



The World
Bank Group

Deepening Voice and Accountability to Fight Poverty: A Dialogue of Communication Implementers

**March 30 - 31, 2006
Paris, France**

A SUMMARY NOTE

I. Introduction

About 80 representatives from government, civil society, think tanks and media organizations in developing countries, as well as representatives from multilateral and bilateral donor agencies, academic institutions, and international civil society organizations participated in a dialogue about deepening voice and accountability to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of national poverty reduction strategies.¹

The purpose of the conference was to bring together the experience and perspectives of disparate actors in the policy community who are focusing on poverty reduction to coalesce around areas of mutual interest.

The objective of the conference was to begin to break through the “iron triangle” of technocrats in government, civil society and donor agencies that currently defines, and in many ways constrains, the development process; to amend the prevailing development paradigm to more effectively address issues of deepening voice and accountability; and to recognize the contribution of information and communication processes to that agenda.

II. Conference Structure

The conference was designed as a dialogue with a focus on hearing the voices and experiences of the core participants – the government, media, and civil society representatives who are communication implementers in developing countries. The discussions were divided into four broad topic areas, with emphasis on the policy aspects of these issues on the first day, and the practical aspects on the second day. The topics for discussion were:

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| Panel I: | Democracy and Poverty Reduction: Can we even have this discussion? |
| Panel II: | Accountability: What creates the demand for good governance? |
| Panel III: | A Strong Civil Society: Looking for commitment |
| Panel IV: | The Media and Poverty Reduction: Moving beyond criticism |

¹ The list of participants is attached as Annex A.

III. Issues of Discussion – Areas of Consensus and Debate

The discussion quickly coalesced around the recognition that deepening voice and accountability is fundamentally about the construction of societies that deliver welfare for the preponderance of their citizens. Participants agreed that deepening voice and accountability in developing countries is about people, including those living in poverty, making the decisions that affect their lives. This means the agenda is not just about democracy, it is about “deep democracy” or representative democracy with a strong participatory element. This is the demand-side of the accountability agenda.

The participants discussed the merits of existing mechanisms to promote civic engagement and demand-side accountability, including citizen charters, participatory budgeting, Citizen Report Cards, Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys, and Right to Information Campaigns. A key principle identified in the application of these mechanisms was a focus on local entitlements in order to engage the interests and vigilance of civil society, and particularly of poor people. The challenge faced by communication implementers is to provide an answer to the question these people will ask: What does this mean for me in my locality? This may involve translating a poverty reduction strategy into local languages, simplifying it, removing jargon and communicating clearly how different communities stand to benefit. However it also means allowing local people to have greater influence in determining the priorities of the strategy in the first place.

Participants expressed consensus that donors, governments, academics, media and civil society need to foster an enabling environment for a vibrant, organic civil society that, of its own volition, demands accountability from government and other leaders. The discussion focused on the need to recognize that support for ‘capacity development’ within formal institutions is not enough. Participants want to see support for the *mechanisms* that encourage participation of the unorganized poor. This is painstaking work because every element of the mechanism and every step in the process of applying these mechanisms are important and context-specific.

Following is a brief panel-by-panel summary of discussions.

Panel I: Democracy and Poverty Reduction: Can we even have this discussion?

Participants discussed the implications of donors avoiding discussion of democratic principles and practice in relation to poverty reduction; what it means today for outside agencies to purport to be politically “neutral”; and whether apolitical language is necessary for diplomacy, or rather, a way for both governments and donors to hide from adhering to true democratic principles.

There was general agreement that, while the term “**democracy**” is still too sensitive in the international development arena, the principles on which it is based – participation; transparency; freedoms of information, expression, and assembly; and domestic accountability – are essential to sustained poverty reduction. As one participant said, if you want to deepen voice, deepen democracy.

One participant noted that African governments have trouble agreeing on the definition of democracy, but do agree on the concept of good governance. There was consensus among the group that the principles that are considered “democratic” are universal and suggested using the term democracy with a “small d”.

The participants strongly agreed that donors bear responsibility, if not for ensuring that such principles are adhered to, then at least for helping to create an enabling environment for them to exist. Government to government accountability is not enough. There must also be accountability to citizens too. Participants suggested donors could support this by making the case for democratic principles to governments; demonstrating the long-term benefits of real accountability to political players; increasing communication capacity in governments; and supporting policies and practices that increase the free flow of information within countries.

Some participants suggested that donors need to recognize that there were actors within governments who directly oppose greater accountability in practice, even though they may agree to it in order to receive development assistance. They agreed that donors need to better understand the local political economy, to make adjustments in their assistance that reflect this, and to push ahead with initiatives that increase and measure accountability.

Panel II: Accountability: What creates the demand for good governance?

Participants discussed whether donors and governments define “accountability” clearly enough for it to be measured; the responsibility of donors and governments in strengthening information and communication processes; and the appropriate role for donors in creating an environment that fosters mobilized public opinion.

Participants strongly agreed that strengthening communication and information processes was central to deepening voice and accountability. They also agreed that measuring whether or not people were aware of their rights and understood the intended outcomes of poverty reduction policies and programs was critical for measuring their ability to demand accountability.

In the same way, they said that measuring whether or not people actually had any influence on such policies and programs was important for determining whether the intended “beneficiaries” truly had any voice in their country. Rather than including such measurements of inclusion and effectiveness, most **consultations** on national poverty reduction strategies have been rather tokenistic and under-representative, according to the broad consensus of the group.

There was fairly strong consensus that the word “consultation”, as it is currently being used, merits skepticism. Too often, consultations amount to asking specific, identified groups to comment on development priorities that have already been set by donors and elite leaders in the country. And, after consultations have taken place, the results are typically not communicated. One participant asked that donors and governments allow citizens to act as ‘architects who construct and design, rather than just interior designers who move the furniture around.’

Another participant explained how the cynicism engendered by the first round of consultations for that country’s poverty reduction strategy led the PRSP team to rethink the process and approach people differently by giving them a chance to actually identify the development priorities for the PRSP. This effectively transformed the process of “consultation” into what she termed a process of “co-creation”.

There was broad agreement that **strengthening communication and information flows** on development issues must be more creative than just focusing on the traditional media. Participants expressed the view that “organic” communication channels—that is, informal channels that exist at all levels, but particularly among poor people—should be respected and utilized by

development leaders, rather than reliance only on artificial or externally designed channels such as formal PRSP consultations.

There was a strong call for better listening to local voices on the part of donors and development leaders to understand how people absorb information and make decisions locally, and to “capture” the voice, opinions and priorities of the multitude of people who may not be represented by formal civil society. Participants agreed that only in this way would a poverty reduction strategy truly represent the demands of the unorganized poor. One participant explained how, in her country, donor, NGO and government representatives in the capital wanted to focus on justice in the poverty reduction strategy. But after consulting 38,000 people in the villages, it became clear that education was the first priority for citizens.

Although informal or non-traditional communication, especially among rural and poor people was emphasized, the group agreed that the traditional media was absolutely critical, and called for creative measures to strengthen its coverage of development issues.

Participants pointed to disparities in access to information, and said that people could not have a voice if they did not have access. Definitions of the word “access” varied, with some participants pointing to translation of PRSP documents in local languages, others calling for freedom of information acts (and enforcement of such acts), access to technology, and the writing of documents in layperson’s language instead of technocratic jargon. Others emphasized the need to give greater support to civic education so that people would have a greater capacity to understand development issues and demand accountability.

Panel III: A Strong Civil Society: Looking for commitment. Participants discussed the respective roles and responsibilities of donors and governments, both in intellectual leadership and action, in strengthening civil society. They discussed what would be required for CSOs to take on a more proactive role in demanding accountability, and what the policy implications would be.

The strongest shared sentiment among the participants was that civil society is “organic”, rather than “built”. Focus should therefore be on helping to create the enabling environment needed for an active and independent civil society to grow and thrive.

Participants called on donors and governments to recognize that the formal civil society with which they work is not necessarily representative of the multitudes of poor people. They called on development leaders to be more thorough and creative in their consultative/participatory processes to ensure that those whom they consult were truly representative of the public at large.

There was a fairly strong consensus that civil society had a responsibility to play a greater role in mobilizing public opinion to increase influence on poverty reduction policies and to demand greater accountability. Some suggested that creating strategic alliances, or common platforms, among civil society, the media and academics could help civil society be a more effective watchdog of government activities, and cited a number of examples where this is being done.

There was a call by many participants to look for creative ways for citizens to hold their governments to account, including the Citizens’ Report Card and the public expenditure tracking survey (PETS). It was noted that these tools or mechanisms require supportive information and communication processes in order to be effective.

There was also a call for the strengthening of the autonomy of existing structures of accountability, including parliaments and their oversight committees, ombudsmen, and disclosure acts, as well as grassroots-level structures for accountability.

Participants called on donors to not only make consultation and disclosure mandatory in programs which receive assistance, but to also call for measuring of the success of such activities to ensure that they are having the promised effect of increasing accountability (i.e., whether people know their rights and understand what is happening and whether the environment is such that they may exercise these rights and participate effectively to influence policy).

Panel IV: The Media and Poverty Reduction: Moving beyond criticism.

There has long been criticism of the developing countries' media for being unwilling or unable to sufficiently cover poverty-related issues. However, there is good and bad journalism everywhere. Media in developing countries often face increased risk and require more assistance, according to some conference participants, than they are currently receiving from the highest levels of government and the donor community.

Participants discussed the respective roles and responsibilities of donors, governments and civil society in terms of strengthening the media and improving the environment in which they work. Consensus was expressed around the idea that the media had a responsibility to contribute to development and poverty reduction and that the donors, governments, civil society and academics should see the media as not just disseminators of information, but as active partners in development.

Several expressed skepticism about the media's ability to be an effective and interested partner in development because of the notion that poverty and development issues do not sell newspapers; the political biases of owners of media outlets; and poor capacity of journalists to understand development issues. Others identified examples of news organizations and civil society working together to increase the interest and capacity of the media to cover development issues in a way that did sell, thus making the point that the inherent need of media to cater to their public could co-exist with public-service journalism. In the words of one participant, "socially responsible journalism can be good business."

Participants also mentioned the importance of taking into account the environment in which journalists work. Several noted the risks many journalists take and the intimidation and harassment they face when undertaking investigative reporting. Unless the rule of law and media freedoms are enforced, participants said, the media is not free to fairly report on issues such as corruption and accountability. Such freedom, they said, is central to sustainable development.

There was a strong consensus, however, that the focus on dissemination of information should not be limited to the traditional media, which currently does not reach (or is not respected by) many people at the grassroots level. The advice of many participants was that donors and their government partners need to respect, help strengthen, and work through local structures of communication that already exist.

One participant suggested that media in developing countries need to adopt the best practices from the Western media tradition, particularly journalistic ethics, and adapt them to their own situation.

There was also discussion about the need to increase the capacity of journalists outside of the urban elite newspapers to help increase the coverage of development and poverty-related issues in local media. Repeated calls were made for better training of journalists and increased support to educational institutions that train journalists.

IV. Roles and Responsibilities for furthering the Voice and Accountability Agenda

What Role for Civil Society? Participants agreed that civil society should assume the lead role in amplifying the voice of the people and demanding greater domestic accountability, but said governments and donors should support this by ensuring that more relevant information is provided, and is in a format and language people can understand. There was consensus that civil society should be an active player in setting the agenda for poverty reduction in their countries.

What Role for Governments? Participants said that governments need to be better and more transparent communicators. They need to be more focused on the demand side of development, and ensure that poverty reduction strategies reflect the views of citizens. It was agreed that governments have a role to play in passing freedom of information legislation and making relevant information more readily available to citizens in a format they can understand and access. Some expressed the view that increasing government communication capacity was important. One participant pointed out, however, that governments are often capable of communicating more effectively, but may not have the willingness or incentive to do so.

What Role for Donors? Participants acknowledged that donors should not be the primary actors in developing countries in terms of communicating directly with people, mobilizing civil society, or improving the coverage of journalism. This is the responsibility of countries themselves. However, they asserted that wherever donors provide financing, they have a responsibility to be, in some ways, accountable to citizens, not just governments.

Donors also have a role to play in creating an environment where citizens' participation in the development process is improved by better information and communication processes around development issues, according to participant consensus. Some expressed the view that donors should do more to increase government communication capacity, and where political will is lacking, make the case to governments for implementing participatory processes, and emphasizing the political benefits of accountability.

Participants called on donors to increase conditionalities to oblige governments to disclose information, foster an enabling environment for the media and civil society to participate freely in the development discussion, and fully implement freedom of information acts.

What Role for the Media? There was consensus that the media should be seen as active partners in development, not just mouthpieces for government or donors. It was noted that donors should promote the media's role as an independent watchdog, and as an institution essential to the governance and accountability agenda. It was suggested that the media should and could do a better job of covering development issues in a way that interests their audiences. It was also suggested that the media could share some common platforms with civil society and academic groups to improve coverage of poverty issues.

What Role for Academics? The role of academics was seen as one of partners with journalists and civil society for translating and explaining complex development issues. One academic present said that the role of academics in developing countries as partners for civil society and media was not being fully explored.

Some academic researchers said their work was constrained by the politics that affect funding for their universities and research projects, leading some of them to be nervous about making comments or undertaking studies that could be construed as political. Nevertheless, they saw there was a need and responsibility for them and their peers to do more to contribute to understanding by governments, the media and civil society of complex development policies.

Academics can also partner with donors to help produce a “body of evidence” that supports the value-added by communication and information for deepening voice and accountability. Many participants noted that such evidence is required to be able to demonstrate the impact of deepening voice and accountability for poverty reduction programs.

V. Participants’ Recommendations for Promoting the Voice and Accountability Agenda

Participants were asked to recommend one practical and feasible action to promote voice and accountability. Suggestions included:

1. **Sharing media best practice:** Identify and share best practices in media through some type of events or activities, to demonstrate that media coverage of poverty is not philanthropy, but is good business as well. The suggestion was made to choose some champions, for example the BBC, to assist in this.
2. **Dedicated fund for training journalists:** Donors could look at supporting a dedicated fund to support investigative journalism.
3. **National-level communication dialogue:** Hold national-level conferences which discuss the central role of information and communication to poverty reduction.
4. **Central role for communication:** Put communication and information front and center in the strategic goals of development. Use the results of this meeting to sensitize technocrats in donor organizations.
5. **Information initiatives:** Donors could invest more in dedicated information initiatives
6. **Communication studies:** Donors fund studies on the local perceptions of the media and communication, the unorganized poor, and alternative ways of communication.
7. **Make communication mandatory:** All projects funded by donors should be required to have communication strategies.
8. **Simplify Donor Processes:** Donors should better harmonize and simplify their procedures so that their representatives in countries can spend more time on implementation to improve the effectiveness of assistance.
9. **Development research:** Select research on development, simplify and convert it into something the various media networks could use to get more media coverage of development issues.
10. **Support pilot projects:** Donors provide support to projects which are already underway, for example ECODAD which is working at the West Africa level to increase civil society influence on development policy, and find ways to replicate the experience.
11. **Communication research:** Choose one or two countries to research how information flows among unorganized poor. Use that research to spark nationwide conversations about what it means to be a part of the unorganized poor. This could be an instructive tool that communicates how to reach this group, rather than just a report.

12. **Sensitize donors:** Donors' field-based staff need to be sensitized to communication issues. Donors should look at practices in some agencies to 'mainstream' communications as a core skill for agency and field staff.
13. **Governance reforms:** Support oversight capacities of parliamentary committees, especially committees on media and information, public accounts, poverty alleviation, human rights and justice.
14. **Standard setting:** Support projects facilitating local implementation of international and regional standards of freedom of expression and information to allow people in countries to fulfill their role as watchdogs.
15. **Help build communication capacity in governments:** Donors should look at ways to help developing country governments build communications and information capacity, and encourage the political will to increase participation
16. **PRSP communication strategy:** In the PRSP updating process, government officials should come up with a communication strategy together with donors.
17. **Support for institutes of higher education** should be given by donors to increase the study and comprehension of development issues.
18. **Support freedom of information** acts in developing countries.
19. **The communication environment audit.** Conduct media audits to show the gaps in reaching the unorganized poor. Start with two cases.
20. **Design and roll out globally a senior management course on development communication.**

**Deepening Voice and Accountability to Fight Poverty:
Dialogue of Communication Implementers
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