

## **‘Engendering’ Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs): the issues and the challenges**

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*This paper discusses the ‘engendering’ of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), and discusses the role of organisations such as Oxfam in supporting this process, at country level and internationally. It is based on an evaluation assessing the extent to which Oxfam GB’s work on PRSPs has been mainstreaming gender and diversity. The evaluation was part of a larger gender mainstreaming evaluation, demonstrating Oxfam’s strong commitment to promoting gender equality in its development work.*

PRSPs had their birth in 1999 as a result of advocacy efforts of NGOs including Oxfam. Initially, PRSPs were introduced as a prerequisite for countries in the Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative to have their national debts reduced by the World Bank and IMF. Now, PRSPs are being introduced in non-HIPC countries too. PRSPs are de facto national economic plans directed at reducing poverty. Bilateral aid agencies like the UK Department for International Development (DFID) are underwriting PRSP preparation. Many PRSPs are still in draft, many others have yet to be formulated, and existing PRSPs will be reformulated periodically to reflect changing needs.

Oxfam has prioritised advocacy around PRSP preparation and implementation as an important strategy to reduce poverty. Oxfam’s main PRSP advocacy strategy to date has been to influence ex-ante participatory processes which solicit PRSP inputs from a broad spectrum of civil society voices. These voices are supposed to feed into PRSP preparation. So far, the payoff from the efforts of Oxfam and its local partner organisations to ensure PRSP processes are genuinely participatory have been mixed. Oxfam’s considerable investment in these activities have precipitated increased involvement from community organisations. However, while Oxfam’s efforts has improved the participatory *process*, civil society inputs into the process have hardly fed into the *content* of most PRSPs. Oxfam intends to expand its PRSP advocacy to trying to influence PRSP content, budgets and implementation monitoring (Oxfam International 2001b).

Oxfam’s PRSP advocacy, like all Oxfam work, is supposed to mainstream gender analysis and promote gender equality. In a few countries like Uganda, where Oxfam influenced PRSP participatory processes, women have participated actively and participatory outputs were engendered. However, as in most advocacy activities, Oxfam alone cannot claim sole credit for this success (Derbyshire 2002a). Even in countries like Uganda where the participatory process mainstreamed gender, engendered participatory inputs have hardly fed into PRSP content. Among the PRSPs reviewed as part of the Oxfam evaluation, only Rwanda’s mainstreamed gender, but Oxfam was not involved in the Rwandan PRSP.

### **PRSPs, gender equality and participation**

PRSPs are supposed to express not only government interests, but also the interests of groups within civil society. Women, and women’s gender interests, remain marginalised from government decision-making, so participatory processes provide their main opportunity for input. Input comes from the of input from civil society which are supposed to take place. However, participatory processes in most countries have hardly been either participatory or gender-sensitive. Input from civil society is often organised *ad hoc*, and information about opportunities for input is often circulated either late or not at all. Women face particular problems in participating. With only little or short notice, women’s groups not only have little or no time to prepare for meetings, but they have the additional problems of members

having to arrange home care and safe transport (Bamberger et al 2001; Derbyshire 2002a; Zuckerman 2001). Even where women's groups have been integrated into participatory exercises, women generally remain marginalised from government, civil society and grassroots decision-making and women's organisations feel removed from macroeconomic debates central to PRSPs (Derbyshire 2002a).

In a study for this evaluation of the extent to which Oxfam GB's PRSP work has been mainstreaming gender, Helen Derbyshire pinpointed three sets of issues which have hampered these attempts:

- A significant problem of 'policy evaporation' in all contexts, as the implementation and impact of PRSPs fail to reflect government policy commitments to gender equality.
- Widespread conceptual confusion between Women in Development (WID) approaches and gender mainstreaming; this confusion hampers policy and practice.
- Inequalities between women and men in the staffing and culture of development organisations, which inhibit effective implementation of gender equality policy commitments (Derbyshire 2002a).

#### *Policy evaporation*

One reason so few PRSPs have integrated gender issues effectively is because of the widespread assumption of stakeholders that 'engendered' participatory processes would be available to feed into PRSPs.

To this end, civil society groups, governments, and NGOs including Oxfam, have made considerable efforts to ensure participatory processes include women, and that their analysis raises key gender issues. Oxfam's advocacy on engendering PRSPs has entailed working with local CSOs and other stakeholders to build their capacity around women's participation and gender analysis. Oxfam has undertaken such capacity-building in various countries including Uganda and Vietnam. However, 'policy evaporation' after Oxfam's capacity-building has been a serious problem. The Ugandan experience described below provides the best example.

Ugandan women's groups played a key role in the participatory process partly owing to Uganda's strong women's groups and partly owing to Oxfam's organisational role. From 1998 to 2002, Uganda conducted an extensive and gender-aware Participatory Poverty Assessment Programme (UPPAP). This assessment consulted the poor, including women, to ensure their voices would be integrated into the PRSP (Uganda 2002). UPPAP included gender training on what gender means, how gender issues influence people's vulnerability to poverty, and how to collect sex-disaggregated data. As part of UPPAP, women's focus groups were convened to overcome women's reluctance to speak publicly. However, the subsequent national participatory 'synthesis workshop' diminished gender issues (Derbyshire 2002a). Previously disaggregated data was aggregated, obscuring gender differences and inequalities. This obscuring process was eventually reflected in the Uganda PRSP, which takes a WID approach, scattering a few references relating to gender-based inequality here and there. In preparation for its next PRSP, Ugandan stakeholders are undertaking another participatory effort, which is even stronger on gender issues than was the first. Efforts are being made to ensure gender analysis remains intact. Oxfam is financing this initiative, but is appropriately leaving the organisation to local stakeholders.

#### *Conceptual confusion about WID versus GAD approaches to poverty*

Most PRSPs produced to date weakly apply an obsolete women in development (WID) approach, mentioning a few female problems in isolation such as girls not attending school, women's reproductive health problems and domestic violence.

A literature analysis carried out for the Oxfam evaluation corroborated this finding (Derbyshire 2002a). The important gender themes PRSPs have addressed tend to be

mentioned in free standing paragraphs or sentences. But most PRSPs fail to mainstream gender by applying a gender in development (GAD) approach - analysing inequalities between males and females and proposing programmes to eliminate these inequalities. A GAD approach would mainstream gender by analysing women's and men's roles sector by sector and issue by issue. This is the essence of the engendering approach that is essential for reducing poverty.

The only PRSP to date that mainstreams gender into its analysis of poverty, with few missed opportunities, is Rwanda's. The Rwandan PRSP process provides some valuable lessons. The box below provides details.

#### **An Example of Good Practice: the Rwandan PRSP**

Rwanda succeeded in 'engendering' its PRSP because it initiated a series of deliberate steps, backed by strong moral and financial commitment, described below:<sup>1</sup>

1. The Ministry of Gender and the Promotion of Women (MIGEPROFE) hired an external gender expert to facilitate the process. The expert analysed the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper's failure to mainstream gender issues in detail and suggested how this could have been done.
2. The consultant held meetings with the PRSP writing group at the Ministry of Economics and Finance (MINECOFIN) to ensure its members were committed to mainstreaming gender into the PRSP.
3. PRSP stakeholders including MIGEPROFE, community organisations and PRSP writing team members tried to persuade the participatory exercise facilitators (also headed by an external consultant) of the importance of ensuring women's as well as men's views were solicited.
4. MIGEPROFE and MINECOFIN co-sponsored a gender mainstreaming workshop. Fifty representatives from a broad range of sectors participated. Two dynamic civil society activists co-facilitated it. The MIGEPROFE and MINECOFIN ministers opened and closed the workshop, giving it a high profile. Presentations focused on the importance of integrating gender into the PRSP in order to achieve poverty reduction, and tools to do this. Participants practised using the tools in teams, integrating gender issues into the IPRSP, sector by sector. Teams formulated recommendations on how best to engender the PRSP using the tools provided.
5. An inter-agency PRSP Engendering Committee was established at the consultant's suggestion to promote PRSP gender mainstreaming. Committee members consisted of the Director of the PRSP writing team, the MIGEPROFE Gender and Development Department Director, and a representative of Pro-Femmes (Rwanda's women's civil society groups' umbrella organisation).

In the Rwanda example, it helped that the PRSP writing team director was previously the MIGEPROFE Director of Administration. Although the IPRSP he directed neglected gender, it was easy to remind him to promote gender equality. It was also critical to convince other PRSP writing team members of the importance of mainstreaming gender to achieve poverty reduction goals, through individual meetings and especially through training practice in mainstreaming gender.

### *Staff capacity-building and organisational culture*

Organisational capacity of staff – staff knowledge, skills and commitment to address gender issues in their work and their work culture – is one of the essential elements Derbyshire identifies for gender mainstreaming. Therefore, this evaluation of the extent to which Oxfam’s PRSP advocacy work has mainstreamed gender assessed staff capacity for this task. To do so, the author interviewed Oxfam GB staff in Oxford and in country offices, Oxfam GB partner agency staff and Oxfam International staff in Washington DC, USA whose core work includes PRSP advocacy. Country office and Washington staff cited insufficient capacity on gender mainstreaming as one of the key elements contributing to weak work on gender and PRSPs. None of the country offices whose staff were interviewed had gender experts on the staff. Some had staff who acted as gender focal points, but said they needed gender experts as well to understand how to mainstream gender into the PRSP especially when it comes to complex macroeconomic issues. Country office staff interviewed also attributed weak work on integrating gender into PRSPs to insufficient support from headquarters. Several Oxfam country offices requested greater guidance from headquarters around gender and PRSP macroeconomic policy issues. Country and Oxfam International staff would welcome additional training around these issues.

A good example of these issues is the case of Oxfam GB in Vietnam.

Because civil society organisations have difficulty registering and getting recognised in Vietnam, Oxfam has been working mainly in its own right, engaging the government in direct advocacy on PRSPs, rather than through partner organisations. At the same time, Oxfam supports the development of Vietnamese civil society organisations. Oxfam GB is the only Oxfam office with this kind of involvement in the formulation of the PRSP and wonders if it should be involved in what should be a ‘country-owned’ process. Overall, many government officials feel cynical about the PRSP, since it is perceived as donor-imposed.

Oxfam is represented on the World Bank-organised Gender and Poverty Task Forces in Vietnam that participate in PRSP consultations. Oxfam reviews PRSP drafts, and tries to ensure they address gender and diversity issues faced by marginalised groups and ethnic minorities. Oxfam GB is also promoting the creation of a ministry-by-ministry gender budget analysis incorporating available sex-disaggregated data. However, since existing sex-disaggregated data needs to be expanded, it would also be very helpful if Oxfam could support its collection.

Oxfam staff in Vietnam believe the Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) are a good starting point for influencing the PRSP. Oxfam GB led the Mekong district PPA, which was one of four held in the country. Oxfam selected researchers from diverse backgrounds, including women from ethnic minorities, and helped train them on the issues of gender and diversity. Diversity was emphasised by interviewing the illiterate, ethnic minorities, and other groups. The Mekong PPA addressed contentious gender issues like violence against women (40% of women suffer from domestic violence) and HIV/AIDS. The PPA has paid off in getting the government to acknowledge these problems, which it formerly denied, and incorporate them into the draft PRSP. However, Oxfam Vietnam staff pointed out that this success cannot be attributed solely to Oxfam.

The Vietnamese IPRSP introduced a few gender and diversity issues but in an ad hoc way, without mainstreaming gender overall including the feminisation of the Vietnamese labour force and the insufficient economic safety-net protection for elderly and disabled people. Hopefully, Oxfam along with other stakeholders, will promote mainstreaming gender and diversity into the PRSP.

Oxfam recently returned to the Mekong district for consultations about the PRSP, to ensure it addresses gender and diversity issues. The IPRSP only mentioned issues facing women in a

few instances, and did not mainstream gender perspectives at all although it raised the needs of ethnic minorities and specific regions several times. Repeated IPRSP discussions about poverty, macro-economic issues including trade liberalisation, and SOE equitisation (a euphemism for privatisation) neglected gender ramifications. An IPRSP 'wish-list' included the environment and the problems faced by the urban poor but was gender-blind except for promoting women's equality in leadership positions.

Despite Oxfam's participation the World Bank-supported Gender Task Force consultations with the objective of mainstreaming gender into the PRSP, the PRSP is not expected to address gender inequalities systematically. Although the PRSP will not be strong on gender, Oxfam staff expect that it will be better on gender than other official documents. Oxfam staff believe their advocacy has contributed to this progress. A key reason for expecting the PRSP to be weak on gender issues is that gender-unaware young male government officials predominate in the drafting team. Another reason is the lack of sex-disaggregated data. However, recent gender analyses provide considerable qualitative data which have not been used. Oxfam staff expect the PRSP budget will be gender-blind.

Constraints and challenges facing advocates working to mainstream gender into the Vietnam PRSP include the existence of laws on equality between men and women, and bodies to address sex equality. The existence of these leads some, including some Oxfam staff, to think the issue has already been dealt with. However, these official women's organisations lack power, and address women's issues in isolation from an analysis of gender inequality. A key area of work in which Oxfam could become involved further is mainstreaming gender with the government and party women's organisations. Oxfam should work on convincing the government of the virtues of gender equality in terms of poverty reduction which the government is keenly promoting.

There are also internal challenges for organisations working on gender and PRSPs. Oxfam staff in Vietnam are confused by the concept of gender, and this hinders the ability of staff to incorporate gender perspectives into work; for example, staff are fuzzy on the difference between equity and equality. The SE Asia Regional Office is recruiting a gender adviser, but there is no specialist in the country office. Staff feel they do not know how to mainstream gender, and need analytical tools to help them do this. Despite Oxfam using gender manuals, giving gender training and agreeing gender-related performance objectives for staff, working on gender inequality is not a priority for all staff. As stated above, some staff asserted that gender equality exists in Vietnam, since there are national women's organisations, and laws on equality between men and women.

Country office staff from several other Oxfam offices expressed lack of confidence in mainstreaming gender generally. One said 'mainstreaming gender is a "mysterious" process', and asked for help in 'mainstreaming techniques'. Special problems confront staff in countries undergoing democratic transitions, for example those in Armenia and Vietnam, where local staff believe gender inequality is not a problem because their countries have gender equality laws and mass women's organisations.

At the level of implementation in developing countries, NGOs like Oxfam need gender experts. Managers are usually already overburdened, and do not all have sufficient time personally to ensure that PRSP work is 'engendered' properly. Encouragingly, Oxfam's nine regional offices have begun hiring gender experts. Hopefully, countries will follow.

At the other end of the spectrum from country-level work on individual PRSPs, Oxfam International has an office in Washington DC, USA, which conducts advocacy work with the Washington-based international financial institutions. The staff here told the author of the need for gender training at this level too. Staff need training in general gender awareness, gender and PRSPs, gender and trade, and broader gender and macroeconomics.

However, training is just one among various complementary change strategies that development organisations including Oxfam need to (re-)explore and implement. One lesson in organisational experience is that ‘engendering’ organisations requires sustained nurturing. It is an on-going process that needs continuous work (Rao, Stuart and Kelleher 1999). This lesson has been learned at Oxfam’s headquarters, where gender awareness has long been promoted, and gender mainstreaming has been policy for the last several years. However, not all staff practise **gender equality advocacy (Elaine please clarify what you mean by this in this context)**. Oxfam’s PRSP experiences suggest that making everyone responsible for gender remains a challenge needing special and continuous interventions.

Oxfam’s decision to analyse the extent to which gender equality has been mainstreamed into its advocacy work around PRSPs is in itself an encouraging sign. There are several others embodied in the following commendable initiatives:

- Oxfam PRSP case studies are underway, including assessments of the mainstreaming of gender and diversity perspectives;
- Oxfam GB and OA have initiated a PRSP e-mail support mailing list. This is a strong initiative. Beyond it, Oxfam GB is considering developing a list-serve. Oxfam could install an online gender advisory service list-serve, to respond to queries and provide ‘just-in-time’ support modelled on the World Bank’s stellar Education Advisory Service, which provides multiple, rich and usually rapid responses from all corners of the world to queries.

Currently, the need to integrate the interests and needs of minority societies into analyses of poverty and development is being increasingly recognised by development organisations, including Oxfam. Diversity needs to become a more integral part of the PRSP advocacy agenda. A few PRSPs pay attention to ethnic minority and other diverse groups, but in an inconsistent, ‘add-on’ way, reminiscent of WID approaches, rather than through mainstreaming.

**Elaine Zuckerman is (add brief bio and contact details here please Elaine)**

## **Endnotes**

1 Used here in the sense of ‘integrating gender into’

2 Derbyshire defines a Women in Development (WID) approach as ‘...small and separate projects and project components run by women for women, typified by women’s income generation projects’. In contrast, she believes that ‘Gender mainstreaming changes the focus of interventions from women as a target group to gender analysis of women’s and men’s roles and relations as part of the planning process of all development interventions, and to gender equality as a goal’ (Derbyshire 2002a).

3 Kenya’s soon to be published PRSP is also supposed to mainstream gender.

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<sup>1</sup> The gender consultant's inputs consisted of 40 working days including 25 days for preparatory and analytical work done at home and 15 days for two missions culminating in the workshop at the end of the second mission.