Kampuchea and the Cambodian National Alliance for Cooperation (CNAC) with technical assistance from Village Focus International (VFI).

A Capacity-Building Needs Survey provided by ANGOC was used to ensure that suitable organizations would be selected to conduct the monitoring required for the project. A number of capacity building needs were identified as a result of this survey, including basic research skills, proposal planning, accounting, advocacy and vocational training.

Based on their capacity and experience, eight organizations were selected to receive training and to carry out the monitoring of government NPRS programs. Five provinces and 40 villages in which these organizations operate were subsequently selected. A monitoring and advocacy framework was then developed based on existing poverty reduction government programs, the capacity needs of NGOs/CSOs and their available resources, as well as on financial constraints associated with the project. Survey results provide some measure by which to monitor government initiatives and a benchmark for future comparison.

A smaller second survey was also administered for the village chiefs, in order to determine their awareness of government poverty reduction initiatives and to assess their perceptions of priority issues.

The NSDP (2006-2010)

Despite the government's extremely rushed process of preparation, NGO Forum made a number of submissions to the draft National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP), which was completed in late 2005. Input came from NGO sectoral groups/lead agencies and a provincial workshop. Cambodian NGO awareness of the planning and monitoring process was enhanced through production of a "Development Watch" magazine, funded by ANGOC.

Throughout 2005, four GDCC meetings were held, with NGO representatives in attendance on all but the first occasion. For each of the four GDCC meetings, NGO Forum worked with NGO sectoral group representatives to prepare a detailed NGO Statement on the Monitoring of CG Indicators.

NGOs were also involved in 12 of the 18 government-donor Technical Working Groups (TWGs), which met more or less regularly to monitor progress and facilitate government-donor coordination.

In 2006, NGO sectoral groups and NGO lead agencies worked together to produce the NGO Statement to the 2006 Consultative Group meeting. NGO representatives to the Consultative Group meeting were chosen at a Civil Society Forum.

The NGO Forum coordinated NGO lobbying on the indicators to be included in the new monitoring framework and produced an analysis of the final result, which was reproduced in the Cambodian Development Watch magazine and is available on the NGO Forum website.

NGOs are now discussing how they may assist monitoring of the NSDP and increase their involvement in the Technical Working Groups.

Box 2: NGO Forum documents on the PRSP in Cambodia

The following documents are all available on the Development Policy Project documents page of the NGO Forum's website (<http://www.ngoforum.org.kh/Development/Docs/doc.htm>):

2006

- Rapid Assessment of the Incorporation of NGO Comments in the National Strategic Development Plan (2006-2010)
- NGO Statement to the 2006 Consultative Group Meeting on Cambodia
- Cambodian Development Watch Magazine, Year 2, No. 1, March 2006

2005

- NPRS Monitoring Field Survey Results
- NGO Statement on the Monitoring of CG Indicators, 12 December 2005
- NGO Statement on the Monitoring of CG Indicators, September 2005
- Cambodian Development Watch Magazine, Year I, No. 1, June 2005
- NGO Statement on the Monitoring of CG Indicators, June 2005
- NGO Statement on the Monitoring of CG Benchmarks, March 2005

2004

- NGO Statement to the 2004 Consultative Group Meeting on Cambodia
- NGO Statement on the First Year of Implementation of the National Poverty Reduction Strategy (NPRS)
- NGO Sectoral and Issues Papers on Poverty Reduction and Development in Cambodia 2003

2003

- Cambodia's National Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper Suggestions for NGO Follow-up, Monitoring and Advocacy
- The NGO Forum on Cambodia and the National Poverty Reduction Strategy
- A Rapid Comparison of the NGO Statement to the 2002 CG Meeting and the Final Draft of Cambodia's National Poverty Reduction Strategy

2002

- A Compilation of NGO and Civil Society Comments on the Second Draft of Cambodia's National Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
- Cambodia's draft Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper - Has NGO Input Been Included?
- NGO Statement to the 2002 Consultative Group Meeting
- NGO Recommendations on the Governance Action Plan

2001

- Result of NGO Discussions on the Draft Socio-Economic Development Plan
- NGOs Comment on the Draft Socio-Economic Development Plan
- NGO Statement to 2001 Consultative Group Meeting
- Mapping of NGO-World Bank Relations in Cambodia: A Need for Standards and Indicators
- Rapid Assessment of the PRSP Process in Cambodia: Two Banks, Two Processes, Two Documents

2000

- NGO Statement, 2000 Consultative Group Meeting On Cambodia
- Results of Initial Discussion among NGOs/CSOs on the National Poverty Reduction Strategy of Cambodia

IMPACT OF NGO PARTICIPATION

The impact of NGO involvement has improved with time.

NGO submissions had no impact whatsoever on the Interim PRSP. NGOs were not even given a copy of the draft I-PRSP until it was in its sixth draft. The government finalized the document in the week before the NGO input was provided.

The main impact of NGOs' contribution to content of the SEDP2 was that short sections on decentralization and on disaster management were added to the new main section of the document (these issues had not been included in the previous drafts). However, comments given on the body of the document were ignored, even where these simply sought to correct arithmetic errors in the totals column of some of the tables. It appeared that the government simply did not have the resources to deal with the comments coming from many development partners and from NGOs.

It should be acknowledged that both the SEDP2 and the NPRS were largely a reflection of existing sectoral plans. Some sectors, such as health and education, involved NGOs in the development of line ministry plans from the beginning, while other sectors had less NGO involvement.

In 2003, the NGO Forum made a "Rapid Comparison of the NGO Statement to the 2002 CG Meeting and the Second Draft of the PRSP." The

report listed all the recommendations in the NGO Statement and whether or not they had been included in the second draft of the RGC's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. Although difficult to quantify, an analysis of the information provided in this comparison shows that of the 268 recommendations contained in the NGO Statement, 45 recommendations had been specifically included in the draft PRSP and 68 recommendations have been partly included. The report also recognized that some recommendations may well have been included in other government planning documents, though not specifically mentioned in the PRSP.

The NGO Forum also successfully encouraged integration of the findings of the ADB-funded Participatory Poverty Assessment, carried out in 154 villages across 24 provinces, into the NPRS, thereby providing a better reflection of the voice of the poor within the document.

A "Rapid Assessment of the Incorporation of NGO Comments in the National Strategic Development Plan (2006-2010)" found that 15 out of 40 NGO comments had been incorporated into the NSDP.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of NGOs has been with regard to process. In March 2001, ADB-funded consultants were due to complete the SEDP2, with little participation from NGOs. Even government participation was lacking. At the same time, the World Bank was keen to see the PRSP completed by the end of the year in order to fit their own planning schedule.

The NGO Forum, along with some donors, lobbied for an extended timeline for both the SEDP2 and the NPRS in order that a more participatory process could be achieved. The timeline for preparation of the SEDP2 was subsequently extended to October 2001, and

that of the NPRS to later in 2002. The NPRS was finally released in March 2003 following a much more inclusive participatory process.

A key concern for NGOs was poor donor coordination resulting in two competing national plans, as explained in the NGO Forum report: "Rapid Assessment of the PRSP Process in Cambodia: Two Banks, Two Processes, Two Documents." As noted in the NPRS, government and donors came to an agreement that in the subsequent plan the SEDP and NPRS would be merged into a single document. This resulted in a single National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) for the period 2006-2010.

Through their monitoring of CG indicators, and also through reports such as the "NGO Statement on the First Year of Implementation of the NPRS", NGOs have contributed to enhancing the accountability of government for the implementation of poverty reduction strategies. NGO advocacy on land rights, human rights and livelihood issues have also contributed to increasing accountability. However, there is still a large gap between planning and implementation in Cambodia, with governance issues often at the heart of such discrepancies.

BREADTH AND QUALITY OF PARTICIPATION

Government officials in Cambodia are still not used to accepting civil society input into planning, and are sometimes dismissive of NGO opinion. Nevertheless, Cambodia generally provides a liberal framework for NGO existence and participation. The main obstacle to better civil society participation in government planning processes is the lack of capacity of both civil society organizations and of the government itself. This has resulted in

donor domination of the development agenda. NGOs generally feel, however, that donor influence is needed to ensure that government programs truly benefit the poor.

NGO Forum's assessment of civil society input into the first draft of the NPRS⁶ provided a measure of both the "breadth" and "quality" of participation. Breadth of participation refers to the range of stakeholders that have been involved in the consultation process. Quality of participation refers to the degree to which issues of contention have been properly debated among stakeholders and agreed feedback has been incorporated into the final document. The assessment found that in most sectors participation was narrowly confined to government officials and a few knowledgeable NGOs, and that there was insufficient debate on issues of contention.

The process for preparing the NSDP was more rushed due to the government's own deadlines, and the breadth and quality of participation was again limited. Both the NPRS and the NSDP suffered from a lack of prioritization.

Participation in some sectors has been more substantial than others. With the assistance of the NGO Education Partnership (NEP), NGOs were substantially involved in the preparation of the Education Sector Strategy Plan (ESSP), on which the relevant sections of the NSDP are based. Similarly, MEDiCAM has helped NGOs provide input to the Health Sector Strategy Plan (HSSP). In general, government has been more receptive to NGO input in the sectors where NGOs are most active.

The ANGOC-funded NPRS Monitoring Field Surveys, carried out by provincial partners of Star Kampuchea and CNAC, was an attempt to better involve provincial-based NGOs in NPRS monitoring.

Outside of NGO participation, civil society participation has been minimal. A few trade union representatives were invited to some of the NPRS workshops, and one gave a speech. The participatory poverty assessments, conducted by the World Bank, ADB and Cambodian Development Resource Institute, and the focus group discussions with women, conducted by Women For Prosperity, provided an avenue for voices of the poor to be heard through the NPRS and NSDP. However, there is little evidence that their contribution had any impact on the strategy. In the case of the NPRS, the chapter describing the strategy was written prior to the chapter describing the results of the participatory poverty assessment.

Nevertheless, the inputs provided by NGOs to the NPRS and NSDP processes was generally of high quality, building on the knowledge of NGOs who know their subject areas well. The NGO Forum provided a means by which the contributions of these NGOs could be collated and presented to government, thereby allowing NGOs to speak with one voice.

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE AND STRENGTHEN CSOs' PARTICIPATION

Long Term Strategies

The above account shows that a number of long term and short term interventions are needed to strengthen civil society participation in poverty reduction strategies.

Over the medium to long term, NGOs need to build up the foundations of a healthy and vibrant civil society, focusing particularly on the development of civil society associations and structures which can represent the poor. These civil society groups need to understand their rights, understand how to advocate those rights,

and how to work effectively with government agencies in achieving those rights. Considering the history of conflict in Cambodia, success will require that trust is built and that constructive ways of working together are found.

NGOs also need to participate in the building of democratic forms of governance, in which government officials and politicians are truly responsive to the voice of the people. For such a system to work, both the government and the governed need to understand their responsibilities to the wider society.

There are already many good examples of NGO efforts to build civil society and to contribute to the building of democracy. These processes take time and need to continue.

The NGO Forum has made various suggestions to donors and government on how civil society participation could be improved. The “NGO Statement on the First Year of Implementation of the NPRS”, made the following suggestions on how wider civil society participation could, over time, be enhanced:

- ❑ The parliament has an important role to play in representing the people. For this to happen, the parliament needs not only to have a role in formulating and approving plans, they also need to spend more time listening to their constituents in order that they can represent them properly. Currently, only a few donors are helping to build the capacity of the parliament, and the parliament is largely bypassed in the NPRS process.
- ❑ Public fora, such as those organized by the NGO “Center for Social Development”, can provide an opportunity for people to engage

Box 3: Framework for assessing participation

Note: The following is an extract from “Cambodia’s Draft Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper - Has NGO Input Been Included?” published by the NGO Forum in 2002:

There is often an implicit assumption that if workshops have been held and various stakeholders invited, then participation has occurred. However, achieving a satisfactory breadth and quality of participation is much more difficult. Constraints of time, money, government capacity, and civil society capacity can all limit participation.

Breadth of participation refers to the range of stakeholders that have been involved in the consultation process. **Quality of participation** refers to the degree to which issues of contention have been properly debated among stakeholders and agreed feedback incorporated into the final document.

For each section of the PRSP document, the **breadth of participation** could be:

- Only government participation;
- Participation concentrated in only one type of organization/ stakeholder (e.g. a few NGOs);
- Participation of most stakeholders involved in the sector, excluding recipients/beneficiaries;
- Participation of most stakeholders involved in the sector, including recipients/beneficiaries (that is, the poor themselves).

For each section of the PRSP document, the **quality of participation** could be such that:

- No feedback has been requested;
- Feedback has been requested but not received;
- Feedback has been requested and feedback has been given, but there has been insufficient debate on issues of contention;
- Feedback has been requested and given, issues of contention have been debated, but inclusion of agreed feedback in the final (or next draft of the) document is lacking or partial;
- Feedback has been requested, given, and debated, and agreed feedback has been incorporated into the final (or next draft of the) document.

with decision-makers. Many NGOs would like to see a return to the National Congresses, where all people could come and ask questions to government leaders at the national level. This used to occur in the 1960s and is mandated in the most recent Constitution, but has not happened in recent times.

- ❑ More connections could be made between national planning processes and the decentralized local decision-making process to ensure bottom-up flow of information. The local planning process in Cambodia currently allows commune plans to feed into provin-

cial plans, but there is not yet any connection with national planning processes.

- ❑ In some countries, NGOs have created “report card” surveys, which gather systematic feedback from the public on the quality and effectiveness of government services. In Cambodia, some NGOs are introducing a similar process to monitor the effectiveness of decentralization reforms.
- ❑ In Cambodia, quite a bit of research has been done, and continues to be done, to collect information from target groups, specially Participatory Poverty Assessments. Information from these assessments needs to feed into decision-making in a more systematic manner.
- ❑ NGOs could help facilitate engagement with other types of civil society organizations, including trade unions, ethnic associations, farmers associations, etc. NGOs can also help arrange meetings between officials and rural communities in ways that are conducive to a real sharing of issues.

In all these processes, the most critical factor is the participation of *poor* and *vulnerable* groups – those whom the poverty reduction strategy is intended to serve.

Short Term Strategies

In the short term, NGOs need to build their awareness of national planning processes and to actively engage in them, providing quality input in a coordinated manner. The NGO Statement to the 2006 Consultative Group Meeting suggested that:

NGOs would like to continue to contribute to RGC’s efforts to improve the livelihood of the poor and vulnerable groups in society. In addition to their day-to-day projects in the villages, there are several ways in which the NGO community could consider complementing the RGC in its efforts:

- ❑ NGOs need to discuss how they can make NGO involvement in the Government-Donor Technical Working Groups more effective.
- ❑ NGO research needs to be more widely shared. To ensure that this research is known and understood by government policy-makers, face-to-face meetings with government officials may be the most effective and appreciated method of getting ideas across.
- ❑ NGOs need to start a dialogue with the Ministry of Planning and the Council for Social Development on how NGOs may best contribute to the monitoring of the new National Strategic Development Plan.

The NGO Forum on Cambodia will continue to raise awareness of the national plans for poverty reduction in its regular fora and meetings. Provincial workshops will be held to raise awareness of the CMDGs and national poverty reduction plans. Prior to the 2008 elections, the NGO Forum will invite political parties to participate in a debate on their poverty reduction policies. The NGO community will continue to make their annual NGO Statement to the Consultative Group meeting their main reference document providing NGO recommendations for poverty reduction. Each year, this NGO Statement will be discussed and released in a Civil Society Forum.

In addition, the NGO Forum has the following plans for monitoring of poverty reduction plans over the period 2006-2008:

- ❑ Cooperate with CCC, MEDiCAM, NEP, Sectoral NGOs and some key provincial networks to produce the parallel report on NSDP implementation. This report may be similar in content to the CG Statement, but is envisaged in response to a new situation, and will follow the structure of the NSDP document. With aid agencies basing their lending or grant-giving on a National Strategic Development Plan, there is a need for NGO/

civil society monitoring of this strategy and how it unfolds. The NGOs' report will be used both to contribute to the government's annual report and to provide an alternative (or complimentary) point of view.

- ❑ Cooperate with Sectoral NGOs to produce reports on the implementation of CG Indicators, as agreed with the Government during the annual CG meeting. The reports will be produced quarterly based on inputs contributed by NGOs, including those involved in the government-donor Technical Working Groups (TWGs). These reports will be distributed to donors, government offices, NGOs, media and the public.
- ❑ Each year, conduct local consultations on the priority development issues in the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) in four regions of Cambodia. The purpose of these consultations is to raise awareness and to monitor the government's progress in implementing the NSDP. The consultations may provide important input to the parallel report on NSDP implementation mentioned above. Each consultation may last one day, and will be organized in cooperation with sectoral and provincial networks. Each consultation will involve 50 to 60 participants from local NGOs, community leaders and commune councils.
- ❑ Contribute articles on important national development policy issues to the *Cambodian Development Watch* Bulletin. The Development Policy Project Officer will coordinate this work, but NGO members and network members will be encouraged to contribute. In addition to contributing original articles, quality articles available in English will be translated to Khmer for inclusion in the magazine. Each bulletin will feature the monitoring of CG indicators. The bulletin will be published quarterly.
- ❑ Continue and widen the NPRS/NSDP Field Surveys, in association with local NGO networks. This may include a repeat survey

in villages covered by the 2005 survey every two years, as well as surveys in new villages every other year. Changes in villagers' perceptions of their food security and village development will be documented over time.

- ❑ NGO Forum's network on Trade and Economic Development will discuss and devise plans for monitoring of key economic, trade and budget management issues, and promote discussion and better understanding of these issues within the NGO community.

THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL ASSISTANCE

Cambodians best know the local situation and are the best placed to work out strategies for Cambodia. However, they are also eager to learn from the lessons and experiences of other countries in the region, and to use all opportunities available for increasing their own knowledge and capacity. Regional groups such as ANGOC have an important role in facilitating dialogue between Cambodian NGOs and other NGOs the region, and in suggesting possibilities for regional cooperation. Regional initiatives may also have greater impact on the World Bank or other international institutions if they help NGOs within the region share their perspectives and concerns with an international audience. How to maximize the impact of external assistance may be further discussed among Cambodian NGO networks and at the PRSP Roundtable Discussion with civil society representatives from neighboring countries facilitated by ANGOC in May 2006. ■

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Paper prepared for the Roundtable Discussion on NGO/CSO Experiences in PRSP Monitoring and Advocacy, May 2006. Presented by Ek Siden, NGO Forum on Cambodia.
- ² World Bank, Cambodia – Halving Poverty by 2015: Poverty Assessment 2006
- ³ “In those parts of Cambodia that were surveyed in 1993/94, the Gini for real per capita consumption has risen from 0.35 to 0.40. Inequality in all of Cambodia in 2004 was 0.42, making Cambodia one of the more unequal countries in the region.” p. vi in Ibid.
“Landlessness is rising. The proportion of rural households lacking land for cultivation has risen from 13 percent in 1997 to 16 percent in 1999 and 20 percent in 2004.” p. 9 in Ibid.
- ⁴ No CG meeting was held in 2003 or in 2005.
- ⁵ The term “civil society” normally does not include the private sector. It also normally does not include political parties, as political parties usually seek to become a part of government.
- ⁶ “Cambodia’s draft Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper – Has NGO Input Been Included?”, NGO Forum on Cambodia, 2002. See Box 3 for a description of the framework for assessing participation.

A Study on Poverty and MDG Achievement in Cambodia

**PRAK SEREYVATH
MANAGING DIRECTOR, CEDAC**

The Millennium Declaration was adopted in September 2000 by all 189 member states of the United Nations General Assembly, as the world leaders agreed to a set of time-bound and measurable goals and targets for combating extreme poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women. These goals, which have been part of the global development agenda for a number of years as endorsed by member countries of the United Nations, are now known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has been fully committed to achieve the MDGs that rapidly became the cornerstone of its development policies and strategies.

About CEDAC

CEDAC is an agricultural and rural development organization set up in August 1997 with initial support from the French NGO, GRET (Group of Research and Exchange of Technology). The center was established to work for the development of ecologically based family agriculture, and to promote a cooperative and mutual assistance movement in the rural areas of Cambodia.

As of December 2005, CEDAC was implementing and supporting agriculture and rural development activities in 1,343 villages in 14 provinces of Cambodia. Approximately 50,000 farmers cooperate with CEDAC and farmer associations in testing and applying innovations, and participating in different group activities (especially relating to savings, marketing and solidarity funds).

MONITORING STUDY ON THE MDGS

ActionAid International is actively undertaking a campaign for collating the voices and analysis of poor people from over 5,000 villages and slums. In order to do reflection on government commitments to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), ActionAid International in collaboration with CEDAC and its partners have conducted a participatory study to document the voices of poor rural people in 11 out of the 24 provinces and cities of

Cambodia. It is expected that this study will be presented to civil society and heads of state, just prior to the Millennium+5 Summit, documenting the experience of poor people on poverty, their report cards on development, and the analysis of activists, academics, and civil society on MDGs and the performance of governments in this regard.

Study Objectives

The objectives of the CEDAC study are the following:

- ❑ To provide the opportunity to farmer associations and community-based organizations to monitor and analyze their own situations, with their reflection on the implementation of MDGs;
- ❑ To provide means and ideas for the Government officials who participate in CG meetings and the G-5 Summit in negotiating or requesting loans or development aid for alleviating poverty in Cambodia; and
- ❑ To expose the voices and real situation of the rural poor for consideration when negotiating or requesting loans or development aid by our negotiators.

Process and methodology

Target areas for the study. Some 500 villages in 164 communes of 40 districts in 11 provinces and one city (Takeo, Prey Veng Svay Rieng, Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Thom, Phnom Penh, Pursat, Kandal, Kampong, Kampong Speu) were selected as the study areas. Among the 500 villages, some are the target areas of CEDAC development programs while some others are the GCE's intervention target areas.

Study team formulation. Two main study teams composed of 35 members were mobilized in June 2005 to undertake the field data collection. They were from CEDAC (18 persons, including 2 trainers and 1 coordinator) and GCE (17 persons). The two study teams were coordinated by a study coordinator from CEDAC.

Training of study team members. Prior to the conduct of the field study, two training sessions were organized in June 2005 for the two study groups (2 day-training session for each group). Two CEDAC trainers were mobilized to train the study team on field survey and interview techniques. Techniques on facilitating focus group discussions (FGDs) were also

shared during the training. Also discussed during the training were the criteria for selection of study areas and target interviewees (individuals for case studies, and farmers for focus group discussions).

Logistical arrangements. Before conducting the field study, a half-day meeting was organized to discuss logistical arrangements (living place, transportation, stationery and meeting place) and sharing of tasks and study zones among the study team members.

Methodologies for the field study. Three main tools were used for information/data gathering:

- ❑ Focus group discussions (FGD) among villagers;
- ❑ Key informant (KI) interviews (e.g. school director or teacher; hospital/health center staff, village chief) using an indicator sheet; and
- ❑ Case studies on villagers' livelihoods (target interviewees identified by the FGD members) with focus on health and sanitation, education, food and livelihood, government services and infrastructure, and specific issues of denial of rights.

The focus group discussions and key informant interviews were conducted by farmer trainers (those trained by CEDAC within the framework of its development program, and members of farmer associations). The case studies were conducted by CEDAC researchers. While conducting the field study, the CEDAC's trainer team worked together with farmer trainers in order to support them during field data collection. A coordinator worked closely with CEDAC's trainer team to monitor the activities and update the results of the study on a daily basis. Some 5,715 people participated in FGDs whose average size by province ranged from 10 to 13, and women constituted 64% of total participants.

Data checking. To ensure the reliability of the collected data, a two-step process for data checking/verification was practiced. First, the collected information/data was reviewed immediately by CEDAC's trainer team after getting the completed questionnaires from farmer trainers. Second, the completed

questionnaires were then checked by the coordinator before the data entry, processing and analysis.

Data processing and reporting. Two CEDAC researchers were assigned to be responsible for data entry. The data entry process was done at

SOME SELECTED FINDINGS

Editor's Note: As the study is still currently being completed, the following show some selected data/tables from the study, related to villagers' livelihood and health.

On livelihood:

Table 1. Percentage of villages with drinking water throughout the season, by province

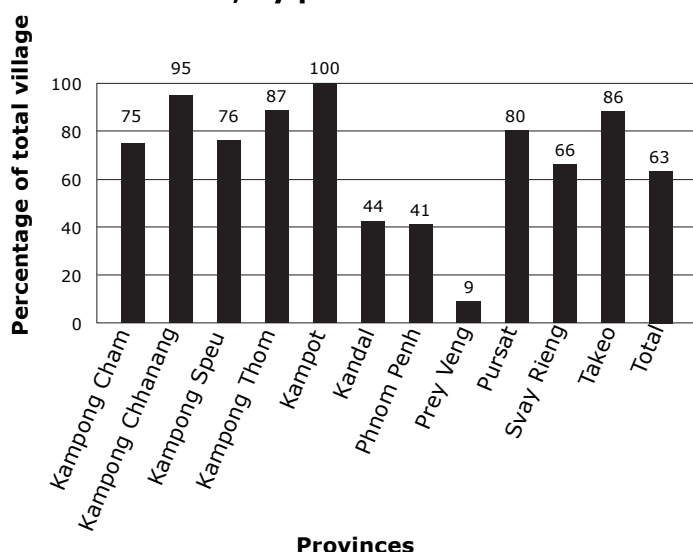


Table 2. Villages with starvation deaths in the past one year

Provinces	No. of villages surveyed	No. of villages with starvation death cases	Percentages (%)
Kampong Cham	20	5	25
kampong Chhnang	20	13	65
Kampong Speu	76	7	9
kampong Thom	15	6	40
Kampot	20	1	5
Kandal	48	6	13
Phnom Penh	46	4	9
Prey Veng	74	6	8
Pursat	75	15	20
Svay Rieng	32	11	34
Takeo	74	10	14
TOTAL/AVG.	500	84	22

The data in Table 2 shows that starvation-related deaths have been experienced in 22 % of the villages surveyed, over the past one year.

the CEDAC headquarters in Phnom Penh. As soon as the completed questionnaires were checked, the data was encoded and entered. The data was divided into two main sets: those from focused group discussions and from key informant interviews (with indicator sheets). ■

On Health:

Table 3. Location of public health center or sub-health center

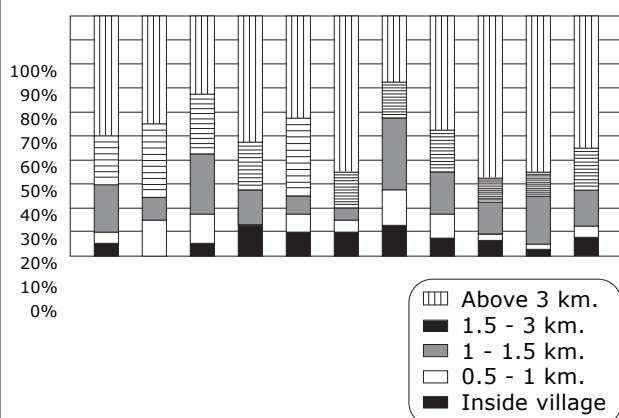


Table 4. Villages with deaths of expecting mothers and infants in the past one year

Provinces	No. of villages surveyed	Villages with deaths of expecting mothers (%)	Villages with infant deaths (%)
Kampong Cham	20	0	80
kampong Chhnang	20	5	39
Kampong Speu	76	47	93
kampong Thom	15	50	45
Kampot	20	16	50
Kandal	48	0	55
Phnom Penh	46	20	33
Prey Veng	74	20	69
Pursat	75	15	65
Svay Rieng	32	87	72
Takeo	74	11	45
TOTAL/AVG.	500	25	59

MEDiCAM's Experiences in NPRS and the Health Sector in Cambodia

DR. SIN SOMUNY
Executive Director, MEDiCAM

MEDiCAM works in close collaboration with the NGO Forum on Cambodia and the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) in many areas:

- ❑ At the start of PRSP, MEDiCAM regional offices participated with NGO Forum when it conducted consultation processes at the grassroots level;
- ❑ Participated at the national civil society workshop in Phnom Penh to prioritize NGO recommendations on poverty reduction;
- ❑ Provided comments on the draft sectoral plans in 2001 when the Government developed a five-year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP);
- ❑ Prepared a joint NGO statement to the CG. This NGO statement was used as the main source of NGO input to the NPRS when the government began its work on NPRS in 2002;
- ❑ Among the 18 existing Technical Working Groups (TWGs), MEDiCAM has joined the TWG on Health, TWG for HIV/AIDS, and TWG for Food Security and Nutrition;
- ❑ With the NGO Forum and CCC, MEDiCAM attends the Government-Donor Coordination Committee (GDCC) on a quarterly basis. It follows up very closely the joint monitoring indicators of the Consultative Group (CG) in the health sector, and joins with the NGO

About MEDiCAM

MEDiCAM is a membership organization for NGOs in Cambodia that are active in the health sector. It is composed of 120 NGOs, bilateral and multilateral agencies, and observers.

Vision: Improved health status in Cambodia by building bridges between the health sector's NGO community and the Royal Government of Cambodia.

Mission:

- Information sharing;
- Representing the voice of NGOs in the health sector;
- Facilitating advocacy; and
- Capacity building for partners, especially grassroots local NGOs.

Forum and CCC in making statements to the GDCC regarding progress made in the Health Sector; and

- ❑ During the development of NSDP, MEDiCAM has been actively involved in providing written comments regarding the health sector. Following debates among the health sector partners, the comments from MEDiCAM regarding the Strengthening of the Health System have been accepted.

Impact

- ❑ Some improvement on cash disbursement at the operational level. Actual cash has been improved a little bit, but there has been good and open discussion between the social sectors (health and education) and MEF to find ways to improve it. This indicator has now been put into the PFM TWG at the CG;

- ❑ Goals and indicators have been incorporated into the NSDP, based on NGO comments; and
- ❑ The Ministry of Health as well as donors in the health sector have integrated a lot of points raised by the NGO Statement to the CG into its annual operational plans as well as into the Joint Annual Health Sector Review. These include, for example, proposals related to Health Care Financing (equity fund, contracting and health insurance), Quality Improvement, Public-Private Mix, and others.
- ❑ Although the Annual Operational Plan (AOP) has developed from the HC level to the provincial and national level, this plan has received no input from the community. There is no connection between the community development plan and AOP of the Ministry of Health. There should be integration;
- ❑ Similar to other sectors, there is still a disconnection between planning and budgeting, budgeting and actual expenditures, and between expenditures and actual results. All these should be matched; and
- ❑ Instead of focusing on NPRS as a separate thing, the Government and its development partners should now focus on NSDP implementation. This is the government ownership of the plan. But the most critical thing now is to make sure that the structures of civil society structure are now strengthened in order to monitor the implementation of NSDP. ■

Challenges Ahead

- ❑ 120 NGOs in the health sector already represent a huge diversity. Managing this diversity to ensure one voice on a specific topic remains as a continuing challenge;
- ❑ MEDiCAM already has good links with policymakers at the national level. But the challenge is how to actively engage NGOs that are under the umbrella of MEDiCAM, especially how to strengthen the linkage between grassroots community-based NGOs and MEDiCAM;
- ❑ Evidence-based information, empirical information as well as good lessons learned are influential and necessary to convince policymakers on policy change. Collecting and collating such quality information is a challenge;
- ❑ Although the roles of NGOs are now more visible and acceptable, the time given for NGOs to provide good comments is still sometimes very limited and constrained; and
- ❑ Sometimes, the opportunity for NGOs to make comments is given only at the final stage of development.

Recommendations

- ❑ Effective involvement in the TWG on Health;

This paper is edited from a powerpoint presentation at the “Roundtable Discussion: NGO/CSO Experiences in PRSP Monitoring and Advocacy” held on 23-25 May 2006 at Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Promoting Equal Rights to Natural Resources: Land, Forestry and Fishery

NHEK SARIN

Executive Director, STAR Kampuchea

If forest and natural resources are to be managed sustainably for both current and future generations, it is important to understand this relationship, and to involve different groups of people in the management of natural resources.

ACCESS TO NATURAL RESOURCES AND POVERTY REDUCTION

Cambodia is richly endowed with land, substantial natural resources – notably forests and fisheries – and a wide variety of natural habits and ecosystems, including uplands and lowlands, freshwater wetlands, and diverse riverine areas. However, 70 percent of the population is concentrated on 30 percent of the land, along the lowland corridor from the Thai border in the northwest to the Vietnamese border in the southeast. Most land is used for rice cultivation and fishing in the flood plain and riverine areas, with population pressure increasingly threatening the Tonle Sap ecosystem (flooded forest and lake fisheries). The presence of remaining land mines is an additional issue particularly in the northwest and in some of the central and southern provinces. In contrast, dense forests and low population density characterize the north/northeast and southeast of the country. Transition zones between lowlands and uplands are experiencing increasing in-migration and encroachment of farmers on forested areas. Strategies and policies for the management of natural resources would need to recognize these differences and provide

responses tailored to regional and local situations: different densities and different agro-ecosystems.

Following the recent cancellation of non-performing forest concessions, approximately 1.6 million hectares of forest areas have reverted to “forest reserves,” for which management arrangements still need to be defined. The cancellation of another 1.86 million hectares of non-performing forestry concessions is also under consideration. An additional 1.73 million hectares seems to be scrub land, undergrowth, and non-wooded land, and similar unused areas not yet declared to be under any authorized size under the new Land Law will further increase the reserve of land potentially available for agriculture development. However, the exact use of these areas and the potential for fisheries remain; half of areas previously under concession arrangements (appropriately 500,000 hectares) were cancelled in 2001, but joint-management arrangements involving local communities have to be further developed. In the short term, sustainable and transparent management arrangements need to be developed to prevent misappropriation and over-exploitation of these resources.

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS AND ACTIONS IN NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

Second Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP 2001-2005)

The Royal Government of Cambodia's (RGC) Second Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) is a policy document focusing on a broad variety of developmental issues with a concentration on actions to be taken to stimulate economic growth and private sector development. Because of the natural links between this policy and the recently adopted National Poverty Reduction Strategy (NPRS), the two will be combined in 2006.¹

The policy makes a commitment to the sustainable use of natural resources and discusses the areas of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and land management reform; but statements that can be linked directly to natural resources are quite limited. The document does specifically call for the "optimization of benefits (from forest resource) for rural communities through community based forestry," as well as "formulation and implementation of a legal and regulatory framework for community fisheries management," and recognizes as a guiding principle "structured interventions to provide local communities with the skills to manage the natural resources based on which their livelihoods depend" is the most effective way of achieving sustainable management of these resources.²

Strategy of Land Policy Framework 2002

This document elaborates on the 2001 Statement on Land Policy and sets forth the principles and plans which will be utilized to accomplish the RGC's goals regarding land and

plans for assuring that land resources are used effectively to achieve broad national goals. It presents an on-going process of creating detailed land policy for Cambodia.

There are several promising principles adopted that link people's rights to access natural resources. The policy states that "the people who use the land are the day-to-day land managers, their participation in land use planning is essential." The policy also states: "concepts of planning and land management are expected nationwide."

The policy explains that the preferred method for implementing decentralized land use planning is referred to as Participatory Land Use Planning (PLUP). This is a method that is based on the principles of local ownership and control of the planning process. In relation to indigenous land rights, the document states that principles of "local land use planning and expanded partnerships between indigenous communities, NGOs and government in managing areas in and around communal property will guide implementation of communal titling."

National Forestry Policy (2002)

This document is not so much a policy document as it is a government statement of commitment to broad management principles. A comprehensive forestry policy within Cambodia still needs to be developed, and is required under provisions found in the Forestry Law. With this in mind, there is very little in this statement that links people's rights to natural resource access.

The document states that the government shall "ensure the maximum involvement of the private sector and local communities in the form of sustainable conservation and management of forest resources..." recognize and "legally

protect the traditional rights of local communities in use of forest resources...” and “increase the benefits of local communities from the use and management of forest resources through the concepts of community based forest and wildlife conservation.”

ACCESS TO NATURAL RESOURCES – A PRIORITY IN THE NPRS/PRSP?

The NPRS, like SEDP II, covers a broad range of issues impacting on poverty reduction within Cambodia. The policy does an excellent job of clearly listing objectives, actionable measures to be taken, measurable indicators and targets set to specific timelines, and the agencies responsible for carrying out the actions.

As such, this an example of a well-written policy document as described above.

The NPRS and the SEDP will be integrated into one broad policy document in 2006, to guide development and poverty reduction.

Unfortunately, the NPRS policy makes very few statements that can be linked directly to people’s rights of access to natural resources. The policy does specifically call for the “establishment of land use planning and integrated with natural resources management and decentralized land use planning and management,” which should be incorporated into a sub-decree on Land Use Planning as called for under the Land Law. This sub-decree has yet to be enacted. It also calls for establishing and strengthening community forestry through increasing awareness and “assisting forest user groups in implementing community forest management plans,” and continuing efforts of sustainable communities-based fisheries management.

I INVOLVEMENT OF THE CSO/NGO COMMUNITY

Has civil society been allowed to sufficiently participate in the formulation of the NPRS/PRSP? What has civil society in Cambodia done to react to the government’s poverty reduction programs?

The NGO community appreciates the work undertaken by RGC in developing the NPRS, and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the first annual review of implementation. The NGO community wishes to reiterate its support to the government’s implementation of the NPRS. NGOs also wish to continue to work with the RGC and donors to further develop, implement and monitor the outcome of the NPRS in achieving a real impact on poverty alleviation.

The NGO community welcomes its inclusion in the process of contributing to the NPRS and assessment of its progress in a positive manner offering a pro-poor, experience-led contribution – both of debates surrounding poverty reduction and through its own poverty reduction activities:

- ❑ NGOs contribute much to the poverty reduction plans by sharing the observations and conclusions arising from their development experiences as they work closely day-to-day with the poor and vulnerable groups, and therefore are in a strong position to communicate the needs of these groups to decision makers.
- ❑ In 1993, NGOs attended the first meeting of the International Committee on the Reconstruction of Cambodia (ICORC); NGOs were able to provide donors a wealth of knowledge based on their previous 13 years of experience in Cambodia. NGOs have since attended every Consultative Group (CG) meeting, and have each year presented a detailed statement on NGOs’ issues and

recommendations for the development of Cambodia.

- ❑ NGOs also participate in various donor and government working groups. However, in the past, some of these working groups did not include NGOs, while others did not include government. It is understood that the new working groups will include government, donors and NGOs. NGO representation at CG meetings and working groups is effectively coordinated through cooperation between umbrella NGO membership organizations and an informal system of NGO sectoral groups.
- ❑ NGOs have close relations with Ministries in various sectors, which provide an opportunity for direct input into sectoral policy dialogue. For example, MEDiCAM, an association of NGOs working in health, liaises closely with the Ministry of Education. The NGOs' Commune Council Support Project has a Liaison Office located within the Ministry of Interior.

STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION IN THE DEMOCRATIC SPACE

STAR Kampuchea, a non-profit organization and an advocacy organization network, was established and registered in August 1997. As a network organization it works together with four provincial advocacy networks, 39 officially affiliated organizations, 20 community based-organizations, 20 commune councils, six union federations and one trade union. Its partners are based in both Phnom Penh and the provinces. The main goal of STAR Kampuchea is to strengthen civil society groups to advocate for a strong democracy.

Based on its three-year plan (2004-2006), STAR Kampuchea runs an Advocacy Action Program (AAP) and Capacity Building Program (ACP).

Advocacy. AAP devotes much effort to organizing various events. Each year, two provincial meetings are held and a yearly Constitution Day is organized. Under the conviction that a “good law” requires participation of the people, AAP regularly stages Public Fora on Draft Laws. Held in selected provinces, these fora are designed to enable the grassroots to be more actively involved in the legislative process through contributions of their views and inputs to the proposed laws.

AAP also advocates for the respect of labor rights, by cooperating with union federations to organize Labor Fora, which provide workers with the opportunity to express their opinions, unity in solidarity and improve their professionalism in advocating for their rights. Moreover, AAP manages many urgent advocacy issues, by lobbying with the concerned institutions. For example, it addresses such issues as land conflicts in Kampong Cham Province, teachers' demand for salary increases, and the unconstitutional proclamations made by the Ministry of Interior.³

Every year, AAP distributes several thousand copies of major laws, which are the Cambodian Constitution, Land Law, Administrative Commune Law and others. AAP also publishes a bi-monthly Newsletter, distributing more than 10,000 copies every year, to inform the public about the activities of STAR Kampuchea. The newsletter also provides space for the public to express their concerns, particularly as they apply to democracy in Cambodia. Most important, the newsletter educates the people through the publication of laws that are of concern to the general public.

Capacity-building. ACP focuses on capacity building in advocacy, by providing training courses on themes such as local governance and decentralization, persuasive writing, networking skills, media and communication, grassroots

advocacy, conflict resolution and on several other topics, including the Land Law, impact of globalization and effective relations in advocacy. These training courses contribute to the strengthening of the grassroots movement, which is the foundation of democracy. ACP also provides training courses on advocacy at low cost to other NGOs, as requested. ACP also offers technical assistance on how to develop policies for networks, write proposals, make strategies for dealing with urgent issues, and build relations with local authorities. STAR Kampuchea has also organized six local study tours and three overseas study tours (to Thailand and Philippines).

WHAT SHOULD CAMBODIAN CIVIL SOCIETY DO WITH THE NPRS?

The question of wider civil society involvement in the NPRS process is difficult, since there has been less progress in this area. The issue really is how the concerns of the wider Cambodian population can feed into NPRS planning, implementation and monitoring. The following are suggestions on how wider civil society participation could be enhanced over time:

- ❑ The Parliament has an important role to play in representing the people.
- ❑ More public fora should be organized to provide the opportunity for people to engage with decision makers. Many NGOs would like to see a return to the National Congress, where all people could come and ask questions to government leaders at the national level. This used to be practiced in the 1960s and is mandated in the most recent Constitution, but has not happened in recent times.
- ❑ More connections could be made between the national planning process and the decentralized local decision-making process to ensure the bottom-up flow of information. The local planning process in Cambodia

currently allows commune plans to feed into provincial plans, but there is no connection yet with national the planning processes.

- ❑ In some countries, NGOs have created “report card” surveys, which gather systematic feedback from the public on the quality and effectiveness of government services. In Cambodia, some NGOs are introducing a similar process to monitor the effectiveness of decentralization reforms.
- ❑ In Cambodia, quite a bit a research has been done, and continues to be done, to collect information from target groups, especially Participatory Poverty Assessments. Information from these assessments needs to feed into decision-making in a more systematic manner.
- ❑ NGOs could help facilitate engagement with other types of civil society organizations, including trade unions, ethnic associations, farmers associations, etc. NGOs can also help arrange meetings between officials and rural communities in ways that are conducive to a real sharing of issues. ■

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Development of Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) in Cambodia (Phnom Penh: CBNRM Learning Initiative, 2005), p. 23.
- ² Ibid., p. 60.
- ³ In Cambodia, laws passed by the National Assembly are not the only legislation or the most significant. Government and ministries issue proclamations or “prakas” that STAR Kampuchea also monitors. In January 2003, concern arose after the Ministry of Interior issued such a prakas regulating the status of NGOs, in the absence of proper comprehensive laws as advocated by STAR Kampuchea and its predecessor organization from 1993.

Civil Society's Engagement in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) Process in Vietnam: An Evaluation of Opportunities and Challenges¹

NGUYEN THI LE HOA
Program Coordinator
OXFAM GB PROGRAM IN VIETNAM

POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY PAPER (PRSP): THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

PRSP in Vietnam: Striving to balance poverty reduction and high economic growth

The Government of Vietnam (GoV) appointed the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) as the nodal agency in April 2000 to promote comprehensive, country-driven, results-oriented and partnership-based poverty related strategies and, more immediately, to draw up an interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (I-PRSP). MPI held several consultations with a variety of stakeholders, including International Non-governmental Organizations (INGOs), to arrive at an I-PRSP draft. The GoV approved it in March 2001. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) was swift to establish a Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF) in April 2001 and the World Bank (WB) Board committed to a Poverty Reduction Support Credit (PRSC) in the following month.

A series of participatory consultations were held to further sharpen the focus of the I-PRSP. Participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) in six chosen sites in the country followed on the request of MPI. Local people in these communities were invited to recommend improvements and suggest revisions so that they could exercise influence in governance and be mobilized into the participatory poverty planning process. In a span of 14 months, a drafting committee comprising 52 government

officials (representing 16 agencies and ministries) worked to transform the I-PRSP into the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS).

The GoV approved of the CPRGS in May 2002. It was meant to translate into action the GoV's 10-year Socio-economic Development Strategy (SEDS). Although the plan period of SEDP was 2000-2005 and it had already progressed beyond its second year of implementation, the CPRGS

was expected to lend momentum to its progress, provide roadmaps for implementation and firm up sectoral development plans.

The CPRGS was rolled out at the sub-national level with the support of donors and INGOs. Although the intentions were ambitious, the implementation of CPRGs was confined to the level of the province in 20 pilot projects. Familiarity with the concept was restricted to members of the drafting team at central level (including representatives from 16 ministries) and to provinces that implemented the pilot provinces. Awareness levels among people of CPRGS were non-existent; SEDP was still considered the prime strategy to address the country's socio-economic challenges.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN VIETNAM: CHANGING CONTEXT, CHANGING ROLES

The term civil society in Vietnam is understood to mean a broad range of organized groupings which occupy the public space between the state and the individual citizen. Their status over the years has changed. From a total state domination over their activities, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have progressed to gain space in governance and recognition for their contribution. The country's changing context is altering their roles further and many CSOs are moving from the margins of development to the mainstream.

CSOs when organized along a spectrum include three main groups: non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are further divided into INGOs and local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs); mass organizations (MOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs).

INGOs: When CPRGS was conceptualized, only INGOs were well-established and could function with a fair degree of autonomy. Placed at the higher end of the civil society spectrum, INGOs occupy space in-between donor agencies and the other entities of civil society. The key to their effectiveness is independence, wide outreach, and ability to function in a dynamic and innovative manner. They have been among the first to reposition the idea of participation to increase the responsiveness of the common people in governance – an effort that has given them an edge over the others. Their ability to negotiate with the government and donor agencies to adopt participatory, pro-poor policies and simultaneously play the role of watch dog has added to their credibility. In many cases, INGOs turn donors and fund development projects/programs at the local level.

LNGOs: Occupying the middle band of the civil society spectrum, LNGOs are largely Hanoi-based research, training and development centers. Their activities are focused in the areas of business management, urban and rural development, poverty reduction, community development, environmental issues and training. More recently, there has been a trend among some INGOs and donors to operate through LNGOs. This has allowed strengthening of LNGO capacity in program implementation while increasing their outreach. Many of them are now involved in independent field-based research, progressively widening their functions.

MOs: MOs have been the largest and most dominant of social groupings for years. A pervasive feature of the civil society landscape, MOs are socio-political organizations that work under the umbrella of the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF). They were established by the Communist Party and are still led and subsidized by them. Classified as 'semi-government organizations', there are about 30 MOs at

present. The five dominant ones are: Women's Union (WU), Farmer's Union (FU), the Vietnam General Federation of Labor, the Vietnam Veteran Association and the Youth Union. They are well organized and spread out at the central, provincial, district and commune levels.

Over the years, MOs have proved to be effective in service delivery at the commune level and can take credit for improving access of services across the poorest provinces as well. They have helped fulfill the twin-objectives of reaching concerns of the poor to the government and mobilize people's support for GoVs policies. MOs are currently redefining their role and position in the rapidly changing development context of Vietnam and addressing the socio-economic needs of its members with increased responsiveness.

CBOs: At the lowest end of the spectrum are CBOs that include informal collectives/groups at the commune and district level. Established by people in rural areas, they articulate and address the concerns of the people. However, they lack formal legal status. CBOs include water user groups, savings and credit groups, farmers' collectives, agricultural extension groups and village development committees, among others. Most activities undertaken by CBOs are financially sustainable and their emergence is closely associated with donor/INGO development interventions. They are almost always effective in serving the needs of the communes/villages but in some instances they have been known not to represent the interests of the poor.

CSO PARTICIPATION IN CPRGS: SYMBOLIC RATHER THAN SUSTAINED

For the first time, the political and institutional environment in Vietnam has turned tolerant and

conducive to CSO engagement in public debates in policy. With the exception of MOs which have played a limited role in framing policy, other CSOs have had little interface with state policy. CSO participation in the CPRGS process at different levels is elaborated below:

INGOs: They have played a dominant role in shaping the CPRGS and have enjoyed a comparative advantage due to the absence of participation of local NGOs. Although there are several INGOs in Vietnam, only a few have actually participated in the CPRGS process. The INGOs who have been active include Oxfam Great Britain (OGB), Oxfam Hong Kong (OHK), Save the Children - United Kingdom (SCUK), Action Aid in Vietnam (AAV), Plan International, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Canadian Center for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI) and Netherlands Development Organization (SNV). These INGOs took advantage of the entry point to policy offered to them. They contributed to policy, strengthened capacity of other CSOs, expanded the definition of poverty and stepped-up government and donor focus on poverty alleviation through policy efforts. Their main contributions to CPRGS include:

- ❑ Providing inputs to the poverty diagnostic process through PPAs (prior to the drafting process). Three out of the four PPAs were conducted in 1999 by INGOs (OGB, SCUK and AAV);
- ❑ Being an integral part of all I-PRSP and CPRGS related working groups, such as the Poverty Working Group, Poverty Task Force, and Technical Working Group that were meant to develop strategy papers. These groups participated in developing several long-term strategies and plans during 2000-2002; the notable ones being the various drafts to the Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction (HEPR) strategy (2001-2010), the Communist Party Socio-economic Development Strategy (2001-2010) and I-PRSP. The

INGOs also participated in all the consultative meetings organized by the Ministry of Labor, Invalid and Social Affairs (MOLISA) and MPI during the formulation process;

- ❑ Conducting research and commissioning studies to obtain authentic and updated information and also alternative data and analyses needed for the policy formulation/planning process. OGB and OHK, for instance, jointly conducted a research on the impact of trade liberalization on rice cultivation. The key results fed into the CPRGS formulation and the Vietnam Development Report 2001;
- ❑ Organizing local level consultations on I-PRSP to assimilate the concerns and needs of local people into the CPRGS document;
- ❑ Providing detailed written comments to the I-PRSP and CPRGS documents;
- ❑ Representing the entire INGO community at Consultative Group (CG) meetings. During CG meetings in December 2001, four INGOs (OHK, OGB, CRS and Plan-International) were active in influencing strategy formulation;
- ❑ Providing support to roll out the CPRGS in two provinces; and
- ❑ Monitoring implementation of select programs under CPRGS and SEDP at the local level in coordination with LNGOs, MOs and CBOs.

LNGO: LNGO participation in the CPRGS process, on the contrary, has been very limited. Even as the GoV often acknowledges the need to increase their role and enhance their responsibilities, it is reluctant to accept them as equal partners in policy discussion. Only three LNGOs were invited to be members of the Poverty Task Force that played a crucial role in influencing CPRGS. These are: (1) Rural Development Services Center (RDSC); (2) Center for Legal Research and Support (LERES); and (3) Center for Family and Women's Studies.

These three LNGOs were chosen because of their dynamic and active leaders. Their participation in Poverty Task Force (PTF) has thus been far less active and effective as compared to INGOs. Some LNGOs did contribute indirectly to the CPRGS by supporting the efforts of donor organizations. RDSC provided consultancy services to the World Bank (WB) to conduct PPAs in two provinces in the Red River delta. Other LNGOs also facilitated the rolling out of the CPRGS at the provincial level. For example, Center for Rural Progress (CRP) was contracted by OGB to facilitate the rolling out of CPRGS in the Tra Vinh province. The strengthening of LNGOs and increasing their presence at the macro-planning level as yet remains a huge challenge. It must be said, however, that though their role in the CPRGS process was partial, LNGOs could emerge out of the shadows for the first time. Although their contributions were small, they did take this unprecedented opportunity extended to them to work with donor organizations and the GoV and make their voices heard.

MOs: Mass organizations, as mentioned earlier, have always been looked upon as official stakeholders to be consulted while drafting government policies and plans. Although this premise held true for the CPRGS process, MO representatives were invited only to a few consultative meetings. At the national level, WU did contribute actively to the drafting and consultation process. They were part of six meetings on gender mainstreaming and together with the NCFAW drew up an action plan to incorporate gender issues in the CPRGS. This exercise involved a survey of 65 female National Assembly members and pulled together their opinions. It also involved consultations with provincial and communal WU officials and members, and hosting a high-level roundtable meeting with the CPRGS drafting committee. In select provinces where CPRGS was rolled out,

both WUs and FUs aided the process actively. With the support of OGB, in Tra Vinh province, WU and FU conducted a PPA in four poor communes to provide inputs for the Tra Vinh section of CPRGS. They were also involved in consultations for the provincial plan. The Tra Vinh WU, in particular, developed a strategy in partnership with NCFAW and UNDP to mainstream gender issues into the provincial plan. But in the final analysis, their participation was limited to the planning stage and no further involvement of MOs – either in the implementation or monitoring stage of the CPRGS process – has been reported.

CBOs: There is no record of CBO participation in the CPRGS formulation process. Their unacknowledged role is, in large measure, due to discussions on CPRGS being restricted to the provincial level. There have of course been exceptions and some CBOs did get involved in local consultations, particularly where their links with INGOs were strong.

To sum up, the participation of CSOs in the CPRGS process has been modest. While the role of INGOs has been forthcoming, MO participation has been limited to attending meetings rather than actively impacting policy, and local NGOs and CBOs have played a very negligible role.

It is difficult to assess the role of CSOs in implementation and monitoring of CPRGS, as the implementation has been contained within pilot projects in provinces. CPRGS implementation has been symbolic rather than a sustained process. Some CSOs did succeed in monitoring implementation but their involvement in policy advocacy using findings from these monitoring and evaluation activities is very limited.

In the long run, the CPRGS has been unable to fulfill its aim of bolstering the efforts of the

five-year SEDP to address the socio-economic concerns of the country. Although the CPRGS was approved by the Prime Minister, it is not a well-known document even within government circles. Those who do know of it perceive it to be a “donor’s” document. Public awareness of the document is low.

CSOs AND SEDP

New spaces for productive policy dialogue

Earlier, SEDPs were drafted solely by GoV with little or no participation from others. MOs, as semi-government organizations, were the only organizations consulted as they worked closely with communities across all administrative levels. Local people (specially the poor and ethnic groups) – ostensibly the real beneficiaries – were not involved in the design, planning, implementation or monitoring of SEDPs though the decisions affected their lives the most. In the absence of definition for participatory processes, they were still passive recipients of decisions.

However, the upside of the government experience with the CPRGS exercise was its recognition of the value of people’s opinions, the need for people’s ownership over poverty initiatives and the necessity of accommodating the views of all CSOs. A change in GoV perception was reinforced with donor and INGO insistence on broadening inclusion and synergy among all the stakeholders to maximize impact.

GoV’s decision to support a participatory approach while working on SEDP for 2006-2010 has been its way of acknowledging the merit of the CPRGS approach. The Prime Minister’s Directive 33/2004/CT-TTg mandated that CPRGS approach be integrated into the second

SEDP (2006-2010) planning process. The Directive defines the SEDP preparatory framework and affirms GoV commitment to abide by the principles and objectives of CPRGS. MPI also promulgated Decree 2215/BKH-TH to guide local socio-economic development planning along the lines of CPRGS approach.

In light of the two documents, more stakeholders are allowed to participate in the planning process, including research institutes, universities, investors, the business community and NGOs, hitherto not part of the process. In a bolder move, it also decided to make public the plan, solicit opinions from the people and incorporate their views.

GoV also evolved a legal framework to guide and facilitate the participation of CSOs in the planning process, in particular, and policy dialogue in general. The laws did not add up to a comprehensive framework but were indicative of GoV's openness to wider participation in framing policies and its redefinition of the concept of participation to include CSO and, hence, citizen influence in governance.

Significant legal measures are:

- ❑ **Grassroots Democracy Decree (GRDD) No 29/CP and its revised version No. 79** based on the principle “people know, people discuss, people do and people inspect” that creates favorable conditions for local NGOs to get involved in poverty policy/development program planning, implementation and monitoring.
- ❑ **Decision No. 22/2002/QD-TTg dated 30/1/2002** by the Prime Minister that allows Vietnam Union of Scientific and Technological Associations (VUSTA) to hold social consultations and seek appraisals and criticisms of government policies and development programs.
- ❑ **The Decree on Associations 88 in July 2003** that provides legal sanction to associations/

LNGOs to involve themselves in the socio-economic development process. It encourages the establishment of more LNGOs and associations.

- ❑ A number of other papers indicating mandate of MOs.

CSO participation in SEDP: The inside picture

In response to GoV's Directive 33, many CSOs came forward with their inputs on the planning for SEDP. The level of participation and quality of inputs provided by different groups was varied and mostly depended on the level of interest and the capacity of the particular CSO entity. At this stage, it is too early to evaluate the quality and impact of their participation. In this paper we only aim to document the level of involvement of different CSOs in SEDP formulation process.

INGOs: The INGOs kept up with their active engagement and influenced the direction of the SEDP as they did while the CPRGS was being drafted. In response to an official invitation for participation from MPI (issued to both INGOs and donor organizations), some INGOs took the lead and teamed up with donors like WB and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to develop a consultative strategy and draw up a framework for local consultations.

Four INGOs – OGB, SCUK, Plan International and AAV – facilitated local consultations to elicit people's reactions and suggestions on SEDP in eight provinces representing all seven geographical areas of the country. Local consultations were also held in other localities (across provinces and districts) with varied the focus according to the characteristics of the particular locality though a common framework was followed for uniformity. Findings from consultations in each area were shared with local authority and documented to benefit MPI.

Local consultations helped attain three objectives: One, it allowed local people to gain information on a crucial policy document; two, it helped assimilate people's opinions; and three, it enabled people to exercise their right to participation.

INGOs have also provided their comments and feedback on the draft plan directly. A group of INGOs that lobby for policy change (OGB is a member of this group) joined efforts with the NGO Resource Center to articulate their concerns. The director of the NGO Resource Center circulated the draft plan with clear guidelines on how to incorporate their comments.

Further, a core group comprising six INGOs held an informal consultation with more than 60 INGO representatives in Hanoi to sharpen feedback for SEDP draft. The focus was on five key areas: rural development; social concerns; natural resource management and environment protection; governance, people's participation; and grassroots democracy. Crosscutting concerns included gender, children, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus).

The proceedings of the consultation were summarized and all other written submissions were incorporated into the document before it was submitted to MPI. The summary was also presented at a national workshop co-organized by MPI and WB to dialogue with international partners including many more INGOs (More than 10 INGOs were invited to represent the INGO community at the national workshop).

In addition to direct support to SEDP by facilitating local consultations and providing feedback on the draft plan, some INGOs (OGB and AAV, for example) have supported CSO groups (LNGOs and MOs, in particular) in implementing internal consultations with their

members in an attempt to devolve power to local civil society actors.

Some INGOs (OGB, SNV, OHK, SCUK and VECO, among others) have also participated in debates on sectoral plans and discussed crosscutting concerns such as agriculture, tourism, trade and poverty reduction (Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction Program, Program 135), gender and child rights.

LNGOs: LNGOs have mushroomed in Vietnam after the promulgation of the Decree on Associations 88 in 2003. The sharp rise in their numbers has also been due to donor and INGO support and capacity building over the last three years. At present, there are around 2,000 LNGOs in the country. LNGO participation in SEDP is described below:

- ❑ Around 100 LNGO representatives participated in a consultation organized by VUSTA with support from WB. The focus was on four key issues: science and technology; poverty reduction, social concerns (education, health and gender); and the role of civil society. A working paper was submitted to MPI.
- ❑ Around 70 LNGO representatives attended a consultation on people with disabilities organized by the Vietnamese Disability Network with the help of OGB. They raised concerns on vocational training and livelihoods for people with disabilities and fee exemption for the disabled in public services. Representatives from MPI, WB, MOLISA and INGOs like OGB and VNAH (Vietnam Association for Handicapped) also joined in the consultation.
- ❑ Around 40 LNGO representatives attended a consultative meeting of Civil Society Inclusion in Food Security and Poverty Elimination (CIFPEN) to discuss issues related to agriculture and rural development. CIFPEN's efforts were supported by AAV and CARE International. The participation

of LNGOs in SEDP has shown remarkable improvement as compared to its role in the CPRGS process. But the efforts are not adequate when viewed against the dramatic growth of LNGOs in the recent years. It has been noticed that though many LNGOs attend consultations and meetings, a majority of them remain passive participants. According to VUSTA, unfamiliarity with issues and methodologies are the main reasons for their muted response.

MOs: MOs, especially WUs and FUs, have been the targeted partners of several donors and INGOs in development work for a number of years. They are, in some areas, familiar with participatory approaches and methodologies employed by INGOs and donors at the local level where people move from being users to agents in the broader processes of governance. MOs, especially WUs, are rated to be “more active” and “more effective” in implementing poverty reduction interventions at the grassroots level, along with INGOs.

Naturally, expectations on their contribution to policy dialogue were high. This was also because official largesse bestowed on them over the years gave them a distinct advantage and edge over other CSOs, especially LNGOs. But the truth is different. Their role in policy was extremely modest and far from pro-active. MO participation has been more in the form of attendance rather than active participation.

During the planning process, all MOs were formally invited by GoV to provide comments on plans. MOs at central level were also asked to comment on the national SEDP. In principle, the plan should have been circulated to all members for commenting. An MO representative should have compiled comments in written form to submit to MPI. In reality, however, the plan was circulated among only few members and staff handpicked to comment. No

dramatic turnarounds in the level of participation could be achieved.

WUs and Youth Leagues did organize an internal consultative meeting to discuss some concerns. WUs also participated in NCFAW consultations to contribute to issues on gender in SEDP. Other MOs were invited to participate in regional consultative workshops of the national SEDP. (But the regional workshops were considered internal consultations so that not all MOs were invited and not all provinces have their MOs represented in these workshops. For those who attended the workshop, their participation was observed rather passive.) In conclusion, MO participation has been disappointing.

CBOs: To-date, CBOs are not officially recognized as legitimate stakeholders in the planning process, specially at the central level. CBO participation has been consistently hemmed in over the years. The only evidence of involvement is their presence in local consultations conducted by INGOs. This is also attributed to the efforts of INGOs rather than the CBO initiative. INGOs have been partnering with CBOs, enhancing their capacity and strengthening their role at the grassroots level. In many consultations, INGOs selected CBOs as target audiences as they are most in touch with the lived experiences and problems of the rural poor. CBOs’ participation was assessed “quite active and effective” but only limited within the interest topics and issues at the local level (e.g. credit, land allocation, extension services, etc.).

No documentary evidence assessing CSO participation in SEDP process exists. From the information we have, it can be inferred the engagement has been far more active as compared to the involvement in CPRGS formulation process. In real terms, however, the participation still remains restricted and reliant on INGOs and donor groups. Though the legal

framework favors CSO participation more, there has been no dramatic increase in involvement as compared to 2002 when CPRGS was being formulated.

There are many reasons for the narrow participation. The late availability of policy documents is one. Directive 33 was released only as late as September 2005 when the planning process was already a few months old. Two, planning from bottom-up always requires far more time for stakeholder participation. Three, CSOs had not readied both themselves and identified issues in need of redress. Four, as in the case of CPRGS planning, no LNGO was actually invited to lead the consultation (INGOs and donor organizations, on the other hand were invited); some LNGOs did take initiative and organize local consultations on SEDP but the impact was very little.

CSO PARTICIPATION IN CPRGS AND SEDP: CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES

Many factors have curbed the active participation of local CSOs in Vietnam.

One, though there are discrete laws to assist CS participation in decision-making and planning, they do not amount to a comprehensive legal framework. The current legal environment provides very little scope for CS participation and contribution. There is lack of clarity on the extent of participation possible and it still needs to be fully defined, either by government or by civil society itself. Civil society participation has also not been structured in such a way as to ensure inputs from a broad and representative range of socio-economic groups. There is a need to re-evaluate existing concepts of participation and look more closely at the processes through which policies are formulated, enacted and monitored. Analysts believe that civil society as

a concept is still to emerge in Vietnam. There is much work to be done in developing a meaningful definition and a common shared approach and strategy for engagement with it in Vietnam.

Two, the capacity of CSOs (LNGOs, MOs and CBOs working at the grassroots level) to broaden and enhance the participation of poor in the development planning, implementation and monitoring is poor. So far, there has been very little participation of poor people in the planning process that impinges on their lives and well-being. Such exclusion reinforces their marginalization. The task of restructuring to ensure effective stakeholder involvement in decision making in political processes remains incomplete. There is an urgent need to search for new and more direct ways in which citizens can influence government policy. Also, almost all assessments of government policy implementation have been undertaken by government institutions themselves or by international donor organizations; there have been none by local independent organizations. This trend needs to be reversed for meaningful and effective social and economic transformation.

Three, though LNGO numbers have sharply multiplied in the recent past and many of the existing ones have spread their operations, they have not been able to adequately address rural inequities, evolve people-driven projects or ensure citizen's representation in policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation. They have not also not been able to mobilize popular support for policy change and many of them do not factor monitoring and evaluation – a key determinant for project success – into their operations. Findings of a survey in 2003 on the level of commitment to monitoring and evaluation activities show only 41 percent of LNGOs take it seriously. Development analysts believe the figure will be much lower if a

comprehensive study involving larger numbers of LNGOs and CBOs is carried out. Research in 2005 has affirmed their evaluation. It revealed 40 percent of members from these groups lack awareness on CPRGS and SEDP.

Four, most CSOs do not invest in research – a major failing. It precludes them from providing intellectual direction (both to the government and to their own projects) and negotiating their demands. The purpose of research is not just to broaden and deepen knowledge in a particular area, but to create rigorously tested and readily applicable tools and approaches that can be used to test the efficacy of programs and projects. It is also needed to challenge and correct failings in the current planning and implementation procedures. Unfortunately, most CSOs have been unable to invest in research and come up with alternative analysis and data. Their criticism of government initiatives is not knowledge-based, which undermines their credibility. Most CSOs lack staff that have skills in policy analysis. A training needs assessment of LNGOs indicated 70% of CSO staff do not have knowledge or experience in research and research methodology. The remaining 30%, familiar with research techniques, said they could carry out research only if they had questionnaires. The expertise of a few competent researchers within the LNGO fold is often diverted to projects of INGOs, donor organizations or government projects where their services are used as consultants. LNGOs, hence, need to urgently invest in research, particularly in the area of gender – both at the national and grassroots level. Women continue to be excluded from policy and decision making processes and efforts to mainstream gender in programs and policy making remain inadequate.

Five, LNGOs and CBOs have not succeeded in sharpening their skills at advocacy and lobbying and use opportunities to push for policy change. Advocacy and policy change include a range of

strategies designed to involve people in influencing decision making. It usually involves strategic planning, community mobilization, capacity development, coalition building, and the promotion of changed policies and environments. Although these organizations have an excellent understanding of the ground realities, the extent and nature of poverty and the needs of people, they have not been able to create a knowledge resource or leverage available information to negotiate pro-poor policies in a credible and persistent manner through a set of targeted actions. They have failed to form networks and make use of the opportunities extended to them at policy meetings.

Six, the key strength of civil society – diversity – has become its weakness in Vietnam. CSOs have failed to shape a new socio-economic order because a majority of them work in isolation without harnessing their individual strengths or harmonizing their efforts through networks and common strategies. The past years have seen the formation of some LNGO networks. But these have remained informal, unstructured and still lack government and donor recognition. In a recent survey only one of the 25 members interviewed had experience with networking and 15 said they were aware of the concept. Tellingly, the 25 LNGO staff members interviewed belonged to a newly-established network on policy monitoring and evaluation. CSOs need to recognize that coalitions and networks can help achieve far more than organizations working separately. There is need to recognize the advantages of consensus-building and the ability of networks to sustain initiatives over years.

Seven, MOs have failed to tap their position and strength within the administrative structure as well as their extraordinary outreach across all the administrative levels to increase citizen participation in policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation. Sadly, the debate and progress

of participation within MOs has followed a predictable trajectory and along the lines of LNGOs and CBOs, despite their special powers and position. A survey on organizational capacity of WUs and FUs by OGB in Tra Vinh province supports this observation. The survey exposed the weaknesses within MOs. It revealed the concept of monitoring and evaluation to be relatively unknown among WU and FU staff. It showed the lack of emphasis on assessing the quality of programs being implemented. Awareness of the importance of research – data collection, analysis and presentation (to capture learning and negotiate policy change) – was also found to be low. The survey also recorded low MO presence in critically poor areas where ethnic minority communities live. This pushes the communities into the fringes of society, further away from policy makers.

BOOSTING CSO PARTICIPATION

As INGOs occupy a position in between donor organizations and the other entities of the CS, they are in a unique position to fulfill two functions. One, they can advocate for an enabling environment for local CSOs to become equal partners in policy making. Two, they can help build capacity of local CSOs to equip them to contribute to the process of policy formulation, enactment and monitoring and evaluation.

We would like to share Oxfam GB's experience of working with local CSOs in Vietnam and outline a few recommendations for the organization.

Focus

As working with too many CSOs will dissipate focus, it is important that OGB select a few CSOs to work with at each administrative level. Ideally, these CSOs should have a large outreach

and represent people's interests so that citizen participation in local and national policy making can be broadened. They should also represent the interests of the poor, specially ethnic minorities and women.

There are several issues that CPRGS and SEDP aim to address simultaneously. To contribute effectively to the two policy documents, it is vital for OGB to shortlist issues in order of relevance to the poor people and according to capacity available within OGB. CSO contribution to CPRGS and SEDP can come from CSO operational areas. Each CSO can be assigned to work on two or three issues for better impact.

It is important help CSOs gain comprehension of the poverty reduction strategy to sharpen their understanding on impact of policies on the poor. It is also imperative for them to get a sense of how sectoral plans – education and infrastructure, for instance – affect the lives of the poor. Both these perspectives are essential for an overview of policy, and more importantly, for a critical examination of similarities and differences between the two plans and an analysis of budgetary allocations.

Capacity Building

Capacity building among CSOs should be a prime focus area. It is needed to equip them analyze policy, design policy relevant research, monitor budgets and project outcomes. A training needs assessment conducted by OGB with a group of LNGOs on *Policy Monitoring and Evaluation* has identified the following topics/skills to build capacity: participatory poverty assessment, research methodology (with a whole gamut of activities that include identification of issues for research, research framework, research analysis tools and formulation of research report), report writing, policy advocacy skills, participatory monitoring and evaluation, rights-based approach, gender mainstreaming,

networking, facilitation skills and participatory planning methodology.

A survey conducted by WU and FU in Tra Vinh has also underscored the need to provide capacity building for MOs and CBOs on social mobilization, leadership and communication and consultation skills so that they can better represent the poor and advocate for their rights. The survey maintains training needs assessment should be conducted prior to the capacity building exercise to determine the areas of focus and training methodology. Training topics, it says, can vary for different groups of CSOs. The participatory approach has been assessed to be the most effective and relevant training method. On-the-job training is highly recommended as it helps CSOs staff learn from practical exercise. To lend sustainability to capacity building efforts, it is advised that INGOs support training of trainers for key CSO staff. Those trained will be expected in turn to train others. Capacity building within CSOs needs to be supported with awareness-raising on a rights-based development approach to ensure democratic functioning within CSOs and fair representation of women and ethnic minorities whose concerns draw unsatisfactory attention from policy makers.

Research

CSOs need to facilitate and undertake research to provide new insights and deeper understanding into socio-economic concerns that face the country, particularly poverty. Research is critical to generate authentic first-hand information (that will serve as a knowledge-base) and also to provide alternative analyses and data. More significantly, it can be used to challenge existing policy, contribute to policy change, add to the credibility of the CSO and mobilize popular support for the issues it advocates.

Selection of research issues should depend on their relevance to the CSO and the people whose interests they serve. It should be shaped according to the expertise available within CSOs. It is imperative that research initiatives be rigorous and meticulous to detail. Micro data at the grassroots level needs to be collated and analyzed to arrive at the larger picture and affect policy at the macro level.

Research that critically re-examines existing policies can help actualize policies that address the real needs of people. Attention should be paid to the quality and sustainability of research projects. CSOs must also ensure that research be informed by a strong analysis of gender and social relations. Attempts should be made to disaggregate information that establishes the specific impacts of policy and programs on women and marginalized groups (poor and ethnic minorities).

Advocacy

Advocacy or drawing attention to an issue through public mobilization to promote a change in policy or program is still an untested area in Vietnam. CSOs are hesitant to rely on the power of advocacy to bring socio-economic change for fear of offending political sensibilities. It is important to emphasize the effectiveness of advocacy to bring issues in need of redress to the forefront and to the attention of policy makers.

CSOs need to identify areas for advocacy, outline objectives and work on detailed strategies to expand and legitimize their role in this area and also strengthen organized challenge for policy change. Each CSO can choose an area/s that deserves prior and urgent attention at the administrative level they work in.

Advocacy strategy determines the success of a campaign. CSOs need to draw up compre-

hensive plans for advocacy campaigns that compel attention towards them. They will need guidance on how to assimilate research findings into their advocacy campaigns; retain focus on a few crucial issues; craft effective and enduring messages, overcome administrative hurdles and mobilize the support and feedback of people.

Success in the first CSO initiative will guarantee confidence, motivation and further learning. Advocacy campaigns should take advantage of the good intrapersonal relationships that many CSO members have with policy makers and leverage it for maximum benefit. INGOs can take the lead in areas where CSO presence is low and kick start advocacy campaigns to get the attention of the government. INGOs need to keep up the momentum of their efforts and contribution to Working Groups so that CSOs can benefit from their experience and established working procedures.

Awareness raising

In Vietnam, the National Constitution guarantees rights. Rights of people are also detailed out in the GRDD and some other legal documents. Enabling people, particularly the poor and ethnic minority groups, to understand their rights so that they can impact policy, is an important task ahead of CSOs. The correlation between awareness levels and public participation in shaping public policy is undeniable. People's participation in CSOs need to be encouraged, as without it, projects and policy change will be non-starters. Broad, transparent and inclusive social dialogue needs to be urgently fostered.

At the same time, it is important to revitalize the roles of people who engage with CSOs and help them recognize their rights and responsibilities. People also need to be kept abreast with information on government plans, projects, policies and budgets so that they can

make informed decisions while participating. Information can be provided at meetings, training sessions and public places like cultural houses and the offices of the People's Committee. Messages can be disseminated through bulletin boards, loudspeakers, newsletters, newspapers, leaflets and radio and television broadcasts. In many villages, ethnic minority population comprise 90 percent of the population. Information in villages such as this need to be relayed in the local languages and through radio and television.

Building coalitions and networks

Consensus-building and setting up shared platforms to exert influence on policy are an urgent need. Supporting local CSOs build coalitions and network is vital – be they national coalitions to provide comments/feedback to SEDP or networks representing the rights of ethnic minorities or education or GRDD monitoring. It is undoubtedly a challenge to form networks and coalitions in Vietnam but it not an insurmountable problem. Training CSOs to converge and agree to a common-shared agenda is the starting point. Setting up frameworks, work plans and time tables should follow. Coalitions or networks formed on the basis of people's own needs/interests have a greater degree of sustainability than those formed because they are funded by INGOs. To further strategic partnerships in the CS arena, OGB is involved in setting up a national level network of local NGOs to provide inputs to the monitoring and evaluation process for poverty reduction. This network of local NGOs currently functions under the umbrella of VUSTA.

Setting up CBOs at the grassroots

Presence of CBOs at the grassroots level is essential to involve larger numbers of people in the planning process. INGOs need to help increase the numbers of CBOs, either on their

own or with the help of MOs and LNGOs. They must partner with CBOs to set up effective regulation, systems and procedures within CBOs. This is needed if CBOs are to become catalysts for change at the grassroots level. Seed money for start-up operations should be extended. CBO activities, however, must be decided by the members themselves. They must also make long term plans to ensure the sustainability of their organizations. Mechanisms like membership fees are one way of doing this.

INGOs can also help demystify the functioning of government and help disseminate information on existing administrative structures. They can help strengthen the People's Council for greater people's participation. Their vantage position will allow them to contribute to capacity building for policy-makers and planners in the participatory approach towards development. INGOs can also ensure planners and policy-makers gain first hand knowledge of grassroots realities. It will foster realistic policy design and implementation.

These are only broad suggestions to strengthen the capacity of CBOs based on the experiences of OGB. Many more interventions are needed to boost CBO participation in policy formulation and implementation. ■

ENDNOTE

- ¹ This paper expresses the opinions and viewpoints of the author and does not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam-GB.

Networking for Analysis of Anti-Poverty Policies

HO THI THUY LINH
Project Officer, VUSTA-APPS¹

Vietnam has made significant achievements during the reform period of the recent 15 years. The poverty rate has been reduced from 70 percent in 1990 to about 30 percent in 2000. However, poverty and hunger still remain as major problems, especially in the mountainous minority areas. In the coming decade, activities on hunger eradication and poverty reduction (HEPR) will have to face more challenges and difficulties. In 2002, the Government of Vietnam confirmed its commitment to HEPR through the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS). This strategy considers HEPR to be an important objective in parallel with economic growth. The question now is how effective these strategies and policies will be to the long-term improvement of poor people's lives.

The CPRGS clearly states that the Vietnamese Government expects to encourage and promote the participation of people, state agencies as well as social organizations in the process of strategy implementation and evaluation. This also creates opportunities for LNGOs to engage in policy evaluation, which is a demand of the NGO community.

THE ANTI-POVERTY POLICY STUDY GROUP (APPS)

In such context, the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA)

About VUSTA

The Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA) was established in 1983 as a professional organization representing Vietnamese scholars in the field of science and technology.

VUSTA contributes to the socialization of activities in science and technology, education and training, people's health care, community development, hunger eradication, and poverty alleviation.

It also promotes the mobilization and motivation of scientific and technology academics, and serves as a bridge between the academic, scientific and technological community and the State. VUSTA seeks to strengthen the cooperation with NGOs and other countries' associations, and international scientific and technological organizations.

recognized the importance of establishing a local NGO network in the field of Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction (HEPR) for policy evaluation and advocacy. Hence, the Anti-Poverty Policy Study group (or APPS) was registered under VUSTA. Its main objective is to serve as a forum for exchanging and discussing ideas, opinions and analysis during the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation process of the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy of Vietnam, and to monitor the possible impact of the policy on the livelihoods of people, especially the poor.

APPS' stated objectives are:

- ❑ To build a group of policy assessment and advocacy specialists with sufficient skills and experience;
- ❑ To design the APPS methodology for policy assessment and advocacy; and
- ❑ To promote the participation of grassroots people, contributing to reinforcement of transparency and accountability of poverty policies' planning and implementing processes, improvement of policy, and strengthening the effectiveness of the implementing processes of the policies.

APPS ACTIVITIES

Capacity building

- ❑ **Organizing training courses on research methodologies, assessment skills, gender issues, policy analysis, etc.:** Several training courses have been organized on topics such as advocacy methods, quantitative and qualitative research methodology, data analysis, report writing and policy analysis. Training materials have been developed based on actual situations and experience, and following the participatory approach/method.
- ❑ **Inviting guest speakers on “hot” issues related to development, poverty alleviation, and civil society:** Every two to three months, the APPS network organizes a talk on “hot” issues or those issues that interest its members. So far, three fora have been organized on topics such as: “policy issues in social development”, “the role of civil society in the monitoring and evaluation of poverty alleviation policies”, and “overview of ethnic minority groups in Vietnam”.
- ❑ **Participating in development and assessment activities:** APPS looks for opportunities to cooperate with other organizations. One member of APPS has joined a group

of consultants in the process of drafting the 5-year Socio-Economic Development Plan of Ninh Thuan Province.

- ❑ **Visiting the field areas of member organizations:** APPS organizes study visits to the field sites of each member organization to better understand their work contexts and approaches.
- ❑ **Organizing study tours in Vietnam or abroad to learn from the experiences of other networks.**

Policy assessment

- ❑ **Conducting an assessment of poverty policies in Lao Cai province:** This was basically an experimental field trip for APPS members to better understand the realities of assessment work. Several areas of policy were assessed, such as health care, education, agricultural extension, forestry, non-farm employment opportunities and market access.
- ❑ **Conducting assessments of the policy on health insurance for poor people:** This covered the three provinces of Yen Bai, Ninh Thuan and Dong Thap.

Advocacy

- ❑ **Disseminating assessment results to concerned local authorities:** This is done in order to share information and to listen to comments from local authorities. APPS plans to organize dissemination workshops in each province to present assessment results, well as to gather recommendations for its reports.
- ❑ **From the results of assessments, launching advocacy campaigns** for improvement of the policy, including the preparation of policy briefs to be sent to policymakers and to members of the National Assembly.

A CASE EXAMPLE OF POLICY ANALYSIS AND ADVOCACY: HEALTH CARE FOR THE POOR

Topic selection

One of the main objectives of APPS is capacity-building. Hence, along with the desire to conduct good assessment studies, APPS has also focused on training for its members.

First, a call for proposals from member organizations was sent out. Several criteria were used for topic selection: suitability to the capacity of APPS members, a “hot” topic, and ability to advocate on the topic. These criteria were previously drawn up in consultation with experts and the directors of APPS member-organizations. After the deadline, four topics were brought up. After these topics were presented and carefully considered, the topic of “Government Support of Health Care Costs for the Poor” was chosen.

Assessment preparation

A consultant who is also director of an APPS member-organization was then hired to coach the APPS team and to be in charge of the assessment. It is noted that APPS gives preference to hiring consultants from member organizations. Also, APPS focuses on capacity building for its members in every step of the assessment process. Activities are designed and conducted so that every member of the APPS assessment team has a chance to participate. In this case, a 5-day training course was conducted on the situation of health care services in Vietnam.

It was decided that both qualitative and quantitative methods would be used for the assessment. The method of gathering qualitative information included: in-depth interviews, group discussions and report collection. APPS

members participated in the entire process, starting from the first step of choosing the research questions. An assessment frame was drawn up, and guidelines for conducting qualitative interviews were also prepared. During interviews and group discussions, SWOT analysis methods were used. For quantitative data gathering, a household-level questionnaire was prepared.

The assessment team also invited freelance local researchers from the assessment provinces, including at the preparatory stages of the research. There were two reasons for doing so: first, local researchers have a lot of local knowledge that need to be taken into consideration in the design of the research methodology; and second, local researchers would later join the APPS team during the assessment in their province.

Field work and report writing

Selection of sample households: Three provinces were selected to represent the three regions of Vietnam: North, Central and South. In each province, the assessment team asked the local leaders to choose four villages: one “very difficult” village, plus three other villages where the leaders and health care activities were ranked as “good”, “normal” and “not good”. For each village, a group of respondent households was randomly selected based on the list of all village households. The assessment team made arrangements for the selected households to be at home for the interviews. However, in many poor areas, the team often had difficulty in meeting the selected households, because the families had to go to work during daytime.

Implementation plan: An advanced trip was found to be very helpful in organizing assessment activities. In each province, a coordinator was tasked with preparing the activities for data gathering and assessment. Once all interviews

were done in a given area a preliminary report, based mainly on the qualitative results, was prepared and discussed with local authorities to correct any misunderstanding and to solicit initial comments.

Data processing: After the field trips, all questionnaires were collected. A data processing specialist then took charge. It should be noted that choosing the right software is important, as the software should be familiar to the assessment team for report writing purposes. Also, the assessment team should give clear instructions for data processing. In this case, APPS also provided team members a one-day training on data analysis.

Report writing: After data processing, the assessment team then prepared a report and analysis covering the results from all three provinces, and using both quantitative and qualitative data.

Advocacy plans

Dissemination workshops will be organized in each province that participated in the assessment. The main objective is to present the assessment results, to collect recommendations from local people, and to find initiatives for follow up activities. A workshop will also be conducted at central level to disseminate the research results and recommendations.

Policy brief: several policy briefs and articles will be prepared and sent to related agencies and newspapers.

Some lessons learned

- ❑ **The importance of pre-testing questionnaires**, as even the best consultants cannot anticipate different situations in reality. Further, some words or terms used in

questionnaires may need to be revised to suit local understanding and usage.

- ❑ **The usefulness of having an advanced trip**, specially when the assessment team has little information and experience on the assessment site and people. Arranging all activities with local people, interviewees as well as accommodations will help the assessment run smoothly. Questionnaire testing can also be carried out during advanced trips.
- ❑ **The need to train local (freelance) researchers**, specially when assessing in an unfamiliar area, as the local (freelance) researchers will be able to communicate better with local people, and speak the local language. It will also help reduce costs for the assessment team. ■

ENDNOTE

- ¹ Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations/Anti Poverty Policies Study Group (APPS).

Participation in PRSP Monitoring in Vietnam¹

VACVINA

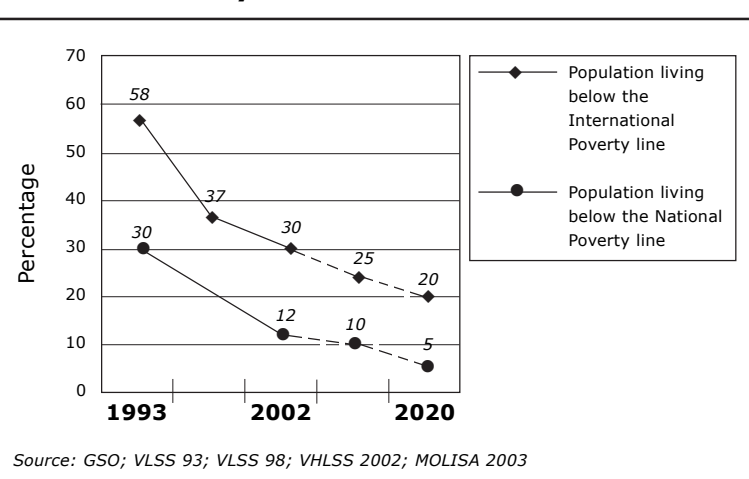
During the *Doi Moi* process, along with its many remarkable achievements on economic growth, Vietnam also experienced many successes especially in poverty alleviation. The poverty rate of 37 percent in 1998 was reduced to 29% in 2002 and then to 22% in 2005 (based on the new poverty line of Vietnam).

However, due to unequal development in the whole country there is still a great difference in poverty rates between isolated mountainous provinces and their counterparts in the coastal lowland areas.

THE COMPREHENSIVE POVERTY REDUCTION AND GROWTH STRATEGY (CPRGS)

In May 2002, the Vietnamese Government launched the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy or CPRGS – a document which concretizes the objectives, tasks, mechanism, policies and general measures of the 10-year Socio-Economic Development Plan for 2001-2010, the Sectoral Strategy, and others. At the same time, the Strategy also represents the UN Millennium Development Goals to which Vietnam is committed to implement. The Strategy consists of specific policies and measures which Vietnam needs to apply in order to ensure sustainable growth along with poverty alleviation.

Chart 1. Poverty reduction in Vietnam



VACVINA'S WORK RELATED TO THE PRSP PROCESS

In association with the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC), the Vietnam Gardening Association (VACVINA) undertook in April 2005 a project that sought to promote NGO/CSO monitoring and evaluation of the CPRGS in Vietnam. The goal of the project was to contribute to increasing the capacity of NGOs and civil social organizations (CSOs) to participate in M&E processes on the implementation of the CPRGS

as well as to engage governmental organizations and donors in policy dialogue and advocacy. The focus of the project interventions was on three main subjects: *food security, rural development and ensured participation of the poor*. This project was implemented by VACVINA with the assistance of some NGOs experienced in this field, namely: RDSC, CERDA, VUSTA, APPS, Oxfam GB and others. After a year of implementation, project accomplishments have included:

Workshop on *Sharing Experiences of Non-Governmental Organizations/Civil Society Organizations in Monitoring and Evaluation of Poverty Alleviation Policies of the Government*

The National Workshop was held at the VACVINA office in Hanoi last 24-25 June 2005, and was attended by more than 50 representatives from various local and international NGOs. Participants shared their experiences relevant to the CPRGS and the opportunities and challenges it presented to NGOs/CSOs. Recommendations were generated on strengthening the role of NGOs/CSOs in monitoring and evaluation, as well as on capacity-building for civil society to engage in PRSP processes.

Training Course and Field Visit

VACVINA organized a participatory training course-cum-field visit in 23-27 April 2006 for 25 participants in monitoring and evaluation of poverty alleviation policies, with a focus on household food security issues. Participants were trained on participatory M&E concepts and tools. The first half of this 4-day activity was devoted to lectures in Hanoi, while the latter half was spent on field exposure and internship in Bac Kan Province, where ANGO and VACVINA have implemented a food security village project.

Table 1. Distribution of poor people per region, 1998 and 2002 (in %)			
Provinces	1998	2002	Difference
Mekong Delta	21%	17%	4%
East Southern	5%	5%	0%
Central Highland	5%	10%	-5%
South Central Coastal	8%	7%	1%
North Central Coastal	18%	21%	3%
Hong River Delta	18%	17%	1%
North Mountainous	25%	23%	2%

PRSP Watch

Three editions of the PRSP Watch were published by VACVINA to heighten awareness of NGOs/CSOs on Vietnam’s CPRGS. Constraints and opportunities, as well as spaces for civil society involvement in CPRGS processes, were identified. Another issue of the PRSP Watch presented the current state of food security in the country, and the government’s response to this, as enshrined in the CPRGS. In the third issue, experiences on participation of local NGOs and CSOs in monitoring and evaluation of the CPRGS were shared.

PRELIMINARY NGO/CSO ASSESSMENT OF THE CPRGS STRATEGY

Strengths:

- ❑ High level of country ownership;
- ❑ Preferential objectives are more clearly identified in the CPRGS than in previous poverty alleviation strategies. Also, the CPRGS shows the policies needed to help obtain the objectives within the given time-frame;
- ❑ A participatory approach has been used at certain levels, i.e., participatory poverty assessments (PPAs), monitoring and evaluation with participation of various organizations under different Ministries.

Constraints:

- ❑ CPRGS was built on the basis of the previous poverty alleviation strategies so there are some unavoidable similar characteristics. Although the commitment of the Government to this Strategy is quite vigorous, in fact, some organizations under Ministries have not been strongly involved in monitoring and evaluation;
- ❑ Although the participatory approach has been used, there is no feedback at all on the results of surveys to communities nor any clear explanation on the reasons why supplementary suggestions will or will not be added into the final version;
- ❑ The planned implementation of CPRGS at grassroots level has been piloted in some provinces with support from donors (Tra Vinh, Lao Cai, Ninh Binh, Ho Chi Minh, etc.) and the CPRGS was designed at the provincial level. However, most of the lower levels have not implemented these plans.

Opportunities from CPRGS:

- ❑ The opportunity to use the participatory approach on a large scale;
- ❑ The opportunity to learn about the process of participatory planning, to ensure that priority focus is given to poverty alleviation;
- ❑ Deepening the awareness of the relationship between economic growth and poverty, and the need for balanced growth in order to attain the objective of poverty alleviation;
- ❑ Strengthening the voice of the poor by using more participatory evaluation tools and surveys with and among communities.

Threats:

- ❑ This official paper is still strategic and lacks a detailed implementation plan with a clear budget breakdown;
- ❑ The objective of “economic growth” may be given higher and immediate priority, while the objective of “poverty alleviation” might still be considered as a “long-term” goal that is expected to result from economic growth.

ASSESSMENT OF NGO/CSO ROLES AND THEIR CAPACITY IN THE MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF CPRGS

- ❑ In reality, it is only international NGOs (INGOs) that are independent and have opportunities to participate in policy negotiations; other CSOs only passively or occasionally get involved in CPRGS building, monitoring and evaluation.
- ❑ CSOs are generally not independent and do not have opportunities to have their own voices.
- ❑ NGO/CSO capacity in M&E (as well as research, advocacy and negotiation) remains weak.
- ❑ NGOs/CSOs often operate independently of each other, and not in a common network or around a common strategy.
- ❑ The Government does not provide clear roles for NGOs/CSOs in monitoring and evaluation; as a result, they have difficulty in approaching government for information or discussion on policies.
- ❑ The legal framework for the operation of CSOs in Vietnam is not clear.
- ❑ For effective CPRGS monitoring and evaluation, the role of NGOs/CSOs should be recognized. Local NGOs (LNGOs) who have the experience in implementing small-scale development projects at the local level need to be involved in supporting the participation of communities, or in acting as donor partners for monitoring and evaluation. Community-based organizations (CBOs) and mass organizations (MOs) who are natural representatives of communities (the poor) should be given the responsibility and capacity in evaluating the needs of the poor, and in giving feedback from the poor to authorities/agencies.

Advantages, disadvantages and challenges of NGO/CSOs in the monitoring and evaluation of poverty alleviation policies

Advantage:

- ❑ CSOs are organizations of communities; thus, many are also representatives of communities; their activities focus on improving the lives of the poor and the well-being of communities that they assist. In addition, CSOs have a lot of experience in implementing development projects, making them capable in gathering and evaluating information on communities.

Disadvantages:

- ❑ Legally, CSOs do not have any formal function in the monitoring and evaluation of the Government's poverty alleviation policies. Among the few Vietnamese organizations that have this function are the Vietnam Union of Sciences and Technology Association (VUSTA) and the Vietnamese Women's Union (WU). And although the evaluation activities of NGOs/CSOs are consultative and independent, the feedback they provide based on their M&E do not attract the attention of policymakers, especially at the local level.
- ❑ Networking among Vietnamese NGOs is still in its infancy. Most VNGOs are small in scale and have young staff with limited capacity in policy analysis.
- ❑ VNGOs tend to operate independently, they often do not collaborate with each other, and they are not in a suitable position to relate with the Government. They do not believe that the Government would deal with them on large-scale activities, specially for missions on policy monitoring and evaluation.

Challenges

- ❑ First, poverty alleviation should be examined in its different aspects, particularly the

evaluation of Programs 135, 143, etc. in combination with other programs such as on population, infrastructure, and others. Over time, monitoring should be enhanced to focus on both quantitative and qualitative targets of poverty alleviation, along with mobilizing the participation of local communities.

- ❑ Evaluation team members need to be well equipped with knowledge not just on M&E methods, but also on content. There is need to invite experts experienced in various fields for more comprehensive and systematic evaluation.
- ❑ Identify the evaluation criteria; these criteria should focus on how poverty alleviation policies relate to specific activities implemented. The seven suggested criteria are: (1) evaluation on the orientation of the poverty alleviation program; (2) the logical order of program implementation; (3) clearance; (4) equity; (5) sustainability; (6) effectiveness; and (7) contribution of the projects/programs to grassroots democratization and improved capacity of the communities.
- ❑ There is need to ensure the active participation of local people and the poor in particular.
- ❑ Prepare the monitoring and evaluation tools to be used at the locality. Questionnaires need to be tested before official use.

Some recommendations

- ❑ Create a "legal corridor" – an environment with the right policies to institutionalize NGO/CSO participation in the M&E of poverty alleviation programs.
- ❑ Following the commitments made by the Government, project/program formulation and implementation should include CSO participation.
- ❑ Improve the project/program design method, apply the logical framework approach (LFA) to the following principles: (a) Combination

of various solutions for poverty alleviation, using CSO and community approaches to identify exactly the needs of communities; (b) Mobilization of support from both inside and outside the locality, piloting models before application, giving recognition to volunteer networks; (c) Ensured equity and clearance during and after the project; (d) Part of budget spent in strengthening the capacity of local staff.

- ❑ Build a monitoring and evaluation system from the center to the local level and ensure CSOs' participation.
- ❑ For NGOs/CSOs: Actively strengthen the capacity of the organizations; attract experienced consultants, taking advantage of the support and cooperation of INGOs to enhance NGO/CSO capacity and skills in analysis, writing reports, and policy evaluation; cooperate with each other in a common network. ■

ENDNOTE

- ¹ **Editor's note:** This paper is taken and edited from the project report prepared by VACVINA entitled "NGO/CSO Participation in PRSP Monitoring in Vietnam with Focus on Food Security, Rural Development and Participation of the Rural Poor," May 2006.

PRSPs and Civil Society Participation in Lao PDR

LORRAINE BRAMWELL
International NGO and Coordinator,
Donor Liaison, LAO PDR

Development in Lao PDR has been hampered by a recent history in which the overthrow of traditional colonialism was followed by a long period of internal power struggles and a secret war fought from 1960–1974 involving three Lao factions supported varyingly by the USA, Vietnam and the Soviet Union. At the end of the war, America pulled out its troops but also withdrew all foreign aid (the USA provided approximately 45 million dollars a year to Laos in foreign aid from 1954 -1971¹). This, along with the loss of a large part of the educated classes who fled abroad after the communist takeover in 1975, drastically reduced the available human and social capital and the efficiency of the new government.

CURRENT COUNTRY CONTEXT

In 1986 the government adopted the New Economic Mechanism to move the economy towards a market-based approach. Economic growth has been strong and remained stable even during the Asian financial crisis of the late nineties and Laos today is recovering and has made substantial progress in improving the lives of the Lao people. Laos is still however one of the UN designated least developed countries (LDCs) and relies on foreign aid for a significant portion of its national budget. Its economy remains essentially agrarian, 39 percent of the population lives below the national poverty line and the share of the poorest quintile in national consumption is decreasing². While the government has shown commitment to pursue development strategies that will benefit the

poorest, it is hampered by a severe lack of capacity. The public service, like that in many other poor countries, is characterized by weak governance, low salaries, endemic corruption and poor management.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) in Lao PDR was localized as the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) and approved in June 2003. It was introduced as “the strategic framework under which all of the government’s future growth and poverty eradication programs will be developed and implemented”³ and was additional to both the Ten Year Socio-Economic Development Strategy (2001-2010) and the sixth Five Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDPP). The NGPES is a strategy and contains no implementation framework or resource allocation. It is widely considered to

have now been superseded by the sixth NSEDP, which is described by the government as the “the vehicle for facilitating the implementation of the second half of the Socio Economic Development Strategy (2001-2010)”.⁴ While there has been an attempt on the part of the government to incorporate the issues of the NGPES into the NSEDP there is still some way to go on this and there is still no clear resource allocation or implementation framework.

The twice-yearly Round Table Meeting (RTM) is the main mechanism by which the donors as a group are consulted on PRSPs. From the pre-NGPES situation until now we can see a slow but sure improvement in the quality and quantity of participation in PRSP formulation processes. Before the NGPES there was no consultation with donors or non-government agencies on government plans. The NGPES formulation process included consultations with donors and international organizations as well as academia and businesses. These consultations were limited however, with little possibility for input to be heard and taken notice of by the government. In the NSEDP formulation process there were more consultations in the provinces and more input from international NGOs (INGOs), including a joint statement on Governance presented by the INGO Governance Working Group.

PARTICIPATION TO DATE

The government has made much of the participatory approach taken to the NGPES. It has stated that as well as involving the mass organisations (MOs) and academia, donors and INGOs were consulted and that dialogue meetings were held with the private sector and Nam Theun 2 (Lao’s largest dam project to date). According to the government, “almost all ideas advanced during consultations with the NGOs can be found in the NGPES in one form or

another, particularly with regard to rural development”.⁵ The NGPES includes a participatory poverty assessment component, which was implemented by the National Statistics Center with the technical and financial support of the ADB.

Consultation of INGOs and donors on the NGPES occurred through the forum of an RTM at which a draft of the strategy was presented for comments. The establishment of the RTMs was supported by the UNDP in order to facilitate dialogue between the government and donors on poverty reduction. About twenty INGOs were invited to the RTM on the NGPES but their ability to be involved in a dialogue was hampered by being seated at the back of the room and away from microphones. While there was appreciation at the new openness shown by the government in inviting INGOs to comment on its strategy, some participants felt that there was little opportunity for real input. In fact dialogue was altogether limited at these meetings, which were organized as a succession of presentations with little time for comments or discussion.

The same consultation method was used for the 6th NSEDP but feedback from INGOs was more positive, partly because the government was more open to NGO input and partly because international organizations were themselves better prepared to take part. The UNDP facilitated a pre-RTM meeting to discuss the plan and in the time between the formulation of the NGPES and the 6th NSEDP, INGO sector working groups had been formed (as had parallel donor theme groups). The NGO Governance Working Group was able to present a joint statement on progress and concerns in that sector which was well received by the government, and INGOs generally felt their comments were falling on more fertile ground. It is clear that being better organized among

themselves allows organizations to participate more effectively in such fora.

No local NGOs or CBOs have been included in the formulation processes of the NGPES or NSEDP. This is due to two main reasons:

- ❑ Limited numbers and capacities of such organizations; and
- ❑ CSOs are not seen as being appropriate or able to take part in the planning processes.

Until very recently there was no legal platform for local NGOs and so there are still only a very few such organizations (in Laos they are known as Non Profit Associations or NPAs) and they are for the most part very young organizations working with very limited human and financial resources. Asking them to become involved in PRS formulation or M&E processes will place a great demand on those resources and it is not clear whether the NPAs currently in existence would wish to be involved as their legal status is still very fragile and anything seen as “activism” is problematic in Laos. NPAs have until now not come together as a group. Some NPAs are beginning to build networks, but again this is in the very early stages.

CBOs in Laos have not yet been considered as appropriate stakeholders in the planning process and there is little information available about their numbers and types. It is not uncommon to hear views from government officials along the lines that they cannot promote village level participation, as villagers do not understand the issues.

POLICY ENVIRONMENT FOR A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO NGPES/NSEDP FORMULATION AND M&E

The Government of Lao PDR is aware of the need to engage with stakeholders. At the

Regional PRSP Conference held in Vientiane (April 2006) the Committee for Planning and Investment made a presentation entitled “Stakeholder Investment in Planning”, which made the following points:

- ❑ The NGPES was formulated through a long process including: a national workshop on poverty alleviation; two separate poverty assessments; three round table meetings; two expenditure and consumption surveys; a presentation to partners in development; and National Assembly approval.
- ❑ Participants in the NGPES formulation process included: central ministries and agencies; the National Assembly and mass organizations; academics and researchers; provinces, districts and communities; the private sector; INGOs; and partners in development.
- ❑ The 6th NSEDP was developed over two years, incorporating a bottom-up approach and drawing on lessons from the 5th plan.
- ❑ Preliminary ideas were shared with partners in development, the private sector, Lao researchers and mass organizations, and the draft 6th plan was presented to: the government (several times); Party Central Committee; National Assembly; partners; and party congress. It was due to be shared with private investors, Lao researchers and mass organizations before a final draft was submitted to the National Assembly in May 2006.
- ❑ The consultations on the 6th NSEDP generated many suggestions, for example on: public fiscal management; financial sector; private sector development; prioritization with poverty focus; implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- ❑ Challenges are: resource mobilization; adherence to priorities; improving implementation; M&E; and reporting.

According to the UNDP, provincial consultations for the NSEDP were held in the

three regions: north, south and central. Local authorities were invited to the provincial consultations. The input and discussions were organized variously by sector and by province and were reported as being extensive and lively. However, it was noted that participatory planning in Laos is difficult as it is expensive and requires a high degree of technical capacity.

The government has begun to include international organizations and some Lao development partners in the consultation process for formulation of plans and this is a welcome development, showing openness and commitment on the part of the government to the role of non-government partners.

However, participation has until now been limited to commenting on drafts and as yet there is no sign of including non-government partners in monitoring and evaluation (an activity currently mandated to the different levels of government, the National Statistics Center and the Committee for Planning and Investment). However, an international consultant has been engaged “to undertake a review of the monitoring and evaluation system, with particular focus on implementation monitoring and evaluation”.⁶

Although there have been important reforms and progress made in the area of governance and the rule of law, there is still no framework for Lao organizations (other than those institutions already included by the government such as MOs and academia) to participate in the formulation or monitoring and evaluation of poverty reduction strategies in Laos.

In addition, capacity in the public arena to understand and critique government policy and achievements is extremely low and the government is sensitive to criticism so even where the capacity exists, people are unwilling to comment publicly.

TOOLS FOR MONITORING POVERTY REDUCTION

- ❑ A review of Lao progress on the MDGs was prepared jointly by the government and UNDP and published in 2004. It provides data and analysis of the seven goals and 11 targets ratified by Laos, giving the 1990 baseline, current status and final goal for 2015. While there is much good analysis of the achievements and challenges so far, much of the data is fairly old and data collection and analysis is weak.
- ❑ Focal Development Area Plans have been created for 13 districts so far, providing a plan of action on poverty eradication in 13 pilot focal development areas, representing 13 of 47 target poorest districts. The plans include budget allocation although the funds have yet to be mobilized. There is an implementation framework but as yet it is only in Lao language.
- ❑ The UN global MDG indicator database *Dev Info* has been localized as *Lao Info*, enabling comparison of Lao Statistics to MDG indicators. Once again though, the data is incomplete and needs updating.

Line Ministries are mandated to provide information to the Committee for Planning and Investment, the body responsible for monitoring Lao’s progress in achieving the targets set out in the NGPES and NSEDP. Data is collected by the National Statistics Center (NSC) but the NSEDP acknowledges that the NSC needs additional resources and capacity-building in order to be able to provide comprehensive and reliable data. Current available data is very limited, as is public access to information (no website). There is no comprehensive budget allocation in the plan, and transparency and data collection are still inadequate. The information is simply not available to enable real monitoring of inputs or progress.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN LAO PDR

Civil society is a difficult concept to define, specially in a country like Laos where there are many different types of organizations, registered and operating in different ways but playing a role in development. At the conference *Civil Society in SE Asia*, held in Cambodia in 2004, Dr. Gerd Mutz outlined two different ways of understanding civil society: the topographical approach in which we refer to three clearly defined spheres in society – the market, state and civil sectors; and the action-oriented approach, where we pay more attention to “civic structures and action ... even (to) civic habit or attitude”.⁷

This second, wider conception of civil society is perhaps better suited to the Asian and specifically the Lao context, allowing us more flexibility in defining who and what may constitute civil society and to include players such as private enterprise, religious organizations and even, possibly to some extent, government-affiliated bodies such as mass organizations.

Let us look then at which (more or less civil) organizations in Laos have the possibility to play a role in poverty reduction or in the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of poverty reduction plans.

Mass Organizations:

When the government mentions civil society, it is often referring to mass organizations (MOs – the Women’s Union, Lao Federation of Trade Unions, Lao Front for National Reconstruction and Lao Revolutionary Youth Union) and the Lao Red Cross, all of which sit quite firmly within the government and/or Party framework. Such organizations would not normally be seen as civil society. However, they are able to reach a large percentage of the Lao population through their district and village level offices, and are often chosen as counterparts to work

with INGOs and other development partners in the implementation of projects. Over the years these organizations, in particular the Women’s and Youth unions, have developed considerable capacity to work in areas such as rural development, health, HIV/AIDS, vocational training and micro credit. More than the other MOs, the Lao Women’s Union seems able to send messages both in the direction of the grassroots from the Party but also from the villages back to the central levels of government.

The Lao Buddhist Association:

The temple still plays a leading role in the village life of ethnic Lao. The Lao Buddhist Association is active in promoting civic virtues and supports development initiatives through groups such as LYAP who work with both international NGOs and the Ministry of Health on HIV prevention activities. Buddhist monks, as model members of Lao society, are regularly invited to work with INGOs such as PSI Laos, with whom they promote HIV/AIDS prevention at traditional festivals and concerts.

Lao Non Profit Associations:

This is a relatively new group of organizations, set up in response to the creation of the Lao Union of Science and Engineering Associations (LUSEA), a body which is based in the Prime Minister’s Office and authorized to register Non-Profit Associations (NPAs). LUSEA seems to parallel the Vietnamese VUSTA and, in the same way as VUSTA, to be providing the legal framework for local development organizations to exist.

While there is much hope among INGOs that this is an opening for organizations which outsiders might see as something akin to local NGOs, it must be noted that the NPAs (currently numbering about 24) are in fact quite a diverse grouping of organizations: professional associations, development organizations and charities, for instance. The

registration process is unclear and many of the NPAs are run by current or former government officials. The NPAs do not have the same kind of national coverage as the mass organisations – most of them are only working in the capital. However, along with the official status of some of the people involved, this could give them the advantage of being more informed with regard to government policy and activities, placing them in a better position to comment or to inform those outside the capital.

Other types of Local Organizations:

Because of difficulties in registering as local NGOs some organizations have in the past registered under ministries while managing to remain largely independent and to run in a similar way to development organizations. These organizations are often run by people with a long history in Lao development and a good knowledge of government structures and operating modes. This could place them in a good position to play an active role in PRSP formulation and M&E.

A number of INGOs support their own local groups (some of which are now applying for independent status as NPAs). While still based under an INGO they have considerable resources and are to some extent “protected” by the INGO. These include: The Sustainable Agriculture Forum (CUSO), The Gender and Development Group (CUSO), Flames Youth Group (Save the Children - Australia), and CAMID (DED).

Private Enterprise:

There are many private enterprises in Laos that have a strong development link. The choice to set up businesses rather than NGOs is sometimes made on the basis of being easier; certainly as in the past it was seen as extremely difficult if not impossible to set up a local NGO. These “development-oriented businesses” either have a clear development slant or sometimes

actually run cooperatives or non-profit development activities under the umbrella of a related business. Many of the people running these enterprises are well connected and have a deep understanding of government mechanisms.

Possible Spaces for CSOs to Get Involved

Although the government has stated that it is committed to better participation, it is also sensitive to anything it perceives as direct criticism and cautious about opening the doors too wide and losing too much control. Two interlinked and important questions which must be asked with regard to CSO participation are: (1) whether local organizations can easily develop the capacity to be involved in a process which is difficult and time consuming; and (2) whether they are willing to take part in what could be considered as a quite risky activity in the current political climate.

These questions notwithstanding, with the support of donors and INGOs it is possible that some of the types of organizations mentioned above could develop the capacity and find the space to become more involved in PRSP processes in Laos, thus helping the government to achieve its targets. Areas that might provide initial opportunities for involvement could include:

- ❑ Implementation
- ❑ Education (of the general public on their rights, etc)
- ❑ Issue based participation – the environment, vulnerable groups, etc.

M&E still seems to be something which international organizations (including INGOs) must take responsibility for, as the government is quite sensitive to criticism. Perhaps NPAs or other Lao organizations can be included through

participation in the sector working groups where these issues will be discussed.

Possible Interventions/ **S**upport to Promote and **S**trengthen CSOs' **P**articipation

It is clear that there is a responsibility on the part of the international development community in Laos to support both the government and Lao organizations to carry out real participatory activities in the future. Some possible interventions which could support this goal are:

- ❑ Exposing the government to participatory practices in the region: study trips, regional workshops for government officials
- ❑ INGO/Donor support to Lao NPAs; initial focus on service delivery
- ❑ Inviting CSOs to INGO meetings and supporting CSO networks
- ❑ Capacity-building (BUT at the same time dealing with the root causes of non-participation) in both government and local organizations
- ❑ Donor/IFI inclusion of Participation Action Plans
- ❑ Identification of targeted CSOs (i.e. mapping of groups already involved in NGPES)
- ❑ Promotion of PRA & PLA techniques
- ❑ Indicator setting
- ❑ Consultation & disaggregated data
- ❑ Development/support of national statistics center
- ❑ INGO Participation in the joint UN/Government Statistics Group
- ❑ Independent research on Lao Civil Society and the possibilities for its active engagement with the government ■

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Barbier Jean-Pierre 1975, Objectifs et résultats de l'aide économique au Laos - Une évaluation difficile. Paris. Reveu Tiers Monde, tome XVI N°. 62, avril-juin (quoted by Francois Guegan, MA Thesis, 2005).
- ² MDG Progress Report 2004, UNDP and Government of LAO PDR, p. 5.
- ³ NGPES preface
- ⁴ Draft of the 6th NSEDP p. 41
- ⁵ NGPES p. 149
- ⁶ Draft of the 6th NSEDP p. 152
- ⁷ International Civil Society Conference, Cambodia, June 2004. Proceedings, p. 10

Unlocking the Potential: The National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction Experience in Bangladesh

PHILIP GAIN
Executive Director, SEHD

The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) of Bangladesh entitled, “Unlocking the Potential: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction” came into being as the final document in October 2005 amidst low-key critiques and skepticism in different quarters. The finance minister of Bangladesh terms the document to be “genuinely home-grown ... prepared on the basis of broad participatory-consultations, highlighting the principles of country-ownership and, unlike other past development plans, making it a result-oriented one.”

Bangladesh is one of the developing countries that must prepare the PRSP because they access money from the soft-loan window of the World Bank, IMF and other international financial institutions (IFIs). The IFIs make countries like Bangladesh describe their “microeconomic, structural and social policies and programs to promote economic growth and reduce poverty,” as the finance minister of Bangladesh agrees.

Bangladesh, indeed, is a country that accesses mostly the so-called “soft-term” loans from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and IMF. Of its US\$17.2 billion external loans as of June 30, 2004, 80% came from World Bank and ADB alone and all of these loans flowed from IDA and ADF, two soft loan windows of the World Bank and the ADB. What these statistics mean is that although Bangladesh is not a heavily indebted

country yet, its obligations to the donor countries are significant. Bangladesh has to comply with stringent conditions to access loans from IFIs. The critics say that participation of Bangladesh in the preparation of PRSP has taken place under strong influences of the World Bank and IMF and it is not “genuinely home-grown” as the finance minister claims. The recently published World Bank Country Strategy Assistance is aligned with the PRSP.

THE PROCESS OF PRSP MAKING

The full PRSP was preceded by the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (I-PRSP) entitled “*A National Strategy for Economic Growth, Poverty Reduction and Social Development*” that was completed in March 2003. Steps that followed for making the full PRS:

- ❑ A high-powered National Steering Committee headed by the Principal Secretary to the prime minister and drawing on all the major public sector ministries was established to steer the process of preparing a full-blown poverty reduction strategy.
- ❑ A National Poverty Focal Point was established within the General Economics Division (GED) of the Planning Commission to act as the secretariat for the strategy formulation process.
- ❑ Nineteen (19) theme areas were identified for which thematic groups were constituted under the relevant ministries for preparation of thematic reports that would feed the final strategy formulation process.
- ❑ Regional consultations were organized with different sections of society, including elected functionaries and grassroots organizations.

The draft PRSP was completed in December 2004 followed by a concluding round of consultations prior to finalization. It was at this stage that critiques became visible. Donor-influenced NGOs also put forward their critiques and inputs at this stage. It was also at this stage that the members of parliament were consulted through the medium of the parliamentary standing committees and through three special all-party meetings. Consultations were also held with development partners, civil society/academics, NGOs, media representatives, eminent persons, women spokespersons, and different groups of poor (garments workers, housemaids, potters, snake charmers, fishermen, cobblers, sweepers, tea garden workers, industrial workers, and Adivasis/ethnic minorities). The PRS formulators termed face-to-face consultations with the poor as “the first of its kind in Bangladesh for formulating policies for poverty reduction.” However, the question always remains whether the poor participate in

consultations with adequate knowledge of different economic processes affecting their lives or they participate just to validate. According to the PRS formulation team the final document incorporated the relevant suggestions emerging from these consultations.

CCRITIQUE OF THE PRSP PROCESS

The PRSP replaces the traditional planning of Bangladesh that used to take place every five years. Prior to the PRSP, five fifth-year plans had been prepared. Government bureaucrats were the main proponents in the making of the five-year plans. According to a lead consultant of the PRSP formulation, there was no participation of the public in it. According to him, that was an out-dated method of economic planning in the era of the market economy. The PRS formulation is a departure from the traditional planning that had no people’s involvement. The PRS is participatory, and the participation has taken place at different levels within the government and the public interest groups. It also engaged professionals through thematic groups. Conceptual issues have been highlighted in which governance issues get utmost significance. Concrete actions have been outlined for three years (up to 2008) and the vision [up to 2015] for future planning and choices have also been laid down in the document. This is also a key element in the Country Assistance Strategy 2006-2009 for Bangladesh that the World Bank has prepared jointly with three of Bangladesh’s development partners — the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) and Japan.

Particular attention given in the World Bank Country Assistance Strategy for Bangladesh

are improving the investment climate in the power sector, water and sewerage, roads, railways and urban development, and trade liberalization; empowering the poor through governance reforms and investments in health, education, sanitation, local government strengthening and safety net approaches; and core governance. This positioning of World Bank and three other development partners of Bangladesh is also aligned with PRS.

The critiques do not agree with the PRSP formulators that wide ranging and informed consultations took place in the process of its formulation. They argue that PRS is not a home-grown idea; the World Bank and IMF make it obligatory for the countries that access “soft-term” money. “The way the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) has emerged, it should not be called a national strategy. It is the global agencies with World Bank and the IMF in the forefront who want it,” said Prof. Anu Muhammad, an economist, at a workshop on the PRSP in Dhaka on 13 October 2004. Prof. Muhammad also critiqued, “What appears from the PRSP is that it has birth problem. I don’t see any opportunity for poverty reduction in the PRSP. Wrongs done with the investment strategies of these institutions are not questioned in the PRSP but are endorsed in it. It is hypocrisy.”

A lead consultant preparing the final PRSP also admitted in the same meeting that “PRSP is completely donor-driven. But there are some possibilities for a country that depend on the nature of its engagement.” Regarding preparation of the PRSP, there are critics who say better options can be explored other than a donor-driven PRSP for poverty reduction.

Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, a lead consultant for PRSP formulation and an expert in

poverty analysis has a contesting opinion. He says, “Rejecting the wrong way is an ivory tower (a sort of utopia where people sit and forget the reality) for me. The larger message is that one has to engage. We are a poor country; the reality of global power is that these forces are there and they won’t go away if we just close our eyes. The ultimate challenge is that we have to transform this reality. On that I’m sure we all stand united. And there we have to pull our resources.”

BUILDING STRATEGY

What the PRSP formulation team says stands out to be a compromise with those on the top of the Babel tower of global economy. The positioning of the PRSP formulation team and that of the government is expressed in their articulation: “Policy prescriptions burdened with encyclopedic wish-lists are often a problem rather than an aid in the fight against poverty.” To be realistic the key issues in building strategies in the fight for poverty suggested in the PRSP include:

- ❑ **Building on past achievements:** Areas where Bangladesh has made progress are: areas of seasonal hunger, safety nets, primary schooling, girls’ education, immunization, micro-credit, female economic participation, birth control and physical mobility. A priority in the new road-map will be to consolidate these gains and move on to the next challenges in each of these areas. Special attention is to be given to specific sub-categories of the poor who may have been bypassed by generic anti-poverty programs such as minority ethnic groups, people living in remote and ecologically vulnerable areas, people who have lost their traditional occupations and people suffering from disabilities.
- ❑ **Preventing slippages:** It is also crucial that there are no slippages in areas where

significant gains have already been achieved as, for example, in the area of population growth.

- ❑ **Addressing implementation:** A sharper engagement with implementation challenges is a critical necessity for accelerated poverty reduction. Four challenges merit priority attention: freeing the annual development program (ADP) from the consistent burden of under-completed and under-funded projects; addressing the “incentives and motivation” issue pertaining to the civil service; a mind-set change to ensure a focus on the “little decisions” as much as on the “big decisions”; and better information flows.
- ❑ **Bringing employment and the meso-economy to centerstage:** With nearly a million new members joining the labor force every year and with an employment-GDP elasticity of only 0.34, employment demands the highest strategic attention. Addressing the employment challenge has several facets: (a) increase in wage employment, (b) increase in real wages, (c) increase in self employment opportunities, (d) increase in labor productivity, and (e) improved terms of trade for the products of labor particularly in agriculture and the informal sector.
- ❑ **Strengthening the focus on women’s advancement:** Women in Bangladesh have won important first round victories of visibility and mobility. Female gains in primary and secondary education, access to birth control measures and micro-credit compare favorably with the situation in other developing countries. The second round challenges include addressing patriarchal attitudes, insecurities of public spaces, social attitudes which put low priority on maternal health and poor female labor productivity, among others.
- ❑ **Up-scaling micro-credit**
- ❑ **Strengthening connectivity:** Overcoming power and port bottlenecks, completion of key infrastructure, effective systems of

maintenance, strengthening telecommunications and its reach, etc.

- ❑ **Bringing the policy process into focus**
- ❑ **Making governance work for the poor and women**
- ❑ **Benchmarking for monitoring progress:** An energized strategy for accelerated poverty reduction cannot but be results-oriented. A crucial need here will be to establish credible and conceptually-sound benchmarks against which progress can be regularly monitored. Benchmarks must focus not only on outcome goals but as importantly on process goals.
- ❑ **Others**
 - Quality education
 - Rational land use and land administration reform
 - Urban poverty
 - Technology
 - Risk, vulnerability and social protection

An Eight-Point Strategic Agenda:

- ❑ Employment
- ❑ Nutrition
- ❑ Quality Education (particularly in primary, secondary and vocational levels with strong emphasis on girls’ education)
- ❑ Local governance
- ❑ Maternal Health
- ❑ Sanitation and Safe Water
- ❑ Criminal Justice
- ❑ Monitoring

According to the final PRSP, Bangladesh faces a triple challenge in building a road map for accelerated poverty reduction: (a) building on past achievements while preventing slippages, (b) addressing the multi-dimensionality of poverty through a strategic choice of priorities, and (c) unlocking the agency potential of the nation through an optimal mix of public action, private initiatives and community mobilization.

PRSP has identified eight specific avenues – four strategic blocks and four supporting strategies – through which the goal of accelerated poverty reduction will be pursued:

1. **Supportive macroeconomics** to ensure rapid growth with particular focus on stable macroeconomic balances, improve regulatory environment, higher private investment and increased inflow of FDIs, effective trade and competition policies, and poor and gender sensitive budgetary process;
2. **Choice of critical sectors** to maximize pro-poor benefits from the growth process with special emphasis on the rural, agricultural, informal and SME (small and medium enterprise) sectors, improved connectivity through rural electrification, roads, and telecommunications;
3. **Safety net** measures to protect the poor, especially women, against anticipated and unanticipated income/consumption shocks through targeted and other efforts;
4. **Human development** of the poor for raising their capability through education, health, sanitation and safe water, nutrition and social interventions;
5. **Participation and empowerment** of the poor, specially women, and other disadvantaged and marginalized groups such as the disabled, ethnic minorities and the ecologically vulnerable;
6. **Promoting good governance** through improving implementation capacity, promoting local governance, tackling corruption, enhancing access to justice for the poor and improving sectoral governance;
7. **Improving service-delivery** in the areas of basic needs; and

8. **Caring for the environment** and its sustainability.

NEED FOR EFFECTIVE MONITORING

Now that the PRSP has been finalized, the key concern and challenge ahead is its implementation. The PRSP furnishes the government commitments and those of the donors. The key questions are whether Bangladesh has the mechanisms in place and if public policies are there to translate the commitments into reality, and if the supranationals (World Bank, ADB, IMF and others) are true to their commitments in translating the PRSP commitments into reality.

What is needed most, as also agreed by the donors and the PRSP formulators, is effective monitoring of its implementation. For monitoring, the civil society groups and the media can pay particular attention to the following areas:

- ❑ Privatization, inflow of foreign direct investments (FDIs) and suppliers' credit
- ❑ Biotechnology
- ❑ Diversification in crop production and non-farm sector growth
- ❑ Diversification of the export sector
- ❑ Environment quality
- ❑ Access to justice
- ❑ Access to resources
- ❑ Access to information and customized knowledge
- ❑ Participation and empowerment of the disadvantaged and marginalized groups such as the disabled, ethnic minorities and environmental refugees.
- ❑ Governance (at local, regional and national levels)
- ❑ Budget analysis and tracking (tracking of public spending in education health, sanitation and safe water, nutrition and social

interventions with the aim of human development of the poor)

- Peoples' participation and peoples' organizations. ■

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