

Poverty Action Network Ethiopia

Civil society and the policy process

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The Poverty Action Network Ethiopia has enabled civil society to engage in the PRSP process. This article explains how the network has grown, in spite of the lack of experience of its members, and the difficult political environment.

For Ethiopian civil society, NGOs in particular, engaging in advocacy presents many challenges. In this emerging democracy where the policy-making process has traditionally been closed, the work of NGOs has tended to focus on service delivery. In recent years, however, civil society has been able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the poverty reduction strategy (PRSP) process, in particular the requirement that a broad range of stakeholders be consulted.

As part of the debt relief process, in 2001 the Ethiopian government produced a poverty reduction strategy, known as the Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Plan (SDPRP). In order to make the most of the space available, various NGOs formed a taskforce within the umbrella organisation the Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA). The taskforce provided a platform for coordinating the views of members, thus ensuring a coherent voice during the writing of the plan, and a means to inform them about the PRSP process.

Many NGO members lacked the experience or skills needed to engage in policy analysis and advocacy work. In 2004 the taskforce decided to expand its membership to include professional associations and research institutes, and relaunched itself as the independent Poverty Action Network Ethiopia (PANE). With their greater research capacity and experience in advocacy, the new members helped to overcome the shortcomings of the original members. PANE now includes more than 70 organisations working on poverty-related issues.

Extending the debate

Both the taskforce and now the network have continued their engagement with the SDPRP process. PANE has commented on annual progress reports and has provided written and oral inputs for the SDPRP II consultations. As a result, the network is now a recognised actor in the process ? PANE has been asked to comment on the draft SDPRP II document, marking an acknowledgement of the role of civil society that was lacking in the first plan.



PANE has also widened the debate on the SDPRP to include stakeholders beyond Addis Ababa. During 2004 it organised five regional workshops for civil society and local government staff to help them understand the process. For many participants, including government officials, this was the first time they had actually discussed the plan and the issues it raised.

Following the workshops PANE formed five regional chapters to continue the debate, and to conduct a 'citizen report card' survey of views on the delivery of basic services. The survey, a collaborative project that brought together civil society and local governments in the five regions, yielded information that will ensure that the voice of local communities influences the policy process. The capacities of the chapters now need to be developed to ensure that they can utilise the information to advocate on behalf of the poor at the regional level.

Engaging in the policy process

During its first year PANE had no office or paid staff, but relied on the commitment of members working on a voluntary basis. While this resulted in strong ownership of the work, it placed a considerable burden on already busy people. The growing demand for results from the membership and donors is also placing even more pressure on the members. A small but committed group worked hard to conduct research and generate policy papers, but when this proved unsustainable, PANE opened a secretariat in Addis Ababa in 2005. The challenge now is to sustain the inputs from members. PANE has therefore formed three core groups, each focusing on different aspects of the work, to help support their engagement.

Ethiopia's political environment remains difficult, particularly since the disputed elections in May 2005, so that engaging in advocacy is a challenge. Both the membership and the government are clear about PANE's remit, so that it has not been affected by political arguments. The network is now focusing on strengthening the regional chapters, and on encouraging members to ensure their capacity to engage in the policy process continues to grow.

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(under construction).

Further reading and links

CIDSE/Caritas Internationalis (2004)

[PRSP as Theatre: Backstage Policy-making and the Future of the PRSP Approach.](#)

IMF/World Bank (2005)

[2005 Review of the PRS Approach: Balancing Accountabilities and Scaling up Results.](#)

Development Cooperation Ireland (2005)

[Assessing Changing Aid Modalities in Ethiopia.](#)

[Christian Relief and Development Association \(CRDA\)](#)