

Some stumbling blocks to the effective analysis, monitoring and evaluation of poverty and poverty reduction programs in Zambia

by

**Venkatesh Seshamani
University of Zambia**

Background

Conditionality is normally regarded as an abhorrent word. But a conditionality that came with the advent of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, PRSP, could be considered as a welcome blessing for Zambia. It was the requirement that for a country to qualify for concessional aid from the IMF and the World Bank, it had to prepare a PRSP through wide stakeholder participation and consultation in order to ensure national approval and ownership of the prepared document.

Civil society organizations in Zambia had hitherto been a motley group of individual institutions working in isolation and with little say in national development decision-making. These organizations now saw in the above conditionality an opportunity to integrate themselves into a collective and powerful group with a voice that government could not ignore. The Civil Society for Poverty Reduction, CSPR, that was born some six years ago, has managed to bring more than a hundred organizations within its network and is now seen to play a very dynamic and purposeful role in orienting the direction of Zambia's development path.

Zambia's national PRSP, incorporating many of the inputs provided by civil society through the CSPR, has come to be regarded as an exemplary exercise in broad stakeholder participation.

The participation by civil society in the preparation of the PRSP has not been a one-off affair. The vibrant civil society has been trying to ensure that all development-related activities will be an inclusive process and that its role will not be confined only to making contributions to the *preparation* of all national documents such as the annual budgets, National Development Plans, etc., but will also extend to the *analysis, monitoring and evaluation* of the *implementation* of the policy and program content of the documents. It is here that success does not seem to be commensurate with that achieved in preparing the PRSP or even the most recent document, the Fifth National Development Plan.

There have been several stumbling blocks to the effective analysis, monitoring, and evaluation of the development policies and programs especially in the context of poverty.

What is the problem?

Zambia's government today undoubtedly interacts with civil society more than ever before. Civil society representation exists in all advisory groups of the government

relating to the preparation of various documents. Of course, the formal inclusion in the advisory groups need not imply effective inclusion and civil society in Zambia has problems in this regard. It is not the purpose of this presentation to go into them. However, this is one of the steps taken in order to ensure transparency in government's operations. An important caveat that nevertheless must be stated is that civil society can assure itself of any scope of interaction with government only through strong moral suasion. No law obligates the government to ensure civil society participation.

Some other steps towards transparency have been taken as well. For example, the format of the budget has been changed to the Activity-Based Budgeting (ABB) format which now provides more details of resource allocations than before. And this has to some extent resulted in more discussions in Parliament on the budget. The oft-quoted example is the allocation in the 2005 budget of a huge sum of money to the refurbishment of the swimming pool in State House. In the earlier format, this would have gone undetected. Parliament did not approve of the proposed allocation and the Government had subsequently to cut it by 50%. Another example is the depiction of the rehabilitation of a VIP accommodation in a province as a poverty reduction program, something that was challenged by the CSPR. Again, such classification could not have been known but for the ABB format. In a sense, therefore, monitoring of PRPs appears easier with budget presentations in the ABB format.

But while measures like the above are being instituted to ensure greater transparency, other things are happening that undermine transparency. It is like in the case of trade liberalization, tariff barriers are being removed but are being replaced by a host of non-tariff barriers which make it more difficult for African countries to export to Europe than before! In a similar vein, some developments are taking place, that would make analysis, monitoring and evaluation a more difficult, and a more politically sensitive, task.

Stumbling blocks.

In order to analyze, monitor and evaluate any process, we must have in the first place very clear concepts and definitions of the key variables involved in the process. So if it is poverty and poverty reduction programs we are concerned with, what are their definitions? Long ago, Aristotle said that words do have meaning, but not to have one meaning is to have no meaning.

I was recently reading the draft of a PhD thesis and the student writes in the Introduction that 40% of Zambians live in abject poverty. He then goes on to lay blame on government's lack of commitment for this situation.

Three points can be noted in this. First, one does not know from what source he gets the figure of 40%. Second, the term 'abject' is a pedestrian term that one does not expect in an academic thesis. One uses terms such as moderate, extreme, deep, severe to describe poverty as these terms have clear-cut meaning in poverty literature. Third, the student was, not long ago, a minister in the government but had obviously fallen out of favor and switched sides!

People coming from different societal groups tend to use words and figures in a cavalier fashion often with underlying political motives. If any such group is involved in monitoring and evaluation, one can only expect biased results.

But let us rule out the above kind of situations and assume that analysis, monitoring and evaluation will be done by competent and objective-minded experts who will base their inferences only on reliable statistics relating to well-defined standard concepts. We still encounter a number of problems.

Some say that statistics never lie while others say that statistics are the worst form of lies. In Zambia we can say charitably that statistics can be very confusing and make people wonder what is going on! There are several reasons for this.

Change of definitions leading to incomparable statistics

According to the Central Statistical Office's Living Conditions Monitoring Survey of 1998, the overall incidence of poverty in Zambia was 73%. According to the most recent Survey of 2002/03, it was 67%. At the launch of the 2002/03 Survey Report, the government stated that there had been a change in the methodology of data collection and hence the results of the two surveys were not comparable. One could not, on the basis of the figures, conclude that poverty had come down between 1998 and 2003. And yet, some subsequent government papers give one the impression that poverty in Zambia did come down over the 5-year period!¹

In 2005, the government announced a change of definition of what constitutes poverty reduction programs and expenditures. It is a far more elastic definition than the one that was obtaining previously. So when the government announces it has significantly raised the allocations for PRPs, the question (that cannot be readily answered) is: do the 'higher' allocations reflect a genuine increase or merely a change of definition? Are there 'swimming pools and VIP accommodations' that are now part of the PRPs?!

Growing political sensitivity to unpalatable statistics.

In recent years, the Zambian government seems to be very sensitive to statistics that portray the country in a bad light.² The word 'poverty' in particular is being treated as an anathema. Many political leaders say that they do not wish to talk of poverty but only of wealth as if advocates of poverty reduction are against wealth creation. Such a perspective, if it becomes widespread among the powers that be, could lead to policies and programs that are overly focused on economic growth to the neglect of direct interventionist programs and social safety nets required for a more effective redressal of the poverty situation.

¹ Another analysis by a consultant to a multilateral institution using the same data from the 2002/03 survey but a different methodology finds the overall incidence of poverty to be only 56%!

² During a very recent meeting at which this author was present, a high-ranking official from a powerful financial institution confessed that during his many meetings with the government over a week, he did not hear the word 'poverty' being mentioned even once!

There are apparently some growing political compulsions to show that the economy is performing well under the present government. There are definitely some positive signs such as a positive growth rate, declining inflation, etc. but there is no incontrovertible evidence that these are indeed translating into poverty reduction.

There are several variables on which government statistics vary significantly from those from other sources. The most telling instance is average life expectancy at birth. In its *Human Development Report 2005*, the UNDP stated Zambia's life expectancy to be 32 years while government insists it is 50 years even after allowing for HIV/AIDS! The government has rejected the UNDP figure and has exhorted all Zambia researchers to use only government statistics.

Very recently, the Government has condemned Transparency International's report on the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) which ranks Zambia 111th out of 163 countries, with a score of 2.6 that has not changed since 2001.³

The macro-micro divide

There seems to be a growing difference in the perceptions of change by the government and civil society. In the early years of liberalization, the World Bank said that Zambia was doing well (because of her improving performance on the macroeconomic indicators) while CSOs cynically retorted by asking: when they say Zambia is performing well, who is Zambia? Today, the Government has taken over Zambia's 'good performance' as its theme song while CSOs are more elegiac in their assessment of Zambia's achievements on development.

One obvious reason could be that the Government is concentrating on the country's macroeconomic performance while CSOs deal with grassroots outcomes. So for instance, a comparison of the MDG reports for Zambia for 2003 and 2005 prepared by the government shows that the prospects for Zambia's attainment of most of the MDGs has improved over the two-year period. CSOs have challenged this saying their day-to-day interactions with the grass root communities show that the suffering of the poor is growing. Moreover, their assessment of the prospects is more sober given the high level of resources required to achieve the MDGs by the target date.⁴

One can also understand the difference in the perceptions of corruption by the government and by civil society. Government has been investigating high profile cases such as the former President and other senior civil servants and thereby thinks it is doing good work in the area of corruption. The CPI, however, is based on perceptions by the ordinary Zambians at micro levels. Corruption is defined by Transparency International

³ The Index varies between 0 and 10, a lower score indicating a higher level of perceived corruption.

⁴ A study undertaken by Mphuka in 2005 estimates that Zambia would need to spend on average \$1.5 billion per year between 2005 and 2015.

as “the abuse of public office for private gain”. By this definition, corruption is probably endemic in Zambia in the sense of being prevalent at various levels.⁵

The resource input-physical output/outcome divide

An independent HIPC Monitoring Team was established in 2001 to monitor the use of HIPC funds. The team consisted of representatives of CSOs and officials from the Auditor General’s Office. The Team brought out a report showing gross misuse of HIPC resources. Significant resources (more than \$156,000) had been spent on fuel, festivals and political celebrations in the Northern Province. Shortly after the report came out, the Government suspended the Team citing some legal hitches!

This is perhaps one of the more intractable obstacles to effective analysis, monitoring and evaluation; namely the disconnect that exists between proclamations of commitment to poverty and even allocation of financial inputs on the one side and the physical outputs and resultant outcomes for poverty reduction on the other.

One can with some facility monitor the allocation of financial inputs to PRPs from published documents. But the more important questions from the perspective of poverty reduction are: are the physical outputs (schools, clinics, teacher houses, boreholes, feeder roads, etc.) really there for which the financial inputs were allocated? Have the benefits of the program reached the intended beneficiaries? The HIPC Monitoring Team had found that a great part of the social welfare allocations had not reached the intended beneficiaries in the Northern Province and that several million kwacha had been diverted to non-HIPC programs in the Copperbelt Province.

In a recent public address Zambia’s Agriculture Minister himself stated that the thousands of bags of fertilizer that government had released did not reach the poor farmers for whom they were intended but were appropriated by rich farmers.⁶

Needless to say, the monitoring of physical outputs and outcomes of all PRPs will be beyond the capacity of any organization to undertake, even for a large network like the CSPR.

The lack of correspondence between financial inputs and physical outputs and outcomes is perhaps the biggest threat to poverty reduction. A glance at the allocations in the Fifth National Development Plan look quite salutary for poverty reduction. But what the actual outturns will be, time alone can tell.

Donor funding

Despite a track record of fund usage that has not been too commendable, donors seem to have a growing faith in the Zambian government. This is evident from the increasing

⁵ A businessman recently told this author that one could not even hand over a file to a government official without placing some currency notes inside it!

⁶ ZNBC Main News, Wednesday 16 November 2006.

proportion of aid being assigned to general budget support as opposed to program support.⁷

The above trend is obviously welcomed by Government and some support has also been provided in certain contexts. For example, Mphuka (op.cit.) states that in support of the MDGs, much of the donor financing should come in the form of budget support. However, there are academics with opposing views. Jayne (2005) argues that poverty problems in a country like Zambia, massive as they are now, will be much greater if donor funds are not reallocated from untied budget support to financing of specific productive investments.

Whatever the case for or against budget support, one thing is for sure. Greater the proportion of spending through budget support, monitoring and evaluation of PRPs will commensurately be a more involving exercise.

Postscript

The obstacles to the effective analysis, monitoring and evaluation of poverty and poverty reduction programs in Zambia are so complex that one has a long way to go before realizing the objective.

I would like to point to two things that both the Zambian government and civil society would do well to take note of.

The first is the 1993 Vienna Declaration of the Program of Action that affirms that 'States have the right and the duty to formulate appropriate national development policies'. The policies, however, have to be those 'that aim at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals, on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and the fair distribution of the benefits resulting there from'. As Marks (2006) states in a recent article, the right to development implies that development policies should be revised to meet the human-centered and participatory elements of the definition contained in the Declaration.

I would like to underscore the following elements implied in the foregoing paragraph that constitute any government's responsibility: *obligation* and *commitment* to work for development, promote *national welfare*, as opposed to the welfare of only selected elite groups, ensure that the process of development is *inclusive*, and there is *equity* in the distribution of benefits.

The above elements should guide civil society organizations too in their own operations. In addition, it is civil society's right and duty to act as a watchdog on government behavior in discharging the above responsibility.

⁷ Total general Budget support to Zambia this year stands at \$102 million, an equivalent of K350 billion. These disbursements are supposed to be the result of satisfactory assessment of Zambia's performance under the Poverty Reduction Budget Support Program monitored by the donors.

The second is regarding the Right to Information (RoI) Act that was passed in India in 2005. This has come to be acknowledged as a landmark piece of legislation that has given the common man in India the power to seek and obtain information (within a short time) that he could not have had access to previously and use that information to seek legal redress against the state. Already several cases have been won by individuals using the RoI.

Information in the RoI has been defined as: ‘any material in any form including records, documents, memos, e-mails, opinions, advises, press releases, circulars, orders, logbooks, contracts, reports, papers, samples, models, data material held in any electronic form and information relating to any private body which can be accessed by a public authority under any other law for the time being in force but does not include “file notings”’.

The Right to information includes the right to:

1. inspect works, documents, records;
2. take notes, extracts or certified copies of documents or records;
3. take certified samples of materials;
4. obtain information in form of printouts, diskettes, floppies, tapes, video cassettes, or in any other electronic mode or through printouts;

The Act does exclude several security agencies from its purview but qualifies such exclusion by stating that the exclusion is not absolute and that these organizations too have an obligation to provide information pertaining to allegations of corruption and human rights violations.

In my view, civil society in Zambia must begin to actively advocate for the legislation of a similar Act for Zambia.

References

Civil Society for Poverty Reduction, CSPR (2005): ‘Evaluation of the 2002-2004 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)’, CSPR, Lusaka.

Government of India (2005): ‘Right to Information Act 2005’, Ministry of Law and Justice, New Delhi.

Jayne, T.S. (2005): ‘Vision of donor support for agricultural growth and poverty reduction in Sub-Saharan Africa’, presentation made to All-Party Group on Overseas Development, ODI, London.

Marks, S. P. (2006): ‘Misconceptions about the right to development’, *Development Outreach*, October, World Bank Institute, Washington D.C.

Mphuka, C. (2005): ‘The cost of meeting the MDGs in Zambia’, CSPR, JCTR, CCJDP, Lusaka.