

## POSITION PAPER on the status of PRSP and Civil Society involvement in Malawi

Malawi Economic Justice Network, 4 september 2001

### **INTRODUCTION**

Malawi Economic Justice Network is concerned with the status of Civil Society participation in the PRSP process to date. Several recommendations have been put forward since the process started. But as the process is coming close to the end, national ownership we have been trying to build is fast diminishing. Civil society in Malawi was committed to producing a genuine PRSP that will, in the long run, see genuine poverty reduction of Malawians. Among the various initiatives put up by Civil Society to improve the process are supplementary Civil Society working group discussions.

#### **History of Civil Society supplementary PRSP group discussions**

The idea of the Civil Society supplementary PRSP working group discussions came as a result of a meeting of MEJN Steering Group that was organised on 12th July 2001 at Lilongwe Hotel. This meeting was attended by 19 Civil Society organisations from a broad range of sectors. The meeting discussed, among other issues, the status of thematic working groups and the involvement of Civil Society to date in the working group discussions.

The members present at the meeting noted that in a number of the thematic groups – and in the process in general - Civil Society has had little input but could have done better and that the sense of ownership of the process is generally low among Civil Society. The meeting therefore resolved to hold supplementary Civil Society PRSP meetings.

#### **Objectives of the meetings:**

The Civil Society PRSP discussions are aimed at achieving the following: To extend the feeling of ownership by sharing the contents with members of the Civil Society that did not have the chance to participate in the formal thematic group discussions.

#### **To suggest key improvements in the existing drafts.**

The meeting decided to look at the following groups that were felt to have serious implication for poverty reduction but that did not have much civil society input. The groups are: Good governance, Decentralisation, Macro-economic Stability, Safety Nets, Taxation, Public Expenditure, Credit, HIV/AIDS, Gender and Empowerment, Infrastructure and Environment.

Members agreed that the output of these discussions should be made available to the chairs of the working groups and the Technical Committee for their consideration.

#### **Problems with the implementation of the idea**

In order to complement the work that has already been started by the working groups, members decided to use the current working drafts as base for their discussions. This, it was felt, would allow consensus in the final product. The aim is not to set up parallel process, as this would frustrate the much-needed consensus for the official process.

However, these efforts are said not to have the blessing of the technical committee. The TC is saying that these Civil Society meetings must be cancelled. Some of the arguments being

advanced are as follows: Civil society has already been involved in the group discussions. Why should they look at the papers again?

**MEJN views:**

In the thematic working group drafting team, none of the Civil Society is involved.

**The CS in question does not have the latest drafts themselves.**

CS in the groups have got constituencies too that they must share the discussions with. CS separate discussion on the PRSP would bring in a parallel process as is the case in Zambia.

**MEJN views:**

Our plan is to avoid the same. That is why we want to use the already existing papers. The opposite is true. Denying us access to the drafts means Civil Society must start their own discussions – leading to the feared parallel process. They can "allow" us to meet on condition that members of the TC are present and facilitate

**MEJN views:**

What are they afraid of, if the drafts contain what the members had agreed on? We want to comment as Civil Society, why must they be present? They just want us to play a submissive role when we are supposedly partners in the process. Civil society should wait until the Technical Committee finalises drafting the PRSP document. The document will then will be given to Civil Society for some days for comment, not with these drafts.

**MEJN views:**

We believe it is constructive if people discuss the draft, not the final paper. The current drafting team of the PRSP is comprising the technical committee only, none from the Civil Society. The final paper will not be as sectoral in focus as in the drafts, yet our planned meetings want to benefit the members in specific sectors. The original drafts were withdrawn by the chairs of the working groups for revision i.e. prioritising and costing. The TC does not have any of them.

**MEJN views:**

Our meetings will not concentrate on the technical priorities nor costing but on the issues therein. The papers withdrawn were copies of the drafts. There is no way all the drafts can be withdrawn without leaving copies with the committee.

It has been made clear that the Technical committee is not going to release the drafts and allow Civil Society to go ahead with the discussions. We are calling on all stakeholders to lobby the technical committee to make these drafts available

**DRAFTING THE FINAL PRSP**

It is reported that the final PRSP will be drafted by the Technical Committee alone. Civil society is not comfortable with such an arrangement as the Technical Committee, till now, does not have Civil Society representation.

Civil society has been asking for representation on the Technical committee for quite long. This was envisaged to be the forum where consensus can be proactively reached among the stakeholders. It was reported that Civil Society is informally accepted on the committee but

until now has never been invited to any technical committee meeting. This raises concerns that issues that are considered crucial by Civil Society are not considered as such by the government. What more can be expected in the overall framework to be drawn less Civil Society representation - despite their mention in the discussions. Unless something is done to the composition of the drafting team, there will be serious implications and loss of commitment during implementation of the PRSP.

Civil society expected that just like the precedent that was set by the drafting of the PRSP Findings to Date document, the same would be the case with this extremely important document. The drafting team of the Findings to Date Document included Civil Society and parliament. This was a very welcome by all. MEJN therefore suggests that the drafting team of the PRSP should include 4 members from Civil Society (including MPs). MEJN believes that Donors can help us in this regard.

### **THE PROCESS**

It has been reiterated by Civil Society that there is urgent need to review the communication in the process among all stakeholders. MEJN is however concerned that there is little progress made in this regard. Information sharing in the PRSP process is still one way – from Civil Society to the government. In addition the process is still secretive and not open. Civil society has had to hunt and smuggle information. MEJN fears that this behaviour will compromise the quality of the Malawi PRSP.

### **CONCLUSION**

MEJN strongly believes that it is only when there is free discussion that constructive work can be produced. MEJN believes that government and donors can facilitate effective Civil Society participation by timely release and dissemination of information. Unless there is accommodation of the views of the other stakeholders, the PRSP will not be people-centred and will thus not be the right tool for poverty reduction.