Helping Parliaments to Help the Poor

The global landscape has changed dramatically as international financial institutions have realized that domestic oversight of governmental actions is crucial to fight against poverty and that parliaments are a key oversight institution. Official development assistance over the past twenty-five years has made a difference. Millions of people were lifted out of poverty. Millions of children in poor countries were vaccinated against preventable diseases that could have killed them; school enrolments increased; life expectancy increased around the world—by 24 years in Africa. But today the world faces even greater challenges than it did 25 years ago. The world population has kept growing, straining both national and international development efforts.

Over the next 25 years, the incidence of poverty is likely to explode. In another 25 years, there will be an additional two billion people inhabiting the world, nearly all of whom will live in the developing world, and most of them could well face a life of extreme poverty. Projections are not bright: even if economic growth in the years to come is relatively brisk, the numbers of people living under the $1 and $2 a day yardstick will not improve in parts of the developing world—and in sub-Saharan Africa they will actually continue to rise.

New poverty priorities

This deterioration in poverty and inequality conditions, coupled with the growing recognition to relieve the pressures caused by debt burdens in many developing countries, prompted a September 1999 decision by the World Bank and the IMF to make poverty reduction central in a reformed framework for concessional lending and debt relief.

This new approach, "Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers" (PRSPs), emphasizes poverty reduction as a development goal.
It also assures that policies to achieve the goal are country-driven/owned; establishes full participation in decisions and implementation, including by the poor themselves and by civil society groups; stresses efforts aimed at specific results, over a longer term timeframe, with careful monitoring; and commits increased financial resources from donor sources for this.

As of the beginning of 2002, some 70 countries were involved in the PRSP process—in many cases as part of the path toward debt relief and in others in the context of negotiations for concessional lending support from the Bank and Fund.

**Parliaments and the PRSP process**

One of the key features of the PRSP process is that, while government led, there should be broad consultations within countries and wide participation by civil society, to ensure “country ownership.” The obvious “entry points” for the involvement of parliaments in the PRSP process are through the budget cycle—with parliament reviewing and approving government spending on poverty reduction initiatives—and through the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes and impact. This is the “normal” oversight and legislation link between Parliament and government.

The involvement of parliaments could be even more pervasive, however, given that, in many countries, parliaments have become key pressures for governance reform, aiming to see that governments work more effectively, efficiently and openly. How this was done depended on circumstances and opportunities to achieve positive change.

**The challenge for parliaments**

The challenge is for Parliaments to use their oversight responsibilities—influence on budget matters and legislative leverage to see that the needs of their poor are heard and met—and to insist on serious follow-up of the commitments made to reduce poverty via PRSP specifics. In addition, MPs can take steps in their own constituencies to pursue poverty reduction in a significant way.

**Strengthening parliaments**

As in governance generally, parliaments do have an important role to play in the PRSP process. They oversee development and implementation of strategies; ensure the integrity of the participation process, particularly for the poor; advance the budget cycle process. Their role also involves the monitoring and evaluation stage, given the need for scrutiny independent of the executive to assess results.

Such tasks, though, necessitate improved institutional capacities within most parliaments in developing countries, where basic infrastructure is often missing. Steps are needed to give parliaments the ability to sustain their interventions, bring significant independent expertise to bear, and exercise effective leverage in their oversight activities.

Certain measures can be taken at the national level of parliament itself, such as the formation of an institutional planning capacity to shape improvements; changes in internal rules to permit tougher and more direct scrutiny of key executive leaders; the establishment of specialized committees, for example, on poverty reduction; the strengthening of existing committees—particularly in the case of committees dealing with the budget cycle process, and with key areas of service delivery relevant to the poor (such as education, health, roads and rural development); the establishment of well-
Parliamentary Initiatives for Governance Reform

Participation in South Africa: Parliaments have been very concerned to increase participation by poorer people, many of whom lack writing and language skills to approach formal government institutions. Legislatures have established an "Office for Public Participation," to work at outreach to those with grievances and complaints who feel unable to access Parliaments directly. Their concerns are taken to ministries or agencies involved and, if they cannot be resolved, are directed to a committee of the legislature. Political parties there are also ensuring that Parliament itself is better balanced in gender and socio-economic background through candidate selection procedures.

Anti-corruption in Kenya: Grand corruption has been reported as a growing problem, which is distorting financial allocations and undercutting the provision of public services in the country. Recently, Parliament took leadership against these injustices by having a Select Committee on Corruption established, chaired by a young activist MP. This committee held hearings across the country, documented extensive cases of corrupt practice, and named those who should be targets of action for their lack of integrity. This initiative, while it has not resolved Kenya's corruption, has led to the establishment of a major new impetus to set up an effective anti-corruption agency and to make honest allocation of resources a priority on the political agenda.

Transparency in Nigeria: Nigeria also has a serious problem of corruption, as well as distortion in the allocation of public resources and a lack of transparency. As a result, poverty levels have risen from 45 percent of the population in 1985 to 66 percent in 1999, despite huge past oil revenues and considerable continuing resource income inflows. One of the problems was that the national oil company had provided no public accounting for 12 years! The election of President Obasanjo and a democratic National Assembly in 1999 began to change that—with financial accounts becoming subject to scrutiny and careful review by both the National Assembly and the Government.

Conclusion

Parliaments face many constraints in working to reduce poverty—from training gaps to infrastructure weaknesses. But there are also capacity-building steps that Parliaments can plan, and increasingly international support is available to finance these. In the end, MPs will have to take the lead themselves to assert parliament's key importance in poverty reduction.

Full use of international linkages via the Internet and other communication methods need to be stressed. Parliaments are increasingly developing access to more sophisticated information technology links, and these make access possible to specialized websites—and also provide a basis for helpful networks at low cost on a global basis. Uganda, for instance, has developed a very active program to have its MPs fully capable of using the internet—not only to build international and regional linkage possibilities, but because there are important gains to be achieved in terms of national communication links from constituencies to the capital.

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