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The Role Of Civil Society In Decentralised Governance For Poverty Reduction: The Experience In West Africa

Paper Presented By

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

UN	-	United Nations
IMF	-	International Monetary Fund
UNDP	-	United Nations Development Programme
HDR	-	Human Development Report
NGO	-	Non-Governmental Organisation
PRSP	-	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
ECOWAS	-	Economic Community of West African States
NEPAD	-	New Partnership for Africa's Development
MDG	-	Millennium Development Goals
ADB	-	African Development Bank
ECA	-	Economic Commission for Africa
OAU/AU	-	Organisation of African Unity/African Union
EU	-	European Union
FAO	-	Food and Agriculture Organisation

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Introduction

“The proportion of global poverty attributable to Africa is rising, and the likelihood is that this will continue unless there are radical changes to policies and performance” (African Poverty at the Millennium, World Bank, 2001). It has become increasingly clear in recent years that the effectiveness of efforts in developing countries to achieve their human development goals hinges largely on the quality of governance in those countries and the extent to which their governments interact with civil society organisations to accomplish these goals.

In the last ten years, the spread of democratic governments and market-based economic systems have unleashed a tremendous debate and effort towards advancing popular participation in governance and development in African countries. The evidence is that central governments have started to allocate more of the national budget to local authorities and are facilitating a greater role for civil society organisations and the private sector in providing improved and more focused support to both central and local government in development.

In addition to national level efforts, there are major regional and international initiatives to help Africa in the above pursuit. These include the United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on Africa to mobilize the concerted support of all UN agencies on behalf of African development, launched in 1996, New Partnership for Africa’s Development, the World Bank and IMF sponsored Poverty Reduction Strategies for development planning, among others.

This paper examines, through theoretical and case reviews, the purposes, principles, methods and forms of governments’ partnership with civil society in decentralised governance for poverty reduction. The discussion will lead to major lessons, which may serve as benchmarks for replication in analogous situations. For the most part, the scope of survey will focus on the West African sub-region.

Chapter One: The Socio-Economic Context

Since their attainment of political independence in the early 1960s, the economic performance in most sub-Saharan African countries have remained at levels which may never take them out of poverty. This is largely attributable to overwhelming deficiencies in their development strategies and policies. The current UNDP Regional Human Development Report for West and Central Africa recaps the African economic debacle as follows: “By 1990, Africa was in the throes of a thirty-year-old economic crisis. Today, over ten years later, the crisis

is still present and Africans, guided by their “friends” of the international community are still on the development battlefield or are fervently groping in the dark in search of the light at the end of the tunnel. At the end of the 1990s, Africa remained the poorest continent in the world, the most backward technologically, the most indebted and the most marginalized. With 12.5% of the world’s population, it only produces 3.7% of the world’s wealth”.

Indeed, at the end of the 1990s, which had been dominated by stabilization and structural adjustment programmes and the market paradigm, the socio-economic condition on the continent had worsened such that, 34 out of the then 49 Least Developed Countries were in Africa and nearly 45% of the continent’s population lived below the poverty line. Currently, all but three West African countries are classified as low human development countries . The situation with most socio-economic indicators is equally alarming .

A major paradigm shift to the concept of “Development With A Human Face”, propagated by the United Nations bodies, is bound to ameliorate the misery that underlies these startling statistics. In that regard, and with the staunch sponsorship of the development partners, the orientation of development thinking and management is gradually shifting from the market paradigm to approaches, which now favour democratic, decentralised, participatory governance with a major role for civil society and the private sector. This new paradigm of development “enables all individuals to enlarge their human capabilities to the full and to put those capabilities to their best use in all fields – economic, social, cultural and political” (HDR 1994).

Chapter Two: Decentralised Governance

Governance

Governance comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which collective decisions are made and implemented, citizens, groups and communities pursue their visions, articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences.

Among other characteristics, UNDP qualifies the concept of good governance by the following attributes:

- Participation: i.e. all men and women have a voice in decision-making
- Transparency: i.e. free flow of information
- Equity: i.e. opportunity to improve the well-being of all men and women
- Empowering and Enabling: i.e. ability to pursue legitimate goals
- Partnership: i.e. involvement of stakeholders in conducting the business of governance at all levels
- Spatially grounded in communities: i.e. empowering communities to be self-reliant, self-organizing and self-managing

These qualities must be, and are embodied in the various decentralisation programmes and distinguish participatory governance from a centralised approach to development.

Decentralisation

Some analysts have described Decentralisation as the middle-road between centralism and anarchy. This is the transfer of authority and responsibility between the central and sub-national institutions of governance. Although experience suggests that decentralisation is no guarantee of good governance, many believe that decentralizing governance from the centre to the regions, districts, local communities etc. is more conducive to good governance.

Concerns regarding central administrative capacity, fiscal constraints and the limited accountability at all levels of government have led African leaders and the region's development partners to place increased emphasis on the importance of decentralisation and developing capacity for effective local governance. The other supporting argument for decentralisation is the need for improved government effectiveness in the delivery of goods and services, the promotion of revenue collection, enhanced popular participation as a means of making the public sector more accountable, and empowering people previously excluded from decision-making.

As a result of these motivations, the past two decades have seen efforts at installing various forms of decentralised systems of development management as part of major public sector management reforms in Africa. The forms of decentralisation in these countries have ranged from those that are comprehensive in scope and are designed to transfer development planning and management responsibilities, as well as revenue collection authority to local units of government, to those that are more narrowly conceived, just delegating, deconcentrating or divesting administrative authority among subsidiary or counterpart units.

In most of West African countries, particularly in the previously assimilated francophone countries, the forms of decentralisation were inherited from the colonial system and have remained the mainstay of their administrative structure. Unlike the francophones, some of the West African countries, including Ghana and Guinea, have major programmes of decentralisation currently underway. Apart from these, Nigeria has strengthening its federal system by further disaggregating the number of federal states and empowering them, despite the obvious resource constraints.

Decentralisation Examples In West Africa

a. Guinea:

Guinea started a reform of its territorial government in 1986, initially through delegation of government authority to local subsidiaries. Legislation and regulations enacted in 1986 and 1990 govern the financial and administrative

structures of the local government system (i.e. communes and rural development communities). The local government entities are all financially autonomous with deliberative and executive bodies.

Participation of civil society through a variety of grassroots organisations (NGOs, cooperatives, professional associations, etc.) has reinforced the decentralisation process. Currently, Guinea has 690 local NGOs, 78 foreign NGOs and approximately 4,000 cooperatives and associations. Thus, on the surface, it may seem that Guinea has substantial institutional base for a successful decentralised development management.

However, decentralised governance in Guinea has significant obstacles. These include:

- Resistance to change in central government and local government
- Inadequate capacity of grassroots organisations to design, prepare and manage and evaluate development programmes and projects
- Lack of financial means
- Gender inequality is blatant in the distribution of decision-making positions. Few women have decision-making power in prefectures and sub-prefectures, but none in the higher local government bodies.

With these major inhibitions, it may be presumed that, decentralised governance, though a major development strategy in Guinea, is quite constrained.

b. Ghana:

Ghana has chosen, as its form of decentralisation, devolution of central administrative and fiscal authority to the sub-government levels. This entails:

- fusion of selected governmental agencies into one administrative unit in the regions, districts and communities
- divestiture of administrative and fiscal policy authority from the central government to the District Assemblies
- realignment of these functions within the District Assemblies
- realignment of the functions and responsibilities of the various levels of government, i.e. central, regional, district, etc.
- strengthening of capacity at all levels of government to support the reforms.

To facilitate the District Assemblies' financial resource mobilisation and management, the following measures have been instituted:

- The Central Government Treasuries in the Districts have been merged into the District Assembly Treasuries to enhance fiscal management authority of the District Assemblies
- District Tender Boards have been established under the District Assemblies to empower their financial management authority

- Payments for contracts up to a defined threshold have been decentralised to the District Assemblies

Acknowledging further that financial strength is cardinal to effective local government authority, the government has ceded a number of locally generated revenue items to the District Assemblies. These include:

- i. Rates (basic, property)
- ii. Fees commercial, civil)
- iii. Licences (pets, hotels , alcohol sale, lorry parks)
- iv. Business Operating Permits
- v. Rents
- vi. Trading Services by the District Assemblies

Depending on the resource endowment of districts, these sources are active or redundant. Furthermore, the government has other transfers, including:

- District Assemblies Common Fund:
i.e. 5% of total national tax revenue shared among District Assemblies in quarterly installments for infrastructure development
- Share of Royalties (timber royalties, minerals development fund) from agencies and companies operating in areas of jurisdiction of the District Assembly
- Education Trust Fund
- HIPC Relief transfers
- Social Investment Fund

These financial empowerment mechanisms, coupled with legal and administrative enhancements, are aimed at strengthening the decentralisation process in Ghana.

The above signifies an example of a resolute effort to advance the decentralised administration process. However, as in most African countries, decentralised governance, being an emerging public administration methodology, has its teething constraints, among them being:

- resistance to change at the central and local government level
- lack of physical infrastructure and qualified personnel for decentralised administration
- inadequate budgetary resources
- power distance, with the result that while the essence of decentralisation is to bring administration to the doorsteps of the local people, the society and social groups are marginalized from official decision-making.

While decentralised governance seems to be the dominant logic of the current development administration paradigm, the practice does not depict a total

willingness of governments for its full deployment. A major question then is whether decentralised governance is an approach whose time has come; if yes, then which are the overriding principles by which country progress may be assessed?

Chapter Three: Participatory Governance

As in many other countries, participatory governance in the observed West African governments functions on the basis of known stakeholders. Key among the lot are:

- government
- representative assemblies/parliament
- organised civil society
- private sector
- poor and vulnerable groups
- the general public
- donors

All the government systems avail themselves a role for a combination of these stakeholders in their priority setting, policy making, resource allocation and/or programme implementation. Through the intermediation of these stakeholders, participatory interactions are channeled in the government's interest. The effect of participation has varied from country to country, influenced by the following principles:

- **Country ownership:** active involvement of the national stakeholders and lead role for national institutions in the major stages of the design, implementation and monitoring of activities, which induce commitment and responsibility for results and enhance effective coordination.
- **Target:** participatory processes must be conducted with clearly defined objectives and outcomes to guide agenda setting and corresponding actions.
- **Inclusion:** participation is more likely to be effective if it is based on broad based consultations among the key stakeholders, whose concerns are factored into the decision making process
- **Transparency:** transparency of actions by leaders builds trust and support among all stakeholders.

Risks and Limitations of Participation

In several cases, the experience of the participatory process in governance has encountered major constraints, including:

- conflicting interests, differing bargaining powers and limited trust among stakeholder groups that result in disorganization of the process
- diverse perceptions by different stakeholders concerning the participation process and the possible stalemate in required actions

- insufficient sharing of information between participants in the process, resulting in restrained synergy
- lack of political will among government agents to allow wide participation because they fear loss of power or influence
- limited time, capacity and finance
- consultation fatigue

The Merit Of Civil Society Organisations

Among the major stakeholders mentioned above, civil society organisations are gradually emerging as the effective pressure group that is capable of serving the dual role of collaborating with and facilitating the government sector in the development management process, and yet constituting a watchdog for diligence of the governance function. Being specific purpose and often specialised organisations, they are positioned to augment governments' capacity to develop people-tested policies, design and formulate realistic programmes and actions and implement development activities. Helping civil society to contribute to the maturation of Africa's polity and economy is the continuing aim of the African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation. This Charter views popular participation as "a fundamental right of the people to fully and effectively participate in the determination of the decisions which affect their lives at all levels and at all times".

Despite civil society's obvious benefits to democratic governance, some African leaders view them with suspicion, at times as political competitors and therefore place impediments in their way.

Organisation Forms Of Civil Society Participation In Decentralised Governance

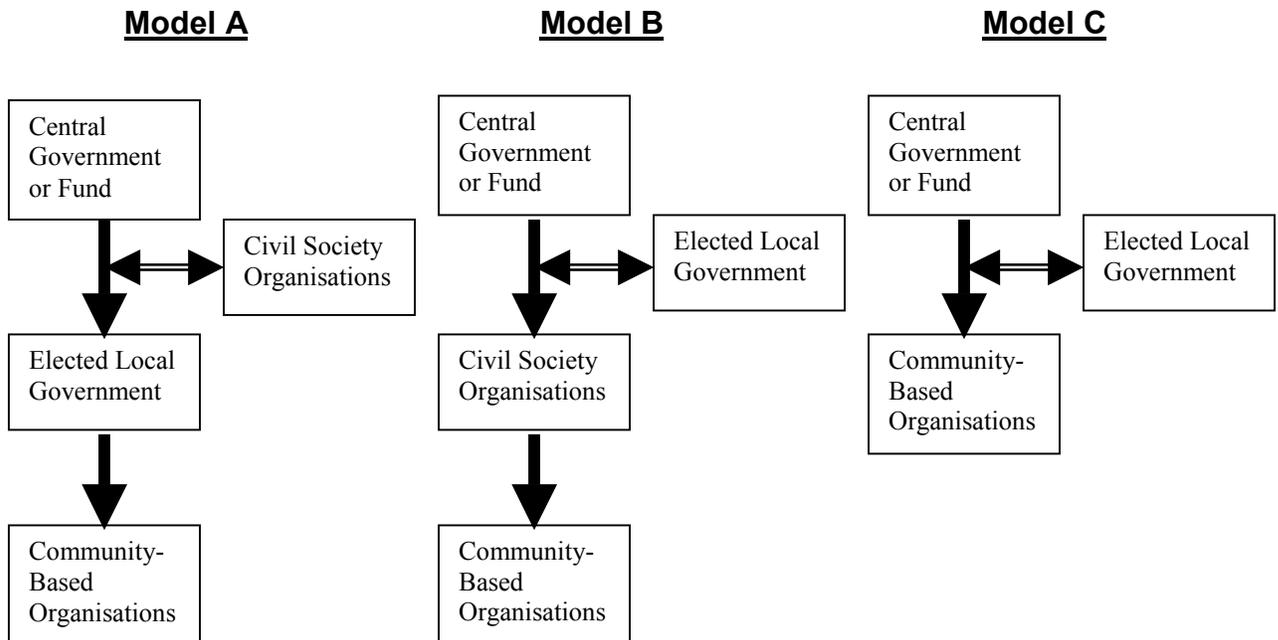
Various organisation forms have been adopted as participatory arrangements for civil society in decentralised governance. In addition to the status of civil society in the country, the main determinant of the participation format in most countries is the nature of decentralisation adopted. Where governments are concurrent to civil society role and the bodies are well organised, they occupy a prominent role in the decentralised structure; however, in situations where the government's official decentralised institutions are active and efficient, civil society role becomes minimized. The more notable of these participation arrangements are illustrated in figure 1 below.

The figure shows the variety of organisation forms between the central governments or central funding agencies (including donors), local or municipal governments and civil society organisations, including the private sector in the community development function. In the countries where decentralisation has become formalized and effective, with devolution of resources and functions to local governments, the Model A is pre-eminent in decentralised governance. In that scenario, development funds flow from the center to the local governments for onward disbursement to beneficiaries and programmes/projects. Civil society

organisations provide support at the community level, but they operate within the sector plans defined for the target communities. This option allows for more coordinated and efficient intergovernmental resources transfer and better regulated development. The example of such countries as Ghana and Guinea, where decentralisation has the form of effective devolution are cases in point.

Figure 1

Selected Models Of Participatory Administration



On the other hand, where decentralisation is largely a decongestion programme, with decentralisation being an informal arrangement rather than a deliberately promulgated administrative methodology, the Model B has the prime of place in decentralised governance. Under that arrangement, civil society is at greater liberty to initiate and implement programmes and activities without necessarily recourse to the official structures, even though local or municipal authorities may provide support to this role. Though this liberal environment may auger well for greater competition among the development organisations in the decentralised system, it also has the danger of falling to resources duplication through overlapping activities of these development organisations, lack of coordination with sectoral plans, non-relevance to priority community needs and possible misapplication of resources. This model is the semblance of the system in some of the former French colonies, e.g. la Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin. In these cases, decentralisation is more of a decongestion of public function from the centre, with civil society playing a dominant role in the development of the communities. The desertification project in Senegal and the environmental programme in Benin, being huge development initiatives, are largely through civil society initiatives and authority, with limited coordination from the local government authorities.

Scenario C is mainly encountered in major political, economic and security situations, where the direct authority of the central agencies is absolutely necessary. In that case, while civil society organisations are removed from the strategic reckoning, these grassroots organisations are eventually involved in a consultative capacity, in social mobilisation and in delivery of selected services.

It is important to note that, these models are not specific to country groups. Rather, they mix in countries, with the dominant model representing the country format.

A major area of special effort in most African countries is the challenge of mainstreaming women in politics and public administration, both at the national, community and even household levels. The impact has been largely weak, as the effort has not been much resolute and some governments have not been much focused on the issue of women in development. Nonetheless, there is the emergence of women as parliamentarians, ministers, senior public servants and community leaders. This trend will blossom, now that women are assuming the mantle of advancing their own societal fortunes. It is expected that, once they become well organised, their role in participatory governance will be far-reaching.

Chapter Four: The Role of Civil Society In Decentralised Participatory Governance For Poverty Reduction

A large number of poverty reduction initiatives have dominated the development strategies of the sub-region. These span a wide area of policy development, macroeconomic management, programmes implementation, qualitative and quantitative studies and analysis, etc. Indeed, nearly all civil society organisations are inclined to poverty reduction. Currently, in the midst of the multiplicity of individual initiatives by the development stakeholders, the international community has embarked on major cross-country initiatives for poverty reduction, which inform the strategies and framework for economic development in the individual countries. These are the Poverty Reduction Strategies Papers, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, the International Millennium Development Goals, and others. The following discussion demonstrates the implementation of these major initiatives as examples of civil society involvement in decentralised governance for poverty reduction.

Poverty Reduction Strategies Papers

The new economic development paradigm of the international development community requires all low-income countries receiving debt relief under the HIPC initiative or concessional loans from the World Bank to develop country-owned poverty reduction strategies as the overriding framework for medium to long term development. This programme is currently on the agenda of 70 low-income countries, including the majority of sub-Saharan African countries. To date, nearly all sixteen West African countries are at various stages of developing

Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP). As at the end of 2002, the IMF and the World Bank had reviewed either the interim or the substantive Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers of Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and a few others in the West African sub-region.

The process of developing these blueprints exemplify a strong commitment to decentralised participatory planning with central roles for civil society. In Ghana, the government contracted a reputable NGO coalition to lead the participatory process. In Guinea, learning from the limitations to decentralised governance, the government anchored the process of drafting and implementing that country's poverty reduction strategy in participatory principles. According to that country's Poverty Reduction Policy Statement Letter (February 2000) "participation and ownership are among the key principles that govern the drafting and implementation of the poverty reduction strategy paper". An examination of a sample number of country PRSPs show that, every country took to participatory methods in the formulation of these development policies and strategies.

Indeed, as an imperative of the PRSP preparation process, the development partners have required the following:

- a. that the PRSP must be country driven and owned, basing on broad-based participatory processes for its formulation, implementation and progress monitoring, and
- b. that it must be partnership oriented, enabling the active and coordinated participation of development partners (bilateral, multilateral, non-governmental) in supporting the country strategy

Considering that these are edicts of the Bretton Woods institutions, it is interesting that a major paradigm shift to participatory development is indeed underway.

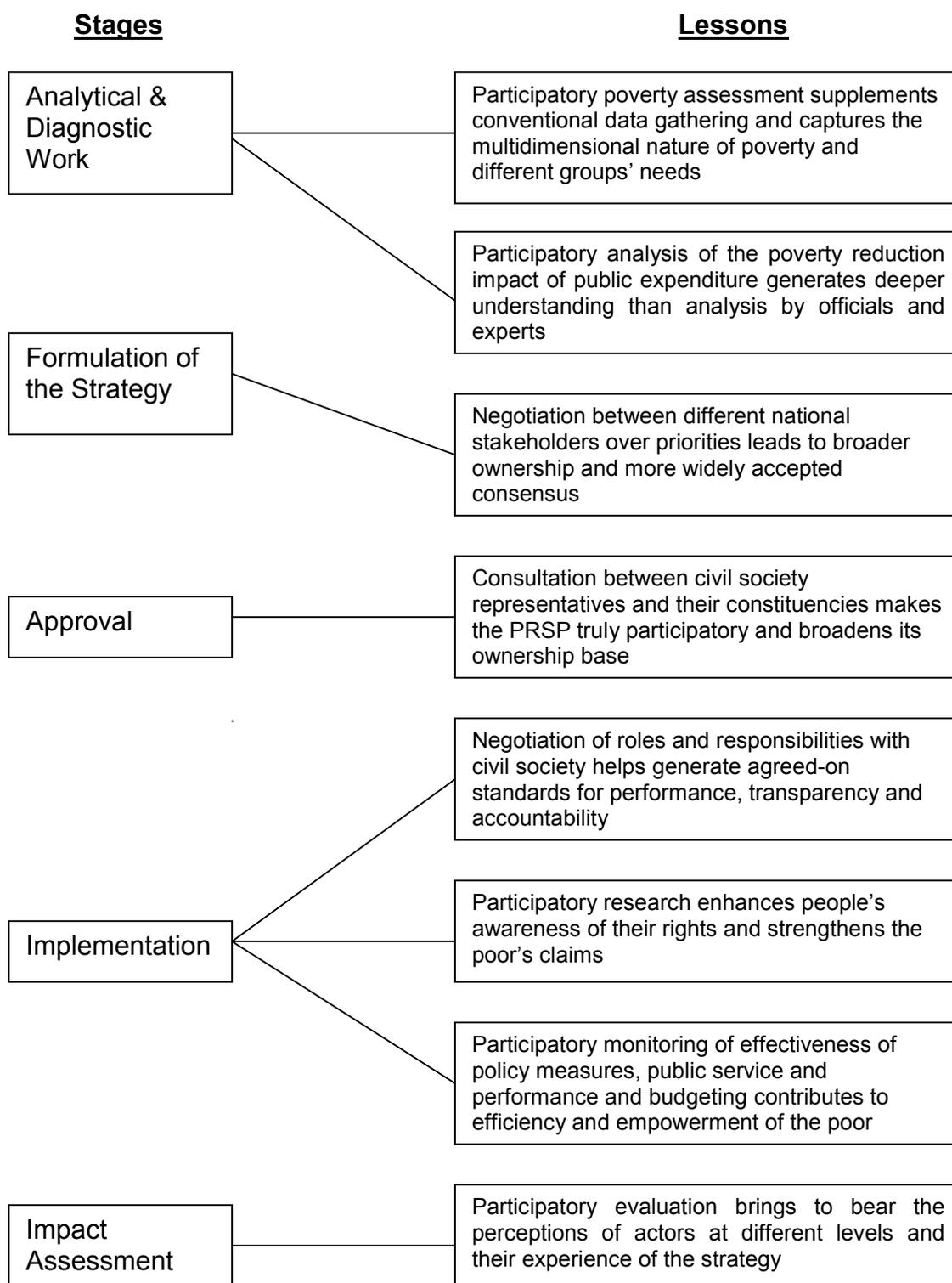
In the course of preparing the PRSPs, individual countries' experiences with the participatory approach with civil society involvement have varied on account of the following factors:

- the type of government and the extent of democratic culture
- the capacity of national authorities to engage in participatory processes with civil society, the public and key stakeholders
- the extent to which civil society groups exist and are active among the poor

The disparities notwithstanding, the experiences offer worthy lessons of civil society participation in decentralised governance for poverty reduction. The experience is summarized along the lines presented in the figure 2 below.

Figure 2

The Benefits Of PRSP Participatory Process



As in most, if not all cases, the process of the PRSPs starts with the analytical and diagnostic work and culminates in impact assessment and feedback. The observations in the right vertical boxes underscore the effect of the participatory and consultative processes of each stage of the PRSPs' preparation.

The Participatory Process Of Developing Selected Country PRSPs

Mali:

This country's PRSP clearly describes the participatory process, which drew from a long tradition of consensus-based policies and strategies. These strategies had hitherto yielded the decentralization policy (1992), the National Strategy for Poverty Reduction (1998), and the National Prospective Study 1999-2025. Participation mechanisms for this PRSP were:

- a. establishment of a broad mechanism for dialogue at both the steering and the technical levels;
- b. involving a wide range of actors representing public administration, civil society, and social and development partners
- c. making special arrangements to involve representatives of local community administrations
- d. conduct of surveys of the poor, and
- e. organization of seminars, workshops, and videoconferences at various stages of the process with different groups on various relevant topics.

The consultation process included two notable elements: first, eleven thematic working groups were established under an overall National Technical Committee to facilitate the participation of sectoral agencies in the PRSP process; second, national and regional-level consultations on the draft PRSP were held.

Two specific issues that emerged early from the participation process but which were speedily resolved were: (i) insufficient inclusion of civil society concerns and (ii) inadequate focus on the private sector's key role in generating growth and employment. This PRSP acknowledged the need for further work to systematize participation and consensus building in the management of public affairs and to strengthen and sustain the consultation process with the poor.

The authorities have started addressing these needs by reorienting the working groups and other institutional structures that prepared the PRSP to (i) better incorporate core beneficiary social groups; (ii) strengthen the capacity of civil society to contribute more effectively in sector and macroeconomic policy dialogue; (iii) intensify the consultation process between the government and civil society and between the government and the private sector; (iv) empower the poor by improving the accompanying information, education, and communication program; (v) extend the PRSP regional committees' mandate to all circles and as many communes as feasible; and (vi) undertake more qualitative surveys, so as to better understand poverty determinants and appropriate strategies from the

perspective of the poor. The government believes that these actions are appropriate for improving the quality of stakeholder participation.

The Gambia

The concept of participation in the Gambia is well developed and is seen as an instrument of accountability, empowerment and joint decision-making. The Gambia's PRSP commenced with the launching in November 2000 of a dialogue process to mobilize public participation in the strategy's preparation. Among other things, the Gambia's PRSP states the main objectives of participation as "to empower local communities to share control over priority setting in the poverty reduction process". It is remarkable that the Gambia's model has ensured that the participatory process is not limited to the preparation of the PRSP document only, but also extended to include budget preparation and programmes monitoring and evaluation.

Consultation activities for the formulation of that country's PRSP included:

- national workshops
- smaller workshops with non-governmental organisations and other civil society
- direct consultations with the poor through a second round of participatory poverty assessments
- sector consultative workshops
- best practice visits
- a donor roundtable.

A National Dialogue Process, established under an earlier special initiative in 1994 continued to be used as a platform for stakeholders' discussion on poverty. For the first time in the Gambia, the Government held pre-budget consultations with civil society. The results of these consultations informed the 2002 budget. Local authorities facilitated the consultations at divisional, district and ward levels and have been actively involved in discussions on viable alternative poverty reduction programmes within their localities.

The PRSP document acknowledges that although there are still some sensitive good governance issues pending, the level of commitment to participation achieved is an encouraging sign for poverty reduction. Among others, it also admits that the participatory analyses of poverty and social impacts of key policy reforms can assist the government to design more pro-poor economic policies, better define appropriate compensation measures, and support country ownership of reforms.

Regional Poverty Reduction Strategy

In recent years, the idea of a regional poverty reduction strategy has engaged the minds of some international bodies. In that regard, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in 2001, embarked on processes to draw up and execute a West African regional poverty reduction programme. Various

consultations have since been held with major stakeholders. Being a new dimension to poverty reduction programmes, preparatory measures have been undertaken as follows:

- a. to give the staff a better understanding of the formulation, content and monitoring of the implementation of poverty reduction strategy papers
- b. to explore the most effective ways of enabling member states to incorporate the regional dimension of poverty reduction into their national programmes
- c. to identify those activities better executed at the regional than the national level

The orientation of these preparatory tasks embodies the objectives of the regional effort. To achieve these objectives, the ECOWAS plans to employ consultative means to synthesise the national PRSPs and deduce a regional poverty reduction strategy. Some of the actions planned are:

- a. an analysis of national poverty reduction strategy papers
- b. a comparative synthesis of national PRSPs
- c. preparation of guidelines on the insertion of the regional dimensions to poverty reduction in the national PRSPs
- d. organisation of a meeting of Heads of national PRSPs to review progress and fix a time-frame for actions
- e. harmonization of concepts and methods for addressing poverty
- f. conduct of studies on a better understanding of the relation between regional integration and poverty, and particularly, between integration and economic growth
- g. formation of thematic groups on poverty related issues.

In effect, the regional strategy will directly benefit from the national participatory processes.

New Partnership For Africa's Development And International Millennium Development Goals

The next major platform where decentralised participatory methods for poverty reduction have been amply demonstrated is the processes of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). This initiative reflects the belief of African leaders that they have the responsibility, together with the African peoples, to address the lack of development and growth on the African continent. The main objective is to eradicate poverty by meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) of the United Nations.

Currently, NEPAD is at its formative stages. There is vociferous concern about the limited participation in its conceptualization and formulation. Equally of concern is NEPAD's willingness to imbibe the poverty reduction strategies of the Bretton Woods institutions.

For NEPAD to be a truly homegrown African poverty reduction framework, it must pass the test of popular participation. It is essential that African private sector and civil society be mobilized in support of NEPAD. The observed experience in some African countries is that high level secretariats have been established to facilitate the participatory process for NEPAD. At the continental level, a number of consultative processes have been adopted in advancing the growth of the process. These include:

- a. Use of leading African knowledge organisations as lead agencies, e.g. AfDB, ECA, etc.
- b. Use of expertise and information of the OAU/AU and its structures
- c. Engagement of the regional economic communities for identifying priority projects
- d. Use of the expertise of identified African experts
- e. Utilisation of the expertise and information of global knowledge institutions like the World Bank, the IMF, the EU, FAO, UNDP, etc.
- f. Utilisation of existing, studies and results of projects and programmes in the various priority areas, which had also been based on the consultative process
- g. Organisation of workshops and conferences at national, regional and continental levels.

These measures notwithstanding, should Africa decide on taking its destiny in its own hands, NEPAD should focus on the establishment of a new social contract based on new alliances of popular forces, including civil society organisations. That way, Africans will participate in decisions that shape the lives of the poor and achieve people-centered, equitable and sustainable development.

Chapter Five: The Benefits Of Civil Society In Governance

The cases observed in this paper lead to the general conclusion that, governments and official institutions alone cannot manage the challenges of good governance and sustainable development. In particular, good governance requires effective decentralised participation by the governed and their organised social partners. The officialdom lacks the human and physical capacities to organise and manage this requirement of grassroots participation. Even though it has been argued that, town councils and unit committees (as in the case of Ghana), though government machineries, are capable of representing the specific interests at the grassroots, civil society organisations have the added attribute of watchdogs of governance, among other unique qualities. In the case of the government machinery, this last attribute is largely compromised. By promoting civil society involvement, they ensure that citizens have the means to express their preferences, engage in dialogue with policy-makers and influence public decisions. This ensures that the interests of ordinary people, including women, disadvantaged minorities, children, the poor, labour, professional associations, traditional groups and authorities, private voluntary organisations, etc. are taken into account in policy decisions and resources allocation. Once

policies have been concluded, civil society organisations demand accountability in the allocation and management of public resources.

The impact of civil society participation in decentralised governance may be summarized as follows:

- i. Government institutions become more transparent, accountable and more responsive at the local level
- ii. Local government has augmented capacity for effective management
- iii. People have greater access to improved government information
- iv. Local and central governments have access to increased and improved grassroots information
- v. More people vote in local and national elections and legislatures become more representative
- vi. Levels of poverty fall through increased empowerment, which result from the above gains.

Therefore, governments need the companionship of civil society in addition to their own decentralised public sector structures and other stakeholders of poverty reduction. There are several ways in which governments can facilitate this relationship to benefit good governance. While the peculiar country situation is a major influence, a few general principles are pertinent:

- i. Governments should promote voluntarism and acknowledge the validity of the role of civil society.
- ii. Governments should have appropriate legislation and official procedures for the registration and public accountability of NGOs and registerable civil society organisations
- iii. Governments at all levels should have appropriate frameworks and mechanisms to facilitate communication and consultation with civil society organisations and to utilize the latter's accumulated experience and expertise in the general policy-making process and in the planning and design of relevant development programmes. This relationship must ensure reciprocal transparency, while nevertheless maintaining the freedom and ability of either party to act independently
- iv. Governments should offer a level playing field to facilitate civil society links to increase the chances of their synergy
- v. Where absolutely necessary, governments should support non-governmental organizations and some other needy civil society organisations financially and technically.

Chapter Six: The Main Issues And The Way Forward

It is evident from the above discussion that participation, as an instrument of accountability, empowerment and joint decision-making, is gaining grounds in the development management process of West Africa. However, there is need for further work to systematize consensus building and consultation with the poor.

Though decentralised governance provides the most practical machinery for grassroots participation in national development, the various country surveys revealed a dire shortage of human and physical capacity for a functional decentralisation. No amount of intervention by civil society will equate the shortfall, which is a recurrent problem. Governments must therefore make efforts to commit resources to decentralisation programmes.

Having acknowledged social inclusion as essential to decentralised governance for poverty reduction, there is the need to strengthen the capacity of civil society to contribute more effectively in sector and macroeconomic policy dialogue, including determining the initiatives for poverty reduction. However, it has been observed that civil society is still viewed with suspicion in certain areas, and is therefore not fostered by some governments. This attitude must be addressed. What civil society organisations need are legitimization, recognition, consultation, dialogue and political space in which to develop.

The consultative process in decentralised governance for poverty reduction is prudent where there is clarity and understanding of the poverty determinants. For that purpose, governments must commit resources for qualitative surveys, analysis and diagnosis of poverty, which is central to the consultative process.

Women bear the greater brunt of the incidence of poverty in the region. While gender-focused civil society organisations have started to assert themselves in some West African countries, the official bureaucracy is not fully enthusiastic about their agenda. There are a few exceptions. The priorities must begin to be reset to reverse the near exclusion of women from centers of power at all levels of the decentralised strata in economic, social and political spheres.

The effort at achieving an African blueprint for the continent's renaissance, through PRSPs and NEPAD is laudable. The fate of this endeavour lies in the extent to which its implementation and advancement will be anchored in the principles of decentralised governance with social inclusion. The need situation of the continent leaves the operationalisation of these programmes to the good nature of the G8 and the community of the continent's development partners. Fortunately, there is a seeming meeting of minds among the partners on the concept of participatory sustainable development. The future of Africa depends on this paradigm shift.

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