

The politics of establishing pro-poor accountability: What can poverty reduction strategies achieve?

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ABSTRACT

The Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) experiment, along with other innovations promoted by the international financial institutions over the past decade, has promised to secure pro-poor forms of accountability in relation to development policy-making. New consultative processes and new forms of conditionality each promise to re-order relationships between poor citizens and their governments, and between governments and donors respectively. Using evidence from Bolivia and Zambia, we identify three critical problems with these claims. First, there is a tendency to focus on promoting accountability mechanisms that are largely discretionary and lack significant disciplinary power, particularly those reliant on certain forms of civil society participation. Second, donors have failed to overcome the contradictions regarding the role of extra-national actors in securing accountability mechanisms within particular states. Third, there is a tendency within the PRS experiment to overlook the deeper forms of politics that might underpin effective accountability mechanisms in developing countries. Ensuring accountability is not simply a technocratic project, but rather is critical for a substantive politics of democratization which goes to the heart of the wider contract between states and citizens. The PRS experiment, as located within a broader project of 'inclusive liberalism', reveals little potential to address this challenge.

KEYWORDS

Poverty Reduction Strategies; accountability; participation; politics; Bolivia; Zambia.

INTRODUCTION

Since their introduction in 1999, Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSs) have become the mainstay of international development policy and are now entering a second 'generation' (Driscoll with Evans, 2005). PRSs were heralded by their advocates as an improvement over their predecessors – Structural Adjustment Programs – because they moved away from what was increasingly perceived to be a narrowly economic neoliberal agenda based on excessive policy conditionality to a more negotiated and country-centered approach. Importantly, they were focused on poverty reduction and involved direct consultations with citizens and their representatives. As of late 2005, 49 countries had prepared national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, while a growing number were either preparing or had completed their second (World Bank/IMF, 2005). This second generation promises to further promote and embed the core principles and practices associated with the PRS experiment, such that PRSs should help to 'develop the stronger government focus (on poverty) into an institutionalized commitment to poverty reduction' and 'expand civil society consultations into deeper forms of government accountability to citizens' (Driscoll with Evans, 2005: 10).

The PRS experiment represents the central modality of the 'Poverty Reduction and Good Governance' agenda that international financial institutions (IFIs) have turned towards of late (Craig and Porter, 2005, 2006). Although novel in certain respects, this agenda remains understandable as the latest phase of 'wider historical Liberalism', a project with a long history 'of promising relief from poverty to those who respected, above all, the rule of law, and the property rights of the powerful' (Craig and Porter, 2006: 7).¹ In this phase, the focus is not simply on poverty but on the institutional arrangements through which it can be tackled. The PRS experiment thus comes with an increased set of governance reform requirements, underpinned by 'the expansive claim ... that good governance would create (opportunity) security and empowerment via a new, citizen responsive, capable state' (Craig and Porter, 2006: 6). These political reforms seek to progress a central concern of Liberalism, namely, the construction of 'durable, universal juridical frameworks – "liberal orders" – that link through technologies of governance the rational domains of policy with actively participating citizens and subjects' (Craig and Porter, 2005: 231). Under such liberal orders, higher levels of participation and ownership within development policy processes are linked to the achievement of wider and deeper levels of accountability between recipient governments and their citizenry, especially the poor. Indeed, accountability has emerged as a central theme of the second-generation PRSs, as underlined in the most recent review by the IFIs, subtitled *Balancing Accountabilities and Scaling Up Results* (World Bank/IMF, 2005).

Our concern here is to analyze the extent to which deeper forms of accountability have emerged or are likely to emerge from the PRS experiment, particularly via 'participatory' processes. Within this general focus we are interested in two linked issues. The first concerns the range of different accountability drivers promoted within PRS processes and whether they are capable of exerting a disciplinary hold over those in power. The second issue concerns the apparent lacunae in debates over accountability, whereby the critical role played by external agencies in the politics and policy-making of poor countries is overlooked. This involvement not only blurs lines of accountability between states and citizens, but also potentially introduces new lines of accountability, between states and donors and (to some extent) between donors and citizens of poor countries themselves.

Importantly, our investigation is contextualized by the optimism in the PRS experiment displayed by the IFIs on the one hand, and the increasingly critical literature on both PRSs and participation from many within academia and civil society on the other. Although lacking the space to fully rehearse these arguments here,² we generally find more evidence to support the skeptics. Of particular relevance here is Brett's (2003) argument that participatory innovations are unlikely to achieve increased levels of accountability unless they are combined with other innovations that can bring the necessary disciplinary force to bear on power-holders. We arrive at a similar conclusion through a number of stages, starting with a review of recent debates on accountability and how PRSs, in theory at least, promise to enhance this. From here we present evidence from recent PRS experiments in Bolivia and Zambia, examining the moves made towards establishing deeper levels of accountability through participatory (and other) mechanisms. We conclude by discussing the implications of moving towards a more politicized project of accountability within the current ideological and policy context.

THE NEW ACCOUNTABILITY AGENDA: POLITICS, PARTICIPATION AND THE PRs EXPERIMENT

Defining accountability

Accountability concerns the relationships of power and obligation between power-holders and those affected by their actions (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005; Jabbara and Dwivedi, 1988). It comprises 'answerability' in making power-holders explain and give reasons for their actions and 'enforceability' in ensuring that poor or immoral performance is punished in some way. In conventional usage accountability is a state-centered concept, closely linked to democracy in terms of giving citizens control over the public bodies that most directly affect their lives. Of particular concern to us here are the mechanisms through which accountability is organized and enacted.

Table 1 Bureaucratic accountability mechanisms (from Smith, 1991)

| | Internal | External |
|-------------|--|---|
| Formal | Hierarchy Rules and regulations Budgets Personnel management Performance evaluation Auditing Program monitoring Code of conduct | Legislative review Advisory committees Judicial action Ombudsman Review tribunals Evaluation research Freedom of information |
| Information | Personal ethics Professionalism Representative bureaucracy Commitment Anticipated reactions from superiors | Public comment Interest group pressure Peer review Media scrutiny Political parties Politicians and officials at other levels of government |

So, it is possible to see accountability as internal and external to a bureaucracy, which can be derived from either formal or informal mechanisms (see Table 1). For example, internal/formal mechanisms such as rules and regulations exist within the bureaucracy, while internal/informal mechanisms relate more to the values that underpin codes of conduct therein. External/formal accountability refers to mechanisms by which the legislative and judicial arms of the state hold the bureaucracy to account (e.g. legislative review or judicial review), while the external/informal mechanisms are those involving the broader involvement of political and civil society, as in the form of interest group pressure or media scrutiny (Smith, 1991).

Conventional approaches to accountability, including those within earlier iterations of the good governance agenda, have tended to focus on formal mechanisms. The result, as Newell and Wheeler (2006: 1) note, is 'the politics of accountability has been reduced to questions of state reform'. This is not to deny the undoubted importance of such mechanisms for redress, but in impoverished societies with low levels of education, such avenues remain beyond the reach of those adversely affected by poor service provision. Part of the reaction to this has been a so-called 'new accountability agenda' (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005), whereby:

Interest is turning ... to ways of 'deepening' democracy where formal democratic mechanisms are already well established, and to democratising public decision-making through civil society and citizen participation where they are not' (IDS Policy Briefing March, 2006: 1)

The new accountability agenda and the PRS experiment

At the heart of this new agenda is a search for novel ways of promoting external and informal accountability mechanisms, by enabling citizens to hold the powerful to account in ways that go beyond periodic elections (World Bank, undated). The focus here is on shared decision-making with citizens on public policy formulation and execution (Brett, 2003; Goetz and Jenkins, 2005), a move underpinned by the assumption that accountability mechanisms can be greatly strengthened through the adoption of participatory principles and approaches, whether in terms of consultative processes or through the decentralization of political and bureaucratic responsibilities. For example, the World Bank's (2002) *PRSP Sourcebook* is peppered with statements about the PRS process and accountability. The following quotes are typical, and reflect the integration of the new accountability agenda in relation to the accountability mechanisms depicted in Table 1:

Participatory processes in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, including information dissemination, dialogue, collaboration in implementing programs, and participatory monitoring and evaluation, are most effective when they are designed to be outcome oriented. (ibid: 237)

Sharing information allows transparency in governance, accountability in public actions and expenditure, and meaningful consultations for policy development. (ibid: 243)

Importantly, different forms of accountability mechanism are associated with different stages of the PRS process, particularly the stages of formulation and implementation.

In terms of PRS formulation the typical participatory processes include consultative workshops or seminars at both national and provincial levels, consultations on specific documents, and participation in policy and budgetary working groups. In these the main locus of accountability concerns that of the state to its citizens, the logic being that this will produce nationally relevant and 'owned' policies. However, there are already widespread concerns that such processes may not achieve their stated outcomes. Critics have highlighted the tendency for such consultations to privilege certain forms of civil society participation (most notably by urban-elite non-governmental organizations or NGOs rather than more political actors such as unions, the media and so on), the timing of consultations in relation to donor timetables rather than in relation to domestic political processes (particularly elections), and also the apparent disconnect between consultative processes and policy outcomes (e.g. Brown, 2004; Gould, 2005, Piron with Evans, 2004; Stewart and Wang, 2003).

Importantly, Brett notes that 'Consultation is useful but user interests will only be fully respected where agencies are answerable to them for

what they do' (Brett, 2003: 18–19). However, the civil society organizations (CSOs) that routinely participate in PRS consultations are only rarely able to exert such sanctions on the state.³ This partly reflects the extent to which state and civil society in developing countries are rarely connected in meaningful ways, and also the relatively weak capacity of civil society actors (Moore and Putzel, 1999; Webster and Engberg-Pedersen, 2002). Furthermore, which civil society organizations are chosen and how they are included remains at the discretion of governments, while the *PRSP Sourcebook* says nothing of the criteria for their selection or any requirement for them to consult with whatever constituency they are presumed to represent (Brown, 2004). Such discretionary processes necessarily lack the sanctions associated with the institutions of representative democracy. Importantly, this lack of enforceability extends to the international level of 'accountability' within PRSs. Here, at the critical stage of Joint Staff Assessments where all PRS papers are signed off by the IFIs, no conditions are attached regarding the level and type of consultation. Once more there appears to be a disconnect between participatory processes and disciplinary processes that might ensure accountability.

When it comes to implementing PRSs a different set of formal and informal accountability mechanisms come into play. These are largely centered on monitoring and evaluation around the budget and discrete projects at local levels. At present, these processes are embryonic and experimental, and the extent to which they have resulted in increased levels of accountability is disputed. Again there is an assumption that this involves citizens holding the state to account by using (and creating) information on the government's PRSP performance, but the availability of information *per se* may only achieve answerability but not enforceability. This reflects a wider problem with participatory approaches such that they tend to unrealistically privilege the capacity of agency over the constraints of structures and institutions (Cleaver, 1999; Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Mohan, 2001). Indeed, the collection of data on PRS implementation and expenditure is done mainly at the behest of donors and they retain the power to sanction poor performance through, amongst other things, the withholding of funds. The Poverty Status Report in Uganda is an interesting case in point here (Canagarajah and van Diesen, 2006).

Indeed, and although the 'new' accountability agenda has focused almost exclusively on the territorial state, donor agencies have remained critical to PRS processes in poor countries, despite its now weaker links to the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative. Graham Harrison (2004) has coined the term 'governance states' to describe those polities where control over policy-making has become substantially shared between governments and donors. In such states the lines of accountability between states and citizens inevitably become blurred and confused. For donors, this dilemma is to be resolved through the PRS process in two main ways.

First, and as discussed above, they presume to be capable of instilling stronger lines of accountability between states and citizens by ‘persuading’ governments to be more pro-poor in their policy-making (poverty reduction being the presumed priority of a majority of citizens).⁴ Second, donors are increasingly seeking to make themselves more accountable to states through new forms of process-based conditionality and new donor practices such as direct budgetary support. A key move in terms of conditionality concerns a shift to *ex-post* forms of conditionality, whereby current and/or future lending becomes dependent on outcomes rather than compliance with particular policy reforms. This is promising to the extent that it leaves open the range of possible routes to poverty reduction that recipient governments may wish to take. Such moves have taken different forms, from the relatively limited shift to focusing on pro-poor expenditure patterns through to an essentially ‘performance-based conditionality’ based directly on actual pro-poor outcomes (e.g. Koeberle, 2003; Morrissey, 2004, Mosley *et al.*, 2004). While such approaches remain incipient, and have provoked an inevitable critique (e.g. Oxfam, 2004), what is critical is the attempt by donors to effectively insert themselves into the accountability relationships between state and citizens via the new poverty agenda.

**PRSs IN PRACTICE: ACCOUNTABILITY AND
‘SECOND-GENERATION PRSs’ IN ZAMBIA AND
BOLIVIA**

We now explore how these critical challenges have played out in the PRS experiments undertaken in Bolivia and Zambia.⁵ This involves evaluating efforts to introduce and/or deepen accountability mechanisms associated with each of the four quadrants depicted in Table 1, and focusing on the capacity of PRS innovations to ensure answerability and enforceability in relation to pro-poor policy processes. Both countries are currently engaged with a second-generation of PRS processes, albeit in very different ways that reflects their different political contexts and histories, types of state–donor and state–society relationships, and policy processes. Party politics in Zambia is fluid, with key opposition parties tending to be defined more in terms of their opposition to the ruling party rather than a distinct ideological agenda (Rakner and Svasand, 2004). In Bolivia, the five main parties are arrayed across a broader ideological range, although personality led forms of politics remain influential.⁶ During the critical moments of the PRS experiment, the ruling party in both countries lacked a strong grip on power, and required coalitions with other parties to run government, with arguably negative effects on the government’s capacity to drive through coherent policy reforms. Whereas decentralization reforms are well institutionalized in Bolivia, in Zambia they remain incipient. Neopatrimonial politics remains arguably endemic in Zambia (Elberlei, 2005), while patronage

politics is also influential in Bolivia, at both national and local levels (Booth with Piron, 2004). In terms of state–society relations, civil society is generally more active, oppositional and organized in Bolivia than Zambia. However, there is a vocal press in Zambia, and the capacity and relative autonomy of the churches and legal profession is beginning to roll out into broader coalitions able to advocate quite strongly on political and development issues (CSPR, 2005; Gould, 2006). Finally, although Bolivia is the poorest country in Latin America, it is far less dependent on aid than Zambia.

Zambia's engagement with first-generation PRSPs led to not one but three separate papers. The first was formulated in 2000 in a consultative manner by the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services with the support of UNDP. However, this was largely sidelined, and the Ministry of Finance (MoF, later renamed the Ministry of Finance and National Planning) took over the process in 2000. An Interim PRSP was then rushed through by MoF according to donor timetables that left no time for consultation (MFNP, 2002). There followed a more systematic effort at inclusion for the full PRSP, although this effort did not prevent a civil society coalition (Civil Society for Poverty Reduction, or CSPR) from publishing its own PRSP in July 2001. Up to three-quarters of its recommendations were mirrored in the final government PRSP, which was officially accepted by the IMF and World Bank in May 2002.

With the first PRSP scheduled for renewal from 2004, the Government of the Republic of Zambia (GRZ) decided to return to a more nationalized form of poverty policy process, namely the National Development Plan (NDP) that it had abandoned under donor pressure in 1994. The Ministry of Finance and National Planning (MoFNP) produced a Transitional National Development Plan for 2004–2005 that sought to encompass the main areas of policy that were not identified by the PRSP (e.g. social protection), while fuller preparations and consultations were made for the five-year NDP, which was finally published in June 2006. MoFNP officials see the NDP process as being significantly different from the PRSP, which was rushed through for donor deadlines, was not closely related to the resource envelope, and did not make strong links to implementation or to a monitoring and evaluation framework. As with the first PRSP, the consultation process for the NDP overlapped with an election campaign, thus raising questions over the potential politicization of the process and over the likely take-up of the plan should a transition take place – issues we return to below.

Bolivia is currently in the process of revising its *Estrategia Boliviana de Reducción de la Pobreza* (EBRP) into a second iteration. There were three consultative processes around the EBRP: two National Dialogues in 1997 and 2000 and then the National Forum. The first Dialogue in 1997 was a quite limited affair whereas the second National Dialogue, in mid-2002, involved the participation of 2,423 people, largely at the municipal level.

Structured around three agendas – social, economic and political – the social agenda was organized through Bolivia’s decentralized government structures (Mollenaers and Renard, 2003), and appeared to produce some important results in terms of participatory approaches to enhanced accountability. In particular, it secured the right of civil society organizations to participate in the monitoring and evaluation of HIPC-related resources through the Mechanism of Social Control. The PRS experiment also secured the National Dialogue as a process to be carried out every three years, thus institutionalizing a previously informal mechanism of external accountability. Although this process was initially seen as shifting the more antagonistic elements within Bolivian civil society from a position of ‘protest’ to ‘proposal’, recent events suggest that the level of contestation between state and some social movements is beyond the policy level. Moreover, observers note that the process remained overwhelmingly dominated by donors, particularly the World Bank and IMF (Dijkstra, 2005: 448). Despite establishing a more thorough National Dialogue in 2004, the government of Carlos Mesa appeared to take little account of its findings in revising the EBRP. In particular, the ‘Productive Dialogue’ carried out by small-scale producers in agriculture and the informal sector was ignored. As in many countries (Oxfam, 2004; Stewart and Wang, 2003), basic assumptions concerning the levels and quality of growth and other macroeconomic issues have not been opened up for debate.

**External/informal accountability in Zambia’s PRSs:
Second-generation advances?**

Efforts to improve government accountability to the poor within Zambia’s first-generation PRS process were focused predominantly on ‘external’ mechanisms at the formulation stage. The record of success in establishing such mechanisms through consultation with stakeholders was, at best, mixed. On the one hand, and as reported above, a large proportion of the recommendations made by the civil society coalition were adopted in the final document and the overall level of civil society participation in the process was considered high (CSPR, 2005; Folscher, 2004). However, significant actors were not involved in the consultative process, and doubts remain as to the efficacy of this participation. For example, despite being one of the strongest pro-democracy forces in recent decades in Zambia, the unions were excluded from consultations around the first PRSP. Given the relative historical impact of unions compared to NGOs, ‘civil society’ consultations arguably provide a weaker form of accountability mechanism than those referred to as ‘interest group pressure’ in Table 1. Similarly, there was no media campaign around the first PRSP, thus depriving the process of a further external/informal accountability mechanism. Such exclusions are widespread in PRS experiments. For example, unions in

Tanzania and Uganda were told that they could participate only after JSA approval was achieved, while the media and certain research institutions have been amongst the most clearly excluded groups alongside producer associations (e.g. Gould, 2005; Piron with Evans, 2004; Stewart and Wang, 2003).

As the timing of the PRS consultations coincided directly with presidential elections, neither civil servants nor donors were inclined to involve politicians for fear of the process becoming overtly partisan (Bwalya *et al.*, 2004). As a result, there is little sense that the political class 'owns' the PRS, or has any incentives to hold the government and civil service to account for the commitments therein. Perhaps most concerning was the fact that the first PRSP was adopted by donors and government despite having not been ratified by parliament (Folscher, 2004). Taken together, this not only reflects a rather thin pursuit of the available external accountability mechanisms, but also reveals something of a selective approach, whereby the more political and arguably more disciplinary mechanisms were eschewed in favor of the lighter touch of holding discussions with a select range of civil society organizations.

The NDP (or second-generation PRSP) has made some progress here, most notably in terms of seeking to strengthen the role of internal accountability mechanisms, such as the participation of local government actors. The NDP was constructed from three sources: bottom-up consultations with districts leading up to the formulation of Strategic District Development Plans; written reports from Sector Advisory Groups (SAGs), made up of GRZ, donor and civil society representatives and charged with providing 'expert' guidance on key sectoral and cross-cutting issues which would form the basis for the NDP chapters; and finally, from civil society 'shadow' 'Thematic Groups', whose recommendations would also feed into the plan.

However, and despite claims from MoNFP that the NDP process has been 'very consultative', doubts have been expressed by those close to the process as to how meaningful this consultation has been, either at the level of districts or national-level civil society. The 'usual suspects' (Gould, 2005) participated in each of the SAGs, with representatives from donor agencies, international NGOs and Zambian civil society representatives alongside civil servants from relevant ministries. In June 2005, MoFNP officials held direct meetings with civil society representatives to encourage their participation. The civil society Thematic Working Groups had their first meetings in mid-July, and were expected to feed into chapters due to be completed in early September, thus effectively ruling out a significant role for either civil society organizations beyond those Lusaka-based agencies capable of rapid responses or research findings regarding the impact of the first PRSP.

Members of Parliament were not included in the SAGs, in part because the coincidence with election year was thought to render the process to

open to adverse forms of politicization. Although there may be some good reasons for not involving Parliament as an institution – some MPs acknowledge that this would compromise the institution’s capacity to comment neutrally on the NDP during the phase of legislative revision – this nevertheless reflects a further disconnection between politicians and the poverty agenda in Zambia. This hardly augurs well for developing a key political constituency in terms of enforcing external/formal accountability mechanisms. Moreover, Zambia’s experience of sidelining elected representatives is not untypical of other PRS experiences, with the failure to engage with political society a key characteristic of the PRS experiment to date (e.g. Booth, 2005; Cheru, 2006; Elberlei and Henn, 2003). For example, in Uganda the Executive and Finance Ministry overrode parliament whereas in Vietnam the one-party state executive dominates the bureaucracy (Piron with Evans, 2004). As Craig and Porter (2006) note, the tenets of the new ‘inclusive liberalism’ have been extended most fully in states where democratic norms are often weak.

A more positive development here has been the attempt to involve local government actors in formulating the plan, something which GRZ touted as being a stronger form of ‘nationalizing the poverty agenda’ than the involvement of civil society – perhaps unsurprisingly given that some civil society organizations constitute the strongest form of opposition to the current regime. Consultations here involved three-day exercises in each district, with officials from the different line ministries and local councils invited to outline their priorities. These lists would then form the basis for a district-level report. However, MoNFP officials admit that there is no coherent strategy for synthesizing the district-level reports with those emanating from the SAGs. Given that the chapter structure of the NDP is derived directly from thematic areas covered by the SAGs, concerns remain that the process will remain heavily centralized and driven by urban-elite interests. Local government officials in one district in the impoverished Copperbelt region complained that the centrally appointed district commissioners tended to dominate local policy debates, highlighting the problem that decentralization remains very weak in Zambia. The limited capacity and powers of local governments in Zambia, coupled with the lack of political agency available to the poor at local levels, reduced the effectiveness and legitimacy of consultation at this level, and calls into question the viability of basing ‘empowerment’ on these axes (World Bank, 2000).

**External/informal accountability in Bolivia’s PRSs:
Towards a more disciplined approach?**

In Bolivia there has been a similar emphasis on the role of participation in deepening external/informal accountability mechanisms, focused at both

the formulation and implementation stages of the PRS. Civil society participation took the form of the Jubilee initiative, the National Dialogue, and the Productive Bolivian Dialogue, each of which brought in new social actors (such as the handicapped, older adults, municipalities, and small producers). However, many social actors in Bolivia feel used and disappointed by the process. For example, there was a significant gap between the consultation and writing process in Bolivia whereby the former has little influence on the actual EBRP document (Dijkstra, 2005: 448). The inclusion of CSOs in PRS consultations was often done on an ad hoc basis, with no clear or transparent guidelines concerning which are chosen as legitimate representatives of the poor. This has led to suspicions that CSOs are being handpicked due to their uncritical stance on government (and donor) policy, and on the basis of prior contact. As in Zambia, neither parliament nor political parties were involved, confirming the wider bias towards participatory rather than representative forms of democratic politics within the PRS experiment.

In contrast to Zambia, the sub-national processes in Bolivia appeared to work quite well, generating some useful partnerships between state and civic actors around public policy-making. This can be explained to a large extent in terms of the higher levels of decentralization and also civil society presence and capacity at the local level in Bolivia compared to Zambia. However, this engagement was uneven and varied between sub-national regions, according to the type of organizations and local political history and economy. For example, in many areas people and CSOs were unaware of either the PRS or the consultation. In urban areas there was evidence of supervisory committees co-opting members on behalf of political parties in charge of the municipal governments. However, in rural areas this co-option was somewhat neutralized by the action of indigenous organizations. For example, the Ayllus – Andean indigenous governance structures – of the Altiplano ended up controlling the participation mechanisms directly in their municipalities, in an open challenge to the economic and political interests of the powerful groups of the urban areas. In Tinguipaya the lack of information from the previous municipal government resulted in a violent conflict when the Ayllus confronted the Mayor and the Supervisory Committee over transparency issues.

In some municipalities there has been more openness towards and coordination with NGOs, in order to strengthen public policies. There is a perception that in the municipalities of the East, planning is participatory. In Pailon municipality, for example, indigenous communities were ignored and de-motivation set in once projects established during the planning workshops were unfulfilled. By contrast, in the valleys, the leaders and the overseeing committees participated in the whole planning process, aided by the strong presence of unions and peasant organizations. The lesson

from this is that the PRS is likely to take on a different flavor depending on the shape of local political agency, itself shaped by long-term processes of citizenship formation. As Whitehead and Gray-Molina (2003) have shown, transformative participatory processes in Bolivia can be linked to earlier moments of political reform, in this case to land redistribution and the creation of peasant organizations in the 1950s, which would later become the basis for participation in local government under the 1994 Law of Popular Participation.

Perhaps most impressive here have been Bolivia's social accountability mechanisms in monitoring implementation. These have advanced beyond the more discretionary elements of external/informal oversight towards what are termed 'Review Tribunals' in the literature on public accountability (Table 1). The municipalities and Vigilance Committees, initially established under the 1994 Law of Popular Participation and used in the PRS consultation exercise, later formed the basis of the 'Social Control Mechanism' (SCM) for stakeholder monitoring of the EBRP/HIPC agreements. The SCM seeks to build domestic accountability through the networking of Vigilance Committees (VCs) in different municipalities with government departments. Departmental committees are composed of representatives of the lower-level networks and interest groups (Piron and Evans, 2004). The SCM extends up to the national-level where the executive, assembly and secretariat are able to interact with the government and donors. The purpose of this nation-wide mechanism is to monitor the use of donor funds and investigate complaints, although there are concerns that it creates a parallel system to monitor the implementation of the EBRP which sits outside of the intended state systems.

Our survey showed that the VCs are in transition, with some communities denouncing them. While they hold meetings periodically to monitor the progress of works and to review contracts, they do not always inform the people of the findings. In other municipalities the VCs have been surpassed by the inter-community assemblies (indigenous groups or unions) to which the local mayors present regular reports on their actions. This is compounded by a technocratic emphasis on targets as opposed to outcomes. The lack of focus on poverty impact here is bound up in the agendas of some CSOs within the municipality, whereby they consider the funds coming from the HIPC program to belong to them so that they have no desire or incentive to present them as part of a poverty reduction policy. This reinforces a political culture based on hierarchy and displays of power, which controls and manipulates financial information. So, members of the VCs are elected from lists drawn up by the political parties which means that community groups who wish to exert an influence at this level must either develop working relations with these parties or form their own parties, which several have done (Jeppesen, 2002). Otherwise, such organizations remain limited to the realm of administrative rather

than democratic decentralization, unable to exert strong forms of external accountability.

Accounting for the budget: Zambia's fragmented planning reforms

The desire for greater effort to exact accountability and transparency from governments means that citizens and civil society organizations are increasingly focusing on the budget and its effects on the distribution of resources. (World Bank, 2002: 258)

This quote from the World Bank's *PRSP Sourcebook* underlines the importance of improving accountability around the budgetary process as a key element of the PRS process. There are both formal and informal mechanisms for driving accountability within the budget process (Norton and Elson, 2002), with the new accountability agenda increasingly emphasizing the role of CSOs in budget monitoring (Robinson, 2006). However, an obvious issue here concerns the tension between donor-driven conditionality and efforts to establish downwards accountability to citizens in the domestic budgetary process. There remains the suspicion that the PRS process and associated institutional reforms, such as medium-term expenditure frameworks (MTEFs), involve external agencies (re)establishing upwards rather than downwards lines of accountability (Stewart and Wang, 2003). In the case of Uganda, for example, Craig and Porter (2003) argue that these new institutional mechanisms comprise new forms of conditionality which actually undermine the participatory mechanisms promoted within the PRS experiment, as local governments become bound to accept externally/centrally determined spending priorities. The case of Zambia bears some familiarity to this wider experience. For example, the key area of disagreement between CSOs and the government concerned macroeconomic policy, and it is in this policy area that civil society was unable to exert any influence in the final PRSP document.

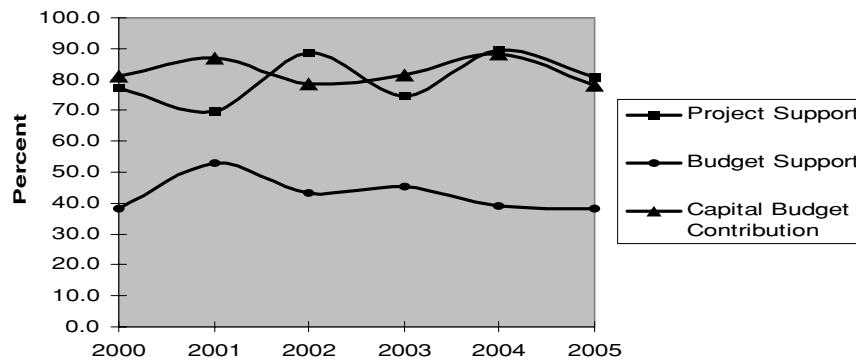
Zambia's MTEF was introduced in 2004 and provides a framework within which both public and donor resources are allocated among sectors so as to achieve government objectives (MFNP, 2003, undated). The methodology used involves both top-down and bottom-up approaches, reflecting Brett's (2003) assertion that participatory approaches to establishing accountability also require the levels of hierarchy and expertise associated with functioning bureaucracies. The top-down approach involves the executive working with IMF officials to estimate the total resource envelope for a three-year period and allocating these resources among line ministries according to government priorities. The bottom-up approach involves the prioritization of activities and related costs by the government agents so as to fit the set ceilings provided at the top. Non-state actors, including the business community, have traditionally submitted budget

proposals in response to MoFNP's invitation to do so. Importantly, a process of consultation with local government was carried out for the recent budgetary process, with the budget formulation process moving from an incremental to an activity-based approach. The 2004 Budget was planned and allocated on an activity basis and this made debate and oversight much easier (MFNP, 2004b). In Parliament, questions were asked about the uses of funds whereas at line ministry, provincial and district levels comments were made about relating costs to activities and also about prioritizing activities. So, a relatively good start has been made and activity-based budgeting be developed into an effective budgeting institution centered on results-based management (Folscher, 2004).

However, citizen participation in the Zambian process and the usefulness of the information has been limited. Despite the strenuous efforts of the CSO coalition for poverty reduction (CSPR) to access and analyze the available data, and use it as the basis to hold the government to account through advocacy work (Cordaid, 2005), little hard budget information has been made available to civil society organizations, thus constraining the quantity and quality of civil society engagement. Importantly, current budgeting procedures suffer from a high degree of dissonance and fragmentation, most notably because the budget and first generation of the PRS and MTEF worked on different temporal and allocative logics (MFNP, 2004a). An outcome here is that PRS priorities are not translated into budget allocations, which inevitably limits their pro-poor impacts. On top of this, the PRS had a number of uncosted items as a result of poor data, which meant that budget support was further undermined as unplanned costs continually emerged and retarded the developmental impacts of spending (MFNP, 2003). As such, efforts to increase levels of external oversight over the budgetary process have as yet yielded few gains.

The elephant in the room: Can donors become more accountable to states and citizens?

The role of funding agencies in promoting greater levels of pro-poor accountability in relation to the budget in Zambia has also been ambiguous. In the first PRS donors were reluctant to offer funding for the priorities outlined in the paper, with only fractions of the required finance made available in the 2002–2004 period. Aid delivery in Zambia remains unpredictable, which exacerbates budgetary planning problems. Despite the rhetoric of moving towards direct budget support, project financing remains the preferred mode of support from donors, averaging 80% per year with an upward trend (see Figure 1). This persistent feature of aid necessarily undermines state accountability and curtails the role of professional civil servants (Craig and Porter, 2006: 264). And, although initiatives are underway in Zambia for certain donors to take a lead on specific sectors –



Source: Derived from Ministry of Finance and National Planning (2005)

Figure 1 Foreign financing of GRZ budget.

reflecting the confidence of IFIs that donor harmonization will ensure ‘mutual accountability’ between states and donors (World Bank/IMF, 2005) – donor support remains largely fragmented. Moreover, there is little guarantee that direct budgetary support and donor harmony comprises a recipe for greater pro-poor accountability. The same civil society advocates charged with holding the government to account through PRS consultations in Zambia rail against direct budgetary support, as they perceive it to involve propping up a corrupt regime. Meanwhile, ministers bemoan donor harmonization as it reduces their scope for developing alternative programs. Finally, moves towards new forms of conditionality have been slow. The European Commission has started to experiment with outcome-based forms of conditionality, although this experience has yet to be reviewed, and overall process-based forms of conditionality have not yet become standard practice in Zambia. A similar situation prevails in Bolivia, where donor harmonization is minimal, and that budget support still comes with a huge range of conditions attached (Dijkstra, 2005: 457–9).

As such, few significant moves have been made to address the dilemma outlined by Brett, whereby donors remain largely beyond the reach of accountability measures exerted from below:

Donor agencies accept the need to make national governments more accountable, but are less clear how this applies to themselves. Their projects commonly fail and are distorted by many perverse incentives, but there is little evidence that they suffer in any way when this occurs. (Brett, 2003: 23)

Although there is evidence that key donors increasingly recognize the importance of ‘mutual accountability’, this focus is currently limited to issues of donor harmonization and the alignment of donor strategies with PRS priorities (World Bank/IMF, 2005). We would argue that this is insufficient,

particularly as donor-promoted policies have themselves shaped the possibility of improved state accountability in Bolivia and Zambia in ways that cannot be easily undone by the PRS processes. As indicated at the outset, the PRS experiment remains embedded within the broader project of liberalism. Within this, the neoliberal policy agenda promoted by the IFIs has systematically helped to ensure that goods are removed from the public sphere in poor countries, and encouraged the privatization of public services whereby non-state actors – themselves removed from the constraints of public accountability – fill the void. Both Bolivia and Zambia are prime examples of ‘markets tearing at wider territorial governance accountabilities’ (Craig and Porter, 2006: 21). Wholesale privatizations have been closely associated with high levels of social protest and unaccountable forms of politics in Bolivia and the loss of developmental statism that accompanied the decline of copper mining in Zambia. In Bolivia, water privatization promoted by the IFIs and, involving transnational corporations from the United States, saw water prices rise steeply despite the lack of purchasing power among poor urban residents. This occurred despite being opposed in the PRS-related Dialogues, and was only overturned by mass popular protest (Olivera with Lewis, 2004). As argued elsewhere (Hickey and Mohan, 2004), the particular forms of capitalism promoted within PRSs, and the role that they apparently require the state to play, have a determining role in shaping the power of participatory processes to achieve higher levels of state–citizen accountability.

CONCLUSION

... participatory processes can never displace the need for hierarchical public and private bureaucracies ... and representative democracy. (Brett, 2003: 11)

This analysis of PRSs in theory and practice suggests that the search for deeper forms of accountability within the international development project remain unresolved. Despite the shift to more ‘inclusive’ forms of liberalism within the new era of ‘Poverty Reduction’ and ‘Good Governance’, there is currently rather more justification for adopting a position of ‘constructive pessimism’ than of the optimism.⁷ We concur with the claim that ‘Under current conditions, getting more substantive shared accountability around poverty outcomes is going to be an enormous struggle’ (Craig and Porter, 2006: 249). At best, ‘second-generation’ PRSs show *some* signs of moving towards potentially more fruitful combinations of accountability measures than was previously the case, although such moves are often underpinned less by PRS-related initiatives than by previous reforms or existing political tendencies within countries. More specifically, our case-study evidence suggests that there have been three tendencies

within PRS processes that undermine improved levels of pro-poor accountability within recipient countries. The first comprises a tendency to focus on promoting accountability mechanisms that are largely discretionary and lack significant disciplinary power, while the second has involved the failure of donors to overcome the contradictions concerning how extranational actors can influence or even become a constructive part of this system of accountability. Third, there has been a tendency to overlook the deeper forms of politics that might underpin effective accountability mechanisms in developing countries.

In terms of the first problem, it is notable that PRS processes focus on those mechanisms that offer arguably the weakest forms and levels of accountability, in terms of their capacity to ensure the answerability of power-holders or the enforceability of conditions upon them (see Table 1). At each turn – that is, in relation to each quadrant – PRSs fail to focus on the mechanisms with the greatest disciplinary power over the long run. For example, in terms of ‘external’ accountability mechanisms, the importance of elections and the role of political parties, parliament and the judiciary is underplayed in favor of particular civil society organizations, reflecting a wider problem whereby PRSs ‘are seldom subjected to normal representative political scrutiny, parliaments or plebiscites’ (Craig and Porter, 2005: 253). Whereas judicial action has binding power, PRS processes prefer advisory committees and program evaluations, neither of which is associated with significant disciplinary effects. Within civil society, consultative processes lack binding power and the criteria for choosing which CSOs participate are discretionary (Brown, 2004). The role of the media and research institutions – both critical in terms of having the capacity to engage with governments (and donors) around often complex policy issues – is often underplayed. So, despite the (largely accurate) tendency to view the PRS process as one accompanied by an ever-growing range of disciplinary forms of governance and modes of surveillance (Craig and Porter, 2006), the forms of accountability mechanism therein remain strangely lacking in institutional muscle.

In terms of moving towards stronger forms of accountability mechanisms, the inclusion of a stronger role for legislative review within Zambia’s NDP is an important step forward. There is also the potential for poverty reduction commitments to be built into the Constitution, with the Constitutional Review tribunal recently floating the possibility of introducing ‘socio-economic’ rights into the new Constitution (*The Post*, July 2005). Although the potential for this becoming a tangible reality is slim, this form of judicial redress would represent the type of disciplinary mechanism that current PRS processes lack. Increased media scrutiny could play an important role here in exerting higher levels of accountability, as suggested by the publicity often gained in Zambia via the publication of the ‘Living Conditions Survey’. Here, one of the leading members of CSPR –

the Jesuit Center for Theological Reflection (JCTR) – publishes monthly tables and press releases in the leading national newspaper, a move that has prompted public responses and explanations from the government. This experience suggests that the involvement of research-based CSOs, particularly those with an alternative agenda (Mitlin *et al.*, 2007), along with well-publicized media scrutiny can offer genuine bite to external accountability mechanisms.

In Bolivia, the more progressive accountability measures have tended to involve forms of citizenship participation, representation and institutional arrangements that have disciplinary bite. Here, weak proxies for participation are replaced by political activism and commitments in party manifestos (see Craig and Porter, 2006: 263), or where forms of representative and participatory democracy are brought together in creative synergy. The social accountability mechanisms in Bolivia similarly resemble a type of ‘review tribunal’ that possesses more disciplinary bite than anodyne evaluation processes. Interestingly, the more successful moves towards stronger forms of accountability have tended to involve ‘actually existing’ forms of politics, rather than donor-driven initiatives.

This relates to the second problem, whereby the PRS experiment to date has failed to enforce greater downwards accountability between donors and states, not least because there are few disciplinary mechanisms on the donor side.⁸ At one level, donor agencies fail to support the forms of accountability that they ostensibly promote through the PRS experiment, most notably through the failure of the Joint Staff Assessment to make binding judgments on the character of the participatory process that is supposed to underpin the PRS experiment. In Zambia, funding attached to the PRSP goals has not been forthcoming and the level of funding attached to direct budgetary support is minimal. Older forms of conditionality still prevail. As such, and although PRSs are about moving away from excessive and debilitating conditionality, accountability remains heavily weighted in terms of reporting to and being sanctioned by the donors (Dijkstra, 2005; Oxfam, 2004). Despite moves towards qualitative improvements in donor-government power relationships, there is still a very long way to go before genuine ownership and accountability are in place. This also reinforces the impression that, despite the rhetoric, the political reforms associated with PRSs are about enhancing the effectiveness of implementing policy conditions rather than empowering states and citizens *per se*.

The third problem is a perennial one within international development, whereby there is little *a priori* effort to establish the specific causal mechanisms that underlie whichever policy outcome or institutional reform that is being promoted. For one close observer, the very theory of political change that underlies PRSs is fundamentally mistaken concerning the actual patterns of politics that exist in highly indebted poor countries

(Booth, 2005). For example, the greatly differing degrees and types of decentralization in Bolivia and Zambia has clearly shaped the extent to which local governments can play a meaningful role in ensuring accountability within PRS processes. Within Bolivia itself the strength of accountability mechanisms can be linked directly to the differing histories of pro-poor political agency in different socio-spatial contexts. This suggests that longer-term processes of state and citizenship formation are central here, and emphasizes the need to take a historical perspective. As Smith (1991: 98) notes, the mechanisms depicted in Table 1 were institutionalized over many decades in industrialized countries. However, we would also stress that lines of accountability between states and citizens develop at multiple timescales, sometimes in an evolutionary sense, at other times through seismic political events. Political struggle and the role played by reform-minded elites are as important to such processes as technocratic fixes – for example, a significant reform movement was required to enforce a meritocratic system of recruitment within the civil service in nineteenth century Britain. In Botswana, the presence of a reasonably functional and rational bureaucracy can be linked closely to the tendency of a leading ethnic group to insist on nation-building and unity as central drivers within political life (Werbner, 2004). This reinforces the importance of looking beyond the mechanisms themselves and towards a closer understanding of the forces that shape their existence and compliance with them.

To argue that PRS mechanisms fail to focus on the deeper forms of politics that underlie effective and disciplinary accountability mechanisms in developing countries is not necessarily a call for the deeper involvement of donors in political engineering. For some, this deeper form of interventionism is unavoidable and simply needs to be recognized and dealt with as clearly and honestly as possible (e.g. Booth, 2005). Although we would agree that there are some ways in which donors can support these underlying processes of state formation – e.g. providing support to different elements of political society – there is also a strong sense that donors may either not be able to influence these mechanisms or in any case have no legitimate role in doing so. In Bolivia, the PRS process has made only limited positive contributions to political development (Booth with Piron, 2004), and the perennial problem that donor activities are as likely to undermine as strengthen domestic accountability remains. Building accountable systems of bureaucratic governance is not simply a technocratic project, but is critical for a substantive politics of democratization (e.g. Berman, 2004). It goes beyond the specifics of particular mechanisms and to the heart of the wider contract between states and citizens. To date, there is little evidence to suggest that the PRS experiment offers a significant way forward in terms of developing mutual accountabilities for poverty reduction.

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NOTES

- 1 Liberalism is defined here as 'A political ideology and form of governance that has hybridized over time, but generally emphasizes the benefits of markets, the rule of universal law, the need for individual human and especially property rights. In its approach to poverty, it eschews major redistribution, and emphasizes moral discipline and (again) markets' (Craig and Porter, 2006: 11).
- 2 For broadly positive reviews of the PRS process see Booth (2003), Driscoll with Evans (2005) and World Bank/IMF (2005), while for strong critiques see Dijkstra (2005), Oxfam (2004) and Stewart and Wang (2003); for more tempered critiques see Booth (2005), Cheru (2006) and World Vision (2005). For critical debates on participation in general see Brett (2003), Cleaver (1999), Cooke and Kothari (2001), Hickey and Mohan (2004, 2005). On participation within PRS processes, see Brown (2004) and World Vision (2005).
- 3 We define civil society organizations as those agencies which inhabit the public space between the state and market. Non-governmental organizations include international as well as local agencies and are 'neither synonymous nor entirely congruent with civil society', despite the tendency for donors to conflate the two (Bebbington and Hickey, 2006: 420).
- 4 An alternative reading, suggested by one of our anonymous reviewers, is that donors have focused on poverty of late in an attempt to be more responsive to their domestic constituencies rather than as a means of ensuring that recipient governments increase their accountability to their citizens.
- 5 The research methodology combined desk-based research with two country case-studies based on primary and secondary data. Interviews were carried out with key informants in government ministries, provincial and district administration, local government, and donor agencies in each country, and also with traditional authorities in Zambia and both business and workers associations in Bolivia. In order to examine local perceptions of popular involvement in participatory and accountability mechanisms, a household survey was undertaken in Zambia using a purposive sampling method, involving 200 households in urban, peri-urban and rural districts. In Bolivia, 42 interviews were carried out in six municipalities, two located in the highlands, two in the valleys and two in the lowlands.
- 6 This research was carried out prior to the election victory of Eva Morales and the MAS in late 2005.
- 7 We borrow this phrase from James Copestake, who applies it to his work on social exclusion.
- 8 There is a notable parallel here with the Millennium Development Goals, whereby the only Goal unaccompanied by an established set of indicators and timeline for progress is Goal 8 concerning the commitment of largely northern agencies, governments and companies to a global partnership for poverty reduction.

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