



Religions and Development Research Programme

Strengthening the voice of the poor: faith-based organizations' engagement in policy consultation processes in Nigeria and Tanzania

Michael Taylor

One of the conditions for debt relief under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries initiative is that a national Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper is prepared. This is expected to be 'locally owned', implying that its preparation is country-driven and participatory. PRSP processes are now well established in many countries. They provide opportunities for wider participation than traditional approaches to policy making and have to some extent been adapted to local circumstances and integrated with national planning and resource allocation processes.

However, there is much scepticism about them. It is said that:

- there is little scope for the content of PRSPs to depart from the economic and social policies favoured by creditor agencies, with the result that the policies they contain deal with the symptoms rather than causes of poverty
- governments treat them as hoops through which countries must jump in order to qualify for debt relief, with the result that they may have little influence, except on the social policies for which the funds released by debt relief are earmarked
- governments pay lip service to the requirement for wide stakeholder participation, but do not take it seriously and many of the priorities and approaches expressed by participants are not incorporated in the strategies
- participation has been confined to private and civil society stakeholders, bypassing the representative political system, with the result that priorities are often decided and resources allocated by the executive rather than legislative arm of government

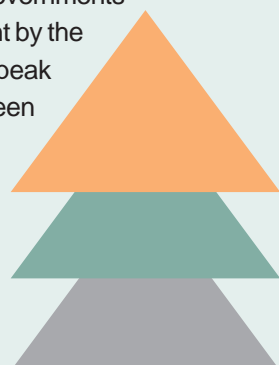
- participatory processes do not recognize differences in the capacity and power of different stakeholders; they favour organized civil society actors and do not recognize that these often represent the voices of the urban elite

Nevertheless, in some countries, the ongoing process of PRSP monitoring and review, has widened the political space for deliberation and the scope for poor people (or civil society organizations that purport to represent their views) to influence policy and resource allocation.

Despite their organizational strength, legitimacy and grassroots membership, religious organizations in Tanzania and Nigeria have been little involved in policy consultation processes, such as those that occur during the preparation and review of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). Semi-structured interviews with key informants from religious and other civil society organizations and relevant government departments identified the main reasons for their lack of involvement.

These include:

- the lack of good opportunities for general civil society participation in such processes, especially in the early stages and especially in Nigeria
- the often uneasy relationships between governments and religious organizations – engagement by the latter in politics is suspect, they do not speak with a united voice, the competition between them is divisive and a source of conflict, and their attitudes to government are perceived as being critical rather than constructive.



- religious organizations lack relevant resources (skills, money, time, equipment) and have limited capacity to collect the experiences and opinions of poor communities and represent them to government in a way that commands respect.

Pilot projects carried out by the RaD programme with networks of religious organizations in Nigeria and Tanzania set out to test whether these obstacles could be overcome, by supporting collaboration between Muslim and Christian organizations. The projects aimed to develop and test 'models' for cooperation between religious organizations to systematically assemble data and analyse it. They provided operational funds, training for staff members and mentoring. The pilots demonstrated that

- Faith-based organizations can cooperate across religious and denominational divides to assemble data at the grassroots on issues central to PRSPs (and their successors), analyse findings and present them to government at appropriate entry points. However, the submission appears to have been more influential in Tanzania than Nigeria, where there have been political upheavals and a stalled policy process. In addition, relations between religious organizations and the state are more sensitive and government interest in participatory processes is more limited in Nigeria.
- In both countries, the local management arrangements worked reasonably well, data on selected issues were assembled and analysed, and reports were prepared and submitted to government. However, existing capacity was limited and the pilots alone were insufficient to overcome all the constraints:
 - Some local providers of training and support had weaknesses
 - The submissions appear to reflect the perspectives of 'the poor' in the selected locations (in addition to those of local leaders). However, care needs to be taken in future to

clarify informants' understanding of categories such as 'ordinary people', 'the poor' or 'the marginalized' and to distinguish between informants with different social characteristics when presenting their views in the analysis.

- Insufficient time has elapsed to fully assess the extent to which submissions have been followed up by the participating organizations and have influenced policy.

The pilot projects indicate that:

- There is potential for religious organizations to work together using approaches similar to those tested to contribute positively to policy consultation processes.
- Religious organizations are able to assemble and represent the views of poor and marginalized people. However, their willingness and ability to do so depend on power relationships within religious organizations and between faith communities and the state, which must be subject to critical examination.
- Similar approaches to those tested could, with appropriate support, be rolled out more widely and also sustained, if the necessary financial resources can be obtained.
- Approaches similar to those piloted could increase the capacity of religious organizations to represent the experience and priorities of poor and remote communities to government and contribute to policy-making processes. However, it may be more appropriate in some circumstances for them to work with other civil society organizations, rather than being singled out for support.

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