

## **ENSURING EFFECTIVE LOCAL ENGAGEMENT IN POVERTY REDUCTION IN WEST AFRICA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

While West Africa possesses a rich natural resource base, weak institutions, poor management and some of the world's highest level of corruption consistently undermine efforts to put its resources to work for the good of the people. The incidence of poverty among the seventeen countries in the sub-region is so high that it would be correct to state that there is generalised poverty in several West African countries. Using a variety of data sources, this study set out to identify the extent of poverty in the sub-region and examine how and why local communities should be engaged in responding to the challenge. The study argues that once the dimension of poverty keeps changing, the strategies to fight it must change alongside. It proposes that an effective engagement of the local communities enhances the efforts at poverty reduction.

**KEYWORDS:** West Africa, Poverty, Poverty reduction, Local Engagement, Human Development Index, Human Poverty Index

### **INTRODUCTION**

Public participation in the socio-economic process is fundamental for sustaining national growth and development. Given that the ultimate political authority is vested in the people, public participation and public deliberation will engender a sense of accountability on the part of government. Governments which actively involve the public in the development agenda are eventually expected to accomplish desired goals and objectives.

Several African countries have initiated development strategies aimed at significantly reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development among some of the world's poorest populations. In many of these initiatives, there is sometimes a lack of local engagement resulting in inefficiency and ineffectiveness in meeting targeted outcomes.

This paper seeks to examine the poverty situation in West Africa and identify how and why local communities should be engaged in addressing the problem. It also proposes alternative policy recommendations that would assist public officials and professionals to more fully engage with local communities in poverty-reduction programmes.

## **APPROACH**

A variety of information sources were used. Existing studies, reports and electronic information bulletins on poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) were identified. General and targeted searches for further documentation then ensued, and in this regard the data sources within the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank became very useful for the study. Significant within these sources were the UNDP's Human Development Index and Human Poverty Index. Country-specific data for each of the seventeen countries in West Africa were examined and analysed and inferences and conclusions drawn. The paper is segmented into seven major sections. The first and second sections are the introduction and the approach for the study, respectively. The third section analyses the relevance of public participation in the policy-making process while the fourth section provides an overview of the concept of poverty. The fifth section examines the poverty situation in West Africa with the sixth section dilating on how local participation could be enhanced in poverty reduction in the sub-region. The last section serves as the conclusion for the study.

## **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

It has been argued that public participation in the policy process legitimises the bureaucratic decision process and improves policy-making (Langton, 1978; Lohan, Murray, and Shaffer, 2004; 1999; and Waugh, 2002). Conventional methods of

participation include, but are not limited to attending public meetings, making written or oral comments, and serving on advisory panels. The others are open house, advisory committee/task force, workshops, target briefings, focus groups, bilateral meetings, toll-free phone line, interviews, and surveys (Kerwin, 2003; Smith, 2003).

Those who advocate greater citizen participation do so for a variety of reasons: to promote democracy, build trust, increase transparency, enhance accountability, build social capital, reduce conflict, ascertain priorities, promote legitimacy, cultivate mutual understanding, or advance fairness and justice (Box 1998; King and Stivers 1998; Putnam 2000; Schachter 1997; Moynihan, 2007). Those who question the value of direct citizen participation do so because it is inefficient, time-consuming, costly, politically naive, unrealistic, or disruptive or because it lacks broad representation. In addition, critics argue that citizens lack the necessary expertise and knowledge; that citizens are motivated by their personal interest, not the public good; and that citizens can be passive, selfish, apathetic, and cynical (Berman 1997; Fischer 1993; Stivers 1990; Moynihan, 2007).

There is ample evidence that, when done right, direct participation and collaborative governance produce positive outcomes. However, there is also ample evidence that the benefits of collaboration and direct citizen participation discussed in the public administration literature are not common practice, as many citizens and public administrators remain ambivalent about the value of direct participation. There is a challenge to finding the right balance between rational, responsive, efficient administration with open, deliberate, and collaborative decision making. The potential to promote direct citizen participation and collaborative governance may be greater today than it was in 1982, when Frederickson wrote that the effective public administration of the future should be intimately tied to citizenship, and to the effectiveness of public managers who work with the citizenry.

Sherry Arnstein's (1969) work on public participation perhaps remains the most cited literature in that area. She argues that participation is valuable to the extent that it is redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens to be deliberately included in the future. There have been many advances in the theory and practice of participation since Arnstein's essay. Cohen (1989) and Gutmann and Thompson (1996) are among many political theorists who have distinguished between aggregative and deliberative decision-making.

It should be noted that widespread, inclusive participation in public policy making may weaken representative government; however, civil solidarity based on the inclusive participation of all citizens contributes to higher self-esteem, greater optimism, and increased confidence in government (Garmise, 2006).

It has been proved by Cohen and Sabel (1997) that public hierarchies can lack the information, ingenuity, know-how, or resources necessary to address social problems effectively. Many non-professional citizens possess distinctive capabilities that can improve public action. In the provision of social services such as education and human development, for example, the involvement of civil society groups in co-production may dramatically increase the quality of some services. In such areas as public safety and environmental regulation, citizens may possess essential local knowledge that surpasses expert knowledge and understanding, as the result of close exposure to the context in which the problem occurs. In all these areas and others, public participation may be able to frame problems and priorities in ways that break from professional conceptions, yet more closely match their values, needs, and preferences (Fung, 2006). Fung further explains that non-professionals may be able to contribute to the development initiative approaches and strategies precisely because they are free from the received but obsolete wisdom of professionals and the techniques that are embedded in their organisations and procedures.

Garmise (2006) recommends investing in and believing in people: creating opportunities and places for people to connect with one another, to become involved in their communities, and to develop trust in one another and in government institutions.

Research shows that active and engaged citizens can contribute to better policy outcomes, renewed faith in the public sector, and a stronger sense of community. Research also shows that communities with higher levels of social capital and citizen participation have governments that are higher performing and more responsive to the public they serve. There is evidence that communities rich in social connectedness and civic engagement produce better schools, lower crime, enhanced government performance, and increased accountability (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Putnam, 2000).

The literature also indicates that citizens who are actively involved with their communities or local governments are more supportive of what takes place. They are a part of the process and therefore more supportive of the outcome. Communities in which citizens are active and involved – in which a strong degree of trust and co-operation are present – tend to perform better than communities in which citizens are disengaged and lack trust in one another and in public institutions (Callahan, 2007:950-954).

Increasingly, discussions around development have been centred on the importance of community participation in development projects. Community-led development projects recognise the vast human capital that exists locally and the ability of communities to identify their needs.

Kliksberg (1998-19-46) confirms that internationally funded development projects that have high levels of community participation have a higher success rate and reach a larger portion of the population than donor-led projects. Donor countries and agencies capitalise on and respect local expertise, providing more equitable and effective results. Community-led projects are also seen as more sustainable because they create an

institutional infrastructure that can be constantly maintained and re-tooled for effectiveness and efficiency (Nkansa and Chapman, 2006:509-532).

While opportunities for feedback and consultations (between government and citizens) are on the rise, large differences remain between countries with long-established traditions of citizen participation and those who have just begun to open up government decision-making to citizens at international level (Fioramonti and Heinrich, 2007). In addressing the poverty situation in Africa, engaging the people offers strong optimism for its reduction and improvement in the welfare of the poor.

## **CONCEPTUALISATION OF POVERTY**

In its most basic form, poverty connotes a condition of low income and failure to satisfy basic needs. Based on this definition adopted in the 1970s, the global poverty problem is still staggering with more than 1.1 billion people in the world living on less than one dollar per day (UNDP, 2004). In the debates of the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of poverty gradually evolved from the notion of “minimum of subsistence” to the notion of “relative deprivation”, which defines poverty as the failure to maintain the standards prevailing in a given society. More recent debates have added other elements to the poverty definition, including such intangibles as ‘capacities’, dignity, autonomy, vulnerability, voice, empowerment and participation (Sen, 2000; Sachs, 2005).

Accordingly, the measurement of poverty has been broadened to include, in addition to income, a broad set of non-income basic needs, like primary education, basic health, and access to social services (UNDP, 1990). Each year since 1990 the UNDP Human Development Report has published human development index (HDI) which looks beyond GDP to a broader definition of well-being. The HDI provides a composite measure of three dimensions of human development: living a long and healthy life (measured by life expectancy), being educated (measured by adult literacy and gross enrolment in education) and having a decent standard of living (measured by purchasing power parity).

Even though the index is not in any sense a comprehensive measure of human development by including, for example important indicators such as gender or income inequality nor more difficult to measure concepts like respect for human rights and political freedoms, it does provide a broadened prism for viewing human progress and the complex relationship between income and well-being.

The discussions above illustrate well that the concept of poverty is likely to be multi-dimensional, encompassing both monetary and non-monetary aspects. An important implication is that any attempt to define poverty by focusing only on one aspect of this concept runs the risk of underestimating its richness and complexity.

In the search for an adequate understanding of poverty, a general consensus has been achieved around the following paradigms:

- That poverty, is a multi-dimensional deprivation (Table 1), is the inability of people to meet economic, social and other standards of well-being. The multiple causes of poverty are either internal and structural, or induced (man-induced or policy-induced);
- That poverty is certainly linked to low income, lack of education and poor health. But, there is a growing emphasis on considering poverty as a direct result of inadequate policies and ill-designed development programmes, such as those preventing sustainable access to social services or control over productive assets (e.g., land and financial resources) and those hampering political empowerment;
- That poverty is not simply a technical problem: it is foremost a highly political one. It also refers to a number of issues at every level of government. In order to be effective, policies have to combine sound technical analysis with political support and legitimacy that emanates from the poor themselves (UNDP, 2001b:4). Unequal social, economic and political relationships between ‘the haves’ and ‘the

have-nots' explain poverty, and being poor is at the lower end of the relationship. Therefore, as being poor means being powerless, combating poverty necessarily means empowering the poor (UNCDF, 2003); and

- That, the poor do not constitute a homogenous group: their coping and survival strategies are thus different and in constant flux.

**Table 1: Poverty as a Multi-Dimensional Deprivation**

<b>Capabilities</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
<b>Economic</b>	Ability to earn income, to consume, to have assets and access to food, security, material wellbeing and social status.
<b>Human</b>	Based on health, education, nutrition, clean water and shelter (core elements of well-being as well as crucial means to improving livelihoods).
<b>Political</b>	Human rights, a voice and some influence over public policies and political priorities; deprivation of basic political freedoms or human rights is a major aspect of poverty.
<b>Socio-cultural</b>	The ability to participate as a valued member of a community. These capabilities refer to social status, dignity and other cultural conditions for belonging to a society that is highly valued by the poor themselves.
<b>Protective</b>	Ability to withstand economic and external shocks.

Source: OECD/ DAC (2001:26)



Poverty, therefore, connotes a condition of low income and failure to satisfy basic needs. Yet poverty is about more than a lack of resources: poverty is about risk; uncertainty about the future; vulnerability; powerlessness; lack of voice, representation and freedom (USAID, 2006).

In response to the all-encompassing nature of poverty, there is a corresponding consensus that poverty-reduction strategies must also be holistic and multi-dimensional: they have to address not only the economic aspects of poverty, but also its social and political dimensions, like deprivation, disempowerment and social exclusion.

## **POVERTY IN WEST AFRICA**

There is generalised poverty in West Africa, which consists largely of low-income countries with Gross National Income per capita ranging from US\$1330 in Cape Verde to US\$180 in Guinea Bissau and US\$130 in Sierra Leone (UNCTAD, 2002). Generalised poverty is defined as “a situation in which a major part of the population lives at or below income levels sufficient to meet their basic needs and in which the available resources in the economy, even when equally distributed, are barely sufficient to cater for the basic needs of the population on a sustainable basis” (UNCTAD, 2002, p.39).

The population of the region is estimated to be about 306.3 million, with income per person standing at \$586 (World Bank, 2007). According to the OECD (2008), the population would reach 480 million by 2030 and between 650 and 700 million by 2050. The population is mostly young, indeed very young (60% are under 25 years of age) and will remain young until 2050. Certainly, the growing number of young people could be a valuable resource but it will also increase pressure on the environment and social services.

Political instability, poor governance, corruption, lack of institutional and technical capacity, environmental vulnerability, infectious diseases, and lack of private sector investment are some of the major constraints to development in West Africa. Conflicts and instability are enormous impediments to development in the sub-region. Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte D'Ivoire have had ethno-political conflicts with huge financial and human costs. Côte D'Ivoire is still struggling to establish some semblance of peace and stability while Guinea's political future and direction look uncertain in the face of a military junta determined to cling to power in spite of domestic and international protests.

Land degradation, a consequence of extensive agriculture, deforestation and overgrazing, has reached alarming levels and further threatens livelihoods in West Africa. The poorest people live in isolated zones, deprived of the social safety nets and poverty reduction programmes available in semi-urban and urban areas.

The low-income per capita figures in West Africa are suggestive of widespread or generalised poverty. On the basis of the purchasing power parity \$2 a day poverty line, the incidence of poverty among the ten West African countries that are least developed ranged between 60% and 94% during 1995-2000 (UNCTAD, 2002). It would therefore be correct to state that there is generalised poverty in several West African countries. This evidence of widespread poverty in the region is suggestive of a substantial proportion of the population being poor over extended period of time.

Despite the important progress made in preventing and managing food crisis, West African countries have faced food crisis in the last decades. Some of them result from temporary shocks (OECD, 2008). Others are mainly linked to structural causes of food insecurity. There is a significant convergence on the need for a greater commitment to address long term structural solutions to food security. Structural poverty is still the main hindrance for vulnerable populations to access food resources. Poverty is above all a rural phenomenon which affects agricultural producers (OECD, 2008).

Research findings from three ‘prominent’ countries from the sub-region, Ghana, Nigeria and Côte D’Ivoire, illustrate the level of deprivation in West Africa.

With more than two decades of progressive, peaceful and democratic political stability, as well as a seemingly robust and growing economy, Ghana has emerged as a leader in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2009). Yet, despite Ghana’s relative prosperity, poverty remains pervasive in the country’s three northern regions, which now account for half of Ghana’s population living under the poverty line (Domfeh and Bawole, 2009: 490-505). This situation was exacerbated by a recent energy crisis coupled with a humanitarian emergency, caused by a combination of severe rains and overflowing rivers (UNICEF, 2009).

According to the UNICEF (2009), one-third of Ghana’s rural population lack access to safe drinking water and only 11 per cent have adequate sanitation. Guinea worm, a parasitic infection largely attributable to drinking unsafe water, continues to plague Ghana which reported more cases of Guinea worm than any other country in 2004.

Nigeria’s huge agricultural resource base and oil wealth offer great potential for growth. However, poverty is widespread in the country and has increased since the 1990s and that over 70% of Nigerians are now classified as poor, and 35 per cent of them live in absolute poverty (IFAD, 2009). In a study by Ogwumike (1996), it was discovered that more than 80 per cent of those living in absolute poverty were in rural areas. The marginalisation of the rural areas through urban-biased development policies is largely responsible for the high poverty incidence in the rural areas (Obi, 2007).

While Côte D’Ivoire still has a relatively large economy in the West African region, the fragile composition of its economy and the protracted conflict (started in 2002) experienced by the country have stifled economic development. A strong reliance on commodity exports, like both Ghana and Nigeria, has left the country vulnerable to changes in international pricing. From the period 2000-2006, the economy declined by

0.4%, as compared to 4.1% growth for the rest of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) (IRIN Africa, 2009).

Years of conflict have had a large impact on the social development of Côte D'Ivoire. The percentage of people living in poverty has risen from 38.2% in 2002 to 49% in 2008. The rural areas in the north and northwest have been especially affected, with poverty rates as high as 77% (IRIN Africa, 2008).

Many Ivorians are not able to access basic necessities. According to the National Statistics Institute (INS) of Côte D'Ivoire, approximately 70% of households have difficulty eating adequately, and 68% do not have adequate healthcare services. A 2008 survey estimated that 27% of households in the north were food insecure and 12% severely food insecure (IRIN Africa, 2009). Furthermore, approximately 18% of children in the north are acutely malnourished, with rates as high as 23.9% in some areas. Côte D'Ivoire's infant and under-five mortality rates are among the highest in the world, and rising (UNICEF, 2009).

### **Human Development Index**

Indeed, West Africa remains one of the poorest and most vulnerable regions of the world. With the exception of Cameroon, Cape Verde, Côte D'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria, the majority of West African countries are classified as "Least Developed Countries" (LDC).

The West African sub-region continues to seek effective ways of enriching its socio-economic status. The depth of the problems of inequality and poverty manifest itself in different ways. West African countries continue to occupy the lowest rungs of the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) which in 2006 and 2007 covered 177 and 182 states and territories, respectively (Table 2), and average life expectancy still ranked among the lowest in the world. Table 2 provides sufficient evidence about the level of poverty in the sub-region. Cape Verde, the highest ranked country in the HDI occupied 106 and 121 positions in 2006 and 2007, respectively. The unenviable positions occupied by Chad,

Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso, Mali, Sierra Leone and Niger confirm the extent and entrenched nature of poverty in the sub-region. The performance of the remaining 10 countries, including oil endowed Nigeria portrays a region entangled in a vicious circle of poverty and deprivation. Indeed, one of the countries of the sub-region, Sierra Leone, was named the country with the lowest life expectancy in Africa in 2006 ((Olukoshi, 2006).

**Table 2: West Africa in the 2006-2007 Human Development Index (HDI)**

Country	Rank		HDI Category		HDI Score	
	2006*	2007	2006*	2007	2006*	2007
Cape Verde	106	121	Medium	Medium	0.722	0.708
Cameroon	144	153	Medium	Medium	0.506	0.523
Ghana		152		Medium		0.526
Mauritania	153	154	Low	Medium	0.486	0.520
Nigeria	159	158	Low	Medium	0.448	0.511
Togo	147	159	Low	Low	0.495	0.499
Gambia	155	168	Low	Low	0.479	0.456
Senegal	156	166	Low	Low	0.460	0.464
Guinea	160	170	Low	Low	0.445	0.435
Benin	163	161	Low	Low	0.428	0.492
Côte D'Ivoire	164	163	Low	Low	0.421	0.484

Chad	171	175	Low	Low	0.368	0.392
Guinea-Bissau	173	173	Low	Low	0.349	0.396
Burkina Faso	174	177	Low	Low	0.342	0.389
Mali	175	178	Low	Low	0.338	0.371
Sierra Leone	176	180	Low	Low	0.335	0.365
Niger	177	182	Low	Low	0.311	0.340

Source: \* Olukoshi (2006); UNDP Human Development Report (2009)

### Human Poverty Index

While HDI measures the average progress of a country in human development, Human Poverty Index (HPI-1) focuses on the proportion of people below certain threshold levels in each of the dimensions of the human development index – living a long and healthy life, having access to education, and a decent standard of living (UNDP, 2009). By looking beyond income deprivation, according to the UNDP, the HPI-1 represents a multi-dimensional alternative to the \$1.25 a day poverty measure.

Using this approach, even countries such as Cape Verde, Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Mauritania, which fall within the medium range category in the HDI, have HPI-1 value of 14.5%, 28.1%, 30.8%, 36.2%, 36.2%, respectively (Table 3). These five *medium* countries are ranked 62<sup>nd</sup>, 89<sup>th</sup>, 95<sup>th</sup>, 114<sup>th</sup>, and 115<sup>th</sup> among 135 countries for which the index has been calculated (UNDP, 2009).

The picture for low ranked countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Sierra Leone, Niger, and Chad conveys a tragic message concerning the level of deprivation among the people in the sub-region (Table 3). Their HPI-1 values are 51.8%, 54.5%, 47.7%, 55.8% and 53.1%, and ranked 131<sup>st</sup>, 133<sup>rd</sup>, 128<sup>th</sup>, 134<sup>th</sup>, and 132<sup>nd</sup>, respectively among a total of 135 countries (UNDP, 2009).

The HPI-1 measures severe deprivation in health by the proportion of people who are not expected to survive to age 40. Education is measured by the adult illiteracy rate. And a decent standard of living is measured by the unweighted average of people not using an improved water source and the proportion of children under age 5 who are under-weight for their age (UNDP, 2009). Table 3 shows the values for these variables for West African countries. In most of these countries, adult illiteracy rate ranges between 50-70% while the rate of the probability of not surviving to age 40 for 14 (82.4%) out of the 17 countries is more than 20%. In Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau and Togo, 58%, 53%, 52%, 47%, 43% and 41%, respectively do not have access to improved water source. The poverty challenge confronting the West African sub-region is enormous and demands the co-operative and collaborative efforts of both public officials and all other stakeholders, especially the local people.

**Table 3: Selected Indicators of Human Poverty for West African Countries, 2007**

Country	HPI-1		Probability of not surviving to age 40 (%)	Adult Illiteracy (% aged 15 and above)	People not using improved water source (%)	Children underweight for (% aged under 5)
	Rank	%				
Cape Verde	62	14.5	6.4	16.2	20.0	14.0
Ghana	89	28.1	25.8	35.0	20.0	18.0
Cameroon	95	30.8	34.2	32.1	30.0	19.0
Mauritania	115	36.2	21.6	44.2	40.0	32.0
Nigeria	114	36.2	37.4	28.0	53.0	29.0
Togo	117	36.6	18.6	46.8	41.0	26.0

Benin	126	43.2	19.2	59.5	35.0	23.0
Côte D'Ivoire	119	37.4	24.6	51.3	19.0	20.0
Senegal	124	41.6	22.4	58.1	23.0	17.0
Gambia	123	40.9	21.8	===	14.0	20.0
Guinea	129	50.5	23.7	70.5	30.0	26.0
Guinea- Bissau	107	34.9	37.4	35.4	43.0	19.0
Chad	132	53.1	35.7	68.2	52.0	37.0
Burkina Faso	131	51.8	26.9	71.3	28.0	37.0
Mali	133	54.5	32.5	73.8	40.0	33.0
Sierra Leone	128	47.7	31.0	61.9	47.0	30.0
Niger	134	55.8	29.0	71.3	58.0	44.0

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2009

## PROMOTING LOCAL INVOLVEMENT

Significantly, the past two decades have seen conscious efforts being demonstrated by governments and major development partners towards poverty reduction initiatives. This observation brings to the fore the extent to which the poor, who are the supposed beneficiaries of policy interventions are involved in the policy process. Without purporting to conclude that the poor are not engaged in poverty reduction programmes in West Africa, it sounds reasonable to propose recommendations that could promote effective local involvement in poverty reduction initiatives. This position is justified in the light of Garmise's (2006) explanation that when citizens have the opportunity to be meaningfully involved, to deliberate key policy issues, to consider policy alternatives, to evaluate their desirability and feasibility, to actually help shape government decisions, the government wins greater legitimacy.



Poverty reduction has been singled out as a major challenge to Africa's development and democratic governance, particularly local governance, has been identified as an important instrument to meet this challenge and achieve the goal of poverty reduction. The importance of local governance as a means to create mechanisms to enhance citizen-state interaction should be stressed in this discourse. It is in this context that the African leadership has been challenged to devise enabling policies, structures, and mechanisms to ensure that good governance principles are upheld in the state and sub-national interactions. Enabling constitutional, legislative and regulatory frameworks and political will to decentralise functions and authority so as to promote inclusive involvement of all stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, local communities and private sector in development efforts are identified as important factors to promote supportive local governance for poverty reduction.

In addition to a broad consultative process with stakeholders at the local level, there is also the need to include a vertical consultative process that includes those in higher positions of power such as government leaders. According to Bortei-Doku (1998), in order for consultation process to be integrated it "should be spread over different layers of institutions and organizations and exhibit vertical as well as horizontal dimensions". The process of decentralization should afford other sectors (non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, and the private sector) to serve as other channels for the distribution of development-related funding. If the strategies are to have a lasting impact within the larger policy context, it is imperative that the government at all levels be involved in the process and must include other key stakeholders.

A classical approach for poverty-reduction which could be appropriate for the West African context is the community development council (CDC) model currently being employed in Afghanistan. CDCs are being used to facilitate the post-conflict development in Afghanistan. The CDC model is a local development initiative that supports community input into the selection and implementation of community-managed sub-projects comprising reconstruction and development (Afghan Research and

Evaluation Unit, 2008). In Afghanistan, the government has implemented it with the assistance of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The NGOs ensure accountability and the government's involvement helps increase its legitimacy and its capacity to distribute resources to communities.

Local community's efforts to influence the poverty reduction process should be divided into initiatives which would seek to ensure that a participatory process is undertaken, and in ways in which participation would influence other aspects of the process. In this regard, the target should be in the areas of information-sharing, broadening the range of the process through inclusion of civil society members in official poverty reduction strategy programme task forces, and quality enhancement.

In terms of achieving shifts in policy priorities, public engagement could have positive results. Small producers and the informal sector should be given the needed recognition as sub-sectors requiring supportive policies to enhance their potential contribution to growth. There are clear indications in Uganda that civil society consultations on the poverty reduction initiatives led directly to shifts in government's policy priorities for poverty reduction, with water provision and insecurity receiving increased prominence (McGee, Levene and Hughes, 2001). According to McGee, Levene and Hughes (2001), priority ranking by poor communities in Rwanda directly informed policy prioritisation and budget allocations in the country's poverty reduction initiatives.

For the full potential of public participation to be realised, considerably higher intensity and better quality will be needed. This means, at the most minimal level, the flaws in consultation practices need to be addressed. But also needed are practices that go beyond mere consultation to genuine engagement of civil society in making decisions about which overall policy orientations are more favourable to the poor and which policy actions and resource commitments should be prioritised in pursuit of these. Interpretations and practices need to shift in the direction of the more transformative

understanding of participation with which many local players enter poverty reduction initiatives.

McGee, Levene and Hughes (2001) explain that one way in which this looks likely to happen in some countries is by civil society claiming for itself, and being assigned by governments, a strong role in monitoring. In this area there is more scope for civil society organisations to set their own goals and design their own approaches than in the formulation stage. The HIPC Watch Project in the Sissala East District in Ghana where a local NGO (PAWLA) monitors the disbursement of HIPC funds to the district and tracks projects being funded by the those resources is a good example.

## CONCLUSION

West Africa is poor and the available information shows that the incidence of poverty is highest in rural communities. A major theme running through the description of poverty in West Africa is the unequal distribution of access to basic services. Income poverty, low education and skills, poor health status, poorly functioning informal safety nets, exclusion, insecurity and unpredictable weather conditions conspire together to provide a cocktail that contributes to the persistence of poverty in many communities in the sub-region.

This paper argues that the definition of poverty has shifted from lacking income and material deprivations, to a more subtle, multidimensional and qualitative understanding, including access and control over productive resources, human deprivations and a lack of empowerment and security.

As the definition of poverty has evolved, strategies to reduce poverty have also expanded from investment in physical capital to infrastructure to improvements in health and education and to local management and the protection of productive environments. Another important development is the attention that should be given to all stakeholders,

especially the poor, in planning and implementing poverty reduction initiatives. As explained by Fung (2006), citizens can be the shock troops of democracy. Properly deployed, their knowledge, wisdom, commitment, authority, and even rectitude can address wicked failures of legitimacy, justice, and effectiveness in responding to societal challenges.

The coping mechanisms of the poor in West Africa are not adequate to prevent them from falling into poverty or to move out of it. The involvement of local communities and civil society organisations in poverty reduction initiatives is highly recommended. This is premised on the fact that they best understand the socio-cultural and economic environments in which they operate and are most capable of identifying the impediments that impede growth and development.

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