

Participation of Workers' and Employers' Organizations in Poverty Reduction Strategies in Uganda

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Abstract

It is now over a decade since poverty reduction strategies were embraced by Uganda as a one of the preconditions to reach the debt relief completion point associated with Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Between 1997 and 2008, the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) was the overarching planning framework for the country. The PEAP has been Uganda's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), guiding policy formulation and program implementation. In 2007, a review of the PEAP was done culminating into the National Development Plan (NDP), 2010/11 - 2014/15. It has been observed that while the PEAP was being formulated and implemented, the participation of the civil society (including workers and employers organisations) was limited to very few organizations, with no full-time engagement. This was founded on the premise that policy formulation was a preserve of government and the social partners had no business in the process of national planning. The engagement and participation of workers and employers began in 2002, when PEAP was being reviewed. However, the engagement was weak because it had no clear institutional framework. There was commendable participation during the recently concluded National Development Plan. In this article, we used a qualitative case study mainly involving key in depth interviews and documentary analysis. The participation of workers and employers' organisations' (Note 1) involvement in the poverty reduction strategies since 1999 is presented in four parts. First, an overview of the socio economic development trends in Uganda is outlined. Second, the concept of social dialogue is outlined. Third, the state of social dialogue in the country is highlighted. Fourth, we analyse the social partners' participation in the country's national development planning process.

Keywords: Poverty reduction, Social dialogue, National development, Uganda, Policy

1. Introduction

Uganda is considered the pioneer among its African peers in developing its own planning framework for poverty eradication, known as the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP). The PEAP was originally formulated in 1997. Its first revision coincided with the introduction of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in 1999, so that the revised version produced in 2000 naturally became Uganda's first PRSP. The Government revised the Plan again in 2004 and 2007(MOFPED, 2007) and the third review turned into the National Development Plan (NDP) 2010/11–2014/15. This is considered Uganda's second PRSP and was released in April 2010 by the National Planning Authority (NPA) of the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MOFPED).

On approval of the original PEAP, Uganda became the first country to gain access to debt relief under the Enhanced HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries) Debt Relief initiative (HIPC II) (Gariyo, 2002, p.24). Uganda was not, however, granted this access without conditions. In order to qualify for HIPC II debt relief the Government had to produce a PRSP within three months, a demand which put it under intermittent pressure from the IMF and World Bank, themselves under pressure internationally as a result of the feeling that the HIPC programme was not working and that only a few countries had benefited (Gariyo, 2002, p.13). Moreover, within the dispensation of managerialism, it was impertinent that there is wide participation to ensure a substantial reduction in poverty (Ndulu, 2002), and to the international financial institutions (IFIs) national ownership is an important political imperative because it favours commitment to and successful implementation of policies (Mcgee, 2001). Other than the governance issues, it has been argued further that participation has greatly influenced the content of PRSPs (Mcgee, 2001; Mkandawire, 2005).

This background is one reason why the participation of employers and workers organizations (sometimes referred to as social partners) in the formulation and implementation of the PEAP in 1997 was limited to minimal engagement of very few organizations. Another reason is that the participation principle belied the reality that policy formulation in Uganda was an area reserved for government and the social partners were not supposed to participate in national planning. Despite the rhetoric from senior government officials concerning the participation of other stakeholders in reforms, 'authoritarianism, arbitrariness, corruption and other manifestations of patronage politics' have remained a dominant feature of the Ugandan public administration management and reforms (Van de Walle 2001). Social partners made their first attempt at genuine participation in the poverty reduction strategies during the second revision of PEAP in 2004. This participation was weak owing to the lack of a clear institutional framework to support the process; nevertheless, despite this frail beginning, the participatory approach gained strength and social partners' participation had improved by the time the NDP was formulated.

As well as being a pioneer, Uganda is seen by the (IFIs) as being receptive to their policy advice and performing well under their programmes. Indeed, IFI staffs have confirmed that Uganda's PEAP was seen as the model for other PRSPs (Piron & Norton, 2004, p.21). The nature of participation of employers and workers organizations remains highly attributed the national politics and the macro international political economy as stipulated by the neo liberal paradigm (Mkandawire, 2005).

2. Social dialogue and poverty reduction

According to ILO (2010), social dialogue institutions can be bipartite, tripartite or "tripartite plus". The key tripartite actors are the representatives of government, employers and workers. At times, and depending on specific national contexts, the tripartite partners may choose to open the dialogue to other relevant actors in society in an effort to gain a wider perspective, to incorporate the diverse views of other social actors and to build a wider consensus. It is this understanding of social dialogue that the paper pursues. However, it has been observed that the enabling conditions for social dialogue are as follows: a) Strong, independent workers' and employers' organizations with the technical capacity and access to the relevant information to participate in social dialogue, b) Political will and commitment to engage in social dialogue on the part of all the parties, c) Respect for the fundamental rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining, and d) appropriate institutional support (Buckley & Casale, 2006, p.18). This kind of social dialogue can only take place when there is participation.

Participation may be seen as people's involvement in decision-making processes. It includes attending meetings, making written and verbal contributions, voting, creating alliances, bargaining and holding leadership positions. Participation is for the sake of influencing the decision making process and making one's own view known and possibly accepted by others (Driscoll, 1978; Pinfield 1986). Mere presence may not constitute participation. We prefer to measure participation by looking at the attendance rates and contributions made by actors. In addition, peers were asked to explain how they found the level of participation of fellow actors, and the reasons to support their answers. Scholars such as Barber (1984) and Pateman (1970) have noted that participation builds psychological attachment to decisions taken and the institutions where these decisions are made. It further inculcates in the minds of the decision makers a high level of compliance to the set rules and fosters dedication to the institution responsible for handling the decision making process in question. Actors influence decisions to suit their interest or interests of their constituencies, through participation. Hildyard, Hedge, Worekamp and Reddy (2001) have suggested that participation may be an occasion where the more powerful get an opportunity to exert their influence, and leads to the maintenance of exploitation and exclusion.

Although it has been claimed that participation promotes the powerful, as far as influence is concerned,

Karvonen & Selle stress (1995: 29) note that participation 'is, if nothing else, a necessary prerequisite to influencing public policy'. Therefore the power of participation cannot be undermined. The ultimate aim of social dialogue is to promote consensus building and democratic involvement among the main stakeholders in the world of work. Thus, social dialogue is an essential component of participatory processes inherent to the drafting of inclusive and meaningful poverty reduction strategies (Buckley & Casale, 2006).

3. Uganda's Poverty Eradication Action Plan: a role model for Africa?

Uganda recorded average annual growth in GDP of 7.9 per cent for the period 2001/2002–2008/2009, though the global financial crisis slowed down the rate of growth from 9 per cent in 2007/2008 to 7 per cent in 2008/2009, in real terms (Bank of Uganda, 2009). The proportion of the population living in poverty fell from 56 per cent in 1992/93 to 34 per cent in 1999/2000 before rising to 37.8 per cent in 2002/2003 and falling again thereafter to 31.1 per cent in 2005/2006. Out of 12 million Ugandans of working age, only 6.4 million were actively working in 2002. By 2015 the labour market will need to absorb an active population of about 8.2 million. The industrial sector is underdeveloped and labour productivity is low. Although several labour laws are in place, they are ineffective (Note 2). At the same time, Uganda has the youngest population in Africa after Niger. (Note 3)

All these factors have serious implications for the country's labour force. However, Uganda seems to have been able to negotiate the successful initiation of the PEAP process despite this challenging background. Several factors have contributed to this achievement.

First, there has been a gradual improvement in terms of social dialogue. Initially, most of the social partners were completely left out of the PEAP formulation process: only the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MOGLSD) was invited to participate, in recognition of its government agency status. Later, in 2000, the National Organization of Trade Unions (NOTU) protested at its exclusion from the PRSP process, and in a speech on May Day 2003 explicitly asked to be included. Following this request up with an approach to MOFPED in writing, NOTU was eventually invited to participate in the PRSP review (Egulu, 2004, p.76).

Second, the role model is buttressed by strong institutional support. The main strength of the PEAP derives from powerful implementation mechanisms tied to the national budget process (Piron & Norton, 2004, p.14). The institutional effectiveness of the PEAP was rooted in a core of committed and competent technocrats in MOFPED who have given a degree of authority, in particular through the budget, to the translation of political priorities into financial allocations. International financial assistance has also been able to interact with and support domestic political and technical projects for poverty reduction (Piron & Norton, 2004, p.42).

Another important factor behind Uganda's PRSP is the strong support it enjoys from the top political leadership. Political opponents expected the PEAP, which is broadly based and has not highlighted any particular groups of the population, to remain a national document, even when there was a change of government in 2006. Being fairly general in nature rather than a fully prioritized document, the PEAP allows sectoral working groups to develop strategies and work out subsequent prioritization processes, in particular through the medium-term expenditure framework (Piron & Norton, p.17).

4. Workers and employers organisations and the Poverty Reduction Strategy

4.1 At what points have social partners taken part in the formulation of the PEAP and NDP?

As noted above, it seems that a favourable environment now exists for social partners to participate in the PRSP. Even during the first revision of PEAP in 2000 there were extensive consultative meetings between donors, government and civil society organizations (CSOs), and a meeting to discuss the methodology for the process of revising and redrafting the PEAP, before a table of contents was released. To facilitate the process, the Government set up a technical committee within MOFPED and hired an international consultant to collect all the relevant information and synthesize it into a form in which it could be incorporated into the revised PEAP (Gariyo, 2002, p.18).

The CSOs actively participated in the process of reviewing the PEAP, setting up a task force, with encouragement from MOFPED and donors, and organizing consultations with various groups. The task force was composed of representatives of international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Uganda (Gariyo, p.25). NOTU and its affiliates were not part of the CSO group; though they were invited by the CSO task force to attend the initial meetings, they did not actively participate in the consultations. As noted above, NOTU protested at its non-involvement in the process during a meeting with President Museveni in 2000 and was eventually invited to participate in the 2004 review. At that point it was included in the MOGLSD's four PEAP working committees, on social protection, gender, employment and labour, and culture.

The Federation of Uganda Employers (FUE) had the same experience as NOTU in that it was not offered a role in drawing up the first PEAP but gradually became more involved in the revision process in 2000, 2004 and 2007. By participating in the formulation of the NDP, FUE expected to contribute to employment creation and a deepening economic liberalization. The Government also set up a steering committee composed of senior government officials and representatives of donors and CSOs to oversee the process. The steering committee was tasked with the responsibility for the eventual formulation of the PEAP and the NDP. CSOs were represented by the civil society task force for the revision of the PEAP and formulation of the NDP. Other stakeholders represented on the committee included donors and research institutions such as the Economic Policy Research Centre and Makerere Institute of Social Research. The Government sought to ensure that research findings from various institutions were incorporated into the PEAP review process: particularly important in this regard were materials from the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Project within MOPFED. This participatory project was established to collect data and information from poor people regarding their own perceptions and definitions of poverty. Such inputs widened the scope and definition of poverty and broadened ownership of the PEAP (Gariyo, 2002, pp. 18-19).

4.2 How extensive, and how effective, has social partners' participation been?

The Government clearly provides adequate channels for social partners to raise their concerns in the PEAP review process. The participation mechanism seems to work well, and several positive outcomes from the participatory approach have been observed during the three review stages.

The results of the consultations have been incorporated into the PEAP, making the revised document more comprehensive than that drawn up in 1997. Priority has now been given to employment creation, the formulation of an employment policy, and raising the incomes of the poor. In the initial drafts, government officials and donors were reluctant to emphasize employment issues. However, after serious debate led by CSOs, this issue now ranks high on the list of critical issues next to macroeconomic stability (Gariyo, 2002, pp.20-21). Thanks to pressure from the CSOs and NOTU, social partners have been heavily and meaningfully involved in preparation of the recently concluded NDP. During the second and third PEAP revisions in 2004 and 2007, NOTU made significant recommendations on employment, labour standards, labour productivity, equitable income distribution, social security protection, employment policy and labour inspection. In the NDP formulation process, social partners were members of the population, labour and employment thematic groups and have a role in the monitoring and evaluation mechanism. Their inputs and proposals are most evident with regard to labour and employment issues. Chapter 7 of the NDP has two sections on labour and skills development, and labour and employment, with their cost implications, are taken into account in the key programmes (Republic of Uganda, 2010).

The NDP's participatory process has differed from that of the PEAP in terms of the overall government direction and approach. Social partners feel not only that they have been involved in the process, but that they have also been able to influence the setting of priorities and the drafting of content. During the discussions in the thematic groups, the social partners – NOTU, FUE, the Central Organization of Free Trade Unions (Uganda) (COFTU) and other stakeholders – worked very closely with one another in regular small group meetings, plenary sessions and consultation workshops facilitated by the NPA. The smaller meetings enabled them to influence the setting of priorities and establish consensus on the formulation of recommendations before submitting them to plenary sessions. They were also able to participate in drafting concept papers for discussion in the thematic groups and in validating the NDP.

The social partners addressed the issue of capacity by setting up their own technical teams, in addition to those paid by the NPA, in order to be capable of participating in the consultations with the Government. Both FUE and NOTU had internal mechanisms for consulting members on developing position papers and responses to proposals. NOTU also sought public input through press conferences, radio talk shows, newspaper articles and policy briefs. FUE consolidated its views with those of other stakeholders through the Private Sector Foundation, which strengthened its legitimacy.

The validated NDP includes social partners' main concerns with regard to the Decent Work Agenda on the key issues of youth employment and productivity, improved industrial relations through the promotion of rights at work, the incidence of child labour and HIV/AIDS at the workplace. Productive employment is implicitly incorporated in the overall theme of the NDP, "Growth, employment and socio-economic transformation for prosperity". Furthermore, the implementation of a national youth employment policy is given high priority, and other employment-related areas feature prominently, such as strengthening labour market information systems, introducing a minimum wage to ensure decent incomes for workers, and the establishment of an industrial court.

The main actors who influenced these issues were the MOGLSD, FUE, COFTU and NOTU.

Social partners have been adequately involved in the formulation process of the revised PEAP and NDP. So far as monitoring and evaluation of PEAP are concerned, participation was limited to a few NGOs in the Poverty Action Fund of northern Uganda. However, the monitoring strategy of the NDP involves the NPA, the office of the Prime Minister, CSOs, ministries, departments and agencies, and other stakeholders including trade unions and employers. This implies that social partners will be involved in monitoring and evaluation activities both within the National Planning Forum and at sector level. (Note 4) Thus all stakeholders will be engaged at all stages of the planning and policy cycle.

5. Lessons and reflections: Is the role model sustainable?

A number of lessons were learnt by the various social partners, and from these recommendations are inferred. Learning implies enlightenment and may manifest in two ways, *Learning as a result* is the ability to reveal and correct mistakes in order to improve; and *learning as a process* happens when observations and experience-based actions create lasting changes (Christensen, Lægveid, and Arne, 2007). To begin with, we notice that these PRSPs are not from a vacuum, they are premised on the neoliberal ideology which is grounded in the pursuance of self interest and a fundamental faith in the free market economics preoccupied with alleviating poverty amongst the deserving poor (Mkandawire, (2005).

In line with the new thinking, the PRSPs are mainly focused on targeting the poor. However, new public management which calls for the deployment of private sector management skills to the public sector, tends to bring about 'parcelisation' and 'projectisation' (Tendeler, 2004), which will not spare the poverty eradication mechanisms, as such undermining the redistributive concerns of the developmental state. This new dispensation has its weaknesses, it creates a situation where those that may need support are denied and those who do not deserve the benefits are receiving them. It may also precipitate local differentiation whereby programmes are hijacked by the local elites who may traditionally sanction discrimination,

It is also influenced by international that could be envisaged in two perspective; first there are socio – economic factors such as risk and vulnerability evidenced by harvest failure, market failure and volatility, conflict and health shocks and low capabilities, and political economy factors non developmental politics characterized by neo patrimonialism and corruption, leave alone poor governance and the resource curse (Handlye, Higgins, Sharma, Bird, and Cammack, 2009). These issues call for a two pronged approach; strengthening economic development and growth while at the same time ensuring the institutionalization of good governance. It is therefore imperative to note that the PRSP performance will be highly hinged on the way the neo patrimonial state in Africa manifests itself. It is therefore arguable that the informal structures in Uganda will highly influence, if not undermine the formal system as far as the PRSPs are concerned. To wit, it can only be hoped that the involvement of the population in the PRSP process was not just posturing but substantial in nature (Mkandawire, 2005).

Uganda has undoubtedly achieved much in respect of social partners' inclusion in the PRS, and donors certainly have an interest in presenting Uganda as a success story. Nevertheless, it would be inappropriate to attempt to replicate the Ugandan experience elsewhere without taking into account the historical origins of the political system in that country and the way in which power is currently exercised there (Piron & Norton, 2007, p.43). It is also important to consider the sustainability of the role model before attempting to export it.

If the PEAP and NDP are to be successful policy planning instruments in Uganda, there is a need to improve administrative and technical capacity within MOFPED and ensure that it is backed up by high-level political support. Administrative and technical capacity needs to be spread more broadly across the civil service, and political support also needs a broader base, including among parliamentarians.

Uganda's political space is rather dominated by the ruling party and in some way restricted. In this environment it would be a mistake to overemphasize the importance of consultations with social partners and the Participatory Poverty Assessment Project: these are valuable exercises in broadening the agenda and providing evidence for technocrats, but they do not obviate the need to create political channels of accountability. The absence of party political competition has probably contributed to the smooth development of the PEAP and NDP by preventing any struggle among parties promoting alternative political projects. However, at present the political system appears to be suffering from insufficient mechanisms for holding the state to account, and from a lack of political space to discuss alternative policy options. The north continues to feel underrepresented by the current political system; continued conflict and increased regional inequalities undermine poverty reduction (Piron & Norton, 2007, p.43).

Another important related point is that the PEAP and NDP are basically technical planning instruments; they do not provide mechanisms for addressing some of the deep issues of political change. Promotion of poverty reduction must be accompanied by additional mechanisms for fostering political dialogue.

A further consequence of the restricted political environment, in which the Government is the main actor, is that neither the PEAP nor the NDP can in any way contradict the manifesto of the ruling party, and the policies adopted have to be politically feasible. President Museveni's 1996 manifesto emphasized poverty reduction; so the 1997 PEAP had to be about poverty reduction. In 2006 the manifesto stressed "prosperity for all"; accordingly, the focus of NDP was on raising per capita income and employment and human development indicators. Thus the national plans are consistent with the pledges of the Government to the population, symbolized by the signature of the President on the foreword of both PEAP and NDP.

Most social partners observed that there was limited funding for lobbying and the dissemination of information. For example, NOTU had no adequate capacity to convene its membership to come up with a common and legitimate position on the NDP. There was also limited financial facilitation for the small thematic groups that had to prepare papers for the plenary.

Finally, the PEAP was criticized as an elitist document, abstract, complicated and focused only on poverty alleviation. The NDP is seen as improved and simpler, but a need is still felt for an abridged version translated into local languages to make it easily accessible to the whole population. A related point is that participatory planning could have been made more comprehensive by incorporating participation at district level.

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Notes

Note 1. In this paper, Employers Organizations refer mainly to the Federation of Uganda Employers-FUE, which consists of direct members and Associations. There are 180 members and four Associations. The total membership employs 150,000 employees. FUE is affiliated to the International Organisation of Employers, the Central and Southern African Employers' Conference and the Pan-African Employers Confederation and represents Ugandan employers. Worker's organizations include National Organization of Trade Unions (NOTU). It is currently the most representative Labour Centre in Uganda with Twenty labour union affiliates, with 192, 373 workers. The other labour union is Central Organization of Free Trade Unions (Uganda) (COFTU). They all partner with the International Labor organization (ILO) and other agencies to promote good labour relations.

Note 2. The Employment Act No. 6 (2006) requires districts to appoint labour officers. However, though there are 114 districts, only 30 such officers have been recruited. Funding for labour inspection of workplaces is inadequate and the level of awareness of existing labour laws is very low among both workers and employers.

Note 3. Population Reference Bureau: World Population Data Sheet 2010. <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Datasheets/2010/2010wpds.aspx> (accessed 20 Sep. 2010).

Note 4. A National Planning Forum is to be established in the republic of Uganda composed of the President, ministers, permanent secretaries and representatives of the private sector. Monitoring and evaluation at sector level will include ministries, departments and agencies, development partners, private sector bodies and NGOs.