

LEGISLATURES AND CIVIL SOCIETY: POTENTIAL PARTNERS IN POVERTY REDUCTION

*AN OVERVIEW OF LEGISLATIVE-CIVIC COOPERATION
IN PURSUIT OF NATIONAL POVERTY REDUCTION GOALS*

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March 2004

ABSTRACT

For the past several years, the international development community has focused a significant amount of attention on civil society's role in national poverty reduction efforts. More recently, it has become clear that national legislative bodies must also be more systematically involved in poverty reduction strategies if they are to be effective. In light of these recognitions, this paper addresses the potential to further enhance the impact and sustainability of national poverty reduction efforts through legislative-civic coordination or cooperation. The first section offers a brief survey of global experience in building constructive legislative-civic partnerships and identifies opportunities for cooperation that strengthen each of a legislature's three main areas of responsibility—representation, legislation and oversight. The second portion of the paper overviews mechanisms by which legislatures can strengthen their own contribution to poverty reduction efforts through cooperation with civic actors at each stage in the domestic policy cycle—issue identification, policy formulation, policy implementation and evaluation/ monitoring. Although relationships between civic and legislative actors have been historically challenging in some countries, numerous opportunities exist for mutually beneficial coordination to the advantage of MPS, civil society and the population at large.

GLOBAL OVERVIEW

In the pursuit of national poverty reduction, there are points where stakeholders have mutually reinforcing goals. Despite the diversity of political views regarding poverty reduction priorities and the technical mechanisms by which to pursue economic growth, nearly all elements of society are in agreement that less poverty is in the National best interest. Once a decision has been taken and funds are expended for a particular poverty reduction initiative, most

stakeholders also hope that the outcome is a genuine reduction in the incidence or experience of the targeted aspect of poverty. Furthermore, regardless of the variety of policy priorities held by each Member of Parliament (MP), there are likely civic actors with compatible concerns. Legislators may wish to increase their constituent's access to clean water, generate local employment opportunities at home through support for micro-credits, or want to determine whether current government initiatives are in fact improving rural access to secondary education; civic activists with respective interests in the environment, entrepreneurship or education could be useful allies in pursuit of these development goals.

Civil Society and Cooperation: Some Definitions

For the purposes of this paper, *civil society* is considered to include: formally organized non-governmental organizations; think tanks; issue advocates; watchdog groups; member based or activist organizations; organized but informally structured citizen groups or networks; and various community development initiatives. All these groups are often loosely referred to as CSOs.

The term *cooperation* also covers a range of possibilities, with varying levels of coordination: joint activities, coordinated timing for separate activities, or independent pursuit of shared goals plus information sharing.

While political positioning, historic antagonism, new institutional relationships, or obstinate personalities can make legislative-civic cooperation challenging, there are benefits to working through the challenges to build a constructive partnership. Particularly where resources are limited, cooperation (or at least coordination) can heighten the impact of either MPs or civic groups acting alone. For example:

- Expanded Human and other Resources: Cooperation means that legislators and civic actors can utilize the knowledge, experience and contacts. Moreover, twice the amount of time can be dedicated to the issue or activity.
- Increased Media Coverage: In many places, particularly where legislative-civic cooperation has been less common, public demonstration of partnership can generate media interest. Further, an MP's status as a nationally elected figure coupled with the issue expertise, or grassroots credentials, of a NGO can be very appealing to the media. With greater media coverage, MPs and civic actors are both better able to communicate their issues to the public directly and to the executive branch indirectly. In some cases, it may also build the public image of the legislature by demonstrating its engagement in critical poverty related issues.
- Improved Public Trust: MPs and civic actors can have complimentary public images. Because they are elected by the general public to play a role in

governing the country, MPs' support for an issue lends it formal recognition. Whereas, concurrent support of an issue (or policy) by non-partisan civic organizations may indicate to the public that the policy is not a mere outcrop of partisan politics. Individual MPs may also find that their popularity increases.

For each aspect of parliamentary duty, there are examples of constructive collaboration with civil society.

LEGISLATION

Regardless of constitutional structure, every legislature is responsible for reviewing and passing laws. In some places however, parliamentary ability to constructively fulfill this function is constrained by a lower capacity for research and/or analysis due to limited financial and/or human resources. When this is the case, the knowledge base built by NGOs through their own research, or on the ground experiences, can be a credible resource for MPs to utilize in the fulfillment of their legislative duty.

Civic Groups in Kosovo Provide Information Regarding Pending Legislation

In Kosovo in 2003, the Kosovo Youth Network (KYN) collected, consolidated and shared information to support legislation and budgetary allocations for municipal youth centers. In part a response to high unemployment, KYN has worked with the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture to organize public meetings in 30 municipalities to solicit input from youth on the proposed legislation's content. In addition, KYN conducted a survey of youth organizations to investigate current sources of support. The results of both activities are being used to shape draft legislation and will likely be used in briefing parliamentary committee members.

Bulgarian NGOs Brief Parliamentary Committee Members

In 2002, a network of women's rights NGOs, the Women's Alliance for Development (WAD), conducted an anti-trafficking campaign. After WAD presented its work at a public roundtable, an attending MP suggested that two or three members from WAD testify before the judiciary or parliamentary committee on human rights. Later that year, WAD detailed its findings before a session of the parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Freedoms, thereby providing additional information on the national aspects of a critical regional issue.

REPRESENTATION

In addition to providing key, or complementary, information regarding pending reforms, CSOs often have strong connections to issues at a grassroots level and with citizens who have specific poverty concerns. This connection can make CSOs an effective partner for gathering information about the needs of a community or district, as well as communicating with citizens on national issues. In states where democratic transition is

still in its initial stages and citizens are have yet to overcome their fear of the previous regime, legislative cooperation with a trusted NGO may help build public trust in legislators as representative officials. Moreover, visible cooperation between MPs and NGOs can help to set a public precedent of working together to address public concerns.

Indonesian and Croatian NGOs Promote Greater Transparency and Public Education

Dealing with Partisanship

Both civic and parliamentary actors must be aware of the potential partisan-ness of CSOs. Legislators wishing to gather an unbiased view may want to talk to a range of CSOs to ensure that they are accurately portraying the needs of the entire region. Where that is not possible, it is helpful to consider the shared information in light of the NGOs' known constituency or bias. Similarly, non-partisan NGOs will likely be very opposed to the partisan use of their name of research. In the interest of sustainable partnership, that position should be respected by MPs.

In many instances, civic programs to improve citizen access to parliament or increase the transparency of legislative processes are seen as somewhat confrontational by legislatures. Nevertheless, when NGOs facilitate methods of introducing the population to the parliament through direct observation, it enhances public understanding of the role of legislatures within a democratic system and can often help to improve the public image of parliament. In Croatia for example a domestic NGO called GONG conducts an "open parliament program" which includes tours of parliament; a *Citizens' Hour*, where citizens and their elected representatives meet to address different questions and issues; and opportunities for citizens to attend live parliamentary sessions. Similarly, in Indonesia, Yayasan Kesejahteraan Anak Indonesia (YKAI) and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) jointly organized a youth parliament in 2002, which enabled a number of youth to simulate legislative sessions in the parliamentary building upon completion of a comprehensive civic-education program on the authorities and procedures of the national legislature. In both cases, the consequent increase in citizen understanding of the legislative process can help MPs to better connect with their constituents over time.

Nigerian NGOs Organize Public Information and Discussion Sessions

Since 2002, Pathfinder International, an organization committed to family planning and reproductive health, has invited Members of the Nigerian National Assembly to participate in public information and discussion sessions regarding HIV-AIDS. Conducted across the country, these sessions provide critical information on HIV prevention and treatment. Assembly Members that join Pathfinder sessions as a welcome-speaker not only have an opportunity to hear the concerns of their constituencies concerns firsthand, but are also able to demonstrate their commitment to a nation-wide issue. In Nigeria, where the effect of AIDS is widespread but public acknowledgement of the crisis is still muted, this collaboration is especially meaningful.

OVERSIGHT

Concrete information regarding implementation of policy initiatives at a national, regional and local level is a critical element of effective legislative oversight. Where statistical information is scarce, civic groups often have the clearest sense of what is actually happening on the ground; in some cases, they are actively engaged in monitoring these activities. Such information can be tremendously valuable to committees conducting activities associated with executive oversight.

Civic Budget Monitors in Croatia Provide Key Details to Parliament

In part a response to a lack of budgetary transparency and parliament's consequent inability to exercise its oversight authority effectively, the Croatian Institute for Public Finance began to publish a newsletter in 1999 and continues today. The newsletter provides concise, but technically informed, analysis of key aspects of the national budget. Originally distributed to MPs in the days just prior to a major decision regarding national accounting practices, the civic-generated newsletter provided Members with critical analytical information when it was most needed. Consequently this newsletter is still anticipated and utilized by MPs today.

Policy Monitors in Malawi Document Effectiveness of Distribution Programs

Since 2001, civic networks of social-service providers in Malawi have organized to monitor government implementation of key poverty-reduction initiatives. In 2003, after gathering data on the outcome of government efforts to distribute medical supplies, seeds and text books, representatives of each of the networks testified before the Malawian budget committee. Because the consolidation of nation-wide distribution information encompasses data gathered at a grass roots level across the country, networks of service providers were more effectively able to gather this information than MPs with their limited time and staff. By sharing this data and analysis with the Malawian Parliament, civic actors were able to enhance government and public attention to their issues. At the same time, the MPs had access to an otherwise unattainable quantity of information to be used in their deliberations and oversight responsibilities.

UNIVERSALLY APPLICABLE PARTNERSHIPS

In addition to the types of cooperation that strengthen a legislature's capacity to carry out a specific responsibility, there are some cases where domestic NGOs committed to the institutionalization of democratic processes may conduct programs that are designed specifically to support or recognize the legislative branch. In Montenegro, for example, the *Center for Democratic Transition* has been coordinating a parliamentary internship program since October 2003. This CSO works directly with MPs and staff (not just parliamentary leadership) to ensure that interns who can fill real staffing needs are recruited and trained appropriately.

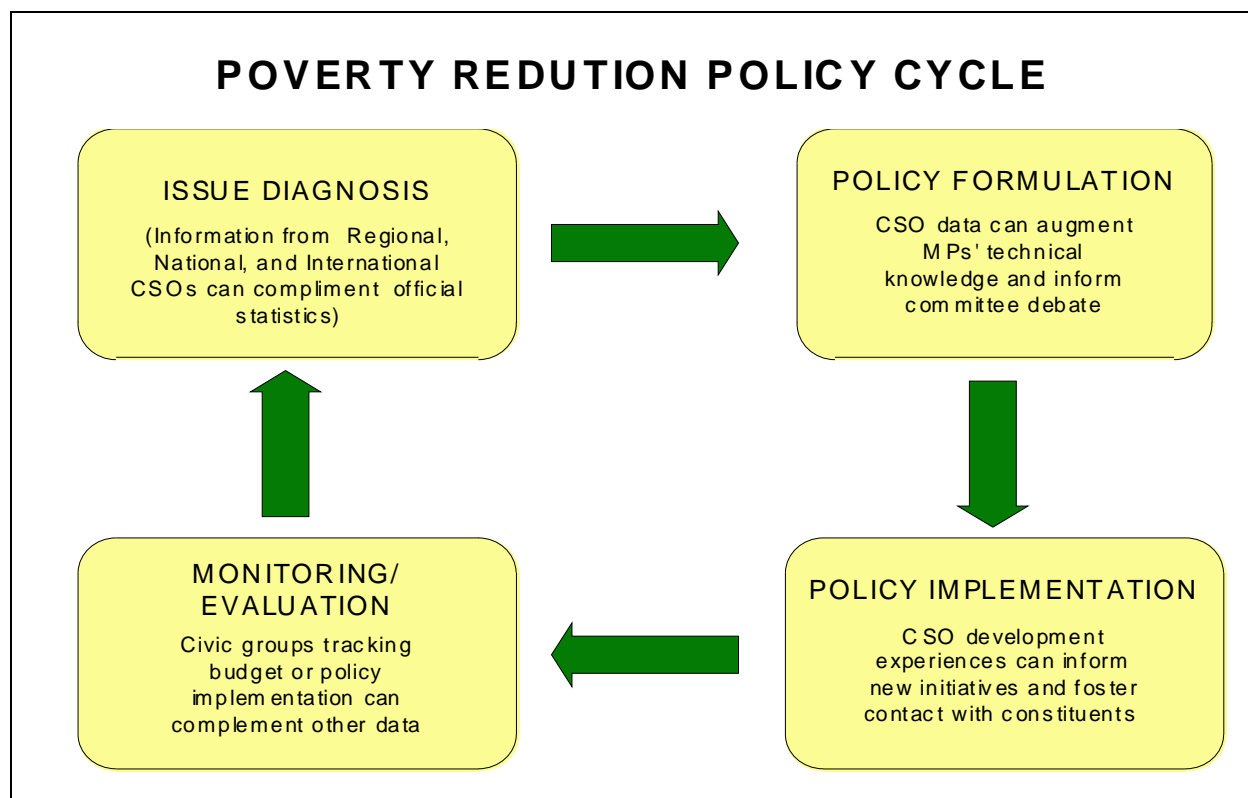
SPECIFIC TO POVERTY REDUCTION

The positive impact of legislative-civic partnerships may be most visible when focused on poverty reduction efforts at the national level. Legislators' proximity to (and involvement in) national policy making processes, in conjunction with civic actors' issue-specific research or access to grassroots experience of poverty, can be a powerful force when pursuing national poverty reduction measures.

Whether talking about national poverty reduction strategies in terms of a PRSP or MDGs, national poverty reduction initiatives tend to follow a similar policy cycle: poverty or issue diagnosis; policy formulation; policy implementation; and monitoring and evaluation. In the case of the PRSP, this is a formal and centrally managed process ultimately resulting in a national Poverty Reduction Strategy that is implemented and adjusted over time to reflect changing circumstance. For pursuit of individual Millennium Development Goals or national efforts to address specific issues within the PRSP, the policy cycle is still a useful way to think about stages through which poverty reduction initiatives progress.

A Note About Political Disagreement

It is no secret that some macroeconomic policies, certain national initiatives, and the order of poverty reduction priorities can be politically contentious. While the specific mechanisms or individual policies chosen to pursue poverty reduction can be controversial in country, there is general agreement among national political leaders, civil society, and the international community that less poverty is a good thing. This general agreement creates some common goals and space for cooperation among sectors that may have had only limited interaction before, such as NGOs and Parliament.



National poverty levels are constantly changing, and so response to these issues is inherently cyclical; policy evaluation melds into diagnosis for the next round of policy formulation or revision. Because of this, the policy cycle also offers a useful organizational mechanism for identifying opportunities for legislative-civic cooperation to support national poverty reduction. In addition to the roles civic groups and parliamentarians can play on their own at various stages, there are many stage specific activities that can be coordinated, or have greater impact if done in a complementary manner. In many cases, working with civil society can strengthen a legislature's impact at respective stages.

POVERTY DIAGNOSIS OR ISSUE ASSESSMENT

Before determining what policies or poverty reduction priorities are most appropriate, each country pursuing MDGs or involved in a PRSP process undertakes a poverty diagnosis. This diagnosis looks closely at the details of how poverty is experienced around the country. For example:

- What is the current situation (statistically) with regard to Millennium Development targets or other poverty priorities?
- How is poverty distributed across the country? Is it regionally specific or varied?
- What are the non-statistical aspects of poverty in-country and how do these vary by population group? Much research is now available to address the non-quantitative aspects of poverty, such as access to information or feelings of powerlessness in society.

The more accurately poverty needs of an MP's district are reflected in this national poverty assessment, the more likely the national PRSP or MDG initiatives are to address those needs. Consequently, MPs may wish to ensure that qualitative information about their region is available in addition to the statistical surveys often conducted by government offices in the context of PRSP or MDG taskforces. In addition to speaking directly with constituents, communication with civic organizations can often be a useful way to gather much of this information.

Gathering Descriptive Regional Information

Civic organizations based in an MP's constituency (or national NGOs with a regional office in the constituency) have access to a range of useful information regarding the day-to-day experience of poverty in a district. They may be able to identify community priorities for the present or uncover brewing concerns about future challenges; provide information about the nature of a specific regional problem such as factory closings, repeated crop failure, or gradual infrastructure decay; or recall previously attempted solutions and the reasons they were or were not successful. In many cases, regional civic groups may also be interested in facilitating better government-citizen

communication and could thus be excellent partners for organizing and holding public meetings where MPs have the opportunity to discuss local concerns and gather information about constituent priorities.

Gathering Comparative National Information

Think tanks or civic organizations advocating for response to specific nation-wide poverty-related issues are another source of detailed information about the nature or degree of poverty in various regions. They may have conducted research or surveyed national statistics to determine the extent to which different problems affect various regions. For example, an organization advocating for improved access to education may have assembled national data on primary and secondary school completion rates by district, number of schools per oblast, or regional graduation rates from teacher training programs. In conjunction with more descriptive information gathered through district visits and/or speaking with regionally based civic groups, comparative statistical information can be extremely useful to Members who are trying to ensure that the needs of their district have been accurately represented. Further, as think tanks or issue-based advocacy organizations are typically based in the capital city, it may thus be easier for MPs to maintain regular, informative contact with national CSOs while keeping abreast of issues that affect their local district.

Gathering Global Perspectives and Experience

In-country branches of international NGOs may be a third source for unbiased information on the impact of poverty in an MP's district; or, an assessment of obstacles to the national achievement of specific MDGs. As a complement to the country-specific information provided by domestic NGOs and think tanks, international groups may be able to provide comparative information on ways in which other countries have accommodated specific policy issues associated with poverty. For example, the local staff managing a water and sanitation program coordinated by an international development NGO, may also have information on the ways in which neighboring countries have addressed limited water supply and aging sanitation facilities.

Mechanisms for Liaising with Informed Civic Organizations

Different types of civic bodies will likely provide different types of useful information but, mechanisms for coordinating with civic actors are the similar across the board. MPs have a range of options from which to choose when coordinating with CSOs, whether it be for information or assistance in monitoring:

- **Individual Meetings or Briefings.** MPs looking for general information that can be used in a range of capacities may wish to meet individually with regional or capital city-based civic groups for a briefing or issue discussion. Such briefings can be particularly useful when MPs are just beginning to be involved in an issue, are preparing for a public event or debate, or are playing a leadership role in

parliamentary efforts to address a particular issue and feel that they need to have a broader knowledge base.

- **Committee or Working-group Briefings.** Where and when MPs are participating in PRSP or MDG-related working groups, or parliamentary committees are preparing to address poverty-related legislation, each may wish to invite informed civic organizations to brief the group or committee on the current poverty situation. Such a briefing could encompass challenges at the national level or illustrate the range of challenges among specific regions.
- **Attendance or Participation in Regional Events Held by NGOs.** In addition to providing a mechanism for MPs to gather firsthand information about citizen experiences in their constituency, participating in regional events may also build public support for the MP among district voters.

POLICY FORMULATION

The actual activities undertaken during the policy formulation phase will likely vary tremendously by country, the issue being addressed, and the policy strategy or mechanism being applied. For PRSP processes this phase may include the establishment of priorities and drafting the I-PRSP, PRSP or annual reports. For the MDG, it is a process of identifying specific methods of reaching MDG targets through national policy strategies. In countries with national strategies already in place (a full PRSP or MDG strategy) policy formulation is more focused on the formulation and passage of specific legislation, initiation of specific executive programs and allocation of funds to implement poverty reduction initiatives. Particularly in these cases, Legislators have a specific role to play in the review and passage of enabling legislation and budgets.

For this phase, a majority of a legislator's work on an issue will be done in committee. Consequently, it is at this stage that detailed, more technical knowledge of relevant poverty issues is most useful for an MP. A detailed briefing or concise report on the impact of various policy solutions to poverty challenges can assist MPs in their review of legislation, provide useful information for floor debates or inform accurate questions to be fielded during oversight hearings or question time. While many MPs develop issue specific knowledge over the course of their tenure on technical committees, this can be easily buttressed by input or briefings from Civil Society.

Increasing Individual MP Access to Technical Information

Just as MPs need sound regional information to ensure that the needs of their constituency are being accurately described, legislators also require some level of technical knowledge to constructively contribute to debates on the most appropriate policy response. In some cases, MPs can expect a briefing from their legislative. Where staffing resources are already exhausted however, NGO research-organizations or think tanks may be an alternative source of technical know-how.

While NGOs could brief MPs on a range of topics, MPs are likely most interested in two types of information: the technical details of a proposed policy reform or poverty reduction initiative, and/or that initiative's potential impact nationwide or at a regional level. For example, if the annual budget is proposing an increase in funding for extension of specific agricultural crops, the committee may wish to ask an agribusiness association to brief them on the technical procedures involved in such an extension, potential impacts of such a process, and time required for a given type of crop extensions to turn a profit. Such organizations (which may be based in the capital city or have regional headquarters) could enhance MP knowledge about a proposed reform by sharing previously written publications, already-published reports on related projects, or through individual personal briefings at the parliamentary office.

Informing Committee-Based Debate or Legislative Review

While an activist MP can generate significant media attention or interest in an issue, it is often through the committees that legislators have the greatest impact. By inviting NGOs, think tanks or professional associations to brief MPs or testify during committee hearings, the committee can then apply the technical knowledge and experience already gathered by that organization to legislative review or the proposal of amendments.

Public Hearings Also Educate Constituents

One way for MPs to merge the usefulness of informational hearings/briefings with public outreach or education, is to conduct public hearings with NGO speakers at regional locations. For example, where a water infrastructure rehabilitation project has just been approved for the mountainous part of the country, the parliamentary committee for water and public works may wish to consider holding a public hearing at the water facility to be rehabilitated. Relevant government officials as well as NGOs that have been working in the area may be invited to discuss the potential impact of the project, the timeline to be anticipated, and or to answer questions about how similar projects have worked elsewhere.

Committee briefings and public hearings are the most common way to integrate information gathered by civic organizations into the deliberative legislative process. As with individual MPs, civic groups with technical know-how may be able to share expertise that enables MPs to make a more informed policy decision. For example, in preparation for review of the annual health budget, the health committee might invite a medical association to brief them on the anticipated impact of inoculating large numbers of children against childhood illnesses, as opposed to increasing the number of trained medical professionals or improving the distribution of

pharmaceuticals. The procedures for hearings vary among legislative systems, but they remain a useful mechanism for identifying alternative policy approaches or potential improvements on existing proposals. When the topic at hand is controversial, committee briefings are best kept on topic if the organizer bears the following in mind and reminds participating members as needed:

- The purpose of the briefing is to gather information rather than to criticize past policies;

- Briefings can often provide background for further actions or assist in focusing parliamentary involvement on key issues;
- Briefing sessions are neither intended to resolve the problems of the PRSP nor to take decisions on even a single issue. Rather, they are an opportunity to gather or publicize information on a specific issue;
- Civil society speakers represent knowledgeable organizations but may not be empowered to answer all questions, particularly when the topic is politically contentious.

POVERTY POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Once policy strategies have been established or enabling legislation and budgets passed, the new or revised programs will be implemented by appropriate government agencies. A majority of implementation responsibilities rest in the hands of various executive agencies and offices. In some cases, however, NGOs are also actively involved in the implementation of poverty alleviation programs similar to those conducted by the government. This NGO work is often financed with funds raised separately from government aid packages and thus must be respected as non-governmental initiatives. However, MPs may be interested in applying the lessons learned by civic organizations pursuing independent development projects as a means to ensure government sponsored initiatives in their own regions are implemented as effectively as possible. For legislative members of the ruling party, there may be interest in making executive sponsored initiatives more successful in general. Similarly, opposition members will want to determine whether the government is repeating past mistakes.

Applying Civil Society's Lessons Learned through Committee Activity

Public hearings at which civic groups implementing successful development projects offer testimony are one way of gathering the information needed to apply best practices elsewhere. Where the information about best practices is most directly useful to the implementing agency within the executive branch, committees may wish to consider tabling a report which details the findings of the hearing as a set of committee recommendations. Media coverage of the hearing is an alternative (and less official) way of communicating findings to the executive, as well as the public at large.

Supporting Implementation and Enhancing Relationships with Constituents

Individual MPs may also be interested in NGO development projects because it can be useful to know and engage civic actors actively working to alleviate poverty challenges in their constituencies. In addition to supporting implementation, MP involvement or discussion of specific programs, needs or policy initiatives helps to build public awareness of legislators as individual leaders, and of the legislature itself as an institution that has an important role to play in national poverty reduction efforts.

- When civic initiatives designed to pursue PRSP priorities or MDG targets are carried out in a particular region or constituency, MPs are well placed to speak with the media about the challenges being addressed, the nature of the projects undertaken, and—as appropriate—the impact of those efforts. Depending on the nature of the project, national and regional media may both be interested in covering new initiatives to address regional quality of life. In addition to publicizing the project, this is an excellent opportunity for MPs appear in the media in a positive light.
- MPs can also demonstrate support and draw additional public attention to local civic initiatives by participating in key events—speaking at a ground breaking, introducing the project director at a press briefing, etc.

Identifying Local NGOs

Particularly when MPs represent geographically isolated or distant constituencies with poor communication infrastructure, it can be difficult to identify which civic organizations are most active in the home district. In these cases, local government officials and local councilor associations are likely to have more detailed information about which NGOs are conducting (or have conducted) relevant development projects in the region. While their knowledge will be less specific, the international donor community will also have a sense of who has been funded to implement a variety of infrastructure or service projects.

In situations where the reform process is difficult, or has initial negative effects (such as factory closings, price deregulation, etc) NGOs may also be working with constituents to deal with the impact of reforms. Coordination with such groups as a committee may create a better understanding of the positive long-term impact of various policies, and thus improve the public image of MPs.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Once national efforts to implement poverty reduction initiatives have begun, NGOs and parliaments often have similar interests in monitoring implementation and evaluating program impact. As the bodies responsible for executive oversight, parliaments need information regarding the expenditure of national funds, the impact of those expenditures and the degree of progress towards poverty reduction goals. As organized groups in society advocating for poverty reduction, NGOs are inherently interested in the effectiveness of various programs critical to their interest area. For example, a citizen group that has been advocating for environmental sustainability will be more interested in the implementation details of projects funded by industrial clean-up monies, their locations, duration and impact. Similarly, the parliamentary committee on the environment may find this information extraordinarily useful when attempting to exercise oversight authority.

Because of this shared interest in monitoring and evaluating the impact of poverty reduction, legislators may find that information gathered independently by civic groups can be a valuable source of information for use in exercising parliamentary oversight of government initiatives. Particularly where legislative access to information about the impact of poverty reduction programs is constrained by limited resources or statistical

capacity, lack of consolidated information or government reluctance to publicize internal evaluations, civic monitoring efforts can provide MPs with otherwise inaccessible data on impact. While civic groups are in no way obligated to share the results of their own research into poverty reduction efforts, many groups will see it in their interest to share their information with the national legislature through public channels. Briefings, hearings or other public appearances where legislators are seen to make use of an NGO's research may not only raise the profile of the NGO's issue, but can also generate positive media coverage of the NGO itself. This mutually beneficial sharing of information may take a variety of forms as different civic groups are likely to undertake alternative monitoring projects.

Information Shared by Civic Groups Actively Engaged in Direct Project Monitoring

In some cases, NGOs or civic groups actively promoting poverty reduction or Millennium Development Goals may take on program-specific monitoring projects. These projects may be intended to investigate whether a specific program is being implemented as described, identify geographic disparities in implementation or determine the impact of the program. In practice, the monitoring may take the form of: auditing health clinics to ascertain whether they have received the quantity of medical supplies reflected in the national health budget or as reported by the ministry of health; measuring the bacterial content of water to determine what impact new water treatment facilities are having across a region; or, reviewing literacy rates to see whether rural education programs are meeting their literacy goals.

Whether shared with parliamentary committees through testimony at a public hearing or submitted to the committee as a publicly available report of findings, such information is likely to provide MPs with a clear picture of what the program in question is doing on the ground. Furthermore, as part of an advocacy campaign, NGOs may have gathered information on these types of issues at regular intervals; consequently, they may be a good source of information regarding what has or has not changed over time. Inviting CSOs to testify at oversight committee hearings—or including their documents/ papers in the research conducted for committee reports or constituency specific assessment—is one way to build tracking capacity into parliamentary oversight even where staff capacity is heavily constrained.

Information from Civic Budget Analysis or Transparency Initiatives

Even when domestic NGOs are not specifically monitoring the implementation of poverty reduction programs, they may be conducting applied budget analysis or advocating for increased budget transparency in a manner that assists parliamentary budget review.

- Applied budget analysis covers a range of issues, including but not limited to: examining the cost of proposed programs within a sector and identifying alternative program costs, examination of the impact of current budget allocations on specific population groups, and reviewing national revenue trends

in comparison with budget projections. In situations where legislatures have access to limited numbers of staff (and therefore have limited budgetary research capacity) MPs may benefit as much from civic budget analysis as from the time their own staff are able to devote to budgetary matters. Where staffing is very limited or communication with executive agencies is strained, analysis or reporting by non-partisan civic organizations may be the sole source of technical data available to inform legislative review or debate. Where information and staff are both available, civic analysis may provide additional angles or perspectives on the same information.

- Transparency efforts or budget process monitoring provide information on a separate set of issues. In the eyes of many civic actors, greater public access to information about the national budget (how it has been allocated, the process by which it has been constructed and which actors were involved) is one way a government can demonstrate its commitment to poverty reduction by allowing citizens and citizen groups to see which programs have been funded and at what levels. NGOs may pursue transparency through application of Freedom of Information laws, public advocacy for amendments to the budget process that make it more transparent (through public meetings, publication of documents, etc), or broader dissemination of available documents. In the case of the latter, there will often be some issue analysis attached (e.g. noting that public spending of education has decreased, increased, etc). In many cases, such work often aims to enhance citizen awareness of the budget process—and concurrently—the role of the legislature in budgetary processes.

**Think-tanks as an Information Source
Regarding National Oil Revenue**

The Public Policy Research Center in Kazakhstan has for the past few years been engaged in analysis of land reform, budget transparency, as well as monitoring of national income from oil and gas industries - all issues of concern for legislative committees. In each case, research findings have been shared with the national legislature, and/or parliamentary delegates have been invited to participate in roundtable discussions regarding the issue at hand. (Additional information at <http://www.pprc.kz/>)

CONCLUSION

The exact nature of opportunities for cooperation between legislators and civil society organizations will vary tremendously according to each country's political situation, individual actors involved, economic challenges and respective stages in PRSP or MDG strategy development or implementation. Despite these differences however, at each stage in the poverty reduction process, there is a specific role to be played by the legislative branch and numerous potentially complementary civic activities. Whether working to integrate civic assessments of poverty conditions into the issue identification phase of the policy cycle, inviting NGOs to share best practices regarding development work through committee hearings or reports, or applying civic budget analysis to legislative oversight efforts, there are opportunities at all stages for legislative-civic collaboration to strengthen national poverty reduction efforts.