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Civil Society Participation in Rwanda's Poverty Reduction Strategy

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Abstract

The participation conditionality linked to the PRSP creates a wide range of problems. It is too ambitious to be workable, too vague to be monitored. The pragmatic way out has been for the Breton Woods institutions to be uncommonly lenient in the verification of this conditionality. Governments can thus get away with a semblance of civil society consultation. Rwanda's a case in point. We try to show that there has been very little civil society participation, and that any other outcome would have been quite unlikely, possibly even undesirable. We argue that donors should dramatically tune down their ambitions, and set country-specific, limited but firm benchmarks that a government must respect in its relations with civil society. If this had been done from the initial stages of the Rwandan PRSP, some small but significant steps forward could have been taken that stand in stark contrast with the hollow 'participation' actually offered to civil society in some limited areas where it was not ready to rise to the challenge, while at the same time the donor community did little to protect civil society when the regime was clamping down on elementary civil liberties.

Introduction

Since the turn of the century, the discourse on aid and conditionality in low-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere has changed. Policy Framework Papers, the emanation of the Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by the World Bank and IMF, have been replaced by purportedly home-grown Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP). One reason for this change of heart is that donors have come to acknowledge that government commitment, or “ownership”, is an important factor explaining the failure of past structural adjustment policies. The fact that the country is now to produce its own strategy paper is meant to increase such national “ownership”¹. Local civil society (CS) can play an important role in broadening this ownership beyond the level of the government, but also in advocacy on behalf of the poor and in pressing for better governance (Tikare et al. 2001). Participation of civil society has in effect become a prominent feature of the new discourse². This shift in focus creates its own set of problems. The World Bank, the architect but also the major arbiter of the new style, promotes a rather ambitious version of participation: a one-size-fits-all, and an extra-extra-large one at that. In fact, the participation conditionality is very difficult to satisfy in the cultural and political setting of most low-income countries. The pragmatic way out has been for the Breton Woods institutions to be uncommonly lenient in the verification of this conditionality³. If thus an authoritarian political regime faces a lethargic civil society and donor representatives who are not very critical, it may get away with a semblance of civil society consultation. In another context, characterised by effective space for policy debate, an alert civil society with well-articulated views, and insistent donors, the participation conditionality may well make a considerable difference. The outcome thus crucially depends on local settings and dynamics. In this paper we try to do find out how the participation game was played out in Rwanda, a country where the political regime is very authoritarian yet offering competent governance and using aid successfully, whereas civil society is unusually weak⁴.

In the first section of the paper, we draw out the characteristics that government, civil society and donors must exhibit if the participation conditionality is to achieve its intended effect. In a second section we look at Rwanda, which had its PRSP approved by the Breton Woods institutions in July 2002. The most influential donors declared themselves satisfied, and in some cases even enthusiastic, about how the participation condition had been fulfilled. This view was endorsed by some of the influential international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and is echoed in the academic literature. In sharp contrast to this rosy picture, we try to show that there has been very little civil society participation in Rwanda to date. Moreover our analysis suggests that any other outcome would have been unlikely, and possibly even undesirable. The excited participation rhetoric is in fact not very helpful when donors attempt to “strengthen” civil society or increase its political role help-

¹ Not that the traditional ingredients of structural adjustment policies are absent. The strategy documents may be home produced, but they still have to be endorsed by the donors, and in particular the executive boards of the World Bank and the IMF. Probably as a consequence, all the PRSPs produced to date are cast in a neo-liberal mould (Craig and Porter 2003), and a satisfactory record with structural adjustment policies remains a separate prerequisite for reaching the “completion point” where full HIPC debt relief is being granted.

² Donors tend to define civil society in rather loose ways. As we are trying to understand their logic we will not challenge their use of the notion. Note however that, for pragmatic reasons, we do not, in this paper, extend our discussion to the private for profit sector, nor to the media.

³ The WB and IMF staff do not evaluate the participation process as such – this would constitute a political judgment for which they feel they have no mandate – but they verify that some participation has been organized and assess its consequences on the financial, economic, technical quality of the PRSP.

⁴ For our analysis of the very contrasting experience of Bolivia, see Molenaers & Renard (2003).

ful in concrete country settings. In the third section of the paper we discuss the confusion created by the well intentioned but unrealistic participation rhetoric. Our own position is that for reasons of both intellectual honesty and policy effectiveness, donors should dramatically tune down their ambitions, and set country-specific, limited but firm benchmarks that a government must respect in its relations with civil society. If this had been done from the initial stages of the Rwandan Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), some small but significant steps forward could have been taken that stand in stark contrast with the hollow “participation” actually offered to civil society in some limited areas where it was not ready to rise to the challenge, while at the same time the donor community did little to protect civil society when the regime was clamping down on elementary civil liberties. The findings in this paper are based on extensive literature study and a field trip to Rwanda in January 2003. During our stay in Rwanda we interviewed a wide range of stakeholders coming from civil society, the government and the donor community. A complete list of the people we met is available on request

1. The PRS architecture

The participation conditionality is the logical outcome of evolving donor thinking. In particular it is the reflection of the view that what stops low-income countries from following the right development path is political rather than merely technical-macroeconomic in nature. One of the conclusions from the literature on structural adjustment is that government “ownership” is crucial (World Bank 1998). Donors, in devising the new PRS architecture, felt that ownership should be broader than just the government. Ideally, academics, the media, trade unions, development NGOs and other actors of civil society would share the broad outlines of the strategy. Such broader based ownership would be achieved through dialogue and open debate, and thus it was argued that civil society involvement in the preparation of the PRSP and in overseeing its implementation would be desirable. It was further expected that civil society would defend the interest of the poor, and thus make the resulting strategy more effective than it would otherwise be. Finally, civil society was also to play the role of watchdog. Donors were keen to make governments more accountable to their own populations. This was also part of the new, more political interpretation of what was wrong with low-income countries. Following the same line of thinking, we will not value participation by civil society, i.e. by organisations intermediating between the individual and the state, as a goal in itself, but rather as a means to development and democracy, including the participation of individual citizens.

Table 1 sets out for the three objectives of ownership, effectiveness, and accountability what is expected of government, civil society, and donors, for civil society participation to make a meaningful contribution. We discuss the different cells in turn. We do not explicitly address the longer term, systemic contribution that civil society participation may eventually make to democ-

racy. We acknowledge that such effects may indeed be important, arguably more important than those described here, but they will only materialize if the conditions for civil society described in the table are fulfilled.

Table 1: PRS dimensions and actors

	Ownership	Effectiveness	Accountability
Government	1.1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • technical expertise to prepare PRSP and apply participative techniques (technocratic ownership) • highest level commitment to PRS (political ownership) • widespread support for PRS within government (bureaucratic ownership) 	1.2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • quality of poverty diagnostic • quality of planning-budgetting-implementation • low corruption • strong and stable institutions 	1.3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bureaucratic instruments for public sector monitoring and auditing (lateral accountability) • willingness to account to donors (upward accountability) • political room for genuine CS contribution and willingness to share information (downward accountability)
Civil Society	2.1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • representativeness • autonomy vis-à-vis the state • embeddedness • proximity to the poor 	2.2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ability to assess micro and macro needs of the poor 	2.3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • capacity to evaluate government policies • negotiating and organizational skills • voice
Donors	3.1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accept recipient priorities as expressed in PRSP • adapt aid procedures to allow maximum government control over aid resources • co-ordinate with other donors 	3.2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pro-poor aid policies 	3.3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • willingness to exert joint donor pressure and request effective accountability • make “political space” for CS and important issue in policy dialogue • support CSOs with advice and finance in their macro functions

Source: the authors

Conditions regarding the State

Ownership (cell 1.1)

There must be ownership at several levels within the public sector before it can eventually be broadened to civil society. First, the government apparatus must acquire the skills and expertise to develop a home-grown poverty strategy. With senior staff on hand to explain the PRS, amend it when needed, and closely advise policy makers, the strategy stands a much better chance of serving as the basis of actual policies. In addition, the organization by the public sector of hearings, seminars, and debates with civil society requires a technocratic mastery of participatory techniques. Choosing a technique or a combination of techniques from the wealth of instruments that exist is not a simple task. The issues under discussion, their complexity, the outcomes expected from the process, the composition of the participant group, the profile of the participants, the timeframe and the budget all play an important role in planning the depth, width and length of a participation process. Of course, without a firm political commitment, the strategy also risks being abandoned. The highest authorities must therefore be convinced that PRS reforms must be enacted, and they must show a keen interest in targeting the poor. Last, for a PRS to be effective, it should be used as a basic reference in setting and enacting policies at all levels of government. Thus knowledge of the strategy and support for it must be spread wide enough for it to transpire in the day-to-day actions of lower ranking bureaucrats. There must therefore be ownership at

three levels: technocratic, political, and bureaucratic. This threefold ownership is rendered precarious, but not impossible, by the fact that the locus of initiative of the whole approach is situated at the Breton Woods institutions, something local actors are keenly aware of (Booth 2003:155).

Effectiveness (cell 1.2)

The PRS approach will only be effective, in the sense of showing tangible and lasting pro-poor results, if the quality of the diagnostic underlying the strategy is solid, and this is therefore a first condition. Even so, dependable strategic plans have no impact unless and until they are translated into the nitty-gritty of annual budgets, and carefully implemented. It is now generally accepted that the traditional planning and budgeting process through multi-annual public investment plans (PIP), mainly composed of donor funded investment projects, not integrated with the recurrent budget, and poorly articulated with national sector priorities, leads to a strong disconnect between planning and implementation. A Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) is now advocated by the Breton Woods institutions as the best way to restore the balance and to ensure integration of planning, budgeting and implementation. Even if all the foregoing conditions are met, the PRS is under threat from rampant and widespread corruption and incompetence, and weak and unstable public institutions. In this sense, general institutional strengthening is part and parcel of the effort to improve effectiveness. To conclude: if a minimum standard of pro-poor effectiveness is not achieved on the government side, it is highly unlikely that involving civil society will put things right.

Accountability (cell 1.3)

A precondition for any accountability mechanism to work is that there must be adequate financial reporting on public spending and its effect on the poor. Without that, there is no way to trace the pro-poor effectiveness of the PRS. Note that as donor support in the context of PRS is shifting towards sector and budget support, and as fungibility makes that aid, even if earmarked, supports the whole budgetary effort of the government, donors increasingly request insight in the overall performance of the government, rather than only detailed accounts of what happens with the money spent on specific interventions. This raises awkward questions as to the nature of the new relationship. It is claimed that PRS puts the government in the driving seat. Yet the new logic drives donors to request oversight over the whole of government spending, irrespective of the origin. This makes the country more dependent on external control than was the case before. Accountability must also be established vis-à-vis civil society. To do so, the political space must be created for civil society organisations (CSOs) to play the role assigned to them. This supposes that the government provides the opportunity structure that allows citizens to get together, organize, express opinions, and voice discontent. Vital is also that government provides civil society timely and adequate access to information and relevant documents. This merits emphasis, as in many low-income countries the prevailing bureaucratic culture of secrecy and disdain of citizen's rights militates against CSOs' access to information.

Civil society conditions

Ownership (cell 2.1)

The highly technical nature of many of the topics that crop up in the context of PRS makes that they can only be discussed in relatively small settings and among experts. Is it necessary that the people who are taking part in those meetings on behalf of civil society are representative, in the sense of having received a formal mandate through a transparent selection process? Or is it enough that they are embedded, in the sense that they have strong links and empathy with the groups on behalf of whom they speak? One might argue that if they are not formally representing the rank-and-file members, they are in no position to act as brokers between society and the government, hence broad-based ownership is unlikely to be achieved. The representation logic however contains the danger of resulting in conflict between organized groups representing diverging interests, rather than in consensus (Leftwich 2000; Edwards & Foley 1998). And since poor people tend to be poorly organized (Putnam 1993; Inglehart 1997), representation in PRS debates may actually work in favour of vested, powerful and organized interests, instead of the unorganized and voiceless poor. A balance has therefore to be struck between the representation logic and the pro-poor aim of the PRS. Care must be taken that well-embedded groups that work for and with the poor and institutions that are specialized in assessing poverty have a strong input in the discussions, even if some of them do not respond to the bottom-up representative logic.

Effectiveness (cell 2.2)

Activities undertaken by CSOs to influence government must not automatically be considered to lead to better pro-poor outcomes. Success in this respect will depend on a number of qualities which CSOs must exhibit. There must be a genuine desire to act on behalf of the poor. CSOs must further have the capacity to grasp the nature of poverty in the country, and assess the impact of policies. This requires both proximity to the poor and analytical skills. All this must be accompanied by negotiating and lobbying skills. Usually such capacities are mainly present in specialised research organisations and some of the larger, more professional CSOs (trade unions, farmer federations, second line NGOs, platform organisations).

Accountability (cell 2.3)

Governments worldwide are good at making promises. But unless they are held accountable in ways that have consequences for their stay in power, politicians may well promise the sky, and deliver little. Donors are understandably keen, given the political diagnosis they are making, of fostering national, downward accountability⁵. They insist that civil society be involved in monitoring PRS implementation. This among others means that CSOs try to “follow the money” to see that it effectively reaches those intended. While performing their monitoring task, CSOs need to liaise downward to the grassroots and horizontally among advocacy organisations. The larger individual organisations must assign sufficient staff time to study PRSP documents, take

⁵ It has been often remarked that the PRS does not see a comparably enhanced role for parliament. We do not expand on this important dimension here, but it is difficult to imagine how civil society could play its watchdog function in the absence of a proper political accountability system.

positions and prepare meetings. If civil society wants to lay any claim to legitimacy when holding the government accountable, it is furthermore imperative that the organisations composing it themselves are held accountable in one way or another. Their legitimacy will in part depend on their functioning, transparency, and their way of reconnecting back to society. More fundamentally, accountability and the bottom-up construction of the organisational fabric are of primary importance for achieving the second-round effects expected from civil society participation, in particular democratic development. Being involved in organisations is arguably the ultimate learning school for democracy, provided the organisations themselves are internally democratic (Boussard 2002). Finally, CSOs must challenge the government, firmly but constructively. It is far from evident that CSOs have the courage to do this in authoritarian or repressive political environments.

Conditions regarding the donor community

Ownership (cell 3.1)

The PRS is meant to constitute a new contract between donors and recipients, where the latter are firmly in the driver's seat. This requires a new attitude on the part of the donors, and new instruments. If donors stick to their old ways, micromanaging their interventions outside the recipient's budget, then there is no meaningful way in which aid-dependent recipients can gain effective ownership. Civil society participation will in such unfavourable circumstances not make much of a difference. The question here thus is whether donors honour their side of the new aid contract or whether they just pay lip-service to it.

Effectiveness (cell 3.2)

The fact that much of the resources to finance the PRS come from aid, makes that donors wield enormous power, even in cases the recipient government has "ownership" over the strategy finally agreed upon. Therefore the pro-poor effectiveness of the PRS crucially depends on donor priorities. If donors do not have a genuine interest in fostering a pro-poor development strategy, then they will in effect undermine its outcome by bringing in their own conflicting priorities. And again, it is unlikely that civil society participation will put things right.

Accountability (cell 3.3)

Donors play a crucial role in this respect as well. Traditionally they insisted on strict accounting by the recipient government for the use of aid monies. In the context of PRS they are asked to relax the accounting at the micro-level, and replace it by higher level, sector and macroeconomic justifications. Whenever possible they should rely on the country's own budget control and auditing mechanisms. This is linked to an increasing emphasis on budget support and other non-project types of funding which require their own accounting procedures, such as joint public expenditure reviews by the government and donors. Donors must also put the government under pressure to allow

space for civil society to play a role in downward accountability. After all, we are dealing with a scenario of externally driven change where the rules of the game in the country change ahead of underlying political culture. At the same time CSOs, including those engaged in networking and advocacy work, must be strengthened to take on the complex and challenging responsibilities bestowed upon them. Too much external interference or money however may do more harm than good, and donors must have a good understanding of the local dynamics and be prepared to take a long time perspective.

Our brief roundup of the major issues suggests that civil society participation will produce the best results in a context that boils down to a state that is development oriented and that respects civil liberties, a dynamic if not necessarily yet fully developed civil society and a committed and coordinated donor community. But what happens if these pre-conditions are not, or only very partially, fulfilled?

2. Civil society participation in the Rwandan PRSP

The setting

Rwanda is among the 20 poorest countries worldwide. In 2001 its GNI per capita (following the World Bank Atlas method) stood at \$220, against \$430 for Sub Sahara Africa (World Bank 2003). 60% of the population live below the poverty line (MINECOFIN 2002:13). It took four years for the economy to recover from the consequences of the 1994 genocide. Even so, child mortality was higher in the period 1996-2000 than it was in the late 1980s, and the health situation is compounded by a rate of HIV prevalence among adults of close to 14% (MINECOFIN 2002: 21). Since the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) won a military victory that put a stop to the killings and installed a Government of National Unity, high growth rates have prevailed. Although such strong economic performance has only been possible thanks to the stability of the country and cautious economic management, it also reflects important transient factors, such as the resumption of economic activity and a reconstruction boom, that mask serious structural problems (MINECOFIN 2003a: 10). Agriculture, which is the mainstay of the economy, with a contribution to GDP of 40%, is suffering from serious weaknesses. Expansion of area under cultivation reached its limit somewhere in the mid-1980s, and with continued high population growth of close to 3% and a population to land ratios of more than 300 persons per km² - one of the highest in Africa - things are not improving (MINECOFIN 2003b:17). In the absence of inputs and new technologies land productivity is declining. Less than 20% of the population lives in towns, and there is no major industrial activity to speak of. The basis for exports (mainly agricultural produce) is weak, and Rwanda is small and landlocked. With negligible domestic savings and low tax ratios, it will remain aid dependent for a long time to come. In this last regard, the

country cannot complain: it has continued to receive considerable amounts of development aid after the 1994 events. Between 1999 and 2001 for instance Official Development Assistance to Rwanda was a massive 18% of GNI (OECD 2003), suggesting an unusual degree of generosity on the parts of donors but also exceptional aid dependence. Rwanda is on the list of the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC). It prepared an interim PRSP in November 2000 that was endorsed just before the end of 2000 by the World Bank and the IMF. The full PRSP was finalised in June 2002 and approved in July 2002.

Ethnic tensions between the majority Hutu and the minority Tutsi have been high since before independence in 1962, and the 1994 frenzy of killings in which tens of thousands of Rwandans actively participated can only be understood against this background (Prunier 1995). More than half a million people were killed, millions fled their homes, infrastructure was ransacked, and the social fabric of society was torn apart. The civil society that existed before the genocide is tainted in the eyes of many because it has been instrumental in the organisation of the genocide as much if not more than constituting a factor of restraint. Civil society today is weak and under reconstruction (Unsworth & Uvin 2002). The regime is ethnically dominated by the Tutsi minority that was the target of most of the killings. The political opportunity structure is kept tightly closed to the point of suffocation (ICG 2002), and the country scores very poorly in international comparisons on civil and political liberties. Freedom House gives it a “combined” rating (political freedom plus civil liberties) of 6 out of 7 (7 being the worst possible state) in 2003, half a point down from 2002, and rated the country as not free (Freedom House 2003). Yet there are also genuine efforts on the part of the state at decentralisation and national reconciliation, reasonably fair local elections were held in 2001, and general elections are being prepared for the second part of 2003. State power is concentrated in the hands of a small RPF-dominated inner circle and it is unclear how decision-making takes place in that group (Unsworth & Uvin 2002:6). Parliament, which is by excellence the agency to control government, is not able to perform its tasks in Rwanda. Rwanda’s Transitional National Assembly (TNA) was brought into existence through the 1993 Arusha Agreement. A power-sharing agreement divided the seats among the principal parties that did not participate in the genocide (USAID 2002:19). The institution is incapable of exercising its powers to the full, since the executive is able to dissolve the TNA, and there is no mechanism to reconvene it (USAID 2002:29). A new constitution, approved by referendum in 2003, does not seem to fundamentally change this legislative vacuum, given the tight control the regime wants to keep over actors, issues and the space in which they can move.

In the following paragraphs we return to the matrix format of table 1, focusing in turn on the intersections of three actors (government, civil society and donors) and three dimensions (ownership, pro-poor effectiveness and accountability) to discuss the extent to which the conditions for successful civil society participation were actually fulfilled in Rwanda.

The Government of Rwanda

Ownership (1.1 in table 1 above)

The PRSP prepared by Rwanda has been very well received by the donor community (IDA/IMF 2002) to the point of being considered best practice (Mutebi et al. 2003: 269). The Interim PRSP and the final PRSP were prepared by a separate unit, the National Poverty Reduction Programme (NPRP), set up within the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, staffed by handpicked officials, and generously supported by the donors, in particular U.K. bilateral cooperation (DFID) and UNDP. Only in 2002 was this unit fully integrated in the Ministry. As in many other countries major parts of the PRSP document were prepared by expatriate experts. Nevertheless most of the people we talked to were of the opinion that technocratic ownership of the PRS is considerable. Only limited participatory expertise was present in the Rwandan administration, but the government hired expertise from International NGOs (Action Aid) and the National University of Butare to organize participatory processes such as the National Poverty Assessment and the Policy Relevance Test (see later). There is general agreement that there was considerable support for the PRS and the underlying policies at the highest level of the government. The top people in government and president Kagame were highly committed. The joint staff assessment of the PRSP by the World Bank and the IMF acknowledges this (IDA/IMF 2002:2). The weakest link in the public sector is constituted by the line Ministers, the decentralised level, and from a different angle, by lower ranking bureaucrats, including those in the central Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning. Although many know about the PRS, and considerable efforts are put in place to give them appropriate training, it does not necessarily mean that they feel co-responsible for it (Mutebi et al. 2003:258). All in all, we conclude that there is considerable national ownership within the public sector, so that efforts to build on it and deepen it through civil society participation certainly look meaningful.

Effectiveness (1.2)

The way in which the poverty diagnostic was organised has received considerable praise from experts (Mutebi et al. 2001), but also from International NGOs such as Christian Aid (Painter 2002) and ActionAid (Zaman 2002). The full PRSP was produced on the basis of two participative mechanisms designed specifically to gather information on poverty: the National Poverty Assessment and the Policy Relevance Test⁶. The National Poverty Assessment has been broadened into the so-called Ubudehe⁷. There was general appreciation for the resulting diagnostic from all the people we interviewed, both donors and civil society actors. This serves as an illustration of the overall effectiveness of the Rwandan post-1994 state. The point made by Unsworth & Uvin (2002:6) that; despite the glaring democratic deficit, the Rwandan state is in some respects stronger and more institutionalised than most African states was widely echoed during our interviews, even by those donors who were otherwise very critical.

⁶ The National Poverty Assessment gathered data on the levels and nature of poverty and was conducted at the level of the smallest administrative unit, the "cellule". About a 1000 cellules were consulted. In Butare the analysis of poverty was taken to the household level. The Policy Relevance Test tried to figure out what people think about policies the government proposed. About 10000 people were consulted for the latter. In 2002 the exercise was broadened to the national level.

⁷ Ubudehe is the traditional Rwandan practice of digging fields before the rains come and the planting season arrives. Groups of households tend to help each other with these tasks. This collective action mechanism is very inclusive, covering all social and ethnic groups.

A good poverty diagnostic is one thing, a coherent strategy to tackle poverty is quite another. In a multi-country evaluation of HIPC, the World Bank is very critical about most PRSPs produced so far (OED 2003). All of them stress increased social spending, especially in education and health, but most often they do not convincingly address the basic fact that the poor just lack sufficient income-generating opportunities. At first sight the Rwandan PRSP seems to score better in this regard. Most of the extra resources from debt relief are earmarked for immediate investment in support of the agricultural sector, where most of the poor live⁸. But this does not add up to a proper pro-poor strategy. In fact the Rwandan PRSP professes a strong belief in the trickle-down effects of growth. Most of the poor are small peasants, hence a broad-based effort to boost agricultural growth, together with targeted health and education spending will reduce poverty, so the reasoning goes. Although growth is an absolute prerequisite for poverty reduction, no mechanisms have been designed to make it explicitly pro-poor. Yet there is evidence of strong and growing inequality in Rwanda. The PRSP acknowledges the problem. The Gini-coefficient of inequality for instance, calculated for 2001, stands at 0.46 whereas it is estimated that in the mid-1980s it was only 0.27 (MINECOFIN 2002: 18)⁹. Will economic growth reduce the urban-rural divide, or the intra-regional or local inequalities? The joint WB/IMF staff assessment of the PRSP document is rightly critical in this respect (IDA/IMF 2002:4). What for instance about the large number of usually female-headed households who lack access to sufficient family labour inputs, because family members have been killed in the genocide, or because they are still in prison, or because of illness? And what about the hundreds of thousands of Rwandan peasants who just do not have access to enough land to make a living? The land issue is very complex and divisive in Rwanda, and may in some cases have contributed to the killings of 1994 (Andre and Platteau 1998). A fairly confused legal situation prevails, caused by conflicting customary legal practices, and a superimposed “modern” law, leading to insecurity in land access for the poor. The government has prepared new legislation to strike a balance between these different legal logics (André 1998). But that cannot solve the problem that with present and foreseeable agricultural technologies many poor farmers just have not enough land. A related question is the resettlement of refugees. Several hundred thousands Tutsi refugees returned to Rwanda after the new regime came to power in 1994. Many more Hutu fled the country during the period of the genocide, a large part of whom returned later. According to the PRSP document, a massive 3.5 million Rwandan people (out of a total population of 8.2 million) resettled as a consequence of the turmoil created by the war and the genocide (MINECOFIN 2003: 27). The Arusha Agreement of 1993 stipulated that returning refugees who had left the country more than ten years before could not reclaim their previous land holdings, but would be settled by the government on new land. Most of the Tutsi refugees were in that situation. The new regime accepted the Arusha Agreement, but faced considerable problems in providing shelter, and in the case of rural areas, providing access to arable land to all these refugees. In contrast, the mainly Hutu refugees who had fled Rwanda during or in the immediate aftermath of

⁸ Social sector spending only represents 33% of the extra resources Rwanda expects to spend as a consequence of HIPC debt relief and additional donor support (MINECOFIN 2002). The multi-country average in the World Bank study is around 65%, or almost double the Rwanda figure (OED 2003: 35)

⁹ Remarkably, the first PRS progress report seems to backtrack on this point. After stating that, on the basis of available data for Rwanda, changes in inequality over time are difficult to ascertain, thereby distancing itself from the analysis made in the original PRSP, the report further downplays the whole issue as follows: “Whereas inequality may not be as a serious issue in Rwanda as in some other countries in the region existence of differentiation in the rural sector and between the rural and urban sector is certainly notable” (MINECOFIN 2003a:55).

the genocide in principle could reclaim their lands upon their return. The government initiated a policy of resettlements, called “imidugudu” that became linked to the land issue. In a well-documented report, the international NGO Human Rights Watch has claimed that many people have been forcibly moved from their own land into imidugudu, as part of an ill-conceived and badly implemented policy of villagisation that the government of Rwanda initiated around 1996. The confiscated land was then given to other refugees, which among other things may have exacerbated ethnic tensions¹⁰, or used to form large commercial farms (Human Rights Watch 2001). The WB/IMF joint assessment calls these policies “controversial” (IDA/IMF 2002:7) and several donors indicated to us that they are shying away from supporting them financially, although some of them have done so in the past. There are good reasons to believe that a generalised villagisation policy in Rwanda is bound to be as disastrous as similar policies in Tanzania in the 1970s and Ethiopia in the 1980s, with people suffering directly at the hand of a repressive government and indirectly from the dire economic consequences of the policy. This discussion is revealing about the PRSP as a strategy document. In fact the PRSP only briefly mentions the imidugudu policy, but does so unquestionably (MINECOFIN 2002: 53). In this important respect at least, it certainly does not constitute to a convincing pro-poor strategy. The Rwandan government scores better, in the eyes of the donors, when it comes to translating its policies into budgets. There have been serious efforts in Rwanda to introduce the MTEF, although it is acknowledged that many weaknesses remain (Mutebi 2003: 269).

Accountability (1.3)

In the Rwandan case it is useful to distinguish political from technocratic accountability. On the technocratic level, the Rwandan government is engaged in serious reforms that aim at better financial accounting within the public sector, transparent public tendering procedures, an independent General Auditor's Office, reform of Customs and Inland Revenue, and of the judiciary. Donors and experts we met during our field trip were generally fairly positive about the willingness of the government to push these reforms through and optimistic about their eventual effects, although inevitably there remains much to be done (IMF 2003). This is another instance of the donors appreciating Rwandan efforts to improve technocratic governance. In other words, the willingness of the Rwanda government to account to donors in a technocratic sense is good. Again most donors were positive during interviews. Interestingly, the government is also very outspoken in its advocacy of a new, PRS-style, aid relationship. In spite of extreme aid-dependence, there is not much sign of the government being subservient to the donor community in any way. Government ministers will openly criticize donors for not providing more appropriate aid (i.e. budget support) or for not delivering in time, or for not keeping their financial promises. In the first progress report on the PRS a brief checklist to judge the quality of donors is pointedly included (MINECOFIN 2003a:72-73). On the political level, less willingness to be accountable to donors can be found. Illustrative is the protracted involvement

¹⁰ Although in general Hutu and Tutsi farmers stand to profit equally from economic growth and pro-poor policies, the imidugudu policy could be strongly divisive, as it may lead to land being taken away by the local authorities from one group to be allocated to another. Given the strong ethnic sensitivities which continue to prevail in the country, and the fact that the people are keenly aware that the government is controlled by the Tutsi, land redistribution policies have the strong potential of being inflammatory. See Storey (1999) for an analysis of how analogous perceptions about the ethnic effect of structural adjustment policies prevailed in the period preceding the genocide.

(1996-2002) of Rwanda in the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo and how the government strongly resisted donor pressure to withdraw. This caused a major split amongst donors. Donors like for example France and Belgium were of the opinion that the plunder and the human rights violations in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo should influence donor practices in Rwanda. They judged that under the circumstances general budget support was out of the question (DGCI 2002), as in all likelihood some of the money would be siphoned off to pay for the war effort. When it became clear that a considerable part of the war was probably financed from the extraction of mineral resources from the Democratic Republic of Congo (UN: 2001), they increased their pressure on the other donors to be tougher with Rwanda and use the overall aid as a weapon to force a solution. The Rwandan regime, for its part, remained adamant and only relented in the middle of 2002.

Regarding vertical downward accountability, the regime tends to see CSOs as holders of useful information on poverty (Bugingo and Painter 2002: 5), and as subcontractors for grass roots activities, but finds it extremely hard to accept them as partners in a policy dialogue. The regime is aware of the views and expectations of donors in this regard. In 2002 a Presidential Commission on Civil Society was set up. At the end of a three-day conference in December 2002, president Kagame said that he welcomed criticism on policy issues if framed constructively¹¹. But this belies a more troubling relationship. The rare Rwandan CSOs who have dared to be critical have experienced intimidation and enormous pressure. We heard first-hand stories of how some were closed down, or financially threatened, or members of staff put in prison. Even those observers who have shown great understanding of the Rwandan regime admit to “a striking lack of policy debates” (Mutebi et al. 2003:262).

¹¹ communication from the Irish NGO Trocaire.

Civil Society

Ownership (2.1)

The basic conditions for civil society broadening the ownership of the PRS, through an upward constructive yet critical engagement with government and downward feedback through a well relayed network of CSOs is just not fulfilled. There are a few networks but they lack the willingness or the capacity to play an important role. The interlocutors from the donor side who commented on this during interviews confirmed our diagnosis. When we asked CSO representatives who had attended meetings organised by the government in the context of the PRS whether they had had any input, even those who answered in the positive were unable to articulate what the effect had been. Tellingly, most had not had the time or the opportunity to read the final version of the PRSP, almost two years after it had been published!

Regarding the embeddedness and representativeness of civil society, most interviewees seemed to agree that the “visible”, organised part of civil society in Rwanda is mostly situated in the capital. Without necessarily arguing that national organisations (among them the umbrella-organizations)

reflect the interests of the intellectuals, or the middle class, to the detriment of the rural poor, the weak links with grass-roots organisations is regarded as problematic (USAID 2002a:35). Furthermore, it is often argued that certain cultural traits reproduce outcomes that are excessively vertical in nature. Rwandans, so it is said, suffer from a culture of obedience. Deference to authority combined with distrust of the same authority, is often mentioned as a key element of Rwandan society (USAID 2002a; USAID 2002b, Uvin 2003). Surely under such circumstances the creation of a genuine feeling of ownership over a PRS is unlikely. For many of the donor representatives, civil society has to be gradually and slowly built up, and it will take a long time before it will play the role envisaged in the PRS scenario.

Effectiveness (2.2)

We often heard that nobody, not even Rwandan CSOs, really knows what the “people on the hills” really think or want. Interviewees also stated that civil society suffers from a lack of vision, synergy and analytical capacity. Rwandan CSOs have tended to be reactive, rather than proactive and strategic, and concentrate on day-to-day solutions to immediate problems (Bugingo & Painter 2002:7). Nevertheless, CSOs reportedly made two contributions that influenced the final PRSP. The first one concerned the World Bank definition of poverty used in the Interim PRSP. Organizations pleaded for a more precise and contextualized definition of poverty, which led to the organisation of the National Poverty Assessment. The second contribution related to the absence of gender in the Interim PRSP. Criticism by civil society was subsequently taken seriously into account, giving women a special consideration during the participation process at the grass-root level. Although these changes were attributed to CSO input by government officials we spoke to, it is probably that similar comments were brought up by donors or by technical experts in the discussion of the Interim PRSP, so it is unclear how decisive civil society’s role really was.

Accountability (2.3)

Rwandan civil society does not possess the analytical skills to monitor and evaluate government policies, nor the capacity to mobilize internally and articulate common reactions. CSOs suffer from a serious lack of financial and human resources. Even the larger organisations complained to us that they could only get access to external resources when it concerned projects. Most of the staff is executing projects, while policy relevant work is left unattended. Nor are civil society networks well organised. An initiative undertaken in the later part of 2000 to organize the larger, intermediate organisations in a Rwandan NGO-forum in order to co-ordinate their efforts and divide tasks during the PRS process, failed (Mutebi et al., 2001b:14). This missed opportunity was caused, according to some of the people involved, by “a lack of resources, leadership and competences”. At the time of our field visit, International NGOs, especially Christian Aid and Trocaire, continued to try to get the Rwandan umbrella-organizations involved in a national NGO-forum, but with only very limited success.

Admittedly, challenging government is not without risk in such an authoritarian setting as Rwanda, which may explain the considerable discomfort we observed within civil society about playing such a role. Several people we met, both Rwandan and foreign, in fact suggested that many CSOs “co-opt” people close to the regime, or, in another variant, that they are infiltrated by them. Whether true or not, the fact that this was relayed to us by several insiders, by itself testifies to the considerable degree of mistrust that exists within civil society. The following incident further suggests a glaring lack of autonomy. On the eve of the dissolution of the main opposition party in May 2003 - without convincing grounds but probably out of fear that it might prove an effective challenger to the ruling RPF during the upcoming elections - a meeting was organised by one of the larger NGOs, Pro-Femmes, and attended by representatives of a number of Rwandan NGOs, to denounce the opposition party and support its dissolution. Reyntjens (2003: 7) who reports the event, sarcastically notes that the recommendations of the meeting read like a press release of the RPF.

Our overall conclusion is that civil society at the beginning of PRS implementation is embryonic and unable to play even a timid role in holding the government accountable. In some neighbouring countries, the weakness of lay civil society is compensated by the strength of the Churches. In Rwanda however this is not the case. After the genocide, the influential Catholic Church substantially withdrew from “public life” as it tried to come to terms with its role during the genocide. In encounters with CSOs, Church representatives were ambivalent whether they wanted to be regarded as part of civil society.

International NGOs active in Rwanda try to make up for some of the weaknesses of local CSOs. They are much better organised professionally and can get help from their international network for advocacy work. They are also better protected against intimidation because the international voice they can mobilise, at least up to the point where they risk being pestered out of the country. Thus they can boldly go where purely national NGOs fear to tread. A number of international NGOs are aware of this opportunity and are trying gradually to open up more space, in anticipation that one day, national CSOs will have the capacity and drive to do take over. But international NGOs, however well intentioned, also pose a threat to the emergence of a vigorous national civil society. The international NGOs are stronger, more powerful, more skilled, and they compete with local CSOs for funds from bilateral and multilateral donors and for local human resources. Revealingly, most Rwandan civil society actors we interviewed perceived the international NGOs as donors, while the international NGOs themselves seemed to struggle with the label they wanted to be known by.

The Donor Community

Ownership (3.1)

There are good reasons to be critical about the willingness of donors to effectively co-ordinate amongst themselves and to adapt their aid instruments to the new PRS architecture. This may well constitute a major impediment to sustained success in a country as aid-dependent as Rwanda. All the donors we met welcomed the PRSP and said that it constituted a broad framework within which they planned their own aid programmes. However, the PRS discourse supposes much more on the part of the donor community. In Rwanda, donor reactions varied strongly. To understand why, some background information is necessary. Mention is often made of an opposition between the “new” donors (UK, the Netherlands, Sweden) and “old” donors (France, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany) (Da Cam,ra 2001). The distinction refers to the relative length the donors have been present in Rwanda, and the fact that old donors were generous before the genocide but more reluctant, although still present and active, since, whereas the new donors have come in after 1994 and now top the league in terms of aid volumes. The distinction does not cover the whole range, as it leaves out multilateral donors that were important before and have remained so afterwards, such as the EC, the World Bank, or UNDP¹². And the US, which had strongly supported the new regime under the Clinton administration (Lemarchand 1999), has under the Bush administration maintained moderate levels of aid but has become much more critical, both regarding the involvement of Rwanda in the regional conflict beyond its borders as in its internal restricting of civil liberties. Interestingly, the distinction between “old” and “new” also seems to apply to the instruments these donors apply in Rwanda. The “new” donors tend to make a positive evaluation of Rwanda, emphasizing developmental outputs such as stability and economic growth, rather than the political aspects relating to democracy. Their relative trust in the regime has brought them to abandon traditional piece-meal donor-driven project aid, and to evolve towards sector and budget support¹³. This is laudable and fully in accordance with the PRS logic, since it passes responsibility and thus ownership in the hands of the government (Booth 2003:152). The old donors however have serious misgivings in this respect. They feel that the new donors have been too readily swayed by the technocratic qualities of the government, and have seriously overlooked the political danger of giving budget support to a regime that is repressive, authoritarian and mixed up in a regional conflict¹⁴. The World Bank and the IMF on their part have been criticised for not adapting their instruments to the new PRS context (Mutebi 2001b). The conclusion must be that notwithstanding the move towards new aid instruments, led by the UK, most donors have not sufficiently adapted their aid instruments for Rwanda to be able to fully own the planning, budgeting and implementation of its own PRS.

Effectiveness (3.2)

It may well be that some donors modulate the size of their aid to Rwanda in function of their geopolitical views or commercial interests in the wider

¹² In the years 1992-1993, preceding the genocide, the major donors to Rwanda were (in between brackets average annual official development aid disbursements, as reported in OECD(2003)): EC (\$59 million), Germany (\$ 41 million), Belgium (\$41 million), the World Bank (\$33 million), and France (\$29 million). By contrast, in 2000-01, the major donors were the World Bank (\$51 million), the EC (\$47 million), the United Kingdom (\$45 million), then United States (\$27 million) and the Netherlands (\$10 million).

¹³ According to budget documents prepared by MINECOFIN during 2003, recurrent budget support not linked to traditional projects will amount to around 7% of GNP annually in the period 2002-2004. (personal communication to the authors). However not all of this is flexible budget support in the sense envisaged in the PRS approach.

¹⁴ Whereas in Rwanda the new donors, through the larger size of their aid programmes, have much more influence than the old donors, the situation is different in the Executive Committees of the World Bank and IMF, where financial support to Rwanda has been met with much more reservation. This may partly explain the fairly tough stand the IMF has been taken in recent years in its negotiations with Rwanda.

region. But within the confines of their Rwanda aid portfolio, donors seem honest in their insistence on addressing poverty, and genuinely supportive of the poverty focus of the PRS. This is therefore not an impediment to pro-poor effectiveness, or a contribution in this regard from civil society.

Accountability (3.3)

We have already indicated that the donor community is divided over Rwanda. As a consequence, the accountability debate in which donors engage with the Rwandan authorities with respect to the use of aid resources is mostly uncoordinated, although the new donors, in particular the UK, Sweden, and the Netherlands, do work closely together. When it comes to joint negotiations with the Rwandan government on for instance the PRSP document itself or its implementation, an overall donor position is often lacking. As a consequence donor influence is not so strong as could have been the case. The feeble reaction to the ill-advised imidugudu policy discussed above is a case in point.

It is not only upward accountability that is important. In Rwanda the drive towards more downward accountability is externally driven. Unless donors pressure the Rwandan authorities to open space for CSOs, the latter will not be able or daring to speak up on development issues or disagree with the official line. Most donors stated to us that the situation of civil society in Rwanda is problematic, partly because of the treatment it gets from the regime. In its strategy paper on Rwanda the EC openly states that participation of civil society is insufficient, and sharply criticizes the law on the registration of CSOs (EC 2003:7). And the UK, in its strategy paper, states: “DFID’s engagement in Rwanda is predicated on the Government remaining committed to progressively securing all human rights for its citizens, and to establishing a fair and transparent framework for the operation of civil society and the media” (DFID 23003:2). Donors are also convinced that they can help civil society by providing institutional and financial support, so that in some not yet determined point in the future it will be able to take up the role envisaged in the PRS scenario. Most have budget lines for this purpose, operated by their local representations. USAID efforts in particular seem to resort under a coherent and well articulated long-term strengthening strategy (USAID 2002a:53). Overall donors seem to take civil society strengthening fairly seriously. At the same time, not much of this support was visible in contacts with CSOs on the ground. The overall impression we got when talking to intermediate, umbrella like organisations is that they were left to their own devices. Donors lamented the lack of capacity in national intermediate CSOs, but they were as yet reluctant to squarely address this weakness.

3. How helpful is the donor rhetoric about civil society?

Let us recapitulate some of the points we made, and draw them together in a few final comments. Like most people who have been in contact with the technocrats in charge of PRS in Rwanda we were struck by their sincere conviction that civil society should be involved and their many efforts at bringing CSOs to the table. During the preparation of the PRSP, invitations were circulated, and a number of meetings were held, which representatives of civil society duly attended and where they, however timidly, raised certain issues. Formally at least, Rwanda went through the paces that allowed the donors to state that the participation conditionality was met. In contrast to many donors, international NGOs and analysts, we did not however find convincing evidence of genuine civil society participation. The poverty assessments reported on in this paper, initiated by the Rwandan government with the help of contracted experts, and using local administrative structures, however competent and however participative they may have been, do not for us constitute a participation of civil society. In fact, autonomous local organisations were kept at a distance, and national CSOs were not involved in any significant way. And civil society did not have more than a token input in the final formulation of the PRSP document.

Our findings should not come as a surprise. In fact, given the historical and political context of Rwanda, they were perfectly predictable. Although the Rwandan state has espoused the new PRS approach enthusiastically and has shown good technocratic governance, it is also very authoritarian and unwilling to let civil society play a role in the policy debate. Threats to civil society, and outright repression by part of the state apparatus, were occurring at the same time that civil society was “participating” in the preparation of the PRSP. Donors apparently were of the opinion that more than this semblance of participation was at this stage either not possible or desirable. As pointed out in our introduction, donors, somewhat disingenuously, have not set credible minimum standards that have to be satisfied before a participation exercise is graded acceptable. Not surprisingly, their assessments of actual participation processes are perfunctory, and the Rwandan case illustrates this.

But maybe it is just as well that donors did not push for more. As in all conditionalities, they must make complex decisions regarding timing and sequencing. There is no doubt that civil society participation is a good thing, eventually. But when, and in what sequence with other reforms should donors bring it to the negotiating table? The new aid discourse does not provide much guidance. By seeming to suggest that there is no real trade-off, and that everything can and must be had at the same time, it considerably obfuscates the issue. So donor representatives in the field have to navigate on their own compass. They have certain things to go on. For instance, good technocratic governance has to be achieved as soon as possible, without delay. But other things are more uncertain. Civil society participation, with its connotations of civil liberties, space for policy debate, and second-round effects on democratic

culture, is part of a wider process of societal and political change, and optimal timing and sequencing is country-specific, and requires a careful mapping of the local socio-cultural and political dynamics. The scientific literature offers little guidance, and suggests caution if not outright scepticism at such external socio-political engineering. Sure, in the longer run, there is a statistical relation between democracy and prosperity (Inglehart 1997; Moore 1996). But this is not very helpful to aid administrators and policy makers. For in the short to medium run, the relation between political regime and development is ambiguous indeed. Authoritarian government can show positive development outcomes. Some scholars even identify democracy as an impediment for the earlier stages of socio-economic development. Democratic government, as they see it, is not necessarily wise government (Leftwich 1993:8; Leftwich 1998; Landell-Mills 1992:10; Huntington 1991:209-210). Let us apply this to Rwanda. The eagerness of the Rwandan regime to provide good technocratic governance stands in stark contrast with its mean-spiritedness and frequent clamping down on civil society. Is Rwanda emulating the successful East Asian success stories, where in a first historical stage strong, technocratic, output-oriented states dominate over muzzled civil societies, and the reins on civil liberty are kept very tight so as to provide stability and suit the economic growth imperative? Some political scientists may profess that this Asian example cannot be successfully translated to an African setting (Sandbrook 1996), but then to apply this conclusion to an individual country like Rwanda would be rather crude historical determinism. Its traumatic recent history, and the strong ethnic tensions simmering beneath the surface, seem to justify a support for a regime that, however authoritarian, is providing much needed stability, good technocratic governance, and it is addressing the issue of national reconciliation. The question for the donors then is whether the present Rwandan model of a strong development state and limited space for policy debate can work, and, if the answer to this first question is positive, whether the advantages of this path outweigh its obvious costs in terms of civil liberties for the Rwandan people. And if the answer is again positive, they have to determine at what time in the future and how hard they will start pushing the regime to open up a space for civil society and to become more downward accountable. In all this, they have to realize that civil society must grow from the roots, and cannot be artificially pulled upwards by outside actors. In this sense, we have sympathy for the reluctance of donors to impose the participation conditionality more aggressively. At the same time, we deplore the overblown discourse that in the end may hamper good policies. By pretending, for the sake of convenience, to see levels of civil society participation that just are not there, donors become blind to violations of minimum benchmarks in the treatment of civil society by the regime, in particular in the realm of civil liberties. And despite all their budget lines and talk about strengthening civil society, intermediate CSOs in Rwanda did not receive, in the period under review, significant institutional support from the donors.

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