

# Experiences with networks in Ghana

## Engagement or empowerment?

Author: Emmanuel Akwetey, Executive Director, Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG), and coordinator of the Growth and Poverty Forum (GPF), Accra, Ghana < eakwetey@ideg-gh.org >

**Throughout Africa civil society networks are successfully engaging with the state and attempting to influence public policy in order to accelerate poverty reduction and national development. Drawing on the experiences of civil society networks in the PRSP process in Ghana, this article discusses whether engagement has actually led to their empowerment.**

The recent shift in the development paradigm from structural adjustment programming to poverty reduction strategies has created opportunities for the emergence of civil society networks and their entry into the public policy arena. In many developing countries these networks are now addressing crucial issues such as poverty reduction, debt cancellation, fair trade, education for girls, and HIV/AIDS, and are calling for greater transparency and accountability. The Southern Africa Regional Poverty Network (SARPN), the Uganda Debt Network (UDN), the Civil Society for Poverty Reduction (CSPR) network in Zambia, and the Ghana HIPC Watch are but a handful of the multitude of such networks that have emerged.

The spread of these networks highlights several important changes. Networks are clearly growing in number and variety. Their entry into the public policy domain suggests that a major political sphere, which until recently had been closed to non-state actors, is now being opened up. It also signals that policy and decision-making processes are being reformed to accommodate civil society actors.

## Ghana's experiences

Ghana adopted the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRSP) policy framework in 2000, after almost two decades of protests against structural adjustment policies, and the growing demand for change. The PRSP promised to open up the entire process of public policy making ? from conception, formulation and implementation, to monitoring and evaluation ? to civil society and private sector actors. It also raised the prospect that, for the first time, non-state actors would be able to influence economic and social policy making.

Ghana has completed the first round of the PRSP process, known as the Ghana Poverty

Reduction Strategy (GPRS I, 2003-2005), and has now embarked on the second. Many civil society actors – including community-based organisations, NGOs, gender-based advocacy groups, trade unions, student associations, policy research institutes and think tanks – welcomed the opportunity to participate in the dozens of consultation workshops that were held at national, regional and local levels.

## Mixed reactions



The second group, the ‘cynics’, took part in the workshops out of curiosity, but soon found that the space for critical debate was rather limited and the process inadequate to meet their expectations. They became even more cynical and withdrew from the consultation process altogether.

The third group, the ‘explorers’ or ‘learners’, appear to have decided it might be worthwhile continuing their involvement in the GPRS process. They tried to push the frontiers of their participation beyond policy formulation to implementation, in the hope of learning more about the public policy system so they would be better able to reform it. The members of this group opted to engage in the implementation of the strategy, in particular in monitoring the process to track ‘deliverables’, and reporting their findings to the public and their constituents. It was from this third group that the networks and networking on the GPRS emerged.

## Shifting approaches

Needless to say, the civil society networks that emerged in Ghana have different interests and so tend to focus on different aspects of the policy process. Based on their experiences in 2000-2005, it could be argued that ‘networking’ was not their main purpose or approach, especially during the consultation phase. However, it soon became apparent that networking was the way to go when the process advanced to the implementation phase. What could account for this shift?

Taschereau and Bolger (2005) remind us that networks are diverse forms of organisation that link the capacities of individuals and groups in order to exchange ideas, generate knowledge and mobilise for collective action. They emerge when a number of independent organisations or individuals embrace the need for collaboration and joint decision making. They then begin to act as a coherent entity in order to address development issues more effectively in dynamic, complex and challenging environments.

The emergence of networks and networking in Ghana clearly corroborates the views of these and other analysts (see box). The PRSP process was complex in terms of its reform agenda and in

the way it sought to mobilise and engage diverse civil society groups, especially in the consultation phase. However, the high turnover of participants meant that the relations between civil society and the government were somewhat unpredictable.

In another sense, the GPRS process, as an interface between government and civil society, has also been challenging for all parties. For more than four decades, there had been no interaction between public officials and civil society actors in a democratic setting, nor were there systems or mechanisms to promote and maintain constructive policy dialogue. Thus, both new rules of the game, and new procedures for their engagement were, and still are, urgently needed.

## Complexity

The complexity of the PRSP process could well be spurring the move towards networks and networking. This complexity is manifest at two levels – in the broad membership of the networks themselves, and also in the divergent programmes and activities of state and non-state actors in relation to the public policy process.

First, the networks that have emerged in Ghana in recent years are neither exclusive –knowledge networks? constituted by think tanks, or –communities of practice?. Their members often include a wide range of individuals and organisations that bring with them capabilities (hard or soft) and resources, including finance, ideas, culture, experiences and technical competencies, which together define each network?s collective strengths.

In their newly assembled form, however, these capabilities may not be ready for use, and frequently need to be moulded and made suitable for deployment in collective action. This process is time consuming, involving cultivating trust and confidence, as well as defining the rules for, and of, collective action. It also requires the harmonisation of leadership styles, values, incentives and motivation, legitimacy, power relations and organisational culture.

As civil society actors have attempted to engage in national policy dialogue, a growing number have come to realise that dealing with the state and its agencies is a complex undertaking. It calls on them not only to mobilise their diverse and complementary strengths, but also to reconstitute themselves into more coherent entities that are better able to participate in dynamic dialogue with the state.

At the second level, the complexity of the PRSP process is evident in the programmes and activities undertaken by both parties. Currently, the policy formulation, deliberation and dialogue processes of the state are not aligned with those of the civil society networks. There is very little exchange of information about programmes among civil society organisations and networks, and certainly none at all between them and government agencies. As a result, the two sets of actors are hardly able to align or harmonise their programmes and activities in a manner that will facilitate systematic engagement. So far, the interface between civil society and state actors remains *ad hoc* and reactive at best, and disjointed and even conflicting at worst.

Undoubtedly, the adoption of the PRSP framework has opened up the public policy space in many African states such as Ghana, and has encouraged the formation of networks as civil society organisations search for more effective ways to pro-actively engage with the state and influence its decisions. The evidence so far, however, suggests that whilst the emergence of networking appears to confer some form of capacity for more effective interaction with the state by civil society organisations, those involved do not feel sufficiently empowered or able to influence policy choices in the PRSP process.

## Links

[Civil Society for Poverty Reduction \(CSPR\) network, Zambia](#)

[Ghana HIPC Watch, SEND Foundation West Africa](#)

[Integrated Social Development Centre \(ISODEC\)](#)

[Southern African Regional Poverty Network \(SARPN\)](#)

[Third World Network Africa](#)

[Uganda Debt Network \(UDN\)](#)

## Further reading

B. Bucheli and G. Romo (2005)  
[Communities of Practice: Lessons from Latin America](#), Praxis Note 16, INTRAC.

R. Driscoll and A.M. Evans (2004)  
[Second-generation Poverty Reduction Strategies](#). ODI PRSP Monitoring & Synthesis Project.

JICA (2004)

[Capacity Development, from Concept to Practice: Exploring Productive Partnerships](#), Proc. International Symposium, Tokyo, Japan.

M. Sorgenfrei and R. Wrigley (2005)

[Building Analytical and Adaptive Capacities for Organisational Effectiveness](#), Praxis Paper 7, INTRAC.

M. Warner and R. Sullivan, Eds. (2004)

[Putting Partnerships to Work: Strategic Alliances between Government, the Private Sector and Civil Society](#), Greenleaf.

D. Wheeler

*et al.* (2005)

[Creating sustainable local enterprise networks](#), *MIT Sloan Management Review* 47(1): 33-40.

World Bank (2003)

[Participation in Monitoring and Evaluation of PRSPs](#) World Bank working paper.