Poverty knowledge and policy processes in Uganda: case studies from Bushenyi, Lira and Tororo districts

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Contents

Abbreviations

CAO	Chief Administrative Officer
CBO	Community based organisation
CSO	Civil society organisation
DDP	District Development Plan
HIPC	Highly Indebted Poor Country
LC	Local Council
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
LGDP	Local Government Development Programme
MOFPED	Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development
MOLG	Ministry of Local Government
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRM	National Resistance Movement
PAF	Poverty Action Fund
PDC	Parish Development Committee
PEAP	Poverty Eradication Action Plan
PMA	Plan for the Modernisation of Agriculture
PMC	Poverty Action Fund Monitoring Committee
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RC	Resistance Council
RDC	Resident District Commissioner
SC	Sub-county
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UDN	Uganda Debt Network
UPE	Universal Primary Education
UPPAP	Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Process
WC	Women's Council

Abstract

This report, part of a broader research project on Poverty Knowledge and Policy Processes, concerns the poverty reduction policy process in three Ugandan districts, Bushenyi, Lira and Tororo.   It is based on an understanding of policy as series of complex, dynamic, political processes, rather than as linear progression from formulation to implementation. Policy processes for poverty reduction comprise a multiplicity of distinct but linked spaces, in which a wide range of actors, governmental and non-governmental, engage in order to influence and shape policy. Each actor brings into the policy space their own unique version of knowledge about poverty, which informs their actions.

In the first section, we discuss the diversity of understandings of poverty that are acted upon in the policy process at the level of local government. We identify broad differences between poverty knowledge as the lived experience of poor people, and poverty knowledge as the normative interpretations of poor people's priorities contained in poverty reduction policies that emerge from the centre.   This diversity gives rise to contradictions, particularly as local people's knowledge gets decontextualised and simplified as part of the planning process.

We continue by examining key issues which mediate the participation of both government and civil society actors in poverty reduction policy process. Government actors dominate the policy process, and we focus on the diversity of their agendas and identities. Civil society actors, meanwhile, have been reluctant to engage directly in local policy processes, and we look at three different aspects of civil society participation to examine CSO experience and understand the challenges and obstacles of engagement in the policy process.

Finally, we turn to look at some of the spaces in which the policy process is enacted, arguing that a range of spatial practices are a mediating factor in the inclusion and exclusion of particular actors.

Our conclusion examines several key areas of disconnection – between lived experiences of poverty and the policy process, between differently positioned actors who experience difficulties communicating with each other, between what should happen and what does happen, and between citizens and their representatives. These disconnections present important challenges in the development of more responsive and accountable processes for poverty reduction policy.

1. Introduction

Poverty Knowledge and Policy Processes is a research project which takes place in the context of current claims and efforts by governments and international development actors to make poverty reduction policy in sub-Saharan Africa more responsive to the needs of the poor, and to make processes of policy formulation and implementation more accountable. We argue that, in order to move closer to an objective of responsive, accountable policies which are representative of the needs and priorities poor people, it is necessary to better understand the way that policy gets made. Our approach to policy suggests that it is a complex, dynamic process, rather than a linear progression of formulation and implementation.[1] This policy process comprises a multiplicity of distinct but linked spaces, in which a wide range of actors, governmental and non-governmental, engage in order to influence and shape policy. Each actor brings into a policy space their own unique version of knowledge about poverty, which informs their actions.

In Uganda, as well as examining the dynamics of central government,[2] we have looked at the policy process at three levels of decentralised government in Bushenyi, Lira and Tororo districts. In examining the policy process at the district level, issues arise concerning the relative power of a range of actors at different levels of government to influence policy, and to represent the needs and priorities of the poor.

Uganda is frequently held up by members of the international development community as a success story of poverty reduction in sub-Saharan Africa. The narrative of this success story suggests that relatively steady levels of economic growth, achieved through structural adjustment, privatisation and

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[1] See McGee and Brock (2001) and Brock, Cornwall and Gaventa (2001) for more detail on the conceptual framework of this research.
[2] See Brock, McGee and Ssewakiryanga (2002) for findings from the Kampala research

liberalisation, are paralleled by a process of decentralisation which brings government closer to the people. This study aims to look beyond the headlines of successful poverty reduction and the frequently-cited indicators of economic growth and falling poverty levels, to examine the prospects for policy processes which allow for consistent representation of the needs of poor people, and for the development of practices of accountability.

1.1 Background to the Districts: Bushenyi, Lira and Tororo

The research was carried out in Bushenyi and Lira in May 2001, and in Tororo in October 2001.[3] The three districts were selected according to a range of criteria. Whilst it was important to select according to regional difference, livelihood system and relative wealth, other factors were also considered, including language skills within the research team, which was felt to be critical in order to work effectively with local people.

Information disaggregated to the district level is not plentiful, but Table One illustrates some of the contrasts between the three districts presented in the Uganda Human Development Report (UNDP, 2000). The indicators show that, of the three districts, Bushenyi residents might expect to live longest and have the highest household expenditure, and that their levels of human poverty are lower than the national average. Lira and Tororo have higher than average poverty levels, and lower than average life expectancy.

Table 1.1: Human Development Indicators for Bushenyi, Lira and Tororo 1998 (UNDP, 2000)

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[3] The methods used were semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, some of which used tools for visualisation commonly associated with Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). A total of 185 interviews and discussions were carried out across the three Districts. In addition, relevant documentation shared by research respondents was also reviewed.

	Household expenditure per capita (UShs)	Estimated life expectancy	Human Poverty Index
Bushenyi	1,304	54.1	33.3
Lira	801	49.6	38
Tororo	1,043	48.5	37.6
All Uganda		50.9	34

Bushenyi is in the west of Uganda, bordering the Democratic Republic of Congo to the west. While subsistence farming and livestock rearing are important sources of livelihood, so too are cultivation of food banana and coffee as cash crops. The majority of the population are Banyankore, there are many pockets of migrant settlers throughout the district. Bushenyi was purposively selected because it had been a site in the first round of research for the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Process (UPPAP), a major initiative which specifically aimed to introduce poor people's perspectives into poverty reduction policy and district level planning. It also has a popular reputation as a "model district", with relatively low levels of poverty.

Lira lies in the northern region of Uganda, and is the location both of the long-running war between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and the site of periodic cattle raiding from Karamojong warriors from neighbouring Kitgum and Kotido districts. There is a significant population of internally displaced people[4]. Livestock production traditionally forms the backbone of the household economy, but insecurity has caused dramatic falls in livestock holdings. Most of the population are Luo, and the area has a historical identity as a multipartyist stronghold.

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[4] The residents of one of our research sites, Aminawili, had just returned home after several months of displacement. In September 2002, they once again fled the LRA.

Tororo is a border district, with Kenya lying to the east. Subsistence farming is the major source of household income, but there is also significant cross-border trade. Tororo's population is one of the most ethnically diverse in Uganda, with three major ethnic groups – Luo, Ateso and Japadhola – as well as many minority enclaves. Population mobility, especially in the border areas, is high.

In each district, there are context-specific experiences of poverty and of the policy process. Whilst differences emerge which are clearly related to the specific contours of poverty, equally there are similarities across all three districts in terms of the knowledge, actors and spaces of the policy process.

1.2   The context of existing central government policies

While Uganda's policy of decentralisation has prompted a series of changes to systems of governance, most respondents interviewed for this research agreed that most policies continue to originate at the centre. It is therefore important to contextualise our district-level findings by describing those national policies which were seen by respondents to shape the poverty reduction policy process at the lower levels of government.

Table 1.2: Overview of government policies frequently named as poverty reduction policies.

Government policies identified as poverty reduction policies	Summary
Poverty Eradication Action Plan/Poverty	Revised once since its first appearance in 1997[6], notably to incorporate some of the findings from

Reduction Strategy Paper[5] (PEAP/PRSP)	UPPAP and from civil society consultations; in process of second revision. PEAP priority areas are Universal Primary Education (UPE), primary health care, rural feeder roads, water supply and agricultural modernisation.
Poverty Action Fund (PAF)	Ring-fenced fund from debt relief, made available to districts for expenditure on the PEAP priority areas.
Plan for the Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA)	Overarching plan for liberalisation of agriculture, capital-led agricultural intensification and the privatisation of extension services.
Universal Primary Education (UPE)	Museveni's political promise during his first campaign for re-election (1996), guaranteeing free primary education to four children of each family.
Local Government Development Programme (LGDP)	Funding from the World Bank made available on being able to prove that certain reforms in governance have been made at the district level.
Entandikwa	Government credit scheme, no longer operational, but still subject of discussion. Widely held to have been massively corrupt and nepotistic, but also seen to have failed because ordinary people considered the money from Government as a payment rather than as a loan.
"Cattle restocking"	Government restocking programmes which followed cattle raiding and insecurity. Specific to Lira district.
"Clonal coffee"	Government programme to provide high-yield, wilt-resistant coffee seedlings for cash cropping. Specific to Bushenyi district.

[5] The PEAP was accepted, with minimal changes, as Uganda's PRSP
[6] At the time of the research

While there are undoubtedly other policies of the Government of Uganda which may be seen as poverty reduction policies, the table shows those which were most frequently discussed during the fieldwork. As such they reflect district perceptions of what is emanating from the centre. It is notable that very few people – including district officials – were clear about the content of the central policies, or of the differences between them. The exception to this was the PEAP; many government employees were able to name the five priority areas. The most confusion was associated with the PMA, which was in the early stages of implementation, but which nonetheless was open to variable interpretation by a wide range of actors.

2.   Poverty knowledge

Poverty is a diverse and complex phenomenon, and it is viewed in a range of ways by differently positioned actors in the policy process at the district level and below. On one hand, people who perceive themselves as poor often view their situation in terms of a lack of basic needs, shaped by their own lived experience. On the other hand, people who are directly involved in shaping poverty reduction policies – either as representatives of poor constituencies, or as bureaucrats and technicians whose work involves implementing poverty reduction policies – often view poverty from a different perspective, that of agents situated in broader processes with sectoral or political prerogatives. The perceptions of each of these loose clusters of actors translates into a range of knowledges which are introduced into the policy process, and simultaneously shape and are shaped by processes of formulation, planning and implementation.

Often, this translation of diverse knowledges equates with simplification and prioritisation, particularly in the context of "bottom-up planning", which tends to homogenise the diversity of perspectives. The result is often that the

particular version of poverty associated with the more powerful actors in a process will dominate resource allocation.

1.1   Contextualised poverty knowledge: local and regional narratives

Interviews and focus group discussions with residents of the twelve villages in which the research was carried out reveal both consistency and diversity. Our discussions with informants frequently began with the questions "what is poverty here?" or "what does poverty mean to you?" in order to open the doors to a further discussion of what was happening locally to alleviate poverty.   While lack of basic needs – whether food, money, livestock, clothing, good health or education – were usually part of the perceptions of poverty put forward by villagers, there were also differences according to local context, and to the particular features of informants. Both are important sources of understanding the diversity of poverties across contexts, and within heterogeneous communities.

While agropastoral livelihood systems are common to all three districts, definitions of poverty refer to problems of particular features of local agroecosystems.   In Bushenyi, therefore, lack of land and fragmentation of existing landholdings were frequently mentioned as causes of poverty, while in Tororo, problems with diminishing fertility of existing land and resulting chronic food insecurity were highlighted.   In Lira, less mention was made of land-related problems, but lack of cattle was easily the most frequently mentioned and discussed feature of poverty.

Overall, respondents in Bushenyi were far more likely to emphasise lack of money as a definition of poverty than in either Tororo or Lira. This finding, linked to the monetisation of the agricultural economy and the relatively high proportion of cash crops cultivated in the district, agrees with the UPPAP study, which found that poverty definitions were more likely to be income-

based in Bushenyi than for any other district of Uganda apart from Kampala (Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2000). The emphasis on income poverty in Bushenyi was also frequently linked to the falling price of coffee on the world market.

In Tororo, similarly, the low prices available for maize and cotton were often referred to, frequently linked to the lack of access to markets, particularly via a poor road network. Respondents in Tororo were also unique in blaming a lack of industry for poverty, and in placing an emphasis on the rising cost of basic consumer goods. The latter may be attributed to recent attempts by government to regulate cross-border trading with Kenya, which may have resulted in reduction in the level of smuggling, and an increase in tax payment by traders, trickling down in the form of higher street prices for basic goods.

Villagers' perceptions of poverty in Lira are indelibly marked by insecurity, which has resulted not only in massively decreased cattle holdings following Karamojong raiding in the 1980s, but in frequent episodes of displacement, with whole communities fleeing temporarily to avoid cattle-raiding or the violent insurgency of the LRA.   Linked to these, there is frequently a notion of regional marginalisation attached to local narratives of the causes of poverty; as a traditional stronghold of opposition to the Movement system of government, many local people feel that they are being ignored by central government, which is not making adequate efforts to end insecurity, or to alleviate the poverty that results from it. This interpretation of poverty has a political flavour unique amongst the three districts.

Beyond these variations, poverty was linked to a wide range of material lacks: food, land, education, good health of people and livestock, clothing, markets, extension services. Far less frequently mentioned, but nonetheless discussed by a range of respondents across all three districts, were non-material interpretations of poverty. Particularly important here are notions of

dependency, and of structural gender relations producing and upholding poverty.

Dependency, as a mindset which both produces and is produced by poverty, was discussed from several different perspectives. For some, it was seen as the acceptance that one's situation cannot be changed, that it is beyond control. For others, dependency was a function of a lack of education, knowledge and power. Both are perhaps encapsulated by the words of a respondent from Bushenyi who commented simply that 'if you are a beggar, you are not independent.'

Gender relations and their relationship to poverty were discussed and alluded to by nearly all of the women-only groups of respondents, though less frequently so by individual women respondents.[7] Discussions went far beyond the narrative of a double burden of work, or of women being poorer than men. Dimensions discussed frequently included women's lack of control over resources, produce and income. Similarly, lack of political representation of women's interests in the Local Council (LC) system was linked to poverty. In both Tororo and Bushenyi, the issue of dowry was particularly strongly linked to women's perceptions of their own situation; as a focus group member in Bushenyi pointed out, 'once a husband has paid dowry, the woman becomes his property and is enslaved within her marriage, both by the husband and by society at large.'

This brief overview of respondents' perceptions of poverty reflects to some degree the mainstream view of poverty which is currently emerging from Kampala, that poverty is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon with a range of interlinked material and non-material components. There is also an extent to which local understandings of poverty match the generic solutions

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[7] While individual women interviewed tended to have a position in government, women's groups (certainly in Tororo and Lira) tended to be self-organised, self-help groups which had been let down in some way by their representatives.

put forward by the PEAP, with its priority areas of education, primary health care, rural feeder roads, water and agricultural extension.

The fit between the local and the central is not however completely comfortable. The lived experiences of villagers in different regions may be broadly reflected in policies which continue to originate from the centre, but there are notable exceptions which suggest that some local definitions are more appropriate to the vision of central government than others. While the Bushenyi solution of increasing income would fall easily within the government's priority areas, the Lira solution of ending chronic insecurity falls outside the prescribed solutions of the PEAP, lying in a far more hotly contested political terrain.

While no government policy could ever hope to tackle every dimension of poverty, the disconnection between some regional and local poverty narratives and those emanating from the centre give rise to broader questions. These concern the way that poverty knowledges based on lived experience are decontextualised as part of processes of planning and policymaking according to centrally mandated guidelines transmitted to the district level. To address this issue, we now turn to look at the kind of poverty knowledge which is represented in one such process, the Bushenyi District Development Plan (DDP) and contrast these with the knowledge of lived experience represented by villagers' narratives.

2.2 Information for planning: formalised, prioritised poverty knowledge?

Increasingly, the rhetoric of planning and policy at the local level in Uganda is characterised by a stated commitment to "bottom up" processes, which are presented as relying on systematic evidence concerning the priorities of poor people, culminating in the elaboration of District Development Plans (DDPs). This commitment to local, evidence-based planning has come about since the

early 1990s, with government and international development community support for the gradual building of capacity for this style of local planning.

DDPs are simultaneously expressions of local policy which reflect central guidelines, and planning documents for local governments. They often include episodes of consultation, such as sub-county planning meetings which involve community representatives, NGOs, churches and local councillors from different levels. Given the increasingly wide range of actors involved in the process of elaborating these plans, they may be expected to contain a range of understandings of poverty; given the stated commitment to bottom-up planning, one may also expect to see local knowledges represented.

Of the three districts included in the study, all were engaged at different stages of ongoing processes to draw up new DDPs. Reflections of participating actors about the evolution of the DDP process in Bushenyi provides a useful case study of poverty knowledge in the policy process.

The Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of Bushenyi recalled that a situational analysis of the district was carried out in 1998, showing service delivery levels and the 'magnitude of all the district's problems and needs.' On this basis, the District Council were advised on selecting priorities and these were written into a three-year Development Plan. The CAO observed that 'at that time we did not have capacity, we did not know how to plan.'

Subsequently the CAO approached the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MOFPED), the Ministry of Local Government (MOLG) and Unicef, and requested their assistance with planning capacity. The process of transforming this capacity-building was hampered by the perceived inexperience of those sent from the centre, but efforts at a visioning process generated concepts which came to underlie the subsequent DDP. A series of processes were initiated to 'transmit' the priorities of

villagers to district policy-makers through public meetings, which interlocked with the more conventional processes of inputs by sectoral technicians and elected politicians at all levels.

Key informant interviews about the kinds of information which are used in the current Bushenyi DDP, shown in Table 2.2, suggest the use of a wider range of sources than in either Tororo or Lira.

Table 2.2: Poverty Knowledge in the process of elaborating the Bushenyi District Development Plan

Actor	Form of knowledge in DDP process	Issues of knowledge production and access to information
Central Government	Priority programme areas Policy documents Resource ceilings	Basic parameters for district priorities are set at the central level and transmitted through policy documents and grant conditionalities
Planning Unit	Own questionnaire Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) data Sub-county development plans UPPAP	Publicly available information used because of lack of resources to produce own. UBOS data is used by Planning Unit when they are made available from Entebbe, but Production Unit have no access to it for their inputs to the planning process. The Planning Unit claimed that UPPAP was the only mechanism for tracking poverty to which they have access; given that UPPAP was not designed for this purpose and does not provide

		monitoring data, the comment indicates a lack of familiarity with UPPAP's purpose and content.
Population Officer	Community Based Management Information Systems	Funded by Unicef; basic demographic statistics collected and analysed at the community level, which are aggregated at district level and sent to UBOS.
LCIII	Needs of constituents Knowledge from seminars and study tours Criteria for ranking needs	Some questions raised about the politics of representation and prioritisation of constituents' needs. Capacity building for LCIII level actors has increased.
SC and district technicians	Knowledge of "the ground" Professional expertise Data collected by extension staff in various sectors	There are problems with the systematic use of routine information from sectors – technicians identified issues of poor communication and information management.
PAF Monitoring Committee (PMC)	Input and output monitoring of the PAF	Established by Uganda Debt Network in Kampala, but is still establishing local constituency, and has difficulty getting access to information.
"Donors"	Resource pledges Own priority areas	"Donors" here are frequently seen as non-governmental organisations (NGOs). They are presented with a range of funding options quite late in the DDP process, but if they offer resources in non-prioritised areas, they are not turned down

Villagers	Priorities and problems of lived experience	Transmitted through a complex set of spaces to which not all villagers have access, which are largely disconnected from resource allocation processes.

As shown in Table 2.2, a wide range of sources of information about poverty were named by different research respondents as having contributed to the DDP. The DDP document itself, however, lacks both localised perceptions and definitions of poverty, and local priorities, despite the existence of potential sources for such information. The greatest level of disaggregation of the data presented in the DDP are a set of county-level gender-disaggregated population figures. The only information about sub-counties presented is the number of them that exist. No qualitative or anecdotal evidence for the causes of or solutions to poverty is presented (despite the existence of a comprehensive UPPAP report for Bushenyi), part of a far broader absence of research from the plan.

The apparent differences between contextualised narratives and problematisations of poverty, and those represented in official documents like the DDP, indicate a disconnection between the existence of information, and its uptake by those actors who shape formal policy documents. The UPPAP study, for example, only involved one member of the District Planning Unit, and had little impact in terms of building networks or constituencies for a different kind of poverty knowledge in the planning process. Some respondents pointed out that UPPAP had a far greater impact on processes in Kampala.[8]

A second disconnection may be between civil society organisations and a policy process into which they are at least formally invited, but where access

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[8] For more on UPPAP's impact, see Yates and Okello (2002) and Brock, McGee and Ssewakiryanga (2002)

to invited spaces is in reality very limited. As well as limited access to invited spaces, CSOs are often disconnected from the poor constituences that they are often said to represent.

A third disconnection is that between ordinary citizens and their political representatives. Planning processes at LCIII level, and particularly at Parish and Village levels, are often mediated through Local Councillors, many of whom were described as local elites with little genuine interest in the opinions of their poorer constituents, who present information in their own interests.

Finally, a fourth disconnection is between the policy process and research and evidence. Statistics in the DDP are used decoratively rather than substantively, illustratively rather than analytically; and, as we have noted, qualitative research findings are absent. Where situation analyses of particular places are available, there is little evidence of how they may have shaped the content of the DDP.

When asked about the DDP, many respondents in all districts talked about the "bottom-up" planning process, the production of village plans, and the holding of meetings. There were strong verbal narratives which asserted that "gathering the priorities of poor people" was a major preoccupation of technicians and politicians at the lower levels. In the absence of evidence that local people's priorities are influencing planning, what does this "gathering" consist of, in terms of poverty knowledge? This question is the subject of the next section.

2.3 Prioritisation and simplification: implications for responsive policy processes

In the context of the apparent disconnection between research and policy, the experience of prioritising local people's needs becomes a potential re-

connecting bridge for different actors to learn from each other about their views of poverty. Such prioritisation may also become a route for political actors at the lower levels of governance to demonstrate their claims to legitimacy as representatives.

From a perspective of trying to understand how contextualised knowledge – the lived experience of poverty – becomes decontextualised through planning and policymaking, we can describe processes of prioritisation as a mechanism through which diverse knowledges pass in order to be obtain the necessary legitimacy in influencing resource allocation decisions. Here we focus briefly on some of the ways that processes of prioritisation transform the situated knowledge of villagers into what becomes known as the "priorities of poor people".

The fieldwork offered us numerous snapshots of different processes of prioritisation, which raise a number of key issues. In all three districts, as suggested above, there was a very strong narrative amongst elected representatives and some government technical staff that 'we visit the parishes in order to understand local priorities.' One such example is drawn from a conversation with the Chairman of a Parish Investment Committee in Bushenyi district:

> Quizzed on how the prioritisation was done he told us the criterion was need - if a school got blown away by the wind and children were missing school until funds were raised for a new one, this would take priority over a request for a close-by water source where the people had one a few kilometres away that they could get water from meanwhile. He says that they do visit parishes so as to assess degree of need and urgency.

Clearly, such a process of prioritisation is *ad hoc*, focused on crises, and sees the decision about what is a priority – a close by water-source or a school? –

in the hands of the visitor. While other, more systematic, approaches exist, this type of narrative was common in all three districts. In Tororo, the idea of a powerful person prioritising could not be separated from the narrative that elected representatives favour their own ethnic community with resources.   Such processes of prioritisation are therefore liable to decontextualise lived experience according to the priorities of patronage. They are also liable to allow powerful individuals exclude particular groups and their own versions of priority. Such exclusion was reported at several levels. In a Bushenyi sub-county, one elected representative noted that 'the women, youth and disabled have no voice, not even at SC. They are not a priority; even the chief does not care.' In a relatively better-off village in Lira, one young man, asked how the Parish Development Committee had selected water supply as a priority for the village, attributed the decision to an influential, educated opinion leader of the village, who works in a government department which focuses on water and sanitation.

Some cases were reported where locally-agreed priorities were not selected for planning because they did not fit sectoral visions of poverty-related issues. Exclusion of prioritisations which fall outside sectoral guidelines suggests a wider problem, that of a conflict between a top-down system, represented through mechanisms like the PEAP priority areas and the conditions of PAF funding; and the much discussed "bottom-up" planning system. Resource ceilings are a frequently mentioned blockage to pursuing priorities from the bottom up, particularly given that unconditional resources are very scarce.[9] This situation gives those who aggregate village, parish and sub-county priorities into district plans a particularly powerful role in local arenas.

When asked who was most influential in condensing the priorities of individual villages into the planning process, a District Planner replied

The district. It is the district which is local government. It tries to harmonise villagers' priorities with national priorities. The district has to consider the gravity of priorities between places - one place doesn't see that other people's problems are worse than theirs.

Matching top-down to bottom-up priorities is an extension of this 'harmonisation' process, and one which is a critical interface in the elaboration of policy which responds to poor people's needs and priorities. It may involve bringing together the absolutes of central government policy – created by an instrumentalist view of knowledge which reduces the complex issue of poverty to a few manageable variables[10] – together with the relatives of village-level prioritisation, created through lived experiences of poverty.

The prospects for changing the policy process to make it more responsive and accountable to the needs and priorities of poor people will depend in part on the acceptance by more policy actors of a far wider range of differently situated knowledges than is currently the case. Our examination of policy actors in the next section situates our discussion of knowledge in the structures and processes of governance, and question the dynamics of representation which underpin so many of the complex issues of knowledge construction discussed above.

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[9] Conditional grants make up 71% of transfers from central to local government, while unconditional grants cover recurrent wage and non-wage operational costs (UDN, n.d)
[10] Øyen, 1996:9

3. Policy actors

Policy, however it is viewed, is seen at least in part as the domain of government and state. It is critical not to view government as a homogeneous entity, particularly in Uganda, where the National Resistance Movement (NRM) system of 'no-party democracy' lends an almost corporatist flavour to the local organs of the State.[11] The complex system of decentralised local government in Uganda means that the policy landscape is populated by an extraordinary range of bureaucratic, political and technical actors, all of whom are in some sense governmental in their identity. Many of them express strongly-held views about a vision of the policy process in which they situate themselves either as "formulator" and "implementor". This gives rise to a binary narrative, whereby formulation is the job of "politicians" with support from professional bureaucrats, while implementation is the job of "technicians". These two sides are brought together in the policy process at the district and sub-county levels, and their interface is often conflicted, and littered with a tangle of lines of authority and power.

What, then, of civil society, so often put forward in mainstream development discourses as the necessary counterbalance for good governance, the force of accountability and efficient, demand-driven service delivery? Again, the tendency to generalisation must be avoided: the entity described as civil society is composed of a range of actors, from the community-based self-help organisations of Lira and Tororo, to the service delivery NGOs who engage with the implementation of government policies, to the nascent advocacy Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Lira and Bushenyi, to regional faith-based alliances, and international NGOs.

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[11] The Movement Act in 1997 institutionalised a 'no-party' system and made membership in the NRM mandatory for all Ugandans. Party political activity is prohibited, although all Ugandans and can participate in politics through the five tiers of local government, and Presidential and parliamentary elections.

As with government, a series of simplified narratives concerning the role and function of civil society at the local level suggest that it is relatively recently developed, very responsive to donor agendas via resource availability, largely engaged in service delivery, and has been traditionally both discouraged from and unwilling to engage in the policy process at the district level. While interviews reveal many perspectives which are resonant with these narratives, differences emerge according to the position of particular CSOs relative to district or SC government and donors, and according to context. Civil society in Tororo, for example, has become a battleground for resource allocation, ethnic divisions and corruption, in much the same way that local government there has.

In terms of relations between citizens and government – whether or not these are mediated by organisations of civil society - it is important to note changes in governance at the local level. Many interviews with villagers and local opinion leaders suggested that the reality of governance in the late 1980s, at the start of the NRM regime, was far more decentralised than the systems that prevails today after nearly twenty years of gradual institutional decentralisation. The NRM's roots as a political resistance movement mean that the regime has traced a trajectory from grassroots to centre and back, originally rooted in discourses of representative democracy and socialism, but acquiring as it went the trappings of contemporary donor narratives of liberalisation and decentralisation. In a sense these shifts have given rise to a disconnection between the perceived roles and responsibilities of elected representatives with regard to their constituents, and the realities described by citizens in their attempts to engage their elected representatives.

Several respondents noted positive changes which had occurred in governance since 1986; the establishment of Councils of Women and People with Disabilities were mentioned several times. One LCI Executive focus group in Bushenyi noted that 'there has been and still is an aspect of

freedom of speech – people are more free to express themselves.' They also noted that the rights of citizens are considered more than before, particularly in terms of UPE. These positive changes in governance are, however, balanced by a range of more negative impressions, which raise broad issues about the relations of power between different actors in the policy process.

The issue of taxation, the structure of which is integral to institutional processes of fiscal decentralisation, has become a hotly contested arena of local governance. A discussion group in Bushenyi noted that while the Resistance Council (RC) system, the antecedent of the current LC system, 'gave people power to control their own destiny', the LC system in its current incarnation is only used to levy taxes, since LC leaders know what each resident owns.

Discussions in Tororo revealed that many local people saw the whole system of decentralised local governance as opening a new arena of competition for the benefits of existing patronage, and that this extended to the issue of taxation. An LCIII Chairman from Tororo elaborated:

> If you give a zone autonomy, you may find the zone occupied by relatives or one clan. Then the 'I don't care' attitude comes in. Nobody will be willing to pay tax, after all the chairperson can not harass them because he knows their problems and is an uncle. We are supposed to send 25% of the amount collected, but at times you find very few have paid and hence we at times send very little which cannot be planned for. The first time we remitted money to the zones, it was divided amongst the taxpayers and drunk.

The ideas of politicians and administrators in league with each other to collect taxes, and the politics of patronage that surround tax collection, point to the extent to which the state, via the LC system, has a monopoly on many

social functions which concern development and poverty alleviation. A respondent in Lira district noted that

> the power of LCs started in 1990s, when we started talking to the government about our problems. Any idea coming up comes up through the LCs - you cannot come any way except through the LCs. LCs have strength and power – decentralisation brought them more power.

In a different community in Lira district, a male elder drew the links between the power of the LCs, and the issue of holding elected representatives accountable. During a discussion about why he felt unable to remove elected representatives who are not performing well, he noted that the law requires a meeting for such action to be taken. 'The problem,' he observed, 'is that it is the same Chairperson, the one you are trying to get rid of, who calls the meeting.'

These narratives of the totalising force of local government in many cases suggests that ideas of either civil society or autonomous spaces existing in village or sub-county policy processes is minimal. Several references to the collapse of agricultural co-operatives in the mid 1980s provide testimony of the decline of other local institutions alongside the rise and consolidation of the LC system.

These views on changing local governance provide a backdrop to the current range of policy actors we encounter at the district level and below. It is to the diverse identities and complex relationships of government that we now turn.

3.1   Government: diverse identities, complex relationships

As we have noted, government is not, at any level, a monolithic actor. In this section we concentrate on three layers of elected local government (LC V, III and I) each of which has different roles and responsibilities. Perceptions of these roles and responsibilities are filtered through broader understandings of the current system of elections and voting, and we therefore preface our discussion of government actors with a brief introduction to some issues of democracy and representation.[12]

While the CAO of Bushenyi expressed the opinion that regular democratic elections have humbled leaders, and that they appear to be better now at understanding what problems exist on the ground, this view must be countered with others. In particular, the association of voting with resource allocation was strong amongst respondents in all three districts.

A Parish Councillor from Bushenyi pointed out that policies being passed currently do not reflect the real poverty issues, because the politicians, when they are talking to the people, only address those issues that they know will help them to get votes. Politicians, for instance, can talk before elections of eliminating the Graduated Tax, but they do not reflect on the effect it will cause in terms of the sub-county failing to deliver services to the people after the election. A Women's Councillor in Lira observed that 'the only thing we have got here, for which we are grateful, is salt. We were given salt by the government during the elections. Each woman was given a cup full of salt which encouraged them to vote for Museveni.' Both comments illustrate widely held views about the nature of political representation in the electoral system.

Interviews with governmental and non-governmental actors reveal a disjunct between the self-identities of a range of local government actors, and the way they are perceived by others. Many of the government actors

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[12] Fieldwork in Lira and Bushenyi took place against the background of campaigning for Parliamentary Elections in May 2001, and shortly after the Presidential election

interviewed expressed idealised views of how the political system should work, and their role within it. Often, such views were framed with reference to the appropriate sections of the Local Government Act. While these views are important, perspectives *about* the same local government actors, expressed in interviews with non-governmental actors, tended to place a greater emphasis on how the realities of the governmental system differ from what should happen according to the rules of the game.

There are three issues which were repeatedly raised across the range of interviews about governmental actors which require further discussion, revealing as they do both the complexity of relationships between actors, and the importance both of social structure and of resources in deciding which actors are included and which excluded. These are the questions of corruption, gender, and the interface between "politicians" and "technicians".

3.1.1 Corruption

Corruption is a culturally-grounded concept. What is seen as 'corruption' in one culture may in another be viewed as 'patronage' or simply 'relationships of the extended family'. Whilst realizing the need to exercise particular caution with a word which is playing an increasingly important part in the lexicon of powerful international development agencies, we cannot ignore the overwhelming message delivered by a very wide range of respondents whose comments indicated that corruption – often described colloquially as "eating" - is rife in Uganda's local government system.

As we have already discussed, the exchange of votes for material benefits is embedded in the day-to-day political economy of the country; as Chabal and Daloz suggest, 'the legitimacy of African political elites, such as it is, derives from their ability to nourish the clientele on which their power rests. It is therefore imperative for them to exploit governmental resources for

that returned Museveni to power for a third, and constitutionally final, term.

patrimonial purposes.' (1999:15) Framing narratives of corruption from the fieldwork in a broader understanding of relationships between citizens and their state representatives, and culturally embedded processes of patronage and patrimonialism, leads us to understand the paramount importance of the exchange of material resources between actors in the policy process.

Box 3.1.1 shows two different narratives of corrupt practices in politics and planning, one from Lira and one from Tororo. They reveal the complexity not only of what people consider to be corruption, but of politics, accountability, resource allocation and blame.

Box 3.1.1: Narratives of corrupt practices

Sub-county Civil Servant, Tororo: In the sub-county we have been having problems. The majority of the Councillors used to support a certain sub-county Chief who has left now. He bribed them, used to give them money. Funds disappeared. We quarrelled a lot. I tried to mobilise the Councillors to censure the Chief, but they declined. The Chief saw me as a threat. The Councillors did not support me because they were for the Chief. Their task was to sabotage my programmes, so that I would fail. I went to the district and succeeded in having him removed. The current Chief is more co-operative. When he came he denied the links that bring intrigue. This has brought us fast and tremendous change. We now have a health centre....

Village Elder, Lira: These Local Councillors do not mind about people's problems - we had a problem with the road, that goes through the village. My husband saw that the road was bad, so he went to the Supervisor of Works in the County who then referred him to a member of the District Council representing our area. When he reached there, a culvert was promised, but when he went back he found they had given it to another village, where the Councillor comes from. We

> never got to know the reasons - but I believe people normally do things for money. It's rich people who attract things; if you are poor, people don't respect you. Yet these culverts had been brought from the district to the SCs to help; but the allocation was poorly done. The struggle continued - again to the sub-county chief. This time we got the culvert and it was transported to the site. We were promised that the SC would send technicians but to date this has not happened - nothing has been done, despite reminding the SC Council. They keep saying they will send technicians and don't.

These two stories bring out several sides of what might be considered to be corrupt practices: the allocation of resources by powerful people to their own areas of origin, the disappearance of funds and the 'sabotage' of programmes. On the other hand, they also present some of the options available for countering corrupt practices – an attempt to censure an elected representative, frequent visits to administrative headquarters – and the obstacles that exist to making using such channels for accountability.

While these narratives are illustrative of the perspectives of different actors on the way the political and policy processes function, they present only one story of the events they portray; a wealth of stories about the same events exist in the perceptions of different actors which were not captured here. This multiplicity of narratives gives rise to the wider phenomenon of a culture of blame, in which a single truth of good or bad about any given situation become blurred, as each actor blames the other. This in turn implies that the prospects of an open and accountable policy process are faced with challenges far more complex than the establishment of systems and structures either for monitoring, or for representative democracy, and are more related to issues of power and legitimacy of one story over another.

3.1.2 Gender, exclusion and women's councils

The overwhelming message from a range of participants in all three districts is that women's participation in the LC system is largely ineffective, that the spaces provided by that system are gendered, and that this excludes women at all three levels of the LC system examined by the study.

One reason for this, put forward most frequently in Bushenyi, is the existence of Women's Councils (WCs), constitutionally established parallel structures which exist alongside the LC system. One frequently articulated argument suggests that these are structures without teeth, but that their very existence as a women's space makes people feel that the LC structure is *not* a women's space. This concurs with Goetz and Hassim's broader findings about women's political representation in South Africa and Uganda:

> a common means for restoring some of this lost political space is to create a 'national machinery' for women, a set of special mechanisms and institutions inside government to channel women's political and policy demands. While these have functioned to create bureaucratic representation for women, they have generally failed to act as institutional openings for *feminist* politics, understood here as the struggle against inequalities in power between women and men. (2001:2)

Why, then, are the WCs seen as dysfunctional and ineffective in representing women? One respondent pointed out the fact that WCs are perceived as marginalised within the broader system of government, and this in itself contributes to their inactivity. Lack of 'facilitation', that is to say resources, in some cases prevent WCs from sitting at all, and certainly restricts their potential range of activities.

Women's lack of time to attend meetings is another frequently-mentioned reason why WCs do not sit. This has a broader implication, summed up by a sub-county Women's Councillor in Bushenyi:

> Women do not meet because they have got no time, since many spend time in markets where they can earn, but do not attend council meetings where they cannot earn anything. Thus, even if the authorities wanted to consult women more systematically in decision-making, they would find it difficult to locate them. Women do have their own decision-making structures, for example in markets, where they have committees. They hold their own consultations within these spaces.

As such, the public spaces in which women are able to act and exercise agency are more concerned with the governance of income-generating activities, and are detached from the WCs which, as one respondent pointed out, 'are set up for political reasons and are political organisations.'

The relationship between WCs and LCs is a particularly important interface in understanding the role of women as policy actors, and the policy process as a gendered one. WCs have extremely limited power to influence either discussions or resource allocations in the main LCs; they are not mandated, and frequently not invited, to even attend LC meetings. As one sub-county Women's Councillor pointed out,

> we have no opportunity to influence what is happening in Council because we are not there. We render a good service, go there to the Council and SC and teach, but we don't have a vote [on LC III] to do our work as women. Empowered women inside the normal LC system would do better at getting government to hear their concerns.

The chances of the LC system 'hearing the concerns of women' is, in the views of a respondent from Lira, reduced greatly by the gender imbalance of

Council Executives, and by the passive participation of those women who do sit as Local Councillors.

In the absence of the power to act, many Women's Councillors adopt a function that is more social than political, making themselves available, for example, to mediate household disputes. Women's Councillors are also often those involved in self-help groups at the village level, and sometimes have access to a range of opportunities for training and capacity building that are not open to other women. Some of this work may contribute in the long-term towards increasing the agency of ordinary women to make independent decisions about their lives, but it is a long way from work which strategically and effectively challenges unequal gender relations in order to allow women to contribute more fully as actors in the policy process.

3.1.3 The "politician-technician" dichotomy

Researcher's field-notes from a meeting of the Production Committee, Lira district: I attend the Production Committee Meeting as an observer. I introduce myself and the research: I say we are trying to understand how policy gets made. After this, the Chair directs some of his comments at me, in order to explain what's going on to this outsider, this observer. Everyone introduces themselves to me. The Chairman sums up these introductory comments: "So, as you see, the people we have here are the political wing and the technocrats. Of course, the political wing are most interesting for you, as they make policy."

As already noted, the interface between politicians and technicians is one which was frequently discussed by respondents when the issue of policy was raised. The Production Committee Chairman's remarks encapsulate not only

the attribution of roles to these two groups, but readiness with which people are moved to make public pronouncements about those roles.

Relationships between elected officials and civil servants with a technocratic identity are not always comfortable. Comments from a CAO suggest the existence of an idealised notion of how the policy process *should* incorporate politicians and technicians, in a series of iterative, interlinked episodes, whereby policy is shaped as it moves backwards and forwards between each group.

> Problem identification is by technicians, the community or political leaders - anyone can do it. Implementation and supervision of policies often shows up problems. Management then discusses them and passes them onto the political wing. Then technicians say, the designs are inappropriate because of x and y reasons. They recommend a different design to the Executive Committee, which seeks more clarification of why, and what implications the change would have. The Secretary responsible for that activity presents it to the Council for debate and approval. The Council can turn it back to the Education Committee and tell it to report at the next Council sitting.

A range of informants, however, made comments resonating with those of which suggest that the idealised version of how things should be is made unrealistic on a day-to-day basis by poor working relationships, mutual suspicion and blame. Control of resources is clearly central to the way that events actually play out – politicians, particularly, are able to control the extent to which technical staff are facilitated to do their work. This is exacerbated by increasing tendencies to employ formally educated technical staff, which has resulted in the supervision of relatively highly-educated technical staff by relatively poorly-educated politicians, creating widespread difficulty. One retired civil servant, making observations based on her 30-year career, noted

Programmes now are more politically motivated than before - there is a lot more political reflection in content. Civil servants now play it safe and don't want to step on politicians' toes. Civil servants should implement, but they are not safe to do so - to the detriment of programmes. Now there are so many politicians - formerly it was MPs only; now there are tiers of people, to the detriment of the kind of services that are provided. Where there is co-operation between technicians and politicians, it works - but this depends totally on personality traits. Job insecurity is prevalent, from the district downwards.

An LCV Councillor in Tororo commented that 'the relationship between politicians and technicians is not very good because technicians think we are witch hunting them; although there are clear rules between politicians and technicians there still some conflicts.' From the opposite perspective, a member of technical staff at the district observed that 'in policy formulation, we involve [politicians] but it is not a good relationship because of those political attitudes they have'; another, in a similar vein, observed 'policy should be designed by technocrats, and approved by politicians. It shouldn't originate from the politicians.'

Such representations of the roles of different kinds of actors in the policy process are important because they represent the claims of actors to control, authority and power. While respondents were usually asked open questions about policy, their responses very often take the form of narratives of blame, with accusations of malpractice frequently made. The idea that a politician is too corrupt to fulfil her function, or that a technician is too ignorant to do her job, indicate the broad lack of a comfortable relationship in which different kinds of knowledge and levels of power are accepted, and the rules of the game adhered to. Instead, they give the impression of a constant series of arguments, negotiations and re-negotiations, and of a system within which accountability may remain elusive.

3.1.4 Politics and local government actors: linkages to the wider policy process?

Thus far, our discussion of government has focused on those directly involved in processes at the district level and below. There are however two other important clusters of actors who, while they act at the district level, are also important linkages to national policy and politics: these are MPs, and officials of the Movement.

Several MPs were interviewed in the course of the research, and all emphasised their role as communicants of the needs of the district to the national government. Several other respondents also highlighted the importance of MPs who offer resources, advice and support to particular initiatives within the districts they represent. Others, however, such as an LCIII Youth Councillor in Bushenyi, pointed out the exact opposite: a lack of communication with their MP, who is only seen at campaign time.

One of the MPs interviewed pointed out that his agency to influence affairs in the district is restricted by a lack of formal, legal linkage to the district policy process. He reported that Parliament had recently amended the Local Government Act, making MPs *ex-officio* members who can attend sub-county meetings, and follow budgets and implementation. As such, there is an increased opportunity for MPs to exercise power and influence at this level.

The Movement, however, has no need to construct such formal linkages, already having a tentacular structure whose officials occupy positions at all levels of the governance system. Lower down the system, the principal stated role of Movement officials is to mobilize people, to inform the population about government policies and to monitor implementation of these policies. One respondent from Bushenyi made the point, however, that

where the Movement does directly influence policy, it is at the central rather than the decentralised levels of government.

The comments of an LCIII Movement Chairman from Tororo put forward some of the reasons why the Movement has relatively little influence on policy processes at the lower levels:

> The Local Government Act that came first does not mention anything about the Movement Chair. It explains the roles of LC Chairman in sub-county – but the Movement Act, which came later, explains the same role for the Movement Chair. This is like knocking heads, having two structures doing the same thing at the same time.

Thus, in both the case of MPs and the Movement, while formal structures and informal practices exist which link the policy process of the district to the wider processes of central government, these are boundaried by the relationships that these actors have with others at the local level. The result is that communication of poor people's needs and priorities is not always enhanced.

In our discussion of government actors in general, the themes of linkage and communication are critical, particularly with regard to how the views and priorities of constituents are represented. As we have seen, communication and linkage are affected by a broad range of factors, which include gender, ethnicity, patronage and the disjunct between the ascribed and actual roles of different players. These factors are compounded by a structure in which multiple centres of authority exist, with lack of clarity about exactly who is in practice responsible for what, and therefore exactly who can be held accountable for what. The horizontal linkages between different actors at the same level are frequently channels for contestation about resource allocation, and the vertical linkages between levels are often blocked by lack of communication.

While it is clear that government actors dominate local policy processes, it is also clear that they exercise different levels of power in relation to each other, and that a great deal of energy is spent negotiating relationships between different government actors. Government, however, no longer has a monopoly over the policy process. It is to the question of how civil society actors fit into the jigsaw puzzle that we now turn.

3.2 Civil Society: a policy actor at the district level and below?

The emergence of civil society as a policy actor in Uganda is a relatively recent phenomenon, as indeed is the emergence of a formal NGO sector. Despite a lengthy history of unionism and rural co-operatives, during the repressive regimes of Amin and Obote there was little opportunity for the emergence of an autonomous or democratic civil society (Dicklitch, 1998). During a period where government was carried out via alliances of powerful individuals, it was public office rather than civil society that became the *de facto* foundation of economic prosperity.

The advent of the NRM regime in 1986 led to considerable changes in this situation, and a surge of NGOs were constituted in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While this can be attributed in part to the change in government, it must also be clearly seen as an externally driven agenda. International development actors have invested an enormous quantity of resources into civil society organisations, in the belief that by choosing policy instruments which supported civil society, a 'vibrant, pluriform political system' would emerge as a consequence (Ddumba-Ssentamu *et al*, 1999).

As such, the political economy of governance, where public office was a foundation of personal economic gain, underwent something of a reversal, with the non-governmental sector rivaling the governmental in terms of resources on offer. This reversal was amplified by the impact of Structural

Adjustment on the levels of employment offered by the state and the increasing role of the international development community as sources of finance. Such a political economy is not without conditionalities: as Petras and Veltmeyer observe, 'social assistance channelled via NGOs to ameliorate poverty is conditioned on the acceptance of neoliberal macroeconomic policies and structures.' (2001:124)

These shifts in international discourse and national governance have shaped current configurations of civil society in all three districts in the study. The density of CSOs in Lira was greatest, followed by Tororo and Bushenyi, and there was a range of types of active civil society organisation across all three districts, including:

♦ Local credit organisations, usually focused around a particular group (eg. women) or a particular activity (eg. restocking, income generation).

♦ National credit and agricultural service delivery organisations with local wings, as well as training centres and services.

♦ Dispensaries and hospitals run by non-governmental organisations, usually the Churches.

♦ Local clubs for income-generating work, often supported by the Churches, but also through other channels.

♦ Community development workers acting as local change agents.

♦ Councillor-led NGOs, usually formed to take advantage of government funding for service provision.

♦ International NGOs, working both through local structures at the village level, and through district service provision structures.

Despite this range of actors, however, civil society actors are a relatively minor force in the policy process in all three districts where the research took place, particularly when compared to government. A recent study of CSOs and local government in Uganda concludes that, while CSOs have increasingly become recognised as key actors in development, the principal

method of incorporating them as partners has been through the sub-contracting of service delivery. The study suggests that 'NGOs ought to move out from exclusively service delivery focus to that of sensitisation of decision-makers to engage in participatory decisionmaking processes, as a foundation for democratisation.' (CDRN, 2001:6) This conclusion, which mirrors the dominant discourse amongst Uganda's international development partners, begs a clearer understanding not only of why CSOs engage in the way that they do, but also about what inhibits them engaging directly in the policy process.

Many of the CSO respondents in the study emphasised the functionality of working to either provide or influence the quality of service delivery. They argued that it is far easier to influence what is in front of you than to undertake the more abstract work of creating broader changes to a policy which is not always clearly articulated. Further, and perhaps most importantly, they pointed out that there is a need for CSOs to follow resources: being sub-contracted to provide services is a crucial source of income.

Engaging in service delivery, however, is much more than a default choice for some CSOs. Several respondents were keen to emphasise that their strength is to have a positive influence on development through good practice in service delivery. One respondent in Lira gave the example of a credit programme which was failing because of the inflexible terms of government management. When it was handed over to an NGO experienced in managing credit programmes, the repayment rate recovered, and the NGO was able to attract additional funding to expand the programme. The respondent saw this as an example of positive change through the action of better practice. Similarly, an NGO respondent in Bushenyi pointed out that his organisation tries to take a learning approach to service provision, affecting change through participatory critical analysis of difficulties and failures. Both perspectives suggest that the service delivery route can

provide opportunities for developing pro-poor solutions which may be obscured by interpreting it as a resource-driven strategy for CSOs.

Further, while several CSOs emphasised that service delivery for them was a positive opportunity, many saw it as a preferable option to engaging in the policy process, which was viewed negatively for a wide range of reasons. Overcoming the traditions of non-engagement was seen as a major obstacle. For some in Church-based CSOs, for example, the fact that 'the Church has traditionally put a curtain between itself and government' has meant that any engagement in the policy process has historically been backstage, where powerful individuals in the Church have lobbied for particular outcomes. Moving to a more direct, public engagement, in the eyes of Mission staff in Lira, is fraught with dangerous possibilities: 'Government is involved in politics and the Church is involved in spiritual matters. The two should not be confused. If the Church enters politics it will get corrupted.'

Beyond the fears of what would happen if engagement were to take place, there are also uncertainties derived from the habit of non-consultation, which have made CSOs feel sidelined from the policy process. Many are now unsure if they are actually invited to engage, and if so, under what terms and in which spaces. The comments of one CSO worker in Lira are illustrative of the thoughts of many:

> District Council meetings are theoretically open to all comers, but CSOs don't even know that their attendance is invited … If planning meetings take place and other people are sent invitation letters, how can you attend if you have not received a letter? This creates fear in us.

So, while the mainstream rhetoric emanating from Kampala is clear that CSOs are "partners in development", are they really being invited in by government at the local level? The response of one CAO, asked about the role of NGOs in the policy process, is instructive in this regard:

In principle, they are vocal and speak out, they write papers which can then be discussed. Their views can somehow influence change - but here it is not very significant. The group which is significant is the donors. It is very influential because it has the money. We say it's not fair, because sometimes they don't conceptualize the real issues behind the problems. Sometimes the policies behind their money are very hurting.

Similar comments from a range of respondents in all three districts re-iterate this point: it is access to resources which buys effective participation in the policy process as it currently functions. International development actors, in many senses invisible at the district level because of the current lack of focus on projects, in fact wield considerable power as policy actors at this level, sometimes to the detriment of the CSOs they profess to support.

While such perceptions suggest that the window of opportunity currently available to CSOs to engage in the policy process may be small, it is not just the terms of the invitation that inhibit participation. Several CSOs pointed out their own lack of capacity to engage, suggesting that the limitations of their own competencies, skills and resources restrict the possibilities for engagement. One respondent in Lira, for example, said that many CSOs in the district came into being as disaster response organisations, and have not subsequently grown in any other directions. Lack of capacity was also seen in several cases to include a weak understanding of exactly what government poverty reduction policies consist of, and therefore what potential arenas for engagement exist.

One suggested solution for lack of capacity is the recommendation that 'CSOs strengthen existing networks and fora in order to know each other better so as to define jointly their mode of collaboration with other actors, such as Local Governments, and consult with one another on issues that require joint action' (CDRN 2001:10). Existing experience with CSO networking

demonstrates however that creation of such structures is not without its own difficulties. One CSO respondent in Tororo pointed out that the overtly political nature of the Councillor-created NGOs which now dominate the landscape of civil society in the district renders the purpose of networking uncertain, and that instead there is a need to focus at the grassroots level, on supporting local organisations to build their own strategic plans.

In both Lira and Tororo, there is already an NGO Forum in existence. In both cases, it is widely seen as a weak structure; in Lira, this was particularly associated with leadership difficulties, while in Tororo, one CSO respondent pointed out that taking part felt like becoming bound to organisations that were not necessarily trustworthy. Further, there are more functional difficulties: as a respondent from Uganda Change Agents' Association in Lira commented, most of the NGOs involved have very little money, and so although the Forum is supposed to sit every three months, only one or two of the larger NGOs have any resources to make this meeting happen. An international NGO working in Tororo pointed out that they were looked at by other CSOs simply as a funder for the Forum, and this positions them in a way that they do not necessarily find conducive to effective participation.

At the very least, it seems from these comments that 'networking to know each other better … in order to arrive at joint definitions for action' might be a process needing careful facilitation and an awareness of political undercurrents in order to build trust between different kinds of CSOs with different agendas. It may also require an awareness that CSO networks might be manipulated by others; one observation about the NGO Forum in Tororo was that it was being used by district politicians to police CSOs rather than protect them, thereby compromising potential engagement in the policy process. The experiences of networking put forward by CSO respondents point generally to the complex and political nature of civil society at the district level, and the lack of a common agenda.

In the remainder of this section, we examine three specific case studies of different dimensions of civil society which look at this complexity in more detail. The first examines a rare case of civil society actors attempting to directly engage with the policy process at the district level, through the formation of PAF Monitoring Committees (PMCs) in Bushenyi and Lira. The second looks at the political dynamics of civil society in Tororo district, a case where the 'ethnic gangsterism' which pervades formal district politics is also manifest in civil society. Thirdly, we examine the dynamics of community based organisations, a specific type of CSO which is often disregarded in discussions of engaging the policy process, but which nonetheless often forms the foundation of local peoples' participation in poverty reduction processes, and their power to effect change.

3.2.1 Poverty Action Fund Monitoring Committees - challenges and opportunities

The PAF is a source of finance which comes from relief of Uganda's external debt. One of the conditions of the agreement on Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) which structures debt relief is the creation of a 'ring-fenced' fund which a government can only spend on those areas prioritised by its poverty reduction strategy. As such, conditional PAF resources are made available at the district level and below, with the condition being that they are only spent on the PEAP priority areas. Included in the PAF are some resources for the government to monitor expenditure of the fund and report back to donors.

The Kampala-based Uganda Debt Network (UDN), a campaigning and advocacy NGO, was part of the international Jubilee 2000 movement which campaigned for debt relief for poor countries. Since Uganda became the first country to receive debt relief under the HIPC agreement, UDN has focused its activities on anti-corruption, and the monitoring of debt relief funds. To this

end, it has facilitated the establishment of PMCs in several districts, including Lira and Bushenyi.

In both districts, the formation of PMCs was triggered by UDN convening a seminar and a meeting to create awareness about debt relief and corruption. In both cases, this seminar was followed by the formation of a PMC which subsequently undertook tentative first steps towards monitoring district government's implementation of the PAF.

The two PMCs have had very different experiences of establishing themselves. In Bushenyi, the PMC Chair noted that the PMC is the first example of a CSO grouping in Bushenyi which exists principally to hold the government to account, and that progress has been slow. Some Heads of Department were initially unwilling to take the PMC seriously, but the support of the CAO and a formal process of inauguration helped it to gain credibility. The Lira PMC meanwhile was still not formally inaugurated after several months of activity, and did not have a bank account. Like its Bushenyi counterpart, it organised a public dialogue day, but government attendance was very poor. Many departments did not respond to the invitation; the Production Department sent a sub-county Agricultural Extension Officer to respond to policy questions.

Both PMCs have experienced difficulties carrying out the task of monitoring, which point to more general difficulties with civil society holding government to account. Firstly, as the Lira PMC Treasurer observed, 'success will depend on personal influence and tactics for obtaining information.' While the Treasurer, a former District Councillor, had been able to obtain some information on the grounds of his former position, he observed that 'if someone weaker went, he would be told to go away.'

Secondly, there are broader questions of politics. It may be best to gather information for monitoring through powerful people, but this must be traded

off against the dangers of co-optation. In Lira, while the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) had been supportive, PMC members expressed mixed feelings about this support, describing the RDC as a political appointee, and therefore a potentially dangerous ally. One PMC member observed, 'it is a matter of credibility. If you land on the wrong person, you lose credibility.'

Thirdly, there are difficult questions concerning what is actually to be monitored. Both PMCs were focusing on visible indicators that money had been spent. A PMC member in Lira pointed out that different sectors give different opportunities for accountability according to visible indicators: it is much easier to see how many schools have been built than to know about the quality of a road, or the details of exactly what a road sub-contractor has been asked to build. Neither PMC was attempting to monitor non-quantifiable indicators, nor the quality, inclusiveness or representativity of the processes of prioritisation through which PAF funds are directed towards the most pressing poverty reduction initiatives at the sub-county level.

A fourth challenge concerns the dynamics of citizen accountability. The Chair of the Bushenyi PMC sees part of her role as helping people to understand the connection between service provision and debt relief. She observed that people generally are not aware of such links, so that when politicians claim that they personally have provided goods or services, people see such goods as a gift from a politician, rather than something that they are entitled to from government.

Fifth, the effectiveness of the PMCs at this early stage of their evolution was being felt principally at the centre, via UDN, rather than at the district level, via an interface between PMC and district governments. The challenges of establishing not only the legitimacy of the PMC itself, but the legitimacy of the act of holding the government to account in a public and organised way, were at the early stages preventing direct influence on local processes.

While the experiences of the two district-level PMCs are encouraging first steps towards civil society holding government accountable at decentralised levels, there are clearly critical questions not only concerning the kind of information on which monitoring is constructed, but also about the broader politics of accountability in a local governance system where the boundary between civil society and government is not always clear, and where government approval is a necessary first step to obtaining information which may ultimately be used to criticise government. These contradictions pose challenges to the future success of such initiatives.

3.2.2 Civil Society in Tororo - a fragmented political landscape

The landscape of local politics in Tororo, cutting across government and civil society, is marked by infighting, corruption and ethnic partisanship. This has led some CSOs to seek other routes and entry points than direct engagement if they want to effect policy change. One example of this is the Bukedi Diocese Development Office, who have chosen to channel their energy into a Regional Inter-Faith Dialogue on poverty reduction. Through this, they are seeking partners and allies to build a network representing the greater political North, which aims to influence both central and district policy. Staff of BDDO describe this strategy as a conscious effort to disengage from the arena of local government contracting, which they balance with continuing direct engagement in community-level work and the building of a grassroots constituency. In this way they aim to avoid a space which they associate with corruption and 'ethnic banditry'.

Whilst some CSOs endeavor to disengage in this way, others owe their origins to the fragmented and contested political environment in Tororo. These are a phenomenon described as Councillor-led NGOs:

in certain extreme cases, CSOs leadership is made up of politically active personalities who tend to use such CSOs for political gains. They thus rely

on their political powers to spearhead development in the district, thereby undermining the non-partisan nature of CSOs (CDRN 2001).

Negative opinions about Councillor-led NGOs were strongly-held amongst respondents. A major source of resentment and anger concerned their superior access to information, particularly regarding the availability of resources, programmes and donors. One respondent pointed out that the very existence of Councillor-led NGOs is an indicator that local government is 'intrusive in civil society,' via mechanisms that are popularly held to be channels for corrupt contracting, and grants to non-existent entities.

The negative perception of Councillor-led NGOs gives rise to broader questions of representation, legitimacy and governance. The perception that governent entry into civil society constitutes an intrusion presupposes that a separation exists between the two. The study found that in Tororo, there were many policy actors who "wear more than one hat", who were active in government, in civil society, as well as in their geographic and social constituencies. It is partly due to the semi-corporate nature of the decentralised Ugandan state that the boundaries of government space and civil society space, if they exist independently from each other at all, are easily transgressed by policy actors with multiple identities (Allen, 2002; Lister and Nyamugasira, 2001).

What does this imply for potential spaces for the representation of the needs of poor people? The respondent who resented the 'intrusion' of government into civil society is an actor who sees himself as a representative of a poor constituency. His resentment obscures the possibility that a Councillor-led NGO may also represent a poor constituency, albeit one where the mechanism of representation is patronage. While Councillor-led NGOs have become a symbol for corrupt practices, their reality may be more complex.

One sub-county Woman Councillor who also heads an NGO was asked why she had formed the organisation. She replied

> I formed an NGO to get money to serve the people. In the district we don't have money; we always budget for only 2 days in a year to visit our constituency. But because of the debt burden[13] we don't get any funds.

Her reply reveals that she sees part of her role as representative as bringing funds into the district, and forming an NGO to sub-contract for available funds compensates for resources which representatives should be entitled to, but which they do not receive.

Civil society in Tororo is in some ways an extreme example, but it offers us an understanding of the dynamics of relationships between different actors within civil society, and the range of ways they occupy political space. Intervening in the policy process on behalf of poor people requires contextual analysis which goes beyond the simplified narratives of a separation between a political government and a non-political civil society.

3.2.3 Dynamics of Community Based Organisations – why do people form groups?

So far, most of our discussion has focused on CSOs which are centred at the district level, and which have at least some opportunity of direct engagement in a discernible policy process. Looking towards the community, however, different dynamics emerge. Here, the key civil society actors are Community Based Organisations (CBOs), and the policy process is enmeshed in the lower levels of the LC system.

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[13] Tororo District has a large outstanding debt to central government left by previous administrations

In all three of the districts of the study, there are many CBOs. They have a wide range of form and function, and they are founded for a range of reasons. Very often, formation is linked to a local understanding of poverty – credit unions as a solution to income poverty, or digging groups as a response to destocking. In all three districts, women's groups are extremely common, and are frequently associated with rotational credit schemes. One such group who attended a focus group discussion in Bushenyi, were asked why they had formed a group. One member replied

> enough is enough - we can't go on depending on men, even reaching to the extent of having to ask them for money to buy salt and soap for home use. Women want to be able to sustain their families and themselves. We women have to take charge and without money we can't do that.

A sense of 'taking charge' of a situation which is normally beyond control is an important feature of the formation of many CBOs. As notes from a focus group discussion in Lira pointed out, this sense of taking charge is perceived positively, aside from material gains: 'One member said and more than half of those present confirmed that benefits gained from within the group included sharing views and advising one another, mutual love, and building of their confidence.'

As one district-based NGO staff member commented, most CBOs rely on their own collective efforts, discussing their own ideas and initiatives for development; it is on the basis of their collective initiative that others come in and support them. This is not, however, the whole story. External stimuli are commonly a trigger to group formation, as well as the provision of support after formation, and they take a range of forms. One CBO in Bushenyi, headed by an educated woman resident in a town, was created specifically in response to an advertment placed by the Ministry of Health, looking for CBOs to undertake AIDS prevention awareness raising. As the head of the CBO candidly stated, 'it was more for business reasons.'

Also in Bushenyi, a representative of the District Farmers' Association pointed out that one of the functions of the association is to actively encourage the formation of interest groups at the parish level, creating associations of those who produce one crop so that farmers can be directed towards a market for their harvest. Such externally-stimulated agriculture-based CBOs are likely to proliferate as the PMA is more fully implemented, but are not exclusive to the production sector.[14] A Community Development Officer in Lira viewed CBOs as implementors of policy: 'they do the moblisation of people at the grassroots for Functional Adult Literacy[15]'. Both these examples show that the formation of local CBOs can owe a great deal to broad shifts in policy, whether the liberalisation of agricultural production, or the provision of education services.

Indigenously-formed CBOs and those formed as a response to an external stimulus represent very different types of organisation. There is in addition a third broad category of CBOs: those which are formed in response to an external stimulus which does not then provide resources. This was particularly common in Tororo, where a Women's Councillor commented

> Some are from the district, some are from NGOs, some are from the centre - but they are all saying that groups should be formed. But groups have formed and they have got nothing from these people who told them to form groups.

This process, frequently reported, had resulted in widespread demoralisation, and was seen by some to represent a culture of dependency which severely reduced potentials for collective action.

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[14] See Allen (2002) for more detail on the early implications of the PMA on group formation.
[15] A programme of Government of Uganda and donor partners

While it is difficult to generalise broadly, the most stable and effective CBOs encountered in the course of the study were those which were either the result of indigenous collective action, or based on a culturally-embedded institutional pattern which is adaptable to current circumstances. Perhaps the best example of the latter is the proliferation of neighbourhood digging groups in Lira district, which allow households to maximise their labour while they are forced, through destocking, to practice unmechanised agriculture. In this way, a traditional Lango lineage-based institution has been adapted to a contemporary political reality – Karamojong cattle raiding – in a direct attempt prevent whole communities falling further into poverty and food insecurity. The contrast with the "empty promise CBOs" of Tororo could not be greater.

Despite these differences between the form and function of CBOs, one thing that most of them hold in common is a feeling that they are disconnected from the activities of the lower Local Councils, and that poverty reduction activities, of the kind which they actually practice, are disconnected from the services and programmes of government. They largely exist in spite of local government, although sometimes they exist due to the failure of government to fulfil promises of service provision.

But notably they do not exist to allow ordinary people to pursue the entitlements which are their rights as citizens, and it is a fundamental shift in understandings of citizenship which would perhaps be required in a more general sense to transform civil society actors into active, engaged participants in the policy process.

3.3 Diversity, identity and agency: concluding thoughts on actors in the policy process

Our overview of the actors involved in the policy process at the district level and below has ranged from indigenous self-help CBOs in villages to

politicians and bureaucrats in district capitals. While there are clearly discernible differences between those actors who are labelled government and those who are labelled civil society, our findings suggest not only that these two labels capture an enormous diversity of different actors, but that the boundary between the two in the context of the no-party democracy is often blurred.

In discussing how actors engage in the poverty reduction policy process, we are also asking about the prospects for the emergence of policy which reflects the needs and priorities of poor people themselves. Making policy which responds to poor people's needs is largely dependent on how both people and their needs are represented in the policy process, and on the agency and power of poor people and their representatives. Thus, the prospects for pro-poor policy depend a great deal on diversity, not only of the types of actors that are engaged in the policy process, but of the interests, identities, expectations and perceptions of those actors.

The findings discussed above reveal the central importance of perceptions: the way that actors perceive themselves, and the way they are perceived by others. At one level, it is possible to say that many of the ordinary people we met and talked to in the course of this study perceived themselves as disempowered, as unrepresented, and as the losers in a game of corruption and patronage. Equally important were the perceptions, expressed in hundreds of different ways by a wide range of respondents, that government and civil society institutions are principally mechanisms for resource distribution. This is linked to another widely-held perception, that political representation is a commodity, to be bought and sold. This in turn obscures "the poor" as agents and as citizens, and significantly diminishes their power to act. Such a process of disempowerment gives a heightened importance to those actors who claim to represent a constituency of poor people. Such claims were made by MPs, by extension agents, by CSOs with a service provision mandate; each of these has an institutional as well as an individual

identity. It is often these institutional identities, including positioning within hierarchies, which determine the power to act on behalf of, or in the interests of, the poor.

If we hope to understand what policy actors do, and why, we cannot remove them either from the context of their own institution, or the context in which they act. In particular, different kinds of spaces allow possibilities for different kinds of action: a space can inhibit or reinforce the agency of any given actor. In terms of policy, there are spaces into which ordinary people and those who claim to represent them are invited, those from which they are excluded, and those which they create themselves. It is a discussion of the dynamics of some of these spaces which is the subject of the next section.

4. Spaces in the policy process

> Every space has its own story, its own 'generative past'[16]. The 'spatial practices' that constitute everyday development practice - holding public meetings, making 'community action plans', taking part in committees, bringing children to clinics to be weighed or injected - may appear dissociated by the logic of sectors or projects or what is seen to constitute 'policy'. Yet people, ideas, practices traverse these spaces, giving rise to particular understandings and practices of participation and citizenship.
>
> (Cornwall, 2002:4)

Visualising the policy process as a series of interlinked, overlapping spaces, traversed by people, ideas and practices, allows us to see policy as both dynamic and complex, as chaotic rather than predictable, and as ultimately power-laden. The idea that each space has its own story allows us to see that historical context is important. The notion of spatial practices, meanwhile, focuses our attention on the importance of action and movement, as well as the centrality of the 'everyday practices of development'. The idea of 'practice' takes our understanding of space beyond the physical: while a space may be a Council meeting, or a physical place in which a discussion happens, there are other things we can include in our understanding if it encompasses 'practice'. These are perhaps more abstract phenomena like the frameworks of rules and codes which surround funding, and behaviour.

Some of the spaces which exist in the policy process at the district level and below are what might be termed traditional policy spaces, where, for example, District Councillors meet to debate a proposed course of action. In some cases, like sub-county planning meetings, traditional spaces like these have changed their character, in the name of bottom-up planning, by the

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[16] Lefebvre 1991:110

invitation of a wider range of participants and the adoption of different rules and mechanisms which shape the action that occurs in that space.

In this section we examine some of the spaces we encountered during the course of the research, and think about their construction and their boundaries, and the impact these have on the agency of different actors in the policy process. What opportunity do different kinds of spaces offer for the elaboration for policy which responds to poor people's needs and priorities? What constraints exist to the representation of the needs of those living in poverty? What can we learn from the dynamics of existing spaces that might help us construct better ones, in which the rights of poor people can be articulated and influence the formulation and implementation of policy?

4.1 What shapes spaces?

The majority of the policy spaces which we looked at in the course of this research were in some way related to Government. Council, committee and planning meetings were three particularly important types of space, all of which may be seen as traditional policy spaces in the model above. We did of course encounter other spaces: the resource modalities imposed from above or outside on the processes of governance at the district level and below; the informal and backstage spaces of lobbying and closed decisionmaking; and even, in one case, a community meeting called to hold elected officials accountable for misuse of funds.

While these spaces are very different in character, some general patterns emerge about what shapes the participation of different actors in any particular space. In the first part of this section, we look at some of these patterns, before moving on to describe some of the dynamics we were able to observe in a range of scenarios.

4.1.1 Gender Relations

An overwhelmingly uniform finding of the research concerns the gendered nature of policy spaces. In all three districts, at all levels, women talked about the ways in which they are excluded from those spaces traditionally associated with policy and policymaking. As well as what women said, what we as researchers were able to observe about the dynamics of public spaces such as meetings and decisionmaking fora were held suggested that such spaces are structured in ways which limit women's participation. Box 4.1.1 below summarises observations made by research teams, concerning the way that women participated in policy spaces. It is important that these observations include both district and sub-county levels, both Councils and Committees, and include an interaction facilitated by an international NGO.

Women's Participation in Policy Spaces – researcher's notes from participant observation

Bushenyi District Budget Conference; 72 men: 5 women.
The majority of women at the meeting were Councillors; I did not see one among all the district staff present, except the senior economist who has already told us that she is the only woman at her level.

Kirewa sub-county Budget Conference, Tororo; 11 men: 3 women.
The three ladies are really active, surpassing even the male councillors but the Chairman has his way of putting them down […] One lady Councillor is very dissatisfied with the presentation and insists on it being improved so that they can easily understand. She asks for explanatory notes to be attached next time. She gets little support by her colleagues who were equally not satisfied but went along with the presentation. [...] The visibly angry lady responds "Mr. Chairman you are always ignoring women as if we are useless in this Council, you keep putting us off …"

> *Lira District Works Committee Budget Meeting; 12 men: 4 women.*
> The participation of women was disastrous - only one woman spoke at all, to request minutes of the previous meeting.
>
> *Project workshop of 'Support Decentralisation in Uganda', funded and convened by USAID, Tororo; 44 men, 11 women.*
> Before the break none of the women talked and the facilitators did not make an attempt to involve them. They were very timid as the issues were being discussed, but for prayers a lady volunteered. This gave me an impression that for most "serious" discussions the women's input is not sought, only for "lighter" tasks.

There was widespread agreement amongst respondents that women do not participate fully in policy spaces, either in terms of numbers, or in terms of the quality of their participation. One female District Councillor in Bushenyi pointed out that education of girls is high on her agenda partly because of this problem: there are simply not enough women 'able to do the work'. One village woman in Lira, who had been trying to follow up an apparent misuse of funds, said 'you know, education also helps; if you try to tell them, they just say to you "I know more". I am also younger, so I fear.'

While in some cases the 'ability' to 'do the work' of engaging in a policy space is concerned with educational levels or age, it is often the work in which women engage outside of the public spaces of governance which excludes them. This exclusion is sometimes very site-specific; in Tororo, on the Kenyan border, cross-border smuggling is a livelihood strategy predominantly taken up by women, and both the illegality and the time-consuming nature of the work prevent them from engaging in processes connected to the formal, legal world of government. In Bushenyi, meanwhile, one Women's Councillor observed that in her culture, the workload of women is such that it is difficult to find time to become a

Councillor, and that if one has a family, which most women active in politics do, 'it is very prohibitive'.   She did note however that husbands used to be an obstacle in this regard, but that this is beginning to change.

This note of optimism from Bushenyi was unique in the study. In a range of other comments, particularly from Lira, it is possible to see how cultural norms about the role of women pervade the spaces where women try to participate. In particular, one educated, articulate male opinion leader in a Lira village, when asked why so few women had attended a public meeting to decide village priorities, opined 'laziness, and lack of commitment.' Two male church leaders in a Lira village, when asked a similar question about Parish meetings, also pointed out how lazy women are, adding 'they do not come because they feel they will not be paid for coming.' When asked why they might feel this, one of the men replied, 'because they like money.' A male Community Development Officer in Tororo held the opinion that 'women always feel that they should be under men and so they are always submissive and they do not urge for their rights.' It is no surprise, given the common nature of narratives such as these, that - in the words of a village woman from Lira - 'most women fear talking among men.'

Such an apparent lack of participation in the formal policy process, however, must not be confused with a general lack of participation. If anything, women's activism in poverty reduction in wider arenas, outside the formality of policy spaces, highlights the fact that their lack of participation in spaces like council meetings is due to the structure of those spaces and the dominant narratives of gender relations which they mirror.

An account by a female sub-county Councillor from Lira is instructive in this regard:

> In the meeting of last week, a woman complained about the delay in the construction of Kazibwe Girl's Secondary School. But the response by men

was that the Chairman knew what he was doing; there was land dispute, which was being solved. The women suggested how the responsible persons should go about the dispute. Nobody listened. It hurt her so much because they as women struggled a lot to mobilise resources to put up this school.

The respondent went on to detail the extent of women's efforts to raise several million shillings through encouraging women from as many households as possible in the catchment area of the new school to contribute funds. Clearly, the issue here is not one of 'lack of women's participation' *per se*, but the fact that women are severely obstructed from holding accountable those people responsible for effective use of the resources they have raised, once these resources have passed into a space outside their control.

4.1.2 Language, rules and norms

Within the formal spaces of council and committee meetings, particularly at LCV level, but also to some extent at LCIII, respondents repeatedly noted that the question of language is a critical determinant of participation. When proceedings are conducted in English, as they often are at LCV level, there is a resulting exclusion, particularly of women, but also of others. The determinant of participation is not simply whether or not a person understands English, but whether or not they are comfortable articulating their ideas and opinions through that medium.

While this problem is commonly recognised[17], and some District Councils conduct bi-lingual proceedings, findings from Lira suggest that the more powerful have an interest in maintaining the status quo of spoken English.

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[17] See Ahikire et al, 2002 for a discussion of language and other mechanisms by which women are excluded from political participation

One female District Councillor narrated her view of an attempt to adopt bi-lingual proceedings in the Council:

> When the issue of language came up, a decision had already been made outside the Council. When the issue was tabled the speaker gave very few people the opportunity to speak. Thereafter he made a ruling. Yet the majority of the people were not in support of the motion, they knew Apac District Council uses both Luo and English. This decision has blocked so many people from participating. It is not only women who are quiet, some men are equally quiet.

The space represented by Lira District Council meetings is, in this example, shaped by a dominant minority in order to silence a disempowered majority. We also observed such exclusionary practices at lower levels in Bushenyi where, during focus groups conducted for the research, if a powerful individual wanted to dominate a group discussion, he would use the mechanism of switching to English in order to silence the opinions of the rest of the group. Several respondents expressed the opinion that UPE would one day help to resolve the broad issue of exclusion-by-language, but none suggested shorter term solutions.

Language is also part of a wider issue that, in the opinion of a District Councillor from Tororo, affects the power of different Council members to influence, or to have their interests addressed: the importance of presentation skills. He noted that those who lack capacity in this area often fail to be heard. While this is not surprising, it is important in terms of understanding the potential obstacles that poor people and their representatives may need to overcome to access such spaces; it also resonates with remarks made by CSOs both at this level and in the national study, that if one is not able to 'talk the talk', one will not be taken seriously.

In spaces like councils and committee meetings, adherence to an agenda is a spatial practice which shapes the policy process. Agendas are one of a series of rules and behavioural norms which actors entering such a space must navigate in order to achieve a degree of participation. They are the frameworks through which political machinations are processed. While rules might lend a sense of uniformity, of equality of applicability to all, our findings suggest that they are used in different ways by different actors. Equally, norms about expected behaviour constrain certain actors and enable others.

One example of the way that the space represented by Council meetings is shaped is given by a sub-county Veterinary technician in Bushenyi, who notes that

> in the council meetings we *[technical staff]* sit apart and do not talk. It is only the councillors who do the talking; we only participate if there is something that relates to our sector and they need clarification about it. Me, at times I forget and I sit with them, and then they tell you that you have sat in the wrong place you have to move.

It is not just physical space that is subject to such rules. A District Councillor from Lira summed up the opinions of a range of respondents when she outlined the socio-political space in which the agenda of Council meetings is arrived at:

> The business committee that comprises the Secretaries and Chairpersons of the different committees prepares the agenda. Other members are free to add on the list. But this depends on the Speaker; at times if he does not support an issue or he has been lobbied prior to the meeting then the issue will be frustrated. So before you present an issue for discussion you should lobby.

It is crucial to note that even the relatively small range of actors included in this process do not have equal agency. As our research in other areas reveals, some Committees – each of which represents a different government department – are far more powerful than others, and each has its own distinct character. The process of lobbying and the spaces in which it takes place – discussed in more detail below – are far from equitable, and many kinds of people are excluded at this stage because of gender, or ethnicity, or their lack of connections to the networks of the powerful.

A similar process of agenda-setting was outlined at the sub-county level in Bushenyi, with the additional difficulty that, because of lack of funds, the Committees themselves do not sit as often as they should, giving relatively more power to the LCIII Executive, which sits more frequently. A sub-county Councillor in Tororo district details an agenda-setting process which, as with the one outlined for the Lira District Council, is dominated by a single powerful individual – in this case the LCIII Chairman – who controls the agenda, but also in this case acts specifically to exclude a certain kind of knowledge:

> The Chairman prepares the agenda for the meetings. […] Those issues that he does not want, do not appear. For instance, for me, I go to the villages and collect information, take it to the LCIII meetings, but it is never utilised and so nothing comes out of it.

Whilst some formal behavioural norms, like agenda-setting, exclude certain actors and knowledges, some have developed as a response to the exclusion of a particular kind of actor. This seems particularly true of technical staff. One district technician from Bushenyi observed that

> the Chair is biased against some of the things the technicians want to bring up so doesn't let us talk. So there you have to bring up the issue

with a Councillor beforehand; the Councillor then brings it up and you can be called on to talk about it.

This is an example of a mechanism which has developed in response to a perceived exclusion of one actor by another: by calling on a third actor, some space is re-gained for the participation of the excluded actor.

Other practices that are a feature of policy spaces are also a response to actors who are absent from the space. In the case of a Works Committee Meeting in Lira, the absent actors are donors. Researchers' notes from this meeting observe that

the taking of minutes is for outsiders, not for participants themselves - for donors to come and see that you have been meeting - as a criteria for funding. But minute-taking doesn't help them to reflect on what they have done in the past. This practice is more for allowances than decision-making. Signing the attendance book was the most important and urgent thing about the meeting.

What these examples about the process and procedures of traditional policy spaces suggest is that the status quo favours more powerful actors, who are usually able-bodied men, well-versed in the arts of lobbying, and often of a dominant ethnic group. While few respondents were directly reflecting on whether such spaces contain the opportunity for making pro-poor policy, their remarks suggest that considerable structural obstacles exist to incorporating the views of groups who are socially and politically marginalised in the discussions that take place in the meetings which are so important in deciding policy priorities and resource allocations.

4.1.3 Contextual structures and institutions: formal and external

As we saw at the end of the previous section, actors who are absent from a policy space can affect dynamics within it. Such absent actors are representative of the contextual structures and institutions within which a policy space is embedded. These structures include the rules and practices of resource conditionalities, and are therefore often linked to the institutional spaces and practices of both international development actors and of central government. The structure of resource conditionalities has a particularly powerful effect on policy implementation, as well as heavily influencing the traditional spaces of state governance.

A reflection by one CAO concerning how different actors affect the DDP – itself a policy space encompassing a range of invited stakeholders participating in different ways – is revealing about the role both of external actors, and the power of their resources.

> All stakeholders are meant to participate [ie. donors too] in formulating the DDP from local up to District level. We produce the DDP. What the NGOs do is come when we present the way forward for Bushenyi, we tell them that we are planning to do - a, b and c - each sector presents plans, problems, what it needs to move ahead. NGOs then respond that they will support a, b or c. Some do not come to the workshop. Then they come along later with their money, saying that they want to do x and y. Of course we cannot say no.

This narrative is particularly revealing in two ways. Firstly, the conflation of donors and NGOs into one defining characteristic, that of an actor who brings resources into the planning process. Secondly, while some of these resource-bringing actors clearly play according to the rules – that is to say, they attend planning meetings and offer to fund part of the menu of proposed activities on offer – others make their own rules – that is to say, they 'come along later'. What is most apparent is that rules can be rewritten

by external actors, who exercise agency via their command of resources: they buy power to shape policy at the planning stage.

Conditionalities also affect implementation, and many of the same arguments apply. The CAO again:

> A donor decides to construct roads in the south-west. The funds are to come from the African Development Bank. The Ministers go to Abidjan. There are two years of discussions. In the fourth year implementation starts. Machines come to Bushenyi. They propose to select contractors through competitive bidding with x, y, z criteria. The contractors sign the contract, verified by a consultant who is brought specially from abroad for the purpose. One condition is a hugely complex contractual process if you want to terminate a contract.   It takes a year. The contractor is holding you to ransom - he has not delivered and you cannot get rid of him. These are loan funds that Government ends up having to pay back.

While external resources are one important source of funding for development activities and service provision, they are not the only ones. Districts rely on local revenue, from a range of taxes,[18] conditional grants like the Poverty Action Fund and the Local Government Development Fund which fund sectoral activities, and unconditional grants, from which staff salaries are paid.   Staff in all three districts made reference to the difficulties of managing not only these three basic sources of funding, with their different systems of collection, access, conditionality and co-funding, but additional systems which are associated with funding from, for example, bilateral donors or international NGOs.

It was particularly notable when researchers observed Committee meetings at the district level that the participation of different kinds of actors – elected politicians, technical staff and bureaucrats – was mediated by their level of

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[18] Including the poll tax known as Graduated Tax

understanding of the complexities of funding conditionalities. The shape of space in which decisions about policy are taken, particularly about priorities for implementation when funding is limited, is inevitably influenced by these external structures. In Lira, for example, a District Production Committee meeting which was supposed to focus on quarterly work-planning ended up in a long discussion of the complexities of exactly why PAF funding to the district had been delayed, and who could possibly be held accountable for this, or lobbied so that the situation could be changed. Was it the fault of donors, of central government, of other departments of the district, of individual persons in the district administration? These vexed issues completely supplanted a discussion of the merits of different strategies for supporting resource-poor farmers with an efficient extension service.

Clearly a great deal of power is exercised through the structures of conditionality. But to what extent can we characterise resource modalities as closed spaces which exclude certain actors? A sub-county Graduate Extension Officer in an isolated part of Lira district provides something of an answer to this question. When visiting the District Production Office, he saw a report of the CAO's Office about the Equalisation Grant[19], asking the Production Department for a budget to allocate the expenditure of the Grant. His understanding of this letter allowed him to push in the Production Department for more of the Equalisation Grant to support the kind of activities that he himself was engaged in with farmers. But it was complete coincidence that he saw the report at all: there is no systematic way that an actor such as this – geographically isolated, and relatively low in the hierarchy - can access such information, and as such the space in which resource allocation decisions are made is closed to him. If the Extension Officer had not seen the letter, the decision would have rested with his senior colleagues in the Production Department. He remarked, 'I feel cheated by this.'

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[19] A grant made to poorer Districts who have low projected graduated tax revenues, from Central Government. Lira is entitled; Bushenyi and Tororo are not.

Summing up this discussion is perhaps best left to the Secretary of the Works Committee of Tororo District Council, who observed that

> Local Government are supposed to be implementors - but we need flexibility. Funding that comes, comes with very definite instructions - but this leaves us no flexibility, about whether to spend the funds in a labour intensive way and get it done slowly, or in a capital intensive way, to get it done quickly. So we have to do it the way we are told, even when there are times that it really doesn't make sense [...] Donor money must be utilised for the job it has been given for - the World Bank is saying this. They talk and talk and talk but they never come to us. If there was a regular dialogue at the district level... They think of Local Governments as mediocre. But here all the members of the Executive are graduates. They must address us to get to the sub-county, the unit of development – we know the strengths and weaknesses of our own chiefs - how can they know that? When the World Bank does come, they just talk to a few people in Finance, no-one else.

4.1.4 Contextual structures and institutions: informal and local

While the context of distant external institutions informs the nature of policy spaces at the district level, at lower levels it is the sometimes the informal institutions of local culture which shape the opportunities open to ordinary people to participate or be represented in the policy process.

In all three sites to some extent, there is a role for traditional councils of elders and cultural leaders to act as mediators between local people and formal spaces. These range from councils of elders in Bushenyi, who will attempt to settle disputes before they are passed to the LCI. One women's group, which perceived that their LCI Chairman was not interested in their

problems, resorted to presenting their issues to the *Sabataka*, the cultural head of the village, but all he was able to do was re-present their problems to the LCI Chairman. The women expressed disappointment that no alternative channel existed for their problems 'to reach the policy-makers.' Similarly, in Tororo, it was reported that the traditional clan structure liaised with the LCI in planning for the eradication of food insecurity; but again, effective agency was seen to be limited by this connection, rather than enhanced.

While these are examples of attempts to use local structures to gain access to policy spaces, there is also the question of informal, local spaces which exist alongside the more formal structure. An LCI Councillor from Lira observed

> there are a lot of ethnic issues - if you don't drink and you aren't of the dominant ethnic group, you don't get elected. More decisions get made at the drinking group, not in the formal place, and election results are decided before the elections even happen. There is a lot of ethnicity - that is why they never elect people who are knowledgeable. There is no space to vote the right people.

The drinking group as a place where relatively powerful local actors meet and make decisions was frequently mentioned in Lira and Tororo. Drinking places are also a critical backstage space at the district level, where different actors argue and make points which they would be unlikely to make in a formal space. One notable example from the research was when two researchers sought out an informant at a drinking place one evening. A respondent who, during an interview earlier in the day had been praising the pro-poor, egalitarian nature of UPE, was heard to ask 'why bother with these UPE schools? Let poor people send their children to these schools; we can send ours to academies in Kampala.'

While these drinking spaces are still public there is a sense that they exist behind doors which are closed to some, and are a significant site for untransparent networking and politics. Although it is almost impossible in research like this to comment on exactly how the dynamics of these backstage spaces might affect the frontstage spaces traditionally associated with policy, it is clear that the two cannot be disconnected in the search for entry points for representatives of poor people to act effectively.

5. Prospects for a different kind of policy?

As we stated at the opening of this report, our research was undertaken with the aim of trying to understand the prospects and opportunities for a different kind of policy, one which reflects the needs and priorities of poor people. As our exploration of knowledge, actors and spaces has identified, the policy processes that we observed in Bushenyi, Lira and Tororo are scattered with obstacles of attitude and practice which militate against the representation of poor people's priorities.

In searching for entry points to a different kind of policy, we have encountered a series of critical disconnections which currently inhibit the responsiveness of policy to poverty reduction priorities. Thinking about how to overcome such disconnections may lead us towards strategies for change.

Underpinning these disconnections is the language of development and poverty reduction. If one were simply to observe the increased number of "participatory planning events", or to read material about bottom-up planning in the decentralised system coming from Kampala, one may easily be led to believe that Uganda is well on its way to developing a responsive policy process, driven by demands emerging from the grassroots. In this narrated story, the participation of poor people and their representatives is the principal mechanism through which pro-poor policy is to be achieved.

What our study shows, however, is that narratives like this rely on words and phrases imported from orthodox international discourses of development – bottom-up, demand-driven, participatory, accountable – which mean very different things to different people   While these words might suggest a coherent set of practices, this is not the reality of the situation.   Although their inclusion in the discourse implies that politics and power are central issues in policy change, their actual use and the activities that are carried out under their name frequently suggest the reverse.   Often, the processes that are given these labels are used to simplify diverse knowledges, to reinforce unequal power relations, and to constrain alternative, indigenous solutions to poverty reduction.

While the narratives and discourses of poverty reduction policy underpin the policy process itself, the critical disconnections emerge at different stages and levels, and between different configurations of actors, knowledges and spaces.

There is a disconnection between diverse knowledges about the experience, causes and impacts of poverty, and policy formulation and implementation. While there are increasingly mechanisms in place which are at least rhetorically committed to overcoming this disconnect, such as "bottom-up, participatory planning", analysis of the spaces they create suggest that exclusionary power relations influence the kinds of knowledge that are created within them.   Further, the staging of an event for participation to occur is little or no guarantee either that knowledge arising from the event will be used, how it might be used, or by whom.

There is a disconnection in terms of communication between actors.   Across this study, diverse modes of communication emerge: sensitisation, rumour, consultation, extension, blame.   The way that people become informed of a changed opportunity to participate, or the way that they are invited into or excluded from a policy space, is often a matter of adopting one of these

modes of communication. And, across all sites and levels of the study, many people said that communication was blocked. This was particularly true of the vertical linkages which are meant to connect people to upper levels of government. This finding has particular implications for representation; the struggle to communicate means that many people at the bottom of the governance structure feel un-represented.

There is a disconnection between the perceptions of idealised roles – what *should* happen – and practice – what *does* happen. This is as true of the way that elected officials carry out their jobs, as it is of what happens in a sub-county Planning Workshop. The disjunct between what should happen and what does happen could provide a doorway to understanding some of the key issues the prevent the representation of poor people's needs and priorities. Why is what happens different from what should happen? The issues of gender relations, corruption and exclusion of minorities were all highlighted here, and all require attention if this gap is to be closed.

Finally, there is a disconnection between ordinary citizens and their representatives which is a major obstacle to the development of an accountable policy process. This disconnection is fed by the first three, and further augmented by the equation of political representation with resource allocation.

It is perhaps this last point which offers us the most fruitful opportunity to address how the policy process may be changed. It suggests that policy is deeply political, and that challenging the apolitical presentation of orthodox development narratives may be necessary if structural changes are to occur. These need to happen not only at the level of constructive work with citizens about rights and entitlements, but work with elected representatives concerning their obligations, and continued emphasis on opening existing policy spaces to a wider range of actors. These changes must occur in a

context of a greater awareness of the dynamics of the spaces in which policymaking happens.

Such a conclusion may seem far away from poor people and their lives; and yet, if this study has shown us anything, it is that poor people and their lives are embedded in structures and institutions which stretch widely across space and culture. Recognising this implies also the recognition that the changes needed to move towards a different kind of policy are concerned with root and branch, with governance, politics, resource distribution and power. The challenge from here will be to identify concrete strategies by which change might occur.

Annex One

District Dissemination Events on the 'Poverty Knowledge And Policy Process'
Research Project

The research documented by this report was undertaken to better
understand how policy for poverty reduction can be made more responsive to
the needs and priorities of poor people, as well as increasing the
accountability of policy implementation. As a follow up to the field research
stage of the project, dissemination events were organised in Bushenyi, Lira
and Tororo districts between August – October 2002. The aim of the events
was to share the research findings and lessons learnt in the districts. It was
also hoped that this would culminate into a more long-term advocacy
process.

The specific objectives of the dissemination were:

♦ To create awareness amongst government officials, civil society
   representatives, politicians and donors to better understand what happens
   in the policy process as perceived by the different actors in the policy
   arena, challenges in the policy process, and prospects for a policy process
   that genuinely represents the needs of the poor.
♦ To engage the above stakeholders to discuss the implications of the
   research findings and how the policy process can be made more
   responsive and accountable to the needs of the poor.
♦ To seek their commitment and participation in making the policy process
   more pro-poor and accountable.

The research highlighted that the three districts had similar as well as
different challenges in the policy process. For each district therefore, key
specific challenges were identified, and findings about these challenges
packaged to inform the dissemination process.

The major methods used for the dissemination were posters, radio programmes, workshops and local newspaper articles. Posters using cartoons and local languages were designed to disseminate the research findings to the wider community, specifically to the sub-counties and villages were the research took place. Four sets of posters were designed, the first three portraying factors that hinder the policy process from being pro-poor (exclusion, representation and accountability) and the fourth, a vision of an ideal, pro-poor policy process. These posters were displayed two weeks before the radio programme and workshop.

The radio programme was also used to disseminate the research findings, both to the wider community and to those who were to attend the workshop the following day. Three representatives from the District local government and CSO sector participated in the talk show in each district.

Finally a 1-day district forum was held in each district, involving CSOs and Government officials from sub-counties and district, bringing about 40 people together per district. Parts of these fora were recorded on film and footage used for dissemination events in Kampala. The objectives of the district workshops were:

♦ To share the research findings
♦ To discuss the implications of the findings.
♦ To develop an action plan for the district.

In all the districts this workshop created yet another policy space for the different actors to learn about the policy process to engage with each other, to agree and disagree. The most glaring disagreement was between CSOs and local government, with each side blaming the other for contributing to the problems of the policy process. In one district the majority of government participants did not attend, or stayed only briefly, because they

perceived the District Forum as a space where they would be held accountable for the perceived mismanagement of resources in the district.

The major achievement of the workshop was the development of plans by each district to contribute to a responsive and accountable pro-poor policy process. A positive pointer is that some civil society networks have taken these plans seriously and have pledged to work hard in the direction of a pro-poor policy process. Each district plans was later published in the regional newspaper as a "pullout" in the local language.

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