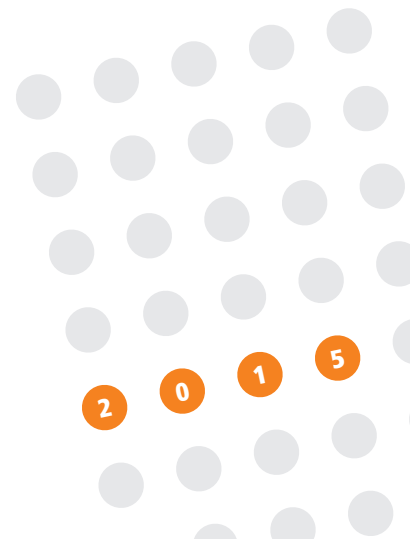




## Fighting Poverty without Empowering the Poor?

Societal participation in implementing  
Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS) falls  
behind needs and possibilities



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**Table of Contents**

1. Summary .....	3
2. The Poverty Reduction Strategies – a provisional appraisal after five years. ....	3
3. The actors: Who is involved? .....	4
4. The processes: When are people involved? .....	5
5. The framework conditions: What facilitates or inhibits participation? .....	5
6. Appraisal: How effective has participation been so far? .....	7
7. Demands for changes in donor policy .....	8
The VENRO Project “Perspektive 2015” .....	10
Joint Conference Church and Development (GKKE) .....	11



## 1. Summary

Societal participation is conceived as a core principle in developing and implementing the *Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS)* – a consequence of failed development policy approaches in past decades which simply bypassed the target groups. As yet, however, the new principle has only insufficiently been translated into reality, according to the interim result of a study covering several years that was commissioned by VENRO, the network of German NGOs in the field of development cooperation. For most of the countries examined, the poverty reduction strategies are dominated by an alliance of technocrats of the respective governments and influential international institutions, in particular, the IMF, the World Bank and a handful of bilateral donors. Significant improvements in the effects of the PRS approach can only be reckoned with if more scope is given for societal involvement and, above all, if an empowerment of the poor sections of the population themselves is attained. The international donors would have a wide range of possibilities to promote this.

## 2. The *Poverty Reduction Strategies* – a provisional appraisal after five years

At the annual congress of the IMF and the World Bank in the autumn of 1999, the development of *Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP)* was adopted as a precondition for debt cancellation or new development aid. In the course of 2000, just under 20 countries presented such strategies (partly still as interim versions). More than 30 further countries followed suit somewhat later.<sup>1</sup> So the implementation of these strategies has been in progress for five years. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have agreed to submit a *PRS Review* at the annual congress in September 2005. Here, five aspects will be given special attention, one of them being societal participation in the implementation and the accompanying monitoring of the strategies.<sup>2</sup> This paper was passed on to the World Bank at the end of May 2005 as a contribution to this international discussion.

Attaching considerable significance to societal participation is a lesson learnt in the earlier development decades (1960s–1990s) and in particular from IMF/World Bank Structural Adjustment Programs that

largely failed. Civil society's insufficient involvement in the development and implementation of poverty reduction or development strategies had been recognised as a structural flaw of these programmes and was to be changed in the PRS approach.

Already in the early stages of PRS implementation, VENRO and the GKKE commenced a critical analysis and comment of real societal participation. A survey looking at the minimum requirements of participatory PRS processes was commissioned by *Justitia et Pax* and the GKKE and submitted in 2002.<sup>3</sup> In 2002, VENRO commissioned the "Institut für Entwicklung und Frieden" (INEF) at the University of Duisburg-Essen to compile country profiles in which societal involvement in PRS processes is analysed. These country profiles are now available for all developing countries participating in the PRS process. They are regularly updated and are published in a website specially set up for this purpose ([www.prsp-watch.de](http://www.prsp-watch.de)). The statement submitted here is based on the results of this backup study.

Out of the total 57 PRS countries, 45 countries have submitted a full version, for which a participation of societal actors is a binding requirement (to be accepted by the IMF and the World Bank). Naturally, the type and intensity of participation is not uniform in these countries but varies considerably, also depending on the general degree to which democracy has been established in them, previous experience with participatory approaches, the openness of the government in office towards societal participation as well as the strength of the respective civil society organisations.

By way of an *initial general overview*, the 45 countries with PRS full versions can be divided into three categories:

1. The first group has integrated relatively comprehensive participatory elements into the implementation and monitoring of implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategies and at least partly institutionalised these elements, i.e. via firmly established structures of dialogue and via a legal basis. Here, too, the population living outside the capital and other urban centres has been involved in one way or the other. A further characteristic of these countries is that (at least in individual cases) in addition to civil society actors elected institutions, i.e. the national parliament or district assemblies/councils are involved in the PRS process. This first group is small, comprising countries such as Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda or Honduras.
2. The second group of countries has involved civil society actors (and occasionally also individual parliamentarians, but not parliament as an institution) in

1 All in all, 57 countries have so far submitted a Poverty Reduction Strategy, 45 of them as a full version and the others as draft versions. Thirty of the 57 countries are in Africa, while ten are in Asia, five in Latin America and two are in the Middle East. Ten PRS countries are Countries in Transition.

2 The other themes are: (i) strengthening the medium-term orientation of the PRS; (ii) utilising the PRS as a mutual accountability framework between countries and donors; (iii) enhancing linkages between the PRS, the MTEF and budgets; and (iv) tailoring the approach to conflict-affected and fragile states.

3 Walter Eberlei: Participation in the Fight against Poverty. Elementary Standards for civil society participation in PRS processes. (= Schriftenreihe Gerechtigkeit und Frieden der Deutschen Kommission Justitia et Pax, 96). Bonn 2002

the development of the strategies and in implementing and monitoring them but only realised ad-hoc participatory approaches that have not been established in terms of structures. While there is societal participation in implementation, it is not institutionalised or secured. The majority of the PRS countries belong to this group.

3. In accordance with the conditions imposed by the IMF and the World Bank, a third group has integrated civil society actors into the development of strategies (mainly on a weak basis), but, following the adoption of the strategies, has made no further efforts to involve societal actors in the implementation or monitoring of the strategies as well. This category includes countries such as Benin, Chad, Nepal or Sri Lanka.

All in all, this overview already reflects how differently the processes have progressed and need to be appraised. Nevertheless, in the following, an attempt will be made to give a comprehensive answer to the question of who is involved in the processes and in what phases this involvement takes place, what facilitates or inhibits participation and how the overall effect of participation should be assessed.

Finally, recommendations addressing the donor community regarding a systematic qualification of societal involvement in the PRS context will be deduced from these general statements on strengths and weaknesses of the processes so far.

### 3. The actors: Who is involved?

The PRS processes are characterised by three groups of actors: the various institutions of the respective government, civil society actors and the influential international donors.

Within the *governments*, it is the finance ministers who are responsible for steering the PRS processes as a rule. Even the line ministries (e.g. agriculture or education) only play subordinate roles. Decentralised government levels are hardly integrated into the development of the strategies but, depending on a country's degree of decentralisation, partly into implementation. In some countries (e.g. Tanzania or Ghana), steering of the PRS processes is solely in the hands of the presidents' offices; in these countries, the political leaders – in this case the presidents – obviously identify more with the approach than in other countries.

Most *international donors* explicitly support the PRS processes. This applies first and foremost to the World Bank and the IMF as well as to most of the major bilateral European donors. However, the US and Japan display a much more reserved attitude towards the approach and mainly continue to pursue their bilateral strategies. As a rule, the UN organisations are integrated into the processes. Theoretically, “supporting” the PRS proc-

esses should not clash with the PRS principle of *country ownership*, i.e. with the professed chief responsibility for contents and processes within the country. In practice, things are different. The IMF and the World Bank in particular, but also some particularly active bilateral donors such as the UK's DFID, severely influence the processes. The progressing harmonisation of the donors is increasing their influence even more. There are several examples that indicate that this is clearly at the expense of domestic actors.

It is impossible to give a uniform description of the *civil societies* in the PRS countries. Depending on a country's history and political tradition and depending on the degree of political liberalisation and democratisation, very different forms of civil society organisation have evolved in the various countries. While civil society movements have already been developing in Latin American countries such as Bolivia or Nicaragua for decades, countries like Ethiopia, Niger or Vietnam hardly have such a political culture at all. What is conspicuous is the particularly active role that non-governmental organisations with strong international links (some of which are “subsidiaries” of international NGOs such as OXFAM) play in several PRS processes. As a rule, they run their own offices in the capital, have well-trained full-time staff and at least some financial resources to participate in the PRS processes. In a number of countries, churches and trade unions also play a role (for example, the Catholic Church has assumed a central role in the Bolivian PRS process). Nearly everywhere, those organisations acting on behalf of the rural population are clearly underrepresented. Furthermore, it is easy to recognise that women are not sufficiently involved. Depending on a country's cultural and religious characteristics, their representation in PRS processes is marginal in some countries (e.g. in countries dominated by Islam, such as Mauritania), and in all of the other countries, it is below their share of the population. In a number of countries, civil society actors have joined up in networks in order to be in a better position to represent their positions in the PRS processes (e.g. in Zambia, Uganda, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Honduras). This is certainly one of the new political developments that have been encouraged by the PRS processes.

Elected institutions such as the national parliaments or regionally or locally elected institutions are *not involved* at all or if so, only marginally. Moreover, in many countries, the wide range of civil society groups that are only established locally or regionally as well as traditional authorities are not integrated into the processes (or, at most, are invited ad-hoc to a workshop at district level without really knowing precisely what the issue is). Of course “the poor” do not constitute a homogeneous group of actors; this is already reflected at first glance by the diversity of clashes in interests between poor women and poor men. Nevertheless, attempts have succeeded to establish the voices of the poor relatively systematically in some countries and integrate their per-

spectives into the PRS planning processes. Here, the work of the *Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Project (UPPAP)* can serve as an example. However, in most of the PRS countries, the poor do not even have a voice in the processes, let alone representatives who would be able to assert themselves in the respective political arena.

#### 4. The processes: When are people involved?

The PRS processes are conceived as a political cycle. In theory, this means that, after an analysis of the poverty situation and its causes, a strategy is developed and formulated (in the PRSP). The implementation of this strategy is followed and analysed via monitoring processes (evaluated annually in the PRS Progress Reports). After three years, a review is to be made that analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy so far, and, based on the results obtained, a revised strategy is formulated (PRSP II) – and the cycle begins anew. Some countries, including Burkina Faso, Ghana, Tanzania or Uganda, have gone right through and completed this cycle for the first time (in the last two countries, draft versions of the second PRS generation are already on hand).

The degree to which civil society has been involved in the phases referred to above has varied. Under the pressure of the donor conditionalities, civil society actors were represented more or less everywhere in the *development phase*. A decrease in participation once the PRSP has been developed is clearly recognisable. The *implementation* of the strategy was left almost exclusively to the government bodies (partly also because these bodies did not wish to expose themselves to civil society involvement and partly because, owing to the way it viewed its role, civil society kept at a distance). In *monitoring*, which is still in the process of being set up in a more or less intensive manner in most of the PRS countries, usually some intentions to involve societal players are articulated on paper. However, participation in the institutions dealing with monitoring is only rarely clearly defined (one positive exception is, e.g., Tanzania). In a handful of countries, the implementation of the strategy through the annual budget is analysed and commented by societal actors. In Malawi, close cooperation between Parliament and civil society has been an outcome of this. In some countries, civil society actors have developed and applied independent monitoring methods (e.g. Zambia, Malawi, Mali, Uganda). At least Uganda and Zambia have ensured clear involvement of civil society in *revising* the strategies. However, it is doubtful whether this has also happened in other countries (see e.g. Ghana, where, for various reasons, there has only been very weak participation of civil society in revising the strategy).

#### 5. The framework conditions: What facilitates or inhibits participation?

The study referred to above that was commissioned by Justitia et Pax and GKKE (see footnote 4) already worked out systematic aspects of effective participation according to which it is above all four aspects that are crucial to a more facilitating or more inhibiting environment for participation:

1. the structures formed for ongoing dialogue;
2. the legal conditions ensuring societal participation;
3. the legitimacy of the organisations/institutions involved;
4. the ability of the actors to act.

The VENRO backup study applies these categories systematically. Summing up, the following interim result can be formulated on this basis:

- In those countries in which participation did not decline too much after the strategy had been developed, government and civil society established more secure *dialogue structures* as a rule. Sometimes these would be sectoral working groups that regularly also supported the implementation of the strategy (Uganda gives a good example). Partly, there are regular forums taking place on a regular basis (e.g. in Mozambique or Tanzania) that perform this role. However, structures of this kind have not emerged in most of the countries. The participation of civil society continued to be correspondingly vague following the submission of the PRSP; what usually remained were only occasional workshops called ad-hoc the composition of which tended to be random or steered by the government. In some of the countries, the donors also contributed to this development by, e.g. in Ghana in the context of growing budgetary support, creating their own dialogue structures with the government in which significant strategic decisions are taken and to which representatives of civil society have no access.

**Participatory structures – the example of the PAF in Uganda:** With its transparency, its co-operative decision-making processes and its sophisticated monitoring system, the Ugandan *Poverty Action Fund (PAF)* is probably the most advanced model of institutionalised participation in the context of poverty alleviation in Sub-Saharan Africa. Around 35 percent of the national government budget is now accounted for by the PAF. While in principle, decisions on how this money is used as well as corresponding reporting are dealt with in the course of the regular budget compilation process and are subject to a final decision by parliament, extensive debates take place in public

sessions called on a quarterly basis. These debates address priorities set in the PAF, important individual measures, controversial issues as well as government reporting on implementation. A number of NGOs and NGO networks regularly and actively participate in these meetings, which are also open to representatives of the donor side and journalists.

- Independently of the PRS processes, it can be noted for most of the countries involved that they formally, i.e. as an element of the constitution, enable the population to participate in political life and also consider this desirable (today, freedom of speech and press, right of assembly, right of association, etc., are enshrined among other aspects in the constitutions in most of the developing countries). In contrast, reality leaves much to desire. In many cases, the enforceable *legal framework* for the participation of civil society organisations is only weakly developed. Participation in the PRS process, which after all is the central strategic process for most countries, is only governed by law in a handful of exceptional cases. But even then, the question remains whether this right really is put into practice (see the law on public participation in Bolivia). Thus participation in PRS processes is at the mercy of the goodwill of the governments or, in many cases, depends on the pressure the donors exert – if this is relaxed, the true prospects for participation decline. The guidelines for the revision of the PRSP in Uganda and Tanzania can be regarded as a positive example of what are at least politically enforceable rules of the PRS process, and Bolivia's Law on National Dialogue of 2001 is noteworthy as well.

**Legal basis of participatory processes – the examples of Bolivia and Tanzania:** The options to improve the legal framework conditions for civil society actors beyond constitutionally guaranteed principles can be demonstrated with the examples of two countries. In Bolivia, Parliament passed the *Law on National Dialogue* in 2001. With this law, a PRSP checking process is formalised one of the aims of which is to achieve better societal control of the distribution of resources (from debt cancellation and, generally, from the development fund). The procedural basis for this has been provided by new mechanisms of “social control” (*Mecanismo Nacional de Control Social*) and enhanced competencies at community level. However, the implementation of this law has been severely complicated and all but prevented by Bolivia's stormy political developments over the last five years. Nevertheless, the framework it provides is remarkable. In Tanzania, too, it ought to be welcomed that

the government is willing to provide appropriate structures for societal participation that may not represent legal rights but do constitute political rights that people can claim. Such precursors of a legal safeguarding of participation are contained in the PRS monitoring system (here, there is an exemplary *Poverty Monitoring Master Plan*), in the guidelines for the review process (which describe the preconditions for participation and the course of the processes) and also in individual implementation strategies defining participatory elements (e.g. in the strategy for Rural Development).

- In principle, the *legitimacy* of civil society participation has been recognised by all countries involved in the PRS process. Not only is the right of people and groups in society to participate in decision-making processes enshrined in international human rights<sup>4</sup>, but it is also an element of many constitutions of developing countries. Moreover, societal participation has been part of a development consensus between government, non-governmental, national and international actors even before the introduction of the PRS approach. Nevertheless, the question of the legitimacy of civil society actors cropped up in the PRS processes of the past years on a number of occasions, usually after conflicts had arisen between the government and civil society actors. In such cases, the question was not whether there should be participation but to what extent. Does participation merely mean consultation, i.e. a hearing of societal forces, or are civil society actors also legitimised to claim the right to joint decision-making when it comes to sensitive political issues? The latter corresponds to the expectations of many civil society actors and is also reflected in how participation is defined internationally.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it meets with resistance on the part of governments in many developing countries. “Who are the civil society actors really representing?” is then a question that is frequently raised. It is indeed worth noting that many civil society actors in the PRS processes are very clearly based in the capitals of the countries, but not in the rural regions, where the majority of the poor live. As a rule, the staff of these organisations belong to the country's educational elite or to the middle or upper classes of society. In connection with dependence on international sources of finance, this raises questions regarding

4 The key documents are the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (Civil Pact, 1966), the *UN Convention on Women's Rights* (1979) and the *UN Convention on Children's Rights* (1989).

5 The World Bank notes: “Participation is the process by which stakeholders influence and share control over priority setting, policymaking, resource allocations, and/or program implementation” (World Bank, PRSP Sourcebook, Washington D.C. 2004, p.237).

their legitimacy. However, one can observe that the legitimacy of civil society actors in the PRS process is also enhanced by certain factors. The stronger these factors are, the greater the generally recognised political scope will be on the part of civil society actors. These factors are, above all, subject competence, gained through years of active development work (this applies to many NGOs operating in socio-political fields such as health and education); proof of a broad membership basis (e.g. churches); and finally, but of considerable importance, networking of civil society organisations. In the PRS countries in which broad civil society alliances with an extensive combination of competencies have successfully been established (e.g. in Zambia, Mozambique, Uganda or Honduras), the question of the legitimacy of civil society interventions is answered very differently in comparison to what it would be like in countries in which various groups obviously tend to represent particularistic interests.

**Legitimacy via the formation of networks – the example of Zambia:** The network *Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (CSPR)*, which was founded in 2001, now comprises more than 80 civil society actors, including several non-governmental organisations, institutions of the influential Catholic Church, a network of women's organisations (NGOCC) and parts of the trade union movement. CSPR runs a small office with a handful of full-time staff in Lusaka. CSPR already worked out extensive proposals in the process of developing the PRSP, and here it was partly supported by scientists at the University of Lusaka. Since then, CSPR has been regularly involved in the political debate on poverty alleviation and provided sound specialist input. Statements on the budget deliberations, on medium-term budgetary planning, on the government's annual PRS Implementation Report, etc., met with a major response among the media. CSPR is also following the work of the donors, in particular the IMF and the World Bank, in a critical and engaged manner. Several of the major member organisations, such as the Catholic Church, can draw on experience from activities in local areas as well. In contrast, CSPR focuses on Lusaka, although regional CSPR groups have been set up in some provincial capitals, albeit it with little influence so far.

- The *ability to act* of the civil society actors is the fourth framework conditions for effective participation. The scope for many civil society actors in the South to effectively intervene in political processes is very limited. Only the larger organisations dispose of full-time staff resources. But these staff members only seldom have time exclusively for content-related lobbying activities. Moreover, as a

rule, they are usually occupied by extensive administrative activities (e.g. managing projects). Smaller organisations (especially from rural local areas) often only work with staff operating in an honorary capacity – who are in a very difficult starting position when discussing issues with the full-time and specially trained staff from the government and the donor community. In addition to the scarce staff and material resources, limited access to information is one of the chief obstacles to involvement in many PRS processes. Civil society organisations are only informed by governments on a selective basis, and frequently, they receive information too late. Often, extensive briefing material for sessions only reaches the actors a day before the actual meeting, thus ruling out any substantial treatment of the matters at issue. Access to independent information is almost completely absent, since, e.g., independent scientists in the countries only very seldom dispose of capacities for research on current developments. Here too, the rural actors are particularly affected. Many members of smaller civil society organisations in rural areas, e.g. self-help groups of farm labourers or local women's groups, have no access to PRS documents. And if they do, these documents are, as a rule, written in English (even in those countries in which the official language is not English, such as Mozambique). Only a minority of staff working for civil society organisations can really access these documents. One positive aspect worth noting is that important documents have been translated into national languages in some countries, such as in Ghana. By and large, the weak capacities to act referred to here can also be observed in the area of elected societal institutions such as national parliaments and local or regional legislative bodies, which is why *capacity building* is needed here, too.

## 6. Appraisal: How effective has participation been so far?

It is difficult to measure the effects of participatory processes. Nevertheless, representatives of civil society organisations again and again stress that the poor framework conditions for participatory PRS processes described above complicate or even prevent effective participation. More and more frequently, PRS processes are being criticised as an “alibi”; effective participation seems to be the exception, not the rule. In most countries, the participatory elements bear the intensity of consultations, but by no means of co-designing, let alone joint decision-making. So far, the PRS contexts have fallen far short of the goal proclaimed by the World Bank and several other donors to enable people to take part in all decisions concerning their lives via participatory processes (cf. definitions in footnote 6). The desired effects of participation – more efficiency, greater

legitimation, improved control of those in government and, last but not least, overcoming political powerlessness – have therefore not been observed so far. Of course exceptions confirm the rule. For instance, there are reports of civil society actors' participation having improved the efficiency of government policy in some countries, e.g. via reducing the corruptive use of public funds. But in no way does this change the overall picture. Empowering the poor themselves has not made any significant progress over the last five years. The opportunities of the new theoretical approach – no longer treating poor people as “target groups”, as objects, but as actors beginning to shape their own living conditions – have not been made use of sufficiently, if at all.

## 7. Demands for changes in donor policy

Improvements in societal participation in PRS processes can be influenced by all groups of actors – governments of developing countries, donors and civil society actors themselves. The following proposals focus on the donor community and are oriented on the four framework conditions mentioned above:

### 1. Promoting participatory structures instead of torpedoing them

- In many cases, donors supported the involvement of civil society in developing the PRSP. Usually, however, this support stopped once the strategies had been submitted. Here, lasting forms of support should be established (positive example: GTZ support in Zambia).
- It is counterproductive if donors set up their own dialogue structures with the government in which civil society is not integrated. Examples: budgetary aid working groups, e.g. in Ghana or Mozambique; IMF and World Bank negotiations on terms for new loans touching on far-reaching political contents; *Consultative Group Meetings* in which civil society actors often represent little more than folklore window-dressing at opening events but are not admitted to the negotiations proper.
- Existing structures for societal participation are also severely weakened by the continuing disregard of parliamentary rights (e.g. in budgetary policy). Several proposals have been put forward for this area. They aim at strengthening legal and political framework conditions in the countries, promoting the functional capacities of parliaments, enhancing interaction with other actors and improving international donor policy framework conditions for the legislatures.<sup>6</sup>

6 Cf. for details: Walter Eberlei/Heike Henn: Parliaments in Sub-Saharan Africa: actors in poverty reduction? Study commissioned by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ). Eschborn 2003

- A significant structural establishment of participation could be achieved in the context of the PRS Progress Reports required to be submitted annually which represent a crucial element of PRS monitoring. But here, the donors above all concentrate on policy contents, and not on whether societal actors can present their views of things (see the *Joint Staff Assessments* of the IMF and the World Bank). Not only is this a missed opportunity, but it also actively weakens the role of societal actors.

### 2. Giving more attention to establishing legal frameworks

- Effective participation requires more than just constitutionally guaranteed basic rights. But where these rights do not exist or are not realised, the donors have to attach particular significance to this aspect, e.g. in restrictions of freedom of the press. In some countries, such as Ethiopia, donors are currently turning a blind eye on issues such as the restriction of freedom of the press or freedom of speech.
- The development of constitutional principles via corresponding laws ought to be promoted (e.g. the Freedom of Access to Information Laws that are currently in preparation in some countries). In the area of progressive decentralisation, too, donors ought to support approaches to establish the participation of civil society actors in the respective laws.
- In addition, an enforceable legal framework is important for the concrete participatory processes in the PRS context. It is essential to support initial approaches such as the guidelines for the revision processes of the PRSP in Tanzania or Uganda.

### 3. Strengthening the legitimacy of participatory processes

- Here, attention should once again first of all be given to the PRS core principle of *country ownership*. In contrast with many statements on the part of the donors, they continue to interfere with the development of policy contents – like in the days of Structural Adjustment. The much professed transition from *Policy Conditionality* to *Process Conditionality* has not taken place so far. Instead, the old set of conditions regarding contents has merely been supplemented with new, additional process conditionalities. For example, when budgetary aid working groups in Ghana take fundamental decisions on policy contents without involving civil society and/or parliament, this clearly contravenes the principle of *country ownership*.
- It is essential to involve democratically elected institutions (even if this may sometimes result in delays or occasionally result in populist and therefore dubious decisions). There cannot really be any mention of legitimate PRS processes without the consistent integration of parliament. Special attention could be given to enabling co-operation between parliaments

and civil society regarding individual subjects – this would benefit all sides.

- In some countries, the legitimacy of civil society has been significantly enhanced by the formation of large networks (e.g. Ethiopia, Uganda, Zambia). The donors – including, in this context, the major international non-governmental organisations – are called on to support the development and consolidation of networks via a corresponding promotion policy.
- PRS processes can only be regarded as legitimate if weak sections of the population in particular are given a say in them. Many donors also (and increasingly) concentrate on the capitals of countries while the civil society actors in rural areas are given hardly any attention. Also, blind spots can still be discovered regarding the development of gender equality. Donors should not be content with PRS documents that, for instance, fail to make any gender-specific statements.

#### **4. Strengthening the ability of civil society actors to act**

- This framework condition has been discussed for several years under the catchword of *Capacity Building*, and it has also been reflected in several donor programmes. Nevertheless, all donors are called upon to state how strongly they intend to promote the capacities of civil society in the long run. This issue has to be intensively discussed, especially in the context of the new programme orientation of development co-operation. It would be an illusion to believe

that actors in civil society such as those in Africa will be in a position in the medium term to cope with complex political processes such as the compilation of a macro-economic framework for poverty reduction without additional staff resources.

- Access to information is a clearly recognisable deficit. Both governments and donors are selective in handling flows of information – to the detriment of civil society. For example, negotiations between the IMF and governments on new agreements are held behind closed doors. And bilateral government negotiations are often carried out without civil society or parliamentary involvement. Documents are almost universally written in English or French, but not in the national languages.
- Participation requires time. Donors have to come to terms with the integration of societal actors slowing processes down. This applies all the more if representatives of poor sections of the population, e.g. from the remote rural regions, really are to be involved in the decision-making processes. This also applies to the individual steps of every PRS process in the countries. And it applies equally to the participatory PRS approach as a whole. After decades of policies being designed and carried out top-down in developing countries (whether it be by authoritarian governments or by the IMF/World Bank in Washington or by the two together), believing that participatory processes can be perfected within a couple of years would be a complete illusion.

## The VENRO Project "Perspektive 2015"

In order to contribute to the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), internationally agreed at the UN Millennium Summit in the autumn of 2000 and supported in Germany by the Federal Government's "Aktionsprogramm 2015" (Program of Action 2015), VENRO launched the project "Perspektive 2015 – Armutsbekämpfung braucht Beteiligung" (Prospects for 2015 – Combating poverty requires participation). This project is chiefly aimed at improving the level of information among the German public regarding the goals of halving poverty and socially and environmentally sustainable development related to 2015. Here, particular emphasis is placed on reporting on current developments at international level (above all the UN, the World Bank and the EU) as well as on initiatives run by the NGOs. Also, the project has set itself the target of urging the objectives that are described in the Federal Government's Action Program – usually only in a general and vague form – to be put into practice and of contributing to conceptual advancement.

The project consists of four components:

1) The *Project Website* "[www.2015.venro.org](http://www.2015.venro.org)", which is constantly provided with new texts and up-to-date information in addition to containing the basic aspects of the MDGs.

2) The *Website* "[www.prsp-watch.de](http://www.prsp-watch.de)" compiled in cooperation with the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF), which provides basic information on the compilation and implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers/PRSP launched in the context of the 1999 Cologne G7/G8 Summit's debt cancellation initiative. At present, 53 country profiles (from "Äthiopien" to "Zentralafrikanische Republik"; English summaries under preparation) are available that contain the contents of the (preliminary or final) PRSP and civil society's involvement in the PRS process.

3) The *Newsletter* "2015 aktuell", which appears once a month and provides news on the international debate and NGO activities concerning the MDGs on three to four pages an issue. The newsletter (only in German) can be subscribed to online via the two project websites.

4) The *publication series* "2015 im Gespräch/2015 in Dialogue", which offers a collection of policy and lobbying papers on the various fields of combating poverty. The titles of the publications issued so far are:

- No. 1: "Armut bekämpfen – Gerechtigkeit schaffen. Folgerungen aus der internationalen und nationalen Debatte über Armutsbekämpfung für die deutsche Entwicklungspolitik"
- No. 2: "Development Needs Financing – How Financing for Development Can Contribute to Reaching the 2015 Goals"
- No. 3: "Globale Armut – Europas Verantwortung. Ein Vorschlag zur Reform der EU-Entwicklungszusammenarbeit" (German version of the BOND paper "Tackling Poverty – a proposal for European Union aid reform")
- No. 4: "PRSP – Prospects and limits of civil society involvement"
- No. 5: "Trade – A driving force in combating poverty? Development perspectives regarding the WTO Doha Round"
- No. 6: "Poverty reduction and crisis prevention. How can poverty reduction be shaped conflict-sensitively?"
- No. 7: "How can the poor gain their rights? Poverty Reduction and Human Rights"

These papers can be found on the Website "[www.2015.venro.org](http://www.2015.venro.org)".

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## **Joint Conference Church and Development (GKKE)**

The Joint Conference Church and Development (Gemeinsame Konferenz Kirche und Entwicklung – GKKE) in Germany is a common institution of the Church Development Service of the Protestant Churches in Germany (Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst – EED) and the German Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Church (Deutsche Kommission Justitia et Pax). GKKE is committed to draw up joint statements on the questions of North-South policies and to enter into dialogue with political and social institutions.

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