

**Research Report 53**

**Poverty knowledge and policy processes:  
a case study of Ugandan national poverty reduction policy**

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August 2002

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## **Acknowledgements**

The authors gratefully acknowledge all those in Uganda, Nigeria and the UK who generously gave their time to be interviewed for the research project ‘Getting it Right: Poverty Knowledge and Policy Processes’, of which this report is one output. Our in-country project reference group gave most helpful insights and feedback at critical points. Special thanks are due to John de Coninck (Community Development Resource Network, Uganda), John Gaventa (Institute of Development Studies, UK), Paul Francis (University of East Anglia, UK) and Andy Norton (Department for International Development, UK) for their useful comments on drafts. We also thank our fellow researchers in the UK, Uganda and Nigeria for their contributions to developing the conceptual and analytical framework of the project and to conducting fieldwork; Community Development Resource Network for logistical support during fieldwork; and Laura Cornish (Institute of Development Studies, UK) and Jonathan Gaventa for help in preparing the manuscript.

Funding for the research was provided by the Committee for Social Science Research of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (grant number R7613).

The views expressed in this paper are the authors’ and draw on the perspectives of those whom we interviewed and whose writings we reviewed. They do not necessarily represent those of the Department for International Development (DFID).

To preserve the anonymity of research respondents, quotes are not directly attributed, although we do give an indication, where possible, of the source’s institutional identity.

## Abbreviations

AAU	ActionAid Uganda
ACFODE	Action for Development
AWEPON	African Women’s Economic Policy Network
BUGADEV	Buganda Cultural and Development Foundation
CBR	Centre for Basic Research
CDF	Comprehensive Development Framework
CDRN	Community Development Resource Network
CG	Consultative group
CS	Civil society
CSO	Civil society organisation
CSTF	Civil Society Task Force
DENIVA	Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Associations
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
DRT	Development Research and Training
EPRC	Economic Policy Research Centre
FOWODE	Forum for Women in Democracy
GoU	Government of Uganda
HDR	Human Development Report
IFI	International financial institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
LC	Local council
MFPED	Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (Uganda)
MoF	Ministry of Finance (Uganda)
MoP	Ministry of Planning (Uganda)
MP	Member of Parliament
NAWOU	National Association of Women of Uganda
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRA	National Resistance Army (Uganda)
NRM	National Resistance Movement (Uganda)
NUDIPU	National Union of Disabled People of Uganda
NURP	Northern Uganda Reconstruction Programme
NUSAF	Northern Uganda Social Action Fund
PAF	Poverty Action Fund
PEAP	Poverty Eradication Action Plan
PEWG	Poverty Eradication Working Group

PMA	Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture
PMAU	Poverty Monitoring and Analysis Unit
PPA	Participatory Poverty Assessment
PRGF	Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility
PRSC	Poverty Reduction Support Credit
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
SAPRI	Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative
Sida	Swedish International Development Agency
UBoS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UDN	Uganda Debt Network
UJCC	Ugandan Joint Christian Council
ULAA	Uganda Local Authorities Association
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UPPAP	Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Project
UWONET	Uganda Women's Network
VECO	Vreideslanden Coopibo (Belgium/Uganda)
WTO	World Trade Organisation

## **Abstract**

This report, part of a broader research project on Poverty Knowledge and Policy Processes, concerns the poverty reduction policy process in Kampala, Uganda. It is based on an understanding of policy as a complex, dynamic process, rather than a linear progression of formulation and implementation. This policy process comprises a multiplicity of distinct but linked spaces, in which a wide range of actors, governmental and non-governmental, engage in order to influence and shape policy. Each actor brings into a policy space their own unique version of knowledge about poverty, which informs their actions.

The report describes and analyses, in turn, the actors involved in policy processes at national level, the kinds of knowledge on which the processes draw, and the spaces, formal and informal, in which policy actors engage with each other. It concludes that the contemporary poverty reduction policy context in Uganda holds several opportunities and several risks. One area of risk relates to the fundamental contradiction between the nature of the national political space and the way the Government of Uganda (GoU) is energetically opening up new policy spaces and ushering in a range of diverse actors. Another is the disconnection between, on the one hand, the international–national alliance operating in Kampala, and on the other, the relationship between Kampala and the rest of the country. Opportunities include the current state of flux of poverty knowledge in Uganda, and the already considerable experience of blending diverse kinds of knowledge for policy purposes. These opportunities allow for optimism about how the “new poverty experts”, sub-national actors and others outside the GoU–donor nexus might affect the course of policy in future.

The report concludes that civil society (CS) actors, and especially non-governmental organisation (NGO) poverty advocates, are at a critical juncture in Uganda today. To enhance their impact on policy, they can either remain relatively passive participants in processes into which government invites them, or can opt to exercise greater agency, act more autonomously and forge their own processes. Paradoxically, although the transformational potential of strong government ownership of a broad-based, participatory poverty reduction policy agenda is clear from the Uganda case, the report ends by calling on non-governmental policy actors to reclaim from government and its donor partners the territory of participation, and to make it more their own again, albeit in the new realm of policy.





## **1 Introduction**

'Poverty Knowledge and Policy Processes' is a research project which aims to explore the ways in which knowledge about poverty is constructed, and how policies emerge from different versions of poverty discourses. This involves looking at a range of policy actors and how they interact and use knowledge in different kinds of spaces in the policy process. The research, carried out in Uganda and Nigeria, takes place in a context of efforts by donors to make poverty reduction policy in sub-Saharan Africa more responsive to the needs of the poor, and to make processes of policy formulation and implementation more accountable to those they are meant to benefit.

This report concerns the poverty reduction policy process in Kampala, and is companion to another report which documents research carried out using the same conceptual framework in Bushenyi, Lira and Tororo Districts.<sup>1</sup> The Kampala research was carried out by a team of three people, conducting about 50 different interviews with respondents selected to illustrate a range of policy actors and institutions. We used semi-structured dialogue as the key research tool, as well as reviewing documentation shared by respondents. The interview checklists were respondent-specific, based on the profile of a specific interviewee; but they were open-ended, to ensure opportunities for respondents to make their own analyses.

Our understanding of policy suggests that it is a complex, dynamic process, rather than a linear progression of formulation and implementation.<sup>2</sup> This policy process comprises a multiplicity of distinct but linked spaces, in which a wide range of actors, governmental and non-governmental, engage in order to influence and shape policy. Each actor brings into a policy space their own unique version of knowledge about poverty, which informs their actions. Our findings, therefore, are divided into three conceptual categories – actors, knowledge and spaces. This categorisation does not presuppose a fine separation between the categories, but they are used as analytical signifiers to help us make sense of the process of policy-making as it plays out in the Ugandan national-level scene. Before turning to our discussion of these themes, we first present a brief overview of the historical context of contemporary efforts at poverty reduction.

### **1.1 The emergence of the contemporary poverty reduction agenda in Uganda**

The Government of Uganda, led by President Yoweri Museveni, is frequently held up as an example of a sub-Saharan African government which has the political will to undertake meaningful poverty reduction policies and strategies. It is undoubtedly true that poverty reduction forms a major plank of Museveni's political platform, and before each of his three re-elections, he has campaigned vigorously around populist themes, such as Universal Primary Education, which are firmly framed as poverty reduction. His re-election on the basis of such themes suggests a political currency for poverty reduction issues, and a political mandate for poverty reduction strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> See Adong *et al.* (2002).

<sup>2</sup> See McGee and Brock (2001) and Brock *et al.* (2001) for more detail on the conceptual framework of this research.

How did the Government of Uganda arrive at this position? The historical context of governance is critical in understanding the contemporary policy process, just as the historical relationship between GoU and the international development community is critical in understanding the contemporary discourse of poverty reduction.

Poverty in the post-independence history of Uganda is a phenomenon that became intertwined with the authoritarian, corrupt and periodically terroristic regimes of Idi Amin and Milton Obote. Following a period of relative prosperity in the 1960s, the 1970s were characterised by the “economic war” against the Asian business community, complete neglect of the productive sector of the economy, and rising prices of petrol and basic goods. Obote, in his second regime, agreed to a Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in June 1981, but in the war context of the early to mid-eighties it was not fully implemented. The country which Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA) inherited when they seized power in 1986 was one in a state of economic collapse, populated by citizens who had lived for years in fear of random state violence. The NRA’s immediate priority was to end civil war and insecurity, and to begin a process of social, political and economic stabilisation and reconstruction. The policy of holding the nation together, rebuilding and rehabilitating it after the devastating effects of the war, effectively won the NRA a strong popular mandate.

On assuming power in 1986, the NRA leadership was far from unanimous on how to proceed in the area of economic stabilisation. Whilst some favoured the liberalisation which was the prescribed solution of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), others retained the commitment to a model of state intervention and price administration. For a year, the control model dominated, but subsequently, in 1987, an Economic Recovery Programme of macroeconomic reforms was adopted. It is notable that since the same year, 1987, aid inflow to Uganda has always exceeded the value of exports. The power of the international aid industry in this context is exceptionally influential.

An Economic Recovery Programme is not, however, a full Structural Adjustment Programme, but the GoU moved inexorably towards an SAP in the late 1980s. A brief conflict between the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the GoU arose in 1991, concerning exchange rates and foreign exchange auctions; it was resolved when the IMF suspended programme aid and Museveni set in motion the institutional reforms which created the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPED) from the former Ministry of Finance and Planning Commission. As one study observes, ‘Since then one can say that the political leadership in Uganda carries the Structural Adjustment Programme unreservedly . . . both before and after 1992 the political leadership has been able to impose reforms on an at times unwilling parliament’ (Ddumba-Ssentamu *et al.* 1999: 50). The apparent success of adjustment in Uganda, attributed by some to the “correctness” of the approach, and by others to the rising price of coffee on the international market and the benefits of relative security, brought the donors and the GoU closer together, united by a mainstream development rhetoric in which poverty reduction has a major part to play. In the mid-1980s, when the World Bank began to re-invent itself as an agent of poverty

reduction,<sup>3</sup> the GoU was close behind, creating a national poverty reduction strategy, the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP), which mirrored the prescribed route from Washington, with a country-specific strategy enclosed in that familiar narrative.

The congruence between the GoU's approach to poverty reduction and that of mainstream development narratives may obscure the domestic political imperative for a populist agenda. The creation of a "no-party democracy" was a response to decades of civil conflict and the ethnic fragmentation of party politics, but the sustainability of the Movement system has come to rest not only on relative security for the majority of the population, but on an increase in economic prosperity and service provision. Poverty reduction became a politically expedient notion which, even before the term was given the wide currency it enjoys today, fitted the National Resistance Movement (NRM)'s bill as a rallying call to the population, who have indeed dutifully proceeded to twice return Museveni to power, in the absence of credible opponents. In the Ten-Point Programme with which the NRM entered power in 1986 (Museveni 1985) the first point, democracy, is defined in terms of three elements: parliamentary democracy, popular democracy, and 'a decent level of living for every Ugandan' (Museveni 1985: 7). It is noteworthy that, although its anti-poverty discourse fits so closely with that of international agencies and its own anti-poverty goal is to cut the proportion living in poverty to 10 per cent of the population by 2017, the GoU continues to prefer the more politically mobilising term "poverty eradication" over "poverty reduction".

While one can view the development of a poverty reduction agenda in terms of the relationship between GoU and the international community, it can also be seen as embodying a significant reversal *vis-à-vis* Uganda's previous history of centralised policy-making and state terror, which had greatly diminished expectations of the state as a guarantor of public goods or human welfare. In Kampala at least, GoU presents to the world a public face of technical competence and rationality, of a developing evidence-based policy process for poverty reduction, connected to a comprehensive strategy for key priorities. The image changes considerably if one looks towards the District and the lower tiers of decentralised government. These lower tiers are an essential part of the Movement logic, which replaces a competitive multi-party democracy with 'direct' representation via the lower levels of government. At these lower levels, the commitment to poverty reduction is far from clear, and strategising and transparent rationalisation are relatively underdeveloped parts of the policy process, which thrives instead on informal networking, local elite politics and corruption.<sup>4</sup> This reveals that the policy process itself is at least as important as the rhetorical agenda of poverty reduction. We therefore turn briefly to look at how the policy process has evolved alongside the poverty reduction agenda.

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<sup>3</sup> See Brock *et al.* (2001) for more on this shift in narrative.

<sup>4</sup> For detail, see Adong *et al.* (2002).

## **1.2 The evolution of the poverty reduction policy process**

The policy process in the pre-NRM era was characterised by the centralised, command style of military rule, which periodically deteriorated into political chaos and a complete absence of a “rational” process, or anything that might be identified as “policy”. The differences between this context and the contemporary one are considerable, and owe much to fifteen years of relatively stable governance, a considerable effort to construct a national consensus around the constitution in the late 1980s, and the political agendas of the NRM and the international development community, as outlined in the previous section. The backdrop to the transformation from one type of policy process to another was a regime which, having come in to power with widespread support, suffered some loss of legitimacy in the early 1990s as the discourse of “ushering in peace” started to wear thin and discontent with the electoral system began to surface. These dynamics made it politically expedient for the Movement to focus on the third element in its definition of “democracy”.

During the period of transformation, key shifts have occurred in each of the thematic areas of our study, namely actors, knowledge and spaces. The emergence of “civil society” as a policy actor in Uganda is a relatively recent phenomenon, as indeed is the emergence of civil society itself. Despite a lengthy history of unionism and rural cooperatives, during the repressive regimes of Amin and Obote there was little opportunity for the emergence of an autonomous or democratic civil society (Dicklitch 1998). During a period where government was carried out via alliances of powerful individuals, it was public office rather than civil society that became the *de facto* foundation of economic prosperity.

The advent of the NRM regime in 1986 led to considerable changes in this situation, and a surge of NGOs were constituted in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While this can be attributed in part to the change in government, it must also be clearly seen as a donor-driven agenda. Bilateral and multilateral donors have invested an enormous quantity of resources into civil society organisations, in the belief that through a choice of policy instruments which supported civil society, a ‘vibrant, pluriform political system’ would emerge as a consequence (Ddumba-Ssentamu *et al.* 1999: 71).

Since the late 1980s, when the majority of NGOs were engaged in service delivery, particularly in the health sector, there has been an expansion of the roles played by civil society organisations (CSOs), and far more are now engaged at least to some degree in advocacy activities on behalf of their constituents. In some senses this can be attributed to the nature of the political system: lacking political parties for representation, and with trades unions absorbed into the structure of government, other institutional forms of representation take on a different resonance. While CSOs have an overwhelmingly apolitical character, they form part of the fabric of political representation which cannot be completely detached from the structure of the Movement state. Their role in the policy process, into which they are more frequently invited, is shaped by this embeddedness in the wider political system.

The widening range of actors involved in the policy process is to a certain extent mirrored by an expansion in the range of information which is considered to be a legitimate contribution to policy formulation. A decade of foreign technical assistance has considerably strengthened the process and analysis of the national household survey, but parallel to this there has been something of a shift towards

using information which purports to represent the “voices of the poor”, gathered using qualitative research methods, and packaged in the form of generic or sectoral messages. Amidst this shift, some CSOs are empowered to act as “researchers”, and some are able to learn about processes of poverty in ways which inform their wider advocacy agendas. The addition of qualitative research methods and findings to the menu of acceptable forms of information has come about partly because of the GoU equating wider participation in the generation and use of poverty knowledge with the increased effectiveness of the policy output.

These shifts in the spectra of actors and knowledge have been enabled by, as well as producing, new policy spaces in a process that was previously closed and non-transparent. The spaces which have opened up are related both to the new focus on wider participation in generating poverty knowledge, and to the new pluralism in the policy community. The latter owes a great deal to mainstream development narratives about the role of civil society as an interlocutor in policy formulation and monitoring.

This introduction gives a sense of some of the historical changes which have produced the policy landscape we find in Kampala at the start of the twenty-first century, which in turn give us clues to the opportunities for creating a different kind of policy, one which responds to and is accountable to the needs and priorities of poor people. The subsequent sections discuss in detail the dynamics of actors, knowledges and spaces in the policy process for poverty reduction in late 2001, before drawing some more generalised conclusions concerning the prospects for pro-poor policy.

## **2 Policy actors in Ugandan poverty reduction: profiles, tendencies and narratives**

The number and profile of those who can be considered “poverty policy actors” has expanded greatly in recent years. Evolving from an earlier exclusive relationship between donors/creditors and central government, the typology of policy actors today is diversified and complex. Some members of the poverty policy community play the roles of leaders and “owners”, some are funders; some are knowledge providers and sharers; and some play an explicit role as advocacy actors. However, if advocacy actors are defined as ‘anyone who attempts to influence the decision of any institutional elite on behalf of a collective interest’ (Lister and Nyamugasira 2001: 12), some in the former categories are also engaged in less explicit advocacy roles, particularly the funders.

### **2.1 International development actors**

Multilateral and bilateral donor agencies and the international financial institutions – or “donors”, as they tend to be called collectively and not altogether accurately in Uganda – are powerful figures in promoting and shaping the poverty reduction agenda. There has been a dramatic improvement in recent years in their relationship with GoU. One reason for this is probably a relatively unified donor agenda; another is the degree to which donor and GoU interests have converged in this period. Donor “ganging-up” is not an issue in Uganda, because there is no fundamental conflict between what the collectivity of donors want for Uganda and what GoU wants for it. Donors need Uganda as much as Uganda needs them, so a threat-based relationship could not work (Ddumba-Ssentamu *et al.* 1999: 5). Nonetheless, for some years this situation has represented a unique opportunity for both donors and GoU. The latest Consultative Group meeting in May 2001 did show some signs of deterioration in the relationship between the GoU and donor and creditor agencies, due to pressure from the latter over governance issues and the domestic political expedience of Museveni being seen to “stand up to” the international community. Overall, however, the steady improvement of relations since the early 1990s has led to Uganda being the first country to produce a document, part-funded and fully endorsed by donors, setting out from its own perspective the principles of government-donor partnerships for poverty reduction (MFPED 2001). The maintenance of a constructive relationship is helped by the dual nature of many foreign missions in Uganda. Embassies and High Commissions, pursuing the foreign policy objectives of the mother country, touch on sensitive issues like the no-party system, human rights and defence policy, leaving the donor and creditor agencies relatively free to ally with GoU on the basis of a shared “common good” agenda of development, consolidation of peace, and poverty reduction.

While it is accurate to speak of a common donor agenda in many respects, there are some differences in emphasis between agencies. DFID (Department for International Development, UK) is the single most powerful bilateral donor. With a large and still growing presence in-country, it far outstrips other donors’ capacity to take an active part in policy dialogue – indeed, its staff has become so numerous that one DFID adviser complains that ‘there are too many DFID advisers in this place’. Two elements in DFID’s

ways of working are central to understanding its role in poverty reduction policy processes. First, as explained by donor agency staff, it has an explicit strategy of working with a carefully targeted and selected – even groomed – group of policy champions in the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development. Members of this “Dream Team” have undergone a conversion to the poverty reduction cause through the 1990s. In nurturing the “Dream Team” and its initiatives, DFID casts itself in the role of protector of the poverty reduction partnership between GoU and other donors, as well as taking care to service its own relationship with GoU. This strategy, conforming closely to DFID’s global approach as articulated in recent key policy documents (for example HMG 1997) of working with “champions” in government to promote a nationally-owned policy reform agenda, reflects a vision of government’s maturity, responsiveness and probity which is still sufficiently unfamiliar to Ugandans to generate scepticism among them as to its potential for change. The wisdom of focusing so intensively on such a small handful of actors, albeit powerful ones, is questioned by informed Ugandan observers.

**Box 2.1 A successful policy actor network: the poverty reduction Dream Team**

A small group of key reformers with the Ugandan Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development has been largely responsible for heightening the priority given to poverty reduction in government, ensuring the safe passage of several poverty reduction policy initiatives through government and garnering government support and commitment to the most significant new poverty knowledge initiative in the country, the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment.<sup>5</sup> This “Dream Team” has received strong backing from selected donors who both prioritise poverty reduction and adopt the approach of working with institutions and key figures in partner governments to create a constituency and climate for pro-poor change. The donor support around which the Dream Team has coalesced and gone from strength to strength has centred on the generation and use of poverty knowledge, in various forms. The account of the Dream Team which follows is closely based on an interview with one of its key members, the coordinator of the Poverty Monitoring and Analysis Unit (PMAU), Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPED).

In 1997, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had been funding the Planning Commission’s Poverty Unit, in the Ministry of Planning (MoP) and Economic Development (now the MFPED) for three years. The Ministry of Finance (MoF) (then a separate Ministry, but merged with the MoP in 1997) had designed the first Poverty Eradication Action Plan and people were starting to talk about the need to monitor it. Previously, government was weak on monitoring, especially on monitoring its own systems, with a stated commitment that was not matched by resource allocation. The DFID Social Development Adviser offered DFID’s support for poverty monitoring. When the MoF was merged with the Planning Commission, and at a time when project support from donors had begun to move towards programme support, DFID agreed to fund a Poverty Monitoring and Analysis Unit, housed in the MFPED, as a bridging strategy – but made it clear that government would eventually have to take over funding. It was easier to get government to accept this commitment to monitoring if it came with some funding behind it; and government agreed to support it by providing the office, communications and some counterpart staffing. The first thing the PMAU did was produce a *Poverty Status Report* (MFPED 1999), the first of a series of two-yearly reports to monitor the progress of the PEAP. This was well received. The Poverty Status Report launch workshop happened at the national level, but also at five regional workshops, where it was discussed chapter by chapter. It was also passed around personally in Kampala, so its dissemination was wider than most.

<sup>5</sup> See Box 3.1 on UPPAP, in section on poverty knowledge.

In 1997 the World Bank decided it needed to hold consultations for the purpose of producing its Country Assistance Strategy. The then Coordinator of Poverty Eradication at the Ministry of Planning (who is now Coordinator of the PMAU), the Commissioner for Planning in the Ministry, the coordinator of the Uganda Debt Network (UDN), and a visiting World Bank staffer from Washington were invited to Kabale, Soroti and Kumi Districts to hold consultations there. At this time the 1997 Poverty Eradication Action Plan was being formulated, and the Coordinator of Poverty Eradication went partly to assess how far the PEAP was addressing people's primary concerns. Consultations were held with sub-county councillors, asking them about poverty locally and their ideas on the best solutions to it at different levels of government. In Kumi the group was joined by the DFID Social Development Adviser. At the end of the consultations, one of the group recalls,

We came back to the Soroti Hotel and all had tea together, and began to reflect on what the councillors had said. All the issues agreed with the issues that were already in the PEAP, but they all said that it missed issues out as well – cattle rustling, land fragmentation, drought. When the consultation finished, the Bank thought it had done its bit and that the consultation was over. But we thought, no, maybe there should be more consultations focused on the PEAP, and [the DFID Social Development Adviser] said 'Maybe a Participatory Poverty Assessment is what we need'.

DFID therefore started a dialogue with the Commissioner for Planning, exploring the idea of holding a bigger, more comprehensive consultative exercise. With DFID assistance the Commissioner for Planning and Coordinator of Poverty Eradication put together a proposal and log-frame for a national Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA). UNDP was brought into the discussion and suggested lessons could be learnt from elsewhere through a study tour. It funded a study tour to Tanzania for a group of eleven people from GoU including the reformers in the Ministry of Planning, national and international NGOs (INGOs), and research centres at Makerere University. The DFID Social Development Adviser was meanwhile building links with the Participation Group at the University of Sussex, UK, who have experience in PPAs. Government lacked such experience, so a tender was put out for managing the PPA on GoU (MFPED)'s behalf, and was won by Oxfam GB. Official GoU sanction for the PPA was obtained easily because the chair of the GoU Development Committee, where it had to be sanctioned, was also the chair of the Planning Commission. Funding would usually have been the stumbling block; but this was lined up, through the links already built with the World Bank and DFID. As plans for the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Programme (UPPAP) progressed, cynics among the economists and accountants in the MFPED were won over; one who has now become an energetic advocate for UPPAP at the international level is the former Director of Budget, subsequently Director of Economic Affairs and now Deputy Secretary to the Treasury.

As this account shows, actors in donor agencies have played a key role in enabling this network of actors to form, cohere and operate. Expatriate technical assistance and ideas from other countries have been central, so much so that their impact has tended to eclipse the fundamental contributions made early on by some participation practitioners from the national NGO community. The success and dynamism achieved by the Dream Team attest to the effectiveness of the strategy of working with a small, committed, fairly powerful and well-positioned group of officials. Yet the same qualities pose obvious risks of atomisation and lack of sustainability, and cause many to question whether the Government of Uganda is poverty-focused, or whether a handful of individuals who currently work in the MFPED are.

The second noteworthy aspect of DFID's strategy is its vision for civil society in Uganda. In DFID's vision of the fight against poverty, GoU, the driver, needs to be kept on course by public pressure and civil society activism. This activism would combine functions of representation of poor people's voices, co-development of pro-poor policies in partnership with government, and holding government to account



for delivering on its pro-poor policy and budget commitments (Lister and Nyamugasira 2001). There is much to suggest, however, that the casting of civil society in this role relates to a broader concern of DFID's – that of the national political landscape and how far it diverges from what DFID sees as an ideal governance scenario. A civil society able to hold government to account can perform many of the functions DFID holds as central for political opposition in a good governance context, diluting the urgency of directly pressing one of its closest partner governments for transition towards a multiparty political system. DFID interviewees referred to DFID's view of the appropriate role for civil society in Uganda as the checks and balances, interrogating and challenging government policy.

The force of DFID's vision for civil society is felt by civil society actors: 'Government's current rhetoric of working with civil society is a result of pressure from the donors – DFID, World Bank. It's becoming a condition for the donor agencies and that is why the government is waking up to it.' Some CSOs, experiencing this as the latest in a sequence of emphases issuing from international development actors, respond with a calculated malleability: 'their strategic plans are flexible so as to fit the donor discourse', whichever way this goes. The heavily Kampala-centric nature of civil society advocacy experience and expertise to date is seen by some as proof of how donor-driven it is.

UNDP seems to see a role for itself similar to that of DFID, and is associated as closely as DFID with the poverty reduction agenda. The Netherlands too prioritises poverty reduction and works to foster a strategic vision of it at District level. Sida (Swedish International Development Agency) is almost as central a poverty reduction actor as DFID and uses similar tactics, working on the macro-level of government institutions in order to strengthen and prime them for receiving and managing budget support. Several donor agencies share the DFID vision for civil society, though they articulate it less forcefully. The EU differentiates its position from DFID's in that 'our support to civil society is to encourage them to speak their own opinions, but we are not engines of creation of a "democracy" according to our view of what one should look like'. Off the record, individuals in donor agencies are sceptical about the recent opening-up of Ugandan government circles to civil society: in response to invitations to civil society to participate in policy debates, it was said, 'there are the few "usual suspects" who turn up every time – then there are those working on the ground who do not have the access to the same as what government and donors have'.

Minor strategic and tactical differences notwithstanding, the policy positions of Ugandan's main donors are well coordinated and calibrated with each other's and with government's, as evinced by the ten donor groups which meet on a regular basis to ensure donor coordination around specific themes. Donor agencies whose programmes are smaller, or diverge from the main areas of interest of the largest, most powerful donors, seem to have little voice in the inter-donor or donor-government policy dialogue, whether because they attach less importance to this dimension of a development cooperation relationship, because they lack the capacity to participate, or because they are squeezed out by the bigger donors. A further negative consequence of such a high degree of donor coordination, cited by many of the donor actors who play a central part in it, is that it requires an intensive meeting and dialogue schedule, which

tends to restrict donor agencies' field of action to Kampala and may result in their losing touch with the realities of Uganda.

The persistently prominent roles played by certain donors have increasingly been counter-balanced – or obfuscated – by an ever-stronger narrative of country ownership of the poverty reduction policy process, emanating both from international development actors and the GoU itself. The shift from project funding to budget support, which most donors to Uganda are currently implementing, is part of this ownership agenda, both conducive to increased national ownership and requiring relatively strong, capable and empowered national institutions in order to work. Donor agencies' strong involvement in GoU efforts to implement its decentralisation agenda, although in some respects contradictory to the “re-centralising” tendencies of budget support and sector-wide approaches, is also presented as the promotion of national ownership, consisting largely of capacity-building and institutional development programmes.

So prevalent is the country ownership narrative in international development discourse at present that in the Ugandan context it is hard to distinguish the expression of this international narrative from national dynamics. GoU has itself promoted an image of strong ownership and leadership, but government ownership is such a desirable commodity among donors that it is claimed by them even in instances where policy statements and programmes bear a heavy donor stamp, raising questions about whether “ownership” is in fact interpreted differently by each party. The Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF), the second phase of the World Bank-supported Northern Uganda Reconstruction Programme (NURP), illustrates this at the level of models of intervention: it bears all the hallmarks of a classic Bank-designed social fund but in pronouncements by Bank staff, heavy emphasis is placed on GoU's formative and leading role in it. In the case of the Poverty Reduction Support Credit (PRSC), the funding instrument supporting the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), one donor view is that ‘the Bank still rules what goes on around here’, its blind adherence to its own current policy priorities making it ride roughshod over the very principles that the PRSP approach was apparently designed to safeguard and promote. This view is borne out by a recent study which concludes amongst other things that the design of the PRSC ignores the findings of a study in which both the GoU and the World Bank participated, strongly questioning the efficacy for poverty reduction of policy instruments that deliver rapid trade liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation (Nyamugasira and Rowden 2002).

The story of how Bank approval was secured for turning the existing Poverty Eradication Action Plan into Uganda's PRSP is a further telling illustration of the contested issue of “ownership”. As told by an observer:

When the Bank and IMF delegation came early 2000 they sat at the top table. The PEAP revision process was ongoing. They introduced the idea of the PRSP and Keith Muhakanizi [Director Economic Affairs, MFPED] spoke up and said ‘This [the PEAP] *is* the PRSP, because it is Uganda's poverty eradication action plan’. And slowly it spread around the room, with everyone saying, ‘The PEAP *is* the PRSP’. So the Ministry staff cut through the narrative of the PRSP, and told the Bank

and IMF that what they should be doing is working with the sector working groups [sectorally-focused bodies which had already been put in place, charged with producing a revised, updated version of the PEAP].

The tacit ownership struggle between the Bank and IMF and the GoU extended to the question of monitoring and reporting on the PEAP/PRSP. As mentioned, when the first PEAP was launched in 1997 (MFPED 1997a) the MFPED instigated a two-yearly *Poverty Status Report*, to be produced or commissioned by the Poverty Monitoring and Analysis Unit within the MFPED, to report on progress against PEAP objectives. Yet with the acceptance of the revised PEAP as the PRSP, efforts were made by the Bank and IMF to subjugate this to their own preferred reporting format. An observer within the MFPED recounts:

The Poverty Status Report on the World Bank website is different from the [MFPED] Poverty Status Report: they revised it themselves. The Bank wanted the PMAU to revise the Poverty Status Report to make it into the PRSP monitoring report, but DFID resisted this, [saying] ‘How can you let the Bank push you around?’ So the PMAU threw out the idea [...]. But the different version is there anyway.

The justification offered by the Bank for acting in a way which threatened to infringe the principle of country ownership is that the GoU’s PEAP needed to be turned into a strategy rather than a wish-list, which implies a perceived need for an injection of realism and technical sophistication.

Certain dynamics within international donor and creditor agencies do militate against approaches conducive to building national ownership and genuine partnership – the pressure to disburse a large aid or loan budget, or the expectation that mandates from headquarters will be heeded over the content of inter-donor discussions and policy dialogue in Kampala. However, some international agencies have acted, as DFID did in the case above, to protect GoU ownership against IFI incursions, and some (such as the European Union) have responded to the PRSP’s central principle of country ownership by placing their own cooperation agreements with GoU wholly within the PEAP framework rather than creating parallel agreements and reporting requirements. In areas other than the PRSP, conversely, there are cases where donors have consciously and deliberately overridden GoU ownership so as to promote a policy area they see as afforded inadequate priority by the GoU. The Gender Unit of the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development attests to this: ‘The donors threaten to turn off the taps unless [other sector Ministries] address these things. Part of our advocacy is through the donors. They have helped us a lot, flagging gender issues or threatening to close the tap if sectors do not take them up’.

## **2.2 The Government of Uganda**

A number of fault-lines separate different organs of government, threatening the sustainability of relations between them, in the poverty reduction policy process as in other areas of government activity. Perhaps the major one is that which separates the “State House complex”, made up of the Presidency, the

Vice-Presidency and the plethora of Presidential Advisers who number around thirty, from the recognisable, tangible, supposedly accountable organs of government. Many interviewees hold that from its position backstage, the State House complex shapes all that goes on in the executive, legislative and judiciary arms of the state, despite having no accountability obligations or mechanisms, even at a rhetorical level.

Another fault-line lies between the MFPED, as the “super-ministry”, and line Ministries. As well as being, in many respects, first among Ministries, the MFPED is universally recognised as the most central poverty policy actor in government. It is variously described as “the coordination Ministry” which can initiate and broker innovations across government; and as “a powerhouse”, a summons to which is compared with being called in to see the headmaster at school. The Ministry is not seen as monolithic, however: the handful of its personnel who make up the “Dream Team”, including Director Economic Affairs and Deputy Secretary to the Treasury, are seen by many Ugandan and international actors as the key catalysts whose continued presence and influence is critical to the sustainability of the poverty reduction policy agenda. An academic comments that the influence of these figures derives from their high technical competence and their ability to engage with knowledge generation and analysis as well as the application of knowledge generated in other spheres. Observers describe these key figures as having undergone a dramatic conversion to the cause of participation in policy processes. This process of transformation has been documented in a video produced by the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Project (UPPAP 2000), which has been used widely by DFID and others for encouraging the economist and accountant personnel of Ministries of Finance around the world to engage constructively with civil society and to open up to non-quantitative approaches to poverty assessment and policy formulation.

MFPED, though seen by some as on a par with the Executive, is judged by many to be surpassed by this in power terms. There have been several instances over the past decade when the President – often referred to verbally as “the Boss” – has explicitly overridden Ministerial decisions (both of MFPED and other ministries), often with clear – if unstated – electoral-political objectives. These cases where the exercise of Executive power constitutes an “overstepping” (in the words of one donor official) of its legitimate role are not backstage or covert, but pass virtually unchallenged in the Movement system, where criticism of government is easily cast as multi-partyist destabilising tactics. Implicitly, the President’s power is underpinned by his leadership of the army, in a continuation of this institution’s historical role in Ugandan politics (Ddumba-Ssentamu *et al.* 1999). The Office of the President is seen as the nerve centre of power – the closer one is, the more influence one has – and the decline in the influence of a particular governmental unit or ministry can be charted in terms of its movement away from this favoured location (as exemplified by the trajectory of the Ministry of Gender). The image of strong presidential control is not always convenient, however: an opponent of the Movement points out that when unpopular policy reforms are being shepherded in, GoU is quick to summon the scapegoat of the international creditor institutions and their covert powers and lack of accountability. Neither is this image invulnerable to donor disapproval. Opponents of the Movement, who see the lack of party-based opposition as helping shore up

a system of autocratic, whimsical rule by Museveni propped up by donors, contend that this situation might become untenable for donors: 'If [the donors] want to see change then it will happen: the one who pays the piper will call the tune'. A donor echoes this: 'Museveni was the darling and he has got away with autocracy', a stance which might cost him donors' approval.

The real loser in this rule-by-Executive is Parliament, and by extension, democratic accountability:

Uganda has a lively Parliament [. . .]. Ultimately, however, power at the top is opaque and seems to be firmly in the hands of the NRM leadership, which overlaps between civilian and military leaders. Those who came with Museveni are usually referred to as "the historicals", and that is widely seen as the centre of power, complemented by the OBs (Old Boys) who have a longstanding personal association with Museveni. [. . .] Both before and after 1992 [when the last real conflict between Museveni and donors occurred] the political leadership has been able to impose reforms on an at times unwilling Parliament.

(Ddumba-Sentamu *et al.* 1999: 53-54)

Parliament is not altogether powerless: the 2000 Budget Act gives it the powers to reject ministries' budget proposals, and it has been known to exercise these powers on a small scale to bring ministries into line.<sup>6</sup> But it is relatively marginalised from important policy processes. One observer justifies this on the grounds that the workings of Parliament lack transparency, yet others regard Members of Parliament as important "missing actors" in the poverty reduction arena, in that they ultimately have to approve the budget and any reallocation of resources towards poverty reduction.

Dynamics within government are significant in determining configurations of actors grouped round particular causes and in enabling them to succeed or fail. Struggles of power and interest over specific policies and programmes are played out fairly openly, with figures and institutions rising and falling, grouping and regrouping, often closely followed by the media. Ethnicity is a key factor here. It is openly admitted by a Movement Secretariat actor that Cabinet has to be composed with ethnic, tribal and religious balance in mind. Another case in point is the new Northern Uganda Social Action Fund. This is a contentious and politically sensitive programme for several reasons, among them the historical marginalisation of the North and the present and previous regimes' ambivalence towards addressing it; the central role of the World Bank amid proclamations of strong country ownership; and the programme's apparently incongruous and retrogressive use of a micro-level Social Fund approach in the country where "upstream" modes of donor intervention such as central and sectoral budget support have advanced furthest. An informed observer, himself from Northern Uganda, reflects on how such programmes provide opportunities for a disparate range of government units and actors to push their own interests:

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<sup>6</sup> A recent example is Parliament's blocking of MFPED international travel funds in 2000 in response to MFPED's failure to comply with the constitutional mandate to establish a National Planning Authority. MFPED rapidly set the process in motion.

This new NURP has suddenly expanded to include Pallisa [District] – OK, Pallisa is poor but it's hardly in the North. All this for the Bank's money; the Office of the Prime Minister [coordinating the programme] has never worked with the Bank before, and everyone wants a slice. The Prime Minister at the time [when the NUSAF was designed] was from Apac [District], and suddenly we find the definition of "North" expanding dramatically.

These sentiments are echoed by a central government figure: 'Our weakness is politics – and that's what the location of the NUSAF is all about; politics in the Bank, politics in government'.

In respect of the relationship of central government with the Districts, the dynamic at the centre seems to work to hold the configuration steady, rather than constantly realigning it. In many ways the relationship of central government with the Districts seems surprisingly little changed by the introduction of the Local Government Act (1997), thanks to the high proportion of local government activity which relates to "conditional funds", passed down from central government. An optimistic donor agency official asserts that this state of affairs is temporary, 'until fiscal decentralisation has got underway'. In the meantime, it seems to be increasing MFPED's power *vis-à-vis* other sector ministries, because of Finance's control of the budget process and resource transfers to decentralised government. The Uganda Local Authorities Association (ULAA), established as a forum for local government to negotiate with central government, is one of the few structures which casts local governments as potential policy actors *vis-à-vis* central government and *vis-à-vis* donors. Despite its limited successes in particular disputes, however, as a "trade union of local government" in a heavily centralised power structure, as one government actor calls it, the ULAA is ill-equipped to fundamentally alter the status quo.

Who at the local governance level is regarded as a policy actor by those at the centre? The divide between "technicians" (civil servants) and "politicians" (elected representatives) at the local level mirrors that at the national level, and is summed up thus by a civil society actor with a political background: 'Generally the linkage between technical and political committees is very weak: technicians do it in technical terms, yet politicians play a very big role in resource allocation'. A Kampala-based NGO wanting to promote gender concerns in local planning targets District technicians as its main allies, identifying these as the actors who really form policies in Districts. Yet despite the politicians' relatively short-term vision and their emphasis on populism compared to their technical colleagues, a ULAA official notes that 'we should not forget the role of the politicians – they are key in getting things done'. Technicians' supposedly disinterested role is questioned in the context of decentralisation which threatens to weaken their power: one strong supporter of decentralisation sees the bureaucracy as imposing stagnancy and inertia on the system, holding up the decentralisation process in the interests of conservative bureaucrats.

### **2.3 The traditional "experts"**

Another group of organisations and institutions generally recognised as poverty policy actors are those dedicated to generating knowledge. The extent, nature and terms of their role, however, is not always clear. Despite fast-deepening understandings of the politics of non-governmental actors' involvement in

poverty policy advocacy, and of the implications of a burgeoning consultancy culture for academic credibility and positioning, there seems to be little questioning of the purportedly value-neutral and impartial professional roles played by poverty knowledge generators and think-tanks such as the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) and the Makerere Institute of Social Research, both at Makerere University. Developing competence in poverty analysis is a vehicle to indispensability for an academic department in the contemporary Ugandan policy context. For NGOs, too, developing this competence is a key aim. The marketing of poverty analysis – to government or to donors – is not necessarily regarded as conflicting with advocacy roles; and the provision of it by paid-up members of the organisation, acting as consultants, is not seen to impinge on the membership ethic nor on the objectivity of the consultancy service rendered.

An extension of donor and creditor agencies' influence over the policy processes is the role played by the technical assistance personnel that they fund. Some of these are extremely powerful, or potentially so. Interviews with some technical assistance personnel and some host institutions suggest that neither donor nor technical assistant always appreciate this, in keeping with a generally limited recognition of power dynamics overall, the specific power of data and the agency that knowledge-producers can exert in policy arenas, especially in this context where poverty levels have become such an important political lever. The donor-supported establishment of the major poverty knowledge generator within government, the Poverty Monitoring and Analysis Unit in the MFPED, detailed in the box above, offers an example of the careful construction of an actor network for the influencing of policy direction through knowledge generation and promotion.

#### **2.4 The new "experts"**

Civil society as a whole harbours many different kinds of policy actors as well as grouping together many related but distinct roles. Lister and Nyamugasira (2001: 2) list the self-selected and self-shaped roles of CSOs, most of which include some sort of "advocacy" function, as invited contributors, pressurisers, service deliverers, monitors, innovators and popular mobilisers. As noted, to some extent the role DFID and other donors cast them in (set out in DFIDEA 2000) gets absorbed and fulfilled by civil society actors, so that donor aspirations as to CSOs' role come to reflect more closely CSOs' actual ways of working than their own perceptions and explanations of their role.

As well as the donor vision of a vibrant civil society as compensating for the absence of a political opposition, there is a GoU vision of civil society as "a potential bridge between Government and society", and as a source of independent and useful information and perspectives on how government is doing. One government actor feels that 'We should facilitate civil society to give us an independent position'. Some other observers are more realistic about the factors that inhibit this, noting that it would be "amazing" to see CSOs speaking their own minds in public without fears of funding drying up should they deviate from a prescribed line. The limitations of CSOs' information and analytical base is seen by some donor officials and by many CSO actors themselves to constrain their ability and confidence to provide such independent perspectives. The financial circumstances of many advocacy NGOs compels

their actors to combine within one entity roles which may be considered at best confusing and at worst contradictory – for example, as members of a membership-based subscription-paying organisation, as government-commissioned consultants, and as strident advocates against government policies.

Civil society actors are not blind to the incentives to government and politicians of ushering them into the policy arena. They note how fast their situation has changed, from having to cajole their way into policy debates to being recipients of multiple invitations to take part in multiple levels and spheres of policy dialogue (Lister and Nyamugasira 2001). A few recognise that ‘if you are targeting politicians, they are also targeting you – they can see they benefit from civil society [involvement]’. Many civil society actors identify two turning points in GoU-civil society relations, both occurring in the second half of the 1990s: the Land Alliance consortium of NGOs which influenced the process and content of the Land Act, finally passed in 1998 (Bazaara 1999; Lister and Nyamugasira 2001); and the campaign for international debt relief led by the Uganda Debt Network (UDN) (with backing from the international NGO consortium Jubilee 2000) against the international financial institutions, in which GoU, standing to gain from a positive outcome, became a firm ally of the civil society campaigners. The opening-up of policy processes to NGOs can also be traced back to the Ugandan Constitution, passed in 1995; in the words of one activist, government has presented CSOs with the opportunity of participation because

it is an important part of the democratic process in the country. If the country is going to boast of democracy then it has to enable people to join in policy processes – the principles of a democracy have to be fulfilled. There are constitutional powers given to civil society to participate in governance; civil society derives its power from the Constitution itself.

While it is undoubtedly true that the Constitution provides legislative spaces for participation to occur, most CSO commentators insist that the driving force behind the turning-point cases cited above and subsequent policy advocacy initiatives comes not from national and local actors availing themselves of their democratic prerogatives, but from sources outside Uganda.

Despite the widely recognised opening up of policy processes towards civil society actors and advocacy initiatives, CSOs are themselves very aware of differences in status between actors in the circles they are now entering:

You as a CSO representative would speak [at a meeting] and no one would take notes; and they would say thank you very much and pass to the next. A donor speaks, and everyone takes notes and everyone afterwards repeats what the donor was saying in different ways.

CSOs engaging in advocacy may be seen as aligned along a spectrum, with a confrontational campaigning approach at one end and at the other a position of considerable accommodation with government, which might be termed cooptation or “cosying-up”. A few started from the confrontational end, notably UDN, and have travelled along the spectrum getting closer and closer to government, leaving behind autonomous spaces and increasingly investing in making use of invited spaces. More started midway along



the spectrum and have gradually moved towards the cooptation end. None seem to move in the opposite direction, unless recent rumblings among international NGOs, who are getting increasingly tired of tokenistic participation, take root – unlikely, as their secure position and freedom to operate within the country are contingent on maintaining a good relationship with government. UDN, having consolidated its relationship with government over their joint efforts to secure debt relief as a mutually beneficial outcome of common interest, is seen by a minority to now be moving back along the spectrum towards confrontation as it turns to issues such as government corruption.

What tactics do the main advocacy actors use? Generally organisations doing advocacy mix a reactive response of stepping into invited policy spaces and using them as well as they can, with a more proactive strategy for making an impact on policy areas they consider priorities. There are two generations of advocacy actors among civil society in Uganda: the first is the few NGOs that have been doing advocacy for some time and are largely in-country satellites of international NGOs; and the second is Ugandan organisations that have adopted advocacy stances more recently. Very few Ugandan organisations were established with an advocacy objective, an exception being the National Union of Disabled People of Uganda (NUDIPU). One critical difference between the international and national NGOs now working on advocacy is that while the first tends to monitor and reflect on the general move towards advocacy and what it means for civil society in the country, the second is too busy trying to achieve the transition to reflect upon it. Part of the reflections of INGOs such as ActionAid Uganda (AAU) and Oxfam GB/Uganda concern the need for continuously fluid, evolving organisational forms and spaces, and capacity-building inputs, to keep the civil society sector responsive to and abreast of circumstances.

A further difference is that the INGOs, free from the preoccupation of raising their profile and competing successfully for funding that affects all the Ugandan NGOs, can afford to take a low-profile backseat role in creating and strengthening local structures and local leadership in ways which avoid fostering dependence. There are mixed views among Ugandan NGOs over whether the INGOs actually take such a back seat, although their roles in the Land Alliance and PEAP revision process, discussed further below, were cited as illustrations. In several cases of international NGOs (AAU, Vreideslanden Coopibo (VECO)) or relatively large and strong national NGO networks (Development Network of Indigenous Vountary Associations (DENIVA), National Association of Women of Uganda (NAWOU)) strengthening local structures and leadership is purposefully extended to the Districts, where grassroots organisations and their members are being primed as local advocates. These efforts are hampered by ‘the scarcity of [. . .] potential leaders in the Districts. It is the same woman everywhere – on the Women Council; as the woman councillor on LC [Local Council] 5, running a women CSO . . . This woman is very stretched and really just attends meetings’. The movement to strengthen local CSOs is happening against a backdrop where, one interviewee argued, well-rooted civic organisations have been deliberately killed off or allowed to atrophy for political reasons: the opposition United People’s Congress accuses government of destroying all the peasant-based institutions and cooperatives: ‘[but] how can we implement [poverty reduction] programmes without institutions?’ Further, some national NGO actors

complain that the usefulness of the INGOs' advocacy tutelage is limited by their erroneous assumption of a full coincidence of interests – in terms of the importance of advocacy in relation to other activities, and of priority advocacy issues – between themselves and national organisations.

Another live debate to which the INGOs contribute centrally is about consensus and difference in the development NGO sub-sector. Reflecting a recurrent pattern in Ugandan cultural and social fabric, civil society networks such as the NGO Forum promote themselves as “a platform for a collective and independent voice”. This stance is taken despite an awareness of how diverse the elements that make up civil society are, and the many axes of difference which traverse Ugandan society, of which organised civil society is but one layer. This perceived need for consensus-building and attaining strength through submerging difference needs to be understood, at one level, in the context of the relative weakness of advocacy organisations in contemporary Uganda; but more broadly, against the backdrop of a consensus-seeking social and political ethos which has prevailed since the mid-1980s and the arrival in power of the NRM. A representative of the Ugandan Joint Christian Council (UJCC) recalls the origins of this organisation in the aftermath of Independence, when a group of religious leaders, anxious that the churches should contribute to the development of the newly-independent state but aware of the deep divisions across the country, formed the UJCC to enable the churches to ‘speak with one voice [. . .], become one forum for action on issues of common concern’. UJCC has continued to play what it describes as a consensus-building role, including hosting dialogues between “multi-partyists” and “Movementists” during the last presidential election campaign; but the fact that it also engaged in careful electoral monitoring suggests that activities it labels as “consensus-building” might represent as much an effort to open up the democratic space as an internalisation of the dominant discourse of consensus.

Tactics and approaches used by civil society policy actors include the deliberate creation and servicing of actor networks which can help to push a cause up the political agenda and into decision-makers' field of vision; concrete support to Parliamentarians to take action on issues of concern at the level of international fora; and, as a variation on the frequent objective of getting legislation implemented where it already exists, actually getting legislation into place where there are gaps, such as on the rights of girls. Networking is very central to the work of most Ugandan civil society organisations and also INGOs. Operating as part of a network has the obvious advantage of helping to level out imbalances in power and status between civil society and other kinds of actor. It is also a useful device in a context where civil society senses, but cannot precisely locate, the limits to government's tolerance of civil society activism: numbers offer safety and a degree of anonymity and equivocation which is not available to advocates or activists working alone. Networks themselves are not homogeneous, and their members do not always wholly share positions on policy or other issues; but the identification with the network tends to be seen as having an intrinsic value which is not diminished by differences between members and their views.

The print media is used tactically as a site for airing and debating views. It is common for civil society actors and organs of government to play out their disagreements on policy issues in newspaper columns or special press supplements on particular issues. In this sense, newspapers are a space where civil society

and GoU actors can engage with each other, very publicly if indirectly. However, apart from isolated columnists or academics with strong views on poverty- and development-related topics, the role of the media tends to be restricted to providing this space, usually at a price, which means that it is not equally accessible to all actors.

Underpinning the role and credibility of CSOs, especially development NGOs, as poverty reduction policy advocates is another set of actors who, rhetorically at least, have recently come to be counted among the “new experts” on poverty: poor men and women. While these rarely intervene directly or formally in policy circles, some of their perspectives on poverty, captured by researchers from civil society in the course of the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment and written into various outputs in the form of documents, videos and media coverage, have been fed into policy debates. Illustrations of this are the inclusion of a member of the UPPAP secretariat on the MFPEP-led working group charged with drawing up the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA), in 1999; and the convening of a national Poverty Reduction Forum at which key UPPAP policy messages are debated by policy-makers, academics, NGO staff, members of the public and the media. The poor are not always willing participants in the new and opened-up policy arena: a researcher-activist comments that ‘grassroots people want tangible benefits and don’t really grasp the explanation that this research might be to influence policy up there’ (see also Yates and Okello 2002). Yet their emergence as a new category of experts has proceeded apace, accompanied – or in some cases driven – by strong donor encouragement and facilitation in the form of provision of expatriate and national technical assistance.

As civil society actors gain prominence in poverty reduction policy debates, ‘representation of “the voice” of the grassroots become an increasingly valuable good’, to cite a recent report on the Poverty Reduction Strategy process in Bolivia, another country where participation has been heavily sponsored by government and donors (Christian Aid 2002: 3). Simultaneously, the credibility of claims by CSOs, especially NGOs, to “represent” or channel these unadulterated voices into fora of debate comes into question. In Uganda NGOs are now seen by some as “the unelected politicians”, who play more of a role in policy processes than legitimately elected local politicians and Members of Parliament (MPs). This is sometimes used against vociferous advocacy organisations: the coordinator of the Uganda Women’s Network reports, ‘The MPs sometimes say, “Why are you complaining? Our constituencies are not complaining” – this is a big challenge that we encounter on a daily basis’. Some NGOs which are invited by GoU or donors to participate in policy debates are acutely aware that they do not represent all of civil society, or all of the public, or even the interests of all the actors working in their particular field. Some have complex and thoroughgoing mechanisms for internal consultation, candidate selection and representation of views, which they activate on a regular basis or whenever their Kampala headquarters is offered a place at the table in a policy debate (VECO, Uganda Change Agents’ Association, NAWOU, Uganda Debt Network, NUDIPU). Some have no such mechanisms. The term “representation”, although contested and often discussed, is used loosely. The UJCC claims, for example, that because 80 per cent of the population classifies themselves as belonging to the three main (Christian) churches ‘we represent 80 per cent of the population’. Women parliamentarians reject the label “District Women’s Representative”

in favour of “District Woman Representative” on the grounds that they are women who represent Districts (despite having no structured channels which justify such grandiose claims) rather than representing the interests of women in these Districts. Although ethnicity is such a prominent issue in Ugandan political and social life, there is remarkable silence on it in the sphere of national-level development-focused CSOs despite – or because of – the fact that the leaders of these are almost all from western Uganda, where the most influential figures in government – including Museveni – also come from. It is a moot question how far the narrative of civil society organisations as representatives of the population and ideal channels for feeding people’s concerns into policy processes is a mere replication of the current global discourse on civil society intermediation and participation in development; and how far it is a specifically Ugandan phenomenon, reflecting the absence of other channels such as political parties and peasant movements for organised engagement of the masses with political and policy processes.

One indicator of the maturity of advocacy actors is the degree to which their activities are informed by strategies rather than dominated by a reactive mode. An important element of advocacy strategy is the systematic identification of entry-points and coordinated work on several of these at once. Few CSOs in Uganda have developed multiple interfaces with the policy process, the political system and the rest of civil society: UJCC stands out as an exception. Many CSOs seem to be at the level of actively pursuing the single goal of getting their people onto seats in meetings or committees; and reactively responding to any invitation issued to take part in any public forum which might afford profile to the organisation or the issue on which it works. These activities are pursued with apparently little analysis of the impact that they might have: an all-consuming fixation with what might be termed “the politics of presence” rather than the politics of influence.<sup>7</sup> Some of those more experienced in advocacy use the “politics of presence” consciously, as one strand of a broader strategy which embraces a range of approaches to representing issues of concern. Oxfam GB/Uganda, for instance, pursues its lobbying work on internal displacement partly by bringing internally displaced people into the same room as decision-makers. A national NGO claims that if it ceased to seek and secure a presence at every table ‘people would ask, “Where are the women?”’, an indication that the “politics of presence” tactic meets – and fails to challenge – strongly held expectations and understandings that representative democracy amounts to merely getting people of all kinds onto seats.

The most salient illustration of this, and of the related tokenisation of certain population groups in the interests of a given political project, is the phenomenon of International Women’s Day. Most District councils allocate no resources specifically for programmes and projects focused on women or for the promotion of gender equity. However, all Districts allocate funds for the celebration of International Women’s Day, which since the NRM came to power has been celebrated boisterously throughout Uganda. This allocation is often as little as 200,000 Ugandan shillings.<sup>8</sup> The Uganda Women’s Network (UWONET) has therefore orchestrated a campaign whereby the minority of women who are concerned

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<sup>7</sup> We owe the term “politics of presence” to our colleague Anne-Marie Goetz at IDS, who used it in conversations with the authors in 2000 about women’s political participation in Uganda and other countries.

<sup>8</sup> Approximately £80.00.

about this tokenistic and superficial act of recognition wear black t-shirts on 8 March to mourn the disempowerment and manipulation of Ugandan women.

One kind of CSO whose involvement in policy advocacy is hard to detect and whose position on poverty reduction is ambiguous or unarticulated is private sector organisations. These are seen by government as fitting actors to be consulted about budget and tax policy (Ddumba-Ssentamu *et al.* 1999: 52). They might well make inputs on a far wider range of issues, considering the private sector's vital role in delivering education and health services, yet are never as visible in consultation meetings as NGOs, whether because they do not influence these debates; or because they influence them in separate, more exclusive, fora; or because their inclusion is less prioritised by the international discourses on country ownership and pluralism in development policy processes, than that of the voluntary and not-for-profit sectors of civil society. An alternative explanation is that their influence is exerted in less visible ways than the NGOs' because they are far more embedded in these in informal networks of power, including some close to the President.

Some groups of actors are conspicuous by their absence from the poverty policy community. Noteworthy in this regard are trade unions, who have become progressively weaker in Uganda as in other countries throughout the 1990s. Also noteworthy is the absence of media actors, but as discussed below (in Section 4) the involvement of the communications media in the poverty policy debate is more often that of providing spaces where the poverty debate is played out. That consultants are not singled out as a category in our discussion of actors reflects less their absence from the debate than their close alliance with donors or other commissioning agencies, which gives their agency a secondary nature and tends to reinforce the primary position of donors in the debate.

### **3 Poverty knowledge in the policy process: watching the poverty headcount and “learning from the poor”**

Poverty knowledge in Uganda is in a state of flux. Related to the opening up of the “poverty policy community” to more numerous and diverse actors, a series of transformations are underway in the manner in which poverty knowledge is generated and used, how, by whom, and to what effect.

#### ***3.1 The changing landscape of poverty knowledge: driving forces and directions***

These transformations are driven partly by changes in the kind of poverty information needed. The introduction of budget support, sector-wide approaches, debt relief packages and the Poverty Reduction Support Credit, as new modes of development cooperation and financing, demand new kinds of poverty information, handled in different ways; and the increasingly decentralised administrative and fiscal landscape imposes other new demands. The discourse of the fight against corruption and the promotion of accountability has far-reaching implications for the generation, use and ownership of poverty knowledge, with the image of academia as the repository of knowledge being left behind in favour of a more pluralist model of academic, NGO and public collaboration in knowledge production and ownership, and a growing tendency for information to be used to exact accountability on policy goals as well as to inform policy design from a technical perspective.

The emerging narrative of country ownership extends to poverty knowledge. Virtually all poverty information on Uganda once emanated from the World Bank, reflecting its vision for the country and its priorities as an international institution (see, for example, World Bank 1993 and World Bank 1995). Through the 1990s this altered significantly, with increased attention to country leadership of the poverty reduction policy process and the diversification of sources of external funding for poverty knowledge generation, with UNDP, DFID and Sida, in particular, assuming stronger roles.

A key event in poverty knowledge generation which both reflected and reinforced these various transitions was the initiation of the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Project in 1998, described in the Box 3.1.

UPPAP findings, the first of which were released in 1999, did indeed embody a concept of poverty which was new for Uganda, if already familiar from mainstream donor discourse: a multi-dimensional phenomenon featuring vulnerability, isolation, information deprivation; gender-based, regional and other forms of social and economic inequality; and requiring multi-sectoral policy responses. Some of the recent developments in Ugandan poverty advocacy stem from this “new” concept, while also reflecting international tendencies. For instance, advocacy on poverty from a gender or a rights perspective, already occurring in Uganda often with international NGO or donor support, derived some new momentum and legitimacy from the findings of UPPAP, as well as being boosted by the attitude changes that accompanied the process.

### **Box 3.1 UPPAP: the generation of poverty knowledge and the emergence of the new experts**

UPPAP is a three-year project, or programme, depending on who one talks to, which was initially funded solely by DFID and later received support from UNDP, Sida and the World Bank. Its aims are:

- to enhance knowledge about the nature and causes of poverty and to generate and apply strategies for poverty reduction;
- to enhance District government capacity to plan and implement poverty reduction strategies using participatory methods;
- to develop systems for participatory and qualitative poverty monitoring; and to establish capacity for participatory policy research in Uganda (MFPED 1997b; Yates and Okello 2002).

The circumstances in which UPPAP was conceived and pioneered are described above in terms of the actor network responsible. However, a further decisive circumstance was the recognition by the GoU, with DFID encouragement, that the kind of poverty knowledge a PPA could generate would be a vital complement to the available macro-economic and sectoral data in explaining why Uganda's economic growth did not seem to be reaching the poorest (Yates and Okello 2002; MFPED 2000). Thus, there was a predisposition among key GoU figures to adopt the different perspectives on poverty that a PPA might offer.

Who is involved in poverty knowledge generation, use and application, and how? Donors have a central stake, as mentioned. The World Bank has been concerned particularly with the production of conventional poverty statistics through its longstanding financial and technical assistance to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBoS), but branched out in 1996 to hold regional consultations with poor people in the preparatory process for its Country Assistance Strategy. UNDP has concerned itself mainly with the production of the Uganda Human Development Report (HDR) which, prior to UPPAP, was the only alternative source of, and perspective on, poverty information besides the World Bank/UBoS census and survey data. DFID's major stake has found expression in its backing of UPPAP, which implied a considerable leap of faith in 1997, the project being highly innovative and process-oriented, somewhat open-ended and heavily dependent for its success on the DFID-Dream Team relationships. Until recently donors, especially the World Bank, probably had at least as much use for information on poverty in Uganda as the GoU did. Various Makerere University departments have worked as contractors or consultants to GoU and donors to generate data and analyse it: predominantly macro-economic data and predominantly in the Economic Policy Research Centre, which was reputedly set up by GoU<sup>9</sup> in an attempt to balance the strong influence of international actors in the generation and analysis of economic and poverty knowledge. The Kampala-based NGO actors who became involved in UPPAP as implementing partners or researchers were in some cases old hands at PPA-type research (Community Development Resource Network (CDRN) and Development Research and Training (DRT) ), in other

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<sup>9</sup> Albeit funded by donor grants or loans. Its mission statement stresses its independence and states that 'the establishment of the centre is a landmark to policy analysis and formulation in Uganda' ([www.imul.com/EPRC](http://www.imul.com/EPRC)).

cases competent social policy research institutions (Centre for Basic Research (CBR)), and in others relatively new to policy research of any kind. But their inclusion as gatherers and analysts of UPPAP data was expected to fuel a significant shift in the way that data is regarded, used and owned, with the public, and even poor people, assuming a more central role as generators and users than previously.

In the past decade there has, in effect, been a wider recognition of the power and importance of knowledge as an advocacy tool and the potential role of NGOs as knowledge producers, brokers and users. This has happened simultaneously with the broadening of understandings of poverty to include “information poverty” and isolation as well as material poverty. Yet how much it is directly attributable to UPPAP – which started in 1998 – is questionable. It needs to be understood, rather, in the broader contexts of mainstream international discourse, and a government and a civil society getting to grips with the concept of evidence-based policy-making and, concomitantly, the concept of evidence-based policy-influencing.

How do different actors’ strategies address or respond to poverty knowledge? Those who have long been central actors in the poverty reduction arena have sophisticated approaches to it. UNDP and DFID’s approach to poverty knowledge is a function of their views on the role of civil society as poverty advocates and accountability exactors: ‘Information is needed for policy advocacy and lobbying. This is one way in which UNDP can support policy advocacy: through generating knowledge’, in the view of a UNDP official. An observer inside government notes that if GoU had good-quality disaggregated poverty knowledge for each District, this would strengthen its position when negotiating with donors and trying to ensure they work in a coherent and coordinated way. Actors such as advocacy CSOs and local governments, who have entered the poverty reduction policy arena more recently, start from a lower awareness than others of the uses of poverty knowledge but are responding fast to the many opportunities to take it up as a tool. An NGO lobbying and building capacity for gender awareness in District-level planning and budgeting sees the lack of clear, well-organised information at that level as offering it a strategic advantage:

When District Development Plans are made, they need to get as close to reality as possible, [. . .] but sub-counties always show a different picture and the level of statistics are different [from sub-county to sub-county]. The confusion is a blessing in disguise. It starts with them not wanting us, but because we involve them from the start, they come round. [. . .] We do our analysis, write it up and then do advocacy. [. . .] Though they always say they haven’t the money to change things, sometimes somehow the allocations reflect some change.

Some advocacy NGOs use their understanding of poverty to directly inform their advocacy strategies; for example, FOWODE (Forum for Women in Development) takes time-use data indicating how much longer rural women’s working day is than men’s, as its starting point for focusing on improving the position of women.



The importance now attached by advocacy actors to information and knowledge is striking, despite the fact that some operate with a very traditional and stylised notion of how policy formulation actually works and the role of commissioned information-gathering within it. The NGO Forum, in its 2001 statement of re-launching and revitalisation, identifies itself primarily as a knowledge promotion and support organisation for local CSOs, positing that a collective and independent NGO voice

... has to be dependent on authentic knowledge and technical knowhow. This in turn [sic] as a result of critical analysis, asking searching questions, that are not commonly asked, going beyond the superficial to intensive searching, from the basic and expected to the unanticipated, unexplored. This is very challenging but, if successful, it increases the quality and depth of knowledge and diminishes empty noise.

(Uganda NGO Forum 2000: 1)

An NGO which took part in UPPAP out of a desire to influence policies and budgets to favour the poor cites as evidence of success an increase of 386 per cent in the budget allocation for the water sector as a direct result of UPPAP findings. One of the most mature and well-positioned advocacy organisations, UJCC, identifies a range of ways in which lack of information, or at any rate information processed and packaged in a useable form, limits its activities and impact by forcing it to advocate at the level of generalities rather than specifics. Larger INGOs such as ActionAid Uganda and Oxfam Uganda, with multi-faceted programmes, point to close connections between their programmatic work and their advocacy priorities, but also between the information that can be derived from the former and used to enrich and ground the latter. These same INGOs draw on their international networks for information on areas of interest for national NGOs which is not readily available in Uganda, and see this “information broker” role as part of the unique support that they can offer to their national advocacy allies. Many civil society advocacy organisations cannot sustain the financial or opportunity costs of investing in producing themselves the knowledge to underpin their advocacy work, and have to settle for using secondary information or other people’s experience instead. The incentive to divert scarce resources into knowledge production is said to be small in some membership-based CSOs, where members want to see short-term, highly visible and concrete results.

Short of conducting field research themselves, which a limited number do, where do advocacy organisations get information relating to poverty and anti-poverty policies? Most need to obtain information from government on a regular basis, and frequently find that access is explicitly denied or is not forthcoming, in contravention of information disclosure legislation. There are some indications that attitudes and practices are changing, for instance in the Bureau of Statistics where a range of different poverty knowledge stakeholders are invited to workshops in advance of each household survey so as to raise awareness, generate interest and eventually build shared ownership of the survey and its findings. In UBoS these changes have coincided with a restructuring that aims to make the Bureau more demand-driven and able to generate its own income, a transition which perhaps explains a more client-focused and

open approach. The case of the new Plan for the Modernisation of Agriculture suggests, on the other hand, that little has changed: this high-profile and long-awaited policy document was fully drafted before any steps were taken to design a public dissemination strategy. NGOs admit that they themselves do not have a culture of sharing information, and some are trying to address this by altering their own practices.

When advocacy organisations fail to extract necessary information from government through official channels, they resort to personal contacts and networks to obtain leaked documents and facts. Some of the women and gender-focused NGOs have carefully constructed their membership and central- and District-level networks with an eye to building in access to important sources of information. Some are adventurous in using international contacts and accessing internet-based sources on particular topics, for example FOWODE for its work on gender and District budgets. Curiously, even the NGOs which are implementing partners in the UPPAP consortium seem not to draw extensively on UPPAP data in their own advocacy work; and NGOs which are not directly involved seem to have only a general, distant and disinterested notion of its potential usefulness as a source of information for advocacy.<sup>10</sup>

Exactly what the implications of decentralisation are for the generation and use of poverty knowledge is a subject of live debate at present in many quarters – academia, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, central government and decentralised planning and administrative units. Given the strong hold that central government still has over District-level planning and resource allocation, through the mechanism of the conditional grant, one position is that ‘If there are conditionalities [imposed by the centre on the District], then you don’t enter into analysis at District level, because you just don’t need to’. On the other hand, the Districts’ need for specific and disaggregated data is increasingly recognised in the Bureau of Statistics, which traditionally has had little or no relationship with Districts except via survey enumerators who pass through Districts gathering survey data to take back to the centre. Providing Districts with locally-specific and contextualised data of a different kind from that UBoS could provide is one stated aim of UPPAP; but there is much to suggest that in practice this aim has been sacrificed to another aim, namely influencing the MFPED and centrally-located policy processes. Research in one of the Districts where UPPAP was implemented reveals very low awareness of the process except in the actual communities covered by UPPAP, which remember it in association with the Community Action Plans that it funded; no evidence was found that the findings have been used in policymaking or planning activities at LC5 level or below.<sup>11</sup> In any case, each individual District has such limited resources to allocate according to its own criteria, that poverty knowledge which cannot be generalised or compared from District to District is probably of little relevance. Any amount of rich and contextualised data gathered at and for the District level is only useful insofar as it can be reconciled with centrally established resource ceilings and directives on how to allocate funding.

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<sup>10</sup> We return to this point later in discussing ownership of poverty knowledge and specifically of UPPAP.

<sup>11</sup> See Adong *et al.* (2002) for more detail.

Going beyond “official” users of poverty knowledge, Kampala-based advocacy organisations note great differences between their own attitude to poverty knowledge and that of their local-level counterparts:

They don't take information as seriously as they should [as an advocacy tool], because traditions and culture all work against them there in the village; in town we are all mixed up together and have to organise ourselves and work out how to resolve problems. [. . .] Poverty and lack of information on where to go, who to report [problems] to, stop them from acting differently. These are just a few of the obstacles to advocacy work on human rights.

So the efforts of some Kampala-based NGOs to provide local-level organisations with information on rights, entitlements and shortfalls in access to the satisfaction of these, have their impact limited by cultural constraints on exposing deficiencies or abuses, and by the lack of culture of using information as a tool. By no means all Kampala-based organisations are familiar enough with conditions, ways of working and the dynamics of influence and decision-making at the District level and below to even recognise this.

One factor which distinguishes the longstanding “poverty policy actors” from the newer arrivals is the two groups' different grasps of poverty knowledge and command of the other complementary knowledges that can be applied when engaging in policy processes. Local actors (governmental and non-governmental) and advocacy organisations find their action in certain circles constrained by their lack of certain kinds of knowledge: an example of this commonly cited by government, non-government and donor actors alike is that CSOs invited into debates on national poverty reduction policy can give opinions about the social sectors and the marginalisation of certain regions but, in contrast with institutions such as EPRC, cannot engage with the highly qualified technocrats of the MFPED over the macro-economic growth strategy or the trade regime that Uganda has adopted. Likewise, national CSOs which have recently found themselves invited to take part in numerous policy processes lack both knowledge about the formal decision-making procedures and the informal channels of influence that operate in government. This restricts their ability to design their engagement strategically and maximise their impact.

Most advocacy CSOs are acutely aware of their own capacity gaps in the area of information generation and management. Several reflect on the comparative ease of doing advocacy on a concrete, visible, relatively incontrovertible issue like physical disability, as compared to a more intangible, contested, politically sensitive issue like poverty or rights. The National Union for the Disabled People of Uganda (NUDIPU) is cited by many as a successful advocacy initiative whose success is best explained not in terms of its own organisational or strategic merits but in terms of the issue on which it campaigns and the fact that its members and most of its staff are themselves disabled. NUDIPU members do advocacy on their own behalf, using as their information base their own experience, rather than advocating on others' behalf and using as their information base others' experience. In the eyes of many poverty and rights advocacy organisations this considerably simplifies their task, because no one can challenge their claim to legitimacy, their information base or their competence to speak on the issue. In

contrast, Kampala-based organisations lobbying on poverty are constantly pressed to demonstrate their legitimacy and to substantiate their claims and demands with concrete information and transparent structures of representation. Whether or not they have good quality statistics or qualitative information to hand, these are always data about someone else's circumstances, not their own, a characteristic which they feel weakens their position. This conundrum of own-experience versus others'-experience advocacy is summed up by an NGO commentator: 'there is a politics of representation, that sometimes becomes more important than the information you are using to present your case'. A particularly thorny problem encountered by these NGOs is how to link micro-level issues – on which they do have information, albeit often anecdotal, based on personal observation and lacking the legitimising stamp of the Bureau of Statistics – to macro-level policies and dynamics, a challenge which in a sense mirrors that of District-level actors attempting to relate local specificities of poverty to national-level guidelines on policy directions and resource allocations. Besides their relative inexperience in knowledge generation and management, a further restriction on CSOs' ability to identify and fill their capacity gaps lies in the nature of their relationship with donors and government, which constrains their assertiveness in stating what they really think in invited spaces rather than what they think those inviting them in wish to hear from them.

Isolated voices – but from quarters with some influence – contest the notion that civil society capacity for policy analysis is low. The NGO Forum in its Annual Report asserts that the oft-cited lack of capacity of NGOs is “a baseless accusation”. This assertion rests, however, on a headcount of graduate and post-graduate qualifications and years of work experience of NGO staff and registered members, not on any qualitative and considered assessment of how far traditional academic qualifications and participation in training courses actually equips NGO actors for engaging in the real, politically-charged and fast-changing world of policy processes. In a context where much donor support to the NGO sector takes the form of providing funding and “capacity-building”, such an assertion is likely to be considered as impolitic by some NGOs, and also as tending to encourage complacency instead of galvanising civil society to adapt to the changing circumstances in which they conduct advocacy. It is not only civil society which needs to adapt to these changing circumstances. Government is woefully ill-prepared to lead the sort of public information dissemination that should be carried out if its commitment to more participatory policy processes is to be realised. This is attested to by the widely acknowledged lack of accessible, appropriate, and timely dissemination of information on the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture.

For advocacy on poverty reduction, information about poverty is of course but one of the necessary information inputs. Building and disseminating the practical skills of demystifying a policy or budget process, identifying entry-points for influence, formulating proposals and putting them forward, are key objectives of some advocacy organisations. This training and capacity-building work is, in a few rare instances, founded on startlingly progressive and nuanced understandings of policy process, especially at the District level:

Who are policy-makers? If you look, for example, at gender budgeting – resource allocation at the District level starts from technical staff. The council is about politics, but the technical staff are about resources. So we start with them, working with them to bring articulated budgets forward, and the force to defend them. But you have to work differently with politicians – it's more to do with understanding.

There are exceptional cases of Kampala advocacy organisations which choose to forego some invitations to policy consultations and debates so as to focus scarce human resources on producing simple-language and vernacular versions of the policies under discussion, which they regard as potentially more effective. Gradually both donors and NGOs are discovering that knowledge about the practical aspects of local resource management and transparency is vital in a decentralised context, yet the general enthusiasm about decentralisation is tending to obstruct recognition of these areas as potential pitfalls and, in the view of a World Bank respondent, is slowing up the production and dissemination of such knowledge.

### ***3.2 Attaining legitimacy: the interplay of methods, political acceptability and origins***

Not all the poverty knowledge in circulation in Uganda at present is considered equally legitimate. Legitimacy seems to rest on three main factors: the methods used to generate the knowledge, the political acceptability of the policy messages contained in particular kinds of poverty knowledge, and where and from whom the knowledge originates.

Broadly speaking, it is no longer true that only statistical or quantitative information, gathered by the Bureau of Statistics using survey questionnaires, is considered a valid basis for policy. Positions have shifted over the past decade. The GoU is now more comfortable with other kinds of information, including knowledge derived using qualitative methods and co-constructed by researchers and ordinary people in participatory processes. While these latter kinds of information definitely remain of secondary importance, they are valued enough for GoU to be investing in combined approaches to poverty knowledge, wherein quantitative data from household surveys is used alongside qualitative findings from social research and the outputs of the second round of PPA research (conducted in 2001/2). This broadening of perspective is traced by many observers to the central paradox exercising poverty analysts in Uganda and Washington in the mid- to late-1990s: that while the poverty headcount appeared to be falling there was evidence from other sources – qualitative research, personal exposure of NGO and government staff to the predicaments many rural communities faced – to suggest that the poorest were not benefiting from overall economic growth (Community Development Resource Network 1996; McClean and Ntale 1998; MFPED 2000). As a result, in the words of an NGO researcher, government 'has seen that it cannot rely on statistics to know if it is doing well [. . .]. Quantitative research leaves out much valuable information'. After some tussles within the MFPED over the validity of UPPAP information and considerable controversy when preliminary UPPAP findings were loosely interpreted in late 1999 as indicating downward trends in consumption levels in contradiction of household survey

findings (McGee 2000), the eventual degree of government endorsement of UPPAP findings now surpasses that of PPA findings in any other country.

Yet the GoU's acceptance of the credibility of qualitative and participatory methods is viewed sceptically by many. It is tacitly recognised that UPPAP, funded by donors, offers government benefits of a populist political nature as well as new poverty information and much-needed investment in central and District-level planning capacity. It is also explicitly recognised among the INGOs involved in UPPAP that the GoU's "conversion" to qualitative and PPA data is but partial, and that 'we still need to continue pressing them on it and pushing this information at them'. Crucially, the nature and political acceptability of the policy implications emerging from PPA and qualitative research seem critical in determining which of these are taken up in policy debate and which are left unpublicised and unheeded. It is pointed out that advocacy actions around the Land Act amounted to a very participatory process in which NGO networks generated and disseminated much data, almost on the scale of UPPAP, but that these data were not taken up and used at high levels of government because of the radical solutions they implied.

Within UPPAP itself, findings seem to have been treated selectively. While some findings did not pose political problems and thus received their due weight – for example, the findings that water provision was not given adequate policy attention, which resulted in the much-acclaimed increase in government spending in this sub-sector – others were deemed less acceptable. Potentially embarrassing and controversial findings on bad governance and corruption are said to have been swept together under the broad heading of "Governance" and discussed only at the most general level, so that they never caused government the embarrassment they threatened. Similarly, views expressed by the rural poor consulted in PPA research amount to a resounding plea for the restoration of state agricultural marketing boards and price controls. These voices did not lead to the serious consideration of this position as a policy option, presumably because of its obvious incompatibilities with the model of liberalisation and deregulation of agricultural markets which dominates contemporary national and international thinking and practice. This indicates that this form of poverty knowledge arising empirically from the Ugandan grassroots is accorded less validity in decision-making circles than the dominant orthodoxy coming from outside the country.

Poverty knowledge that reveals disparities between Districts, regions or ethnic groups, or between other social groups, can be politically acceptable, politically taboo or politically manipulable. In the case of the UNDP's Human Development Report, 'Parliamentarians [. . .] are always reading the statistics [in the HDR] that concern their District. That is a very important thing, because they go on to ask questions that concern their Districts. [These data] are also used by different donors'. Despite this observation, UNDP feels that the HDR is not used as much or as well at District level as it could be, as the only alternative source of disaggregated data available. Although regional disaggregation of poverty data is now technically feasible, it is rare to come across disaggregated data being used to demonstrate conclusively the levels of marginalisation and resource deprivation of certain Districts and social groups in northern Uganda. Conversely, the Buganda Cultural and Development Foundation (BUGADEV) takes issue with official poverty statistics because these reveal that the Buganda kingdom is relatively well-off compared to the rest of the country, and is tempted to launch an advocacy campaign based on its own information to disprove

this and reorient central government resource allocation away from sparsely populated areas in the north towards the Buganda kingdom.<sup>12</sup> Gender-disaggregated poverty data, and other kinds of poverty knowledge which afford understandings of poverty from a gendered perspective, are also a great deal less prominent than current levels of data availability and technical competence suggest that they could be. For civil society advocates the issue of political acceptability of their advocacy messages can critically determine their standing in the poverty policy community. During its lifetime the Uganda Debt Network has experienced a major turnaround in terms of the credibility accorded by officials to the poverty knowledge it uses to substantiate its claims and inform its actions. In the mid-1990s it was a nuisance to government, a small but vocal lobbying organisation placed far outside government and using poverty knowledge from the international Jubilee 2000 movement to campaign for debt-relief alongside other poor, highly-indebted countries. Its positions and accusations were frequently dismissed as ill-founded. In 1999 UDN submitted unsolicited comments to GoU on the draft version of the Poverty Status Report which reported on progress against PEAP targets. These comments drew on alternative information sources, which offered an enriching perspective on the findings of the Report. The subsequent Poverty Status Report, produced in 2001, draws on a far wider information base than the earlier one, including some from UDN. In the interim, UDN has become such a respected source of alternative poverty knowledge in GoU circles that it sits on the MFPED's Poverty Action Fund monitoring committee, bringing to that central government policy table the quarterly outputs of a civil society Poverty Action Fund (PAF) monitoring network which it coordinates and which operates in parallel to the government monitoring system.<sup>13</sup>

In at least two respects the PEAP itself has set new limits on what constitutes acceptable poverty knowledge. Firstly, PEAP focal policy areas are absorbing all available donor and government resources for knowledge generation, with other sectors left out and falling far behind. This can be interpreted as a rational and carefully prioritised investment of scarce resources, or as a dangerously narrow, closed-ended approach which threatens to leave undetected other possible policy issues and developments which may jeopardise poverty reduction efforts in ways hitherto unanticipated. Secondly, quantified targets are used as rallying points for progress towards PEAP service provision goals. As pointed out by a government official, however, the notion of setting quantified targets for other, more controversial, measures contemplated but little articulated in the PEAP, such as the reduction of conditional grants from their current high level of 75 per cent of District governments' transfers from the centre, is not legitimate and imprecise statements of intent have to suffice.

The political acceptability of poverty knowledge depends, in part, on the identity of its source. Who commissions or conducts research and who originates or "sponsors" a particular kind of poverty knowledge, have implications for acceptability. An official knowledge-generating institution or think-tank

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<sup>12</sup> There has been much mention in recent years of "equalisation grants" as the means by which Government would correct regional imbalances in poverty and wellbeing, but little information on how significant these grants are: in fact they are worth less than 1 per cent of total funds going to all Districts, so will make little difference in any case.

<sup>13</sup> For further details on the PAF Monitoring Committees in Bushenyi and Lira, see Adong *et al.* (2002).

such as EPRC is seen as virtually beyond question, at least when its role in revising the PEAP essentially endorsed GoU's preferred macroeconomic strategy. What would have happened had it contested it is a question that can only be pondered on, in the absence of any examples of EPRC fundamentally challenging the GoU line, and in the light of what happened to politically unfashionable findings of UPPAP.

A significant aspect of the overall recent change in attitude to poverty knowledge is the recourse to the poor at the grassroots and the gathering of their perspectives. International donors such as the EU and DFID have given currency to the belief that civil society organisations with close contacts to the grassroots can bring in these perspectives and thus help to shape appropriate and effective policies. It was this tendency, coming through international channels, that gave rise to UPPAP and, partly as a result of UPPAP and its high profile, it has been strengthened and has spread widely in Uganda. The change in treatment of poor people's voices is most obvious when one compares how much the first and the second versions of the PEAP respectively reflect grassroots perspectives: the former (1997) draws on very limited consultations held largely with intermediary organisations in Kampala, whereas the latter (2001) draws heavily on UPPAP, in which extensive field research was conducted in thirty-six poor communities throughout the country; and on a series of public consultation workshops in all four regions, in which draft versions were critiqued and discussed by participants. More recently, the World Bank, main funder of the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, based the programme's design on extensive micro-level consultations in the north, in which they found that 'the poor know their priorities very well'.

However, even among those who value grassroots participatory research a common belief is that 'what the poor want is not necessarily what they should get'. Traditional "expert" intervention is viewed as necessary to translate their expressed wishes, emerging through Participatory Rural Appraisal-type exercises, into policy-friendly, trustworthy outputs. Poverty knowledge which originates at the grassroots and is gathered by NGOs has often been treated as invalid, irrelevant or not even worth finding out, even when it holds the key to complete policy failures. A qualitative study commissioned by UWONET in 1994–5 on the effect of structural adjustment on women saw its legitimacy undermined by heavy critiques from the World Bank on the grounds of methodological weakness; yet more recent qualitative research conducted in the context of the SAPRI (Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative), of which the Bank is part, has generated similar findings about the negative impact of adjustment on the poor. While the SAPRI findings were not summarily dismissed on methodological grounds, however, the messages they contained about the failures of previous adjustment instruments were summarily rejected by the IFIs, in the sense that neither the design of the Poverty Reduction Support Credit nor the Poverty Reduction Growth Facility reflects any internalisation of these (Nyamugasira and Rowden 2002).

Reflecting on the perceived validity of grassroots knowledge, the NGO Action for Development (ACFODE) tells the story of the failure of past policy efforts to get the children of the Karimojong, the nomadic pastoralist people of north-eastern Uganda, into school. As a result of these failures, Ministry of Education staff had a very negative preconception of the Karimojong, believing them to consider education worthless because of their own ignorance. When Ministry staff visited Karimoja and saw that an



informal education programme, designed for this pastoralist group, had enabled some Karimojong children to attain literacy in as little as five months, they were persuaded to revise this impression and to explore what exactly the Karimojong did believe about the formal education system. They discovered that current attitudes dated back to the 1940s, when people came from outside with pens and paper to make lists of children and take them away to war. The pen was cursed as a killer of children, and ceremonially buried in a marked site. Once this history was uncovered and dialogue on the benefits of education became possible, the community elders, with facilitation by ACFODE, held a ceremony of unburying the pen, and this major obstacle to applying the national education policy was symbolically removed.

**3.3 Who owns poverty knowledge? Priorities and politics**

The question of who owns poverty knowledge is slightly different from the question of who generates it. One aspect of the broadening of the poverty policy community is that the producers of poverty knowledge increase in number and diversity. Another is that some knowledge producers are encouraging other stakeholders to take ownership of the knowledge they produce. Both of these dynamics were nurtured in UPPAP. Who owns the knowledge constructed in that initiative?

**Box 3.2 UPPAP: poverty knowledge jointly owned by all partners?**

In the final year of the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment, what do the partners involved say about ownership of the initiative and its outputs?

It is widely acknowledged that UPPAP’s impact at the level of central government, especially on policy processes steered by the MFPED, has been substantial and rapid, commencing even before the first findings were published. This impact only partly results from the new poverty information generated; the relationships between MFPED and non-governmental or donor actors, between actors within MFPED, and between the policy community and the research community, formed in the course of UPPAP are significant impacts in themselves. Generally speaking, the single major achievement of the process has been to open up the poverty policy community and focus the attention of this new, revitalised community and the broader public on poverty issues.

Achieving and sustaining this impact in central government has, of course, had implications for the degree of impact felt elsewhere, and for perceptions of UPPAP, especially with regard to whose initiative it is. Beyond central government, an NGO partner states,

‘UPPAP has had little impact on poverty knowledge outside the corridors of power of the Ministry. It’s a project – that is the right word for it. Everywhere you go it is seen as a project and people expect the same of it as a project. [As an actor involved in UPPAP] you are asked everywhere what you bring. In theory the Ministry is trying to address that by re-naming it a process, but it remains a project. ... You get the reality by talking to Districts. What is the basis of their planning? If it were poverty eradication, that would give them one particular line. If it is something else, why should they want and take up data on poverty? If their priority is not poverty eradication, then it will take years and years before something like UPPAP can make an impact on them. You need to have thinking which focuses on poverty as the overriding theme. The Districts would then be looking for poverty information and UPPAP would become highly relevant as the necessary ingredient’.

The Kampala-based NGO partners almost universally see UPPAP as belonging to central government, as do the few District-level actors who are aware of it. That even knowledge-hungry advocacy NGOs who

themselves were centrally involved in UPPAP should hold off from using its findings, viewing them as exclusively government-owned, is surely evidence of strong preconceptions about government's rightful – dominant – place in any multi-stakeholder initiative; and also of strong identification of data-generation with official actors rather than non-governmental actors. Judging by this UPPAP example, the relationship between participation in the co-production of knowledge and shared ownership of outputs, would appear to be less linear and straightforward than is usually assumed, and in fact distorted by pre-existing and further-reaching power asymmetries between actors.

If UPPAP findings can be called the "voices of the poor", the voices are filtered, heavily synthesised and wrapped in sophisticated packaging. Other, more raw, forms of poverty knowledge that the poor themselves generate and exchange at local levels, appear not to find their way into local planning and decision-making processes either (Adong *et al.* 2002). Thus, poor people themselves, despite having contributed directly to the major vehicle for gathering popular poverty knowledge for policy purposes, have negligible ownership over any of the manifestations of poverty knowledge which inform policy at local and higher levels.

Poverty knowledge is a political currency in Uganda, and as such sometimes gives rise to ownership struggles between the generators of the knowledge and those keen to use it for political ends. In recent years a quiet ownership struggle has gone on between the GoU, on one hand, and the World Bank and some donors on the other. For government, having the right knowledge to hand considerably strengthens its position in, and ownership of, negotiations with the World Bank. A key stakeholder in government reports:

Fifteen guys came from Washington and told us that the PRSP must have five goals, but we said, 'No, we have four, what is missing?' – these guys couldn't convince us. They changed their mind on the spot in a meeting at MFPED. [We managed to change their minds because] we had undergone the process. We knew what poverty was, we knew what we were talking about. They were theorising – but we had facts to back our arguments, we had done our homework. But if they find you on soggy ground . . .

Among some Ugandan government and NGO actors there is a thinly-disguised impatience with the degree to which poverty knowledge is still in foreign hands and is produced through a model of technical assistance which affords lower priority to building national capacity than to churning out figures promptly – even figures which cannot then be explained or replicated by national analysts. At odds with the current international discourse on donors taking a back seat while governments take ownership and leadership, the perspectives of some central poverty knowledge actors closely associated with GoU and with donor agencies reveal that the World Bank's role in producing poverty data has actually increased in Uganda since 2000. This, they hold, is partly because the Bank has a research agenda of its own that it is determined to pursue there, whether or not it dovetails with government's poverty research agenda. That donors are all stating a commitment to better coordination of their research as well as their other agendas, while duplicating each others' efforts in research and poverty knowledge generation, suggests that much donor visibility and sense of achievement in a context like Uganda comes from commissioning new and re-packaged poverty knowledge. This is notable in the number and degree of overlap of consultancies

commissioned by donors. Consultancy reports, as well as consolidating the commissioning agency's position as a generator of and contributor to poverty knowledge, can also provide legitimacy for particular policy or programme prescriptions and simplify the donors' complex development narratives into simple terms and tropes that are readily absorbed into local discourse and approach, as well as influencing directly the donor's own practice.

The range of reactions to recent poverty headcount data illustrates the interplay of actor status, political acceptability, ownership struggles and timing, in conferring credibility on particular items of poverty knowledge.

**Box 3.3 The poverty headcount: a political measure**

In January 2001 some preliminary figures were produced by the expatriate technical adviser who has long been contracted by the World Bank to process UBoS survey data and derive messages from it about what is happening to levels of poverty at national and regional, macro and sectoral levels. These figures appeared to confirm that the average Ugandan's real consumption has increased by 5.7 per cent between 1992 and 2000, and that the proportion living in poverty has decreased from 56 per cent in 1992 to 35 per cent in 2000, with a dramatic decrease of 9 percentage points in the poverty headcount in just two years between 1998 and 2000 (see Appleton 2001).

Some donors have accepted these figures as plausible on the basis that the poverty headcount started off so high that such a significant reduction was in fact possible. In other agencies, however, the reaction to the preliminary consumption increase figures was amazement, and a rush to 'hide them until someone did some more analysis', because advisers could not relate this to their own observations of what is happening on the ground. A technical assistant working on poverty information systems comments: 'First when we heard those figures we did not believe them; now we've repeated them so many times, we've started to believe them'. So technically sophisticated was the production of these data that anyone outside UBoS who might attempt to cross-check the headline figures, would be unable to replicate the process without expert technical assistance. As a result, the data command a certain mystique, which preserves their unchallenged status.

Days after the figures were released, marked 'Preliminary: Not for citation' and recognised as such by the Bank, which had commissioned them, the expatriate adviser responsible for them was shown a double-paged article in the main national newspaper celebrating the fall in poverty headcount and attributing it to successful government policies. This occurred in the run-up to the 2001 presidential election campaign. The article had been placed by the Governor of the Bank of Uganda, former Permanent Secretary Finance, and staunch Movementist.

It was this same expatriate technical adviser who devised the current method of calculating the poverty line and poverty headcount for Uganda. He holds that when he did so, in the early 1990s, very few people recognised the political importance of the choice of poverty line. Now, the degree of attention focused on that 35 per cent figure (the poverty headcount in 2000, the last year for which data are available) is astounding. In his view, the kind of knowledge that he is producing is not well-suited to the purpose to which it is increasingly put. Annual survey findings have become a political litmus test, and political motives are interfering with the evolution of poverty data in Uganda.

A similar, earlier, story is told in a study commissioned by Sida:

The seriousness of the debate on poverty in Uganda is . . . evident in the reaction of the government to a newspaper article in the independent newspaper *The Monitor* under the heading "Millions live on Sh 1000 a day as crime rises". Government responded in full-page advertisements under the heading "Economic growth lifts 2 million Ugandans out of poverty". It argued that despite some money being wasted, government, supported by aid, spends massively on poverty reduction through feeder roads, education and child immunisation. But above all, it referred to survey results which found that in 1992–1995/6 the number [sic] of poor people fell from 56 per cent to 46 per cent.

(Ddumba-Ssentamu *et al.* 1999: 104)

Observers pinpoint the increased government sensitivity over the poverty headcount as starting in November 1999 when, at a conference on the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) (for which Uganda was one of the thirteen pilot countries), the UPPAP team presented preliminary findings which suggested that poverty, as defined by poor people, was increasing and the World Bank's expatriate technical adviser presented the then latest headcount figures which showed that consumption poverty was steadily decreasing. This apparent divergence led to some tendencies in GoU to dismiss and undermine UPPAP findings; but it has also left GoU and the World Bank primed to the importance of having the right figures to hand at the right time to counter any negative messages emerging from elsewhere.

It is rumoured that the same CDF meeting also occasioned a struggle over poverty knowledge at a higher level. One informant recounts that Joseph Stiglitz, the then World Bank Chief Economist who was soon to fall from grace for publicly denouncing the World Bank's approach to privatisation and renouncing the Washington Consensus, was a keynote speaker, and had planned to give his view that structural adjustment had failed everywhere. In the car on the way there, the World Bank's country economist persuaded him to change the tenor of his speech, because GoU had at last come to the conclusion that structural adjustment was finally delivering growth, at least, even if they were not quite sure yet about poverty reduction.

## **4 Policy spaces: invited participation and the crowding out of autonomous spaces**

### **4.1 The nature of policy spaces in the Ugandan context**

Policy spaces have been defined as moments in which interventions or events throw up new opportunities, reconfiguring relationships between actors within these spaces or bringing in new actors, and opening up the possibilities of a shift in direction (Grindle and Thomas 1991). As such, they allow alternative versions of poverty to be expressed by a variety of voices (Brock *et al.* 2001), and corresponding versions of poverty reduction to be pursued by a variety of actors. Examination of policy spaces enables us to understand more closely the dynamics of power, agency and knowledge in the shaping of national poverty policy in Uganda.

Crucial to understanding how actors negotiate their positions in policy processes is an interrogation of the mechanics of inclusion and exclusion in these processes. The discussion of actors above shows that different actors operate in different spaces and use different approaches to advance their agendas in the policy arena. Policy spaces as understood in this research are not just boardrooms or meeting halls but moments of intervention where actors negotiate possibilities, keep out others, mobilise discourses, play out power dynamics and subvert the linear logics of policy making. As such, they are central to any exploration of the policy process; and how different actors occupy and utilise the spaces available to them merits detailed examination.

The national political space of Uganda is itself a complex, contested terrain. Its nature has profound implications for the kinds of policy space that arise within it, and for what can go on in these. The 1997 constitutionally-mandated “Movement Act” institutionalised a “no-party” system, extending Movement membership automatically to all Ugandans and banning party political activity. In its stead, opportunities for political engagement are theoretically available to all Ugandans through the five tiers of local government (Lister and Nyamugasira 2001: 9). This, in the words of an opposition actor, constitutes:

a very complicated scenario. If you conform you are good; if you do not it is because you are a multi-partyist. What is a multi-partyist? Where are the offices? Where is the allegiance? Who is a multi-partyist? You are put in a box and the box is very smart... There are no political parties in Uganda. What we have are just sympathisers. By law we are all part of the Movement system and the parties are not anywhere focused on in the system.

The ruling National Resistance Movement presents itself as an all-embracing space, from the national down to the most local level. It explains itself using a discourse of inclusion, incorporation, consensus, mass mobilisation and political education. Movement rhetoric does not countenance the possibility that this model might, for some, epitomise political exclusion. By unequivocally counting all Ugandans in, the Movement neutralises, delegitimises and disallows divergent tendencies, negating them to the point that they atrophy, politically speaking, in the wings. While rejecting outright the model of competitive

party-based politics, it nonetheless incorporates and subverts the language of competitive democratic politics to describe what goes on *within* the Movement system, claiming, for example, that ‘we have as many political parties as people who stand’. Even at the level of formal electoral politics, the contradictions are legion, and harder and harder to disguise as the grievances of “multi-partyists” find ever-louder echoes in discourses of democracy and governance across Africa and the world.

The implications of this for government accountability are obvious. In the words of the same opposition actor, ‘If we are to influence things there is no forum for influencing anything in this system . . . I think one of our problems is because we do not have options. There are no ways in which government excesses can be checked’. Technical effectiveness, coupled with a populist choice of main policy focuses – keeping the peace and reducing poverty – are offered as substitutes for conventionally defined political freedom; shrouding the actions of government in technical debate, personalising them around the figure of Museveni and his history in the bush war, and conducting them with diligence, keeps the emphasis off more political and sensitive questions. The survival of this system can only be explained with reference to recent Ugandan political history: ‘We are afraid to go back to the past. We are happy to stay the way we are because there is security in the city’. The future of Uganda’s political space now hangs on a further referendum to be held in 2005, but the outcome anticipated by the opposition and many of the public is that when the multi-partyist cause wins, the Movement will simply be declared a political party and the President will start a new term.<sup>14</sup>

Donors, seen by opponents to the Movement as the only actors who might have the power to affect a change in Ugandan political system, are ambivalent or accommodating in the face of the anomalies of Ugandan “democracy”. The EU admits in its country strategy to concerns about the narrowing of political space, yet one of its officials holds that ‘While the EU has a policy of supporting democracy . . . the Uganda case is special’, partly because there has been a vote to keep the current system in place. DFID Uganda enunciates no official view on political parties but generally pushes for a “multiplicity of voices”, a stance which clearly shapes its engagement with civil society but is harder to reconcile with its close relationship with Museveni’s government. The opposition’s view of donors’ positions is that democracy is being traded off against stability: ‘The donors can go to the American club, the British club and other places. The insecurity is far away so it is business as usual’. Sida cites Museveni’s claim that this is a temporary state of affairs, and that modernisation of the economy will bring forward a new middle class, which will break the mould of tribalist and regionalist discourse that the Movement was created to hold in check (Ddumba-Ssentamu *et al.* 1999: 55).

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<sup>14</sup> This is the formal situation. However, the timing of the referendum is regarded as inconvenient as the next Presidential elections are due in 2006, and should a multi-party system only be approved in 2005 this would leave only a year for parties to form and organise themselves to contest the presidential elections. It is anticipated, however, that the Political Organisations Bill going through Parliament at the time of writing might obviate the need for the referendum by obtaining a consensus on multi-partyism sooner than 2005, allowing parties more time to form and organise.

What does this national political scenario mean for civil society organising? As a member of a national NGO sees it, embryonic processes of autonomous civil society organising are increasingly at risk of encroachment by the all-embracing reach of government:

From being a dictatorship [Uganda] is in a transition to liberal democracy, with a few question marks here and there. This has affected other organisations – how they work, how they see government, the impetus to press for change. The move from dictatorship has given organisations like [ours] a space that we must recognise. However, there is an increasing worry that organisations like [ours] get more and more into government-sponsored programmes, so will their independence begin to die?

Other commentators describe ‘the politically determined and uninstitutionalised nature of the space available for operation, as well as the power of individuals’ as a major constraint on civil society engagement in advocacy (Lister and Nyamugasira 2001). For almost all CSOs certain kinds of activity carry unwarranted risks, with the Uganda Joint Christian Council standing out as immune from these: ‘it’s only us that can fill the gap [between different political tendencies] really . . . if anyone else tried they would be branded a multi-partyist or a Movementist, one or the other, or it would be said that they were pursuing their own private interests’. NGOs with presidents, executive directors or members who have political associations find all their relationships and activities are marked by those associations, whether they are relevant or not to the work they do. While many CSOs comment shrewdly and quite openly on this conjuncture, their reactions to it tend to be cautious and conservative rather than challenging it. For example, one national NGO network’s rejection of donors’ efforts to build up CSOs as political opposition is based primarily on its own lack of political aspirations, and only secondarily on doubts as to the appropriateness and practicability of this approach.

In this Movement-dominated national political space, however, spaces do exist for the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders in public policy processes, and more are opening up all the time, particularly in the field of poverty reduction. The room for manoeuvre afforded by each poverty reduction policy space differs from case to case and with the types of actor involved. These spaces are more or less sustained over time, more or less institutional, more or less autonomously created or offered by government. Table 4.1 summarises the kinds of poverty reduction policy spaces that exist and shows examples of each.

The emergence of these spaces in the Ugandan political context obeys several dynamics: an internal dynamic whereby the system sustains itself in an increasingly adverse environment through making minor changes and accommodations; an external dynamic whereby influences from abroad are filtered in via donor agencies and international NGOs; and a growing consciousness and sense of gratification within national civil society that legal and policy frameworks in Uganda do allow it some form of engagement with the rulers, albeit far short of free and competitive party political engagement. Accommodations by the Government of Uganda include the provision of spaces for donors, as well as civil society, to engage with policy processes and key policy events, as part of a general thrust to promote “policy processes as

**Table 4.1 Nature of the policy space**

Nature of the policy space	Examples
Particular policy formulation processes and the resulting policies	<p><b>Multi-sectoral:</b> Poverty Eradication Action Plan, Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture 2001 (defined as a holistic framework for eradicating poverty through multi-sectoral interventions aimed at improving the welfare of poor subsistence farmers, which aims to accelerate agricultural growth by introducing profound technical change); Local Government Act 1997 (creates five levels of Local Councils and charges them with delivering services and other administrative and fiscal responsibilities)</p> <p><b>Sectoral:</b> Land Act 1998 (reform of multiple and overlapping systems of land tenure to create a single uniform system with the objective of encouraging a functional market in land)</p>
Donor-funded programmes or funding mechanisms which aim to influence the nature of governance and/or policy process	<p><b>National:</b> Local Government Development Programme (UNDP and World Bank-supported programme for strengthening capacities of local governments, linking funding releases to compliance criteria designed to promote accountable and decentralised governance); Poverty Reduction Support Credit 2001 (various bilateral and multilateral donors), Health sector investment programme; Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Project</p> <p><b>Regional:</b> Northern Uganda Social Action Fund 2001 (World Bank-supported social fund aimed at enhancing capacity of people in nine poor northern Districts to 'identify, prioritise, and plan for their needs and implement sustainable development initiatives . . . contributing to improved livelihoods by placing money in the hands of the communities')<sup>15</sup></p>
Government funding mechanisms which offer points of engagement for other stakeholders	<p><b>National:</b> Poverty Action Fund, created 1998 (mechanism to channel debt relief and mobilise additional resources for social sector poverty-reducing expenditures)</p> <p><b>District:</b> District Development Plan (three-yearly plan for District activities and resource allocation, intended to be based on planning and prioritisation processes conducted by lower-level councils)</p>
Units of government which generate poverty knowledge	<p>Poverty Monitoring and Analysis Unit (central level)</p> <p>District Planning Units (the office of District Governments which is responsible for planning and resource allocation, including preparation of the District Development Plan and the budget)</p>
Working groups which are interfaces between various actors in policy processes	<p>PEAP Sector Working Groups (Health; Education; Water, Lands and Environment; Agriculture; Social Development; Local Government; Private Sector Development; Law and Order; Public Sector Reform; Accountability; Public Administration; Macroeconomic Framework; Infrastructure; Roads and Works; Security). These groups, bringing together key players in each sector, were created to facilitate the development of sector-wide budget proposals and plans</p> <p>Poverty Eradication Working Group (PEWG), created 2000 (multi-stakeholder group, including civil society and academic representatives, which critically reviews work of sector working groups to ensure that these are poverty-focused)</p> <p>PMA multi-stakeholder Steering Committee which brings together representatives of a range of Sectoral Ministries with donor and government technical assistance staff, and some civil society organisations</p>
Policy or political processes which explicitly allow for civil society accompaniment and engagement	<p>Presidential and local elections</p> <p>Election monitoring schemes, run by civil society with government approval</p> <p>District PAF Monitoring Committees, set up by Uganda Debt Network to monitor PAF expenditure at local level</p>

<sup>15</sup> www.worldbank.org, June 2002.



Meetings and delegations convened by government or other official actors	International level: Official government delegations to international conferences e.g. World Trade Organisation, Food and Agriculture Organisation; Consultative Group meetings, now held in Uganda  National level: Poverty Forum, created 2000 (public discussion space convened by UPPAP partner Makerere Institute of Social Research for wide range of stakeholders including government and general public to discuss poverty issues arising from UPPAP); Ministerial policy consultations (e.g. water, energy)
Donor-hosted meetings	Workshops to which donors invite civil society (e.g. on the role of civil society in Uganda)
"Backstage" spaces	Donor-hosted social events, "tea parties"
The media	<i>New Vision</i> (main pro-Government daily national newspaper) and <i>Monitor</i> (more independent daily)  Column space, advertisements and special supplements paid for by particular CSO and government actors to promulgate their viewpoints and activities on particular national days (e.g. 17 October, National Poverty Day)  A range of local language daily newspapers
NGO campaigns or events	African Women's Economic Policy Network (AWEPON) workshop, where collective critical position on PRSPs was developed by participant NGOs  NGO campaigns (e.g. Anti-Corruption Coalition, Uganda Land Alliance)

pluralist dialogue" and to counter rising numbers of questions and criticisms from donors about the potential exclusionary and undemocratic effects of the no-party system. International influence as a factor in government's growing willingness to offer spaces to civil society is widely recognised: in the words of a civil society activist and researcher,

The influence of international donors on the government ... is great. Much of the space opened up here has been opened because of what the donors say. How far would it have opened up if the donors didn't think it was the best way to do things? ... What happens if donors stop pressing the government of Uganda to take on participation? What is the likelihood that the government will continue creating the spaces necessary for NGOs to participate?

The issue at stake determines whether spaces are opened for debate on it or not. While government is currently inviting participation on many issues that are clearly framed as poverty reduction, other subject areas, some of which lie outside the frame, but have critical influence on the prospects for poverty reduction, do not produce the same invitations. With civil society actors so intensively engaged with government in poverty-framed debates, these issues – which include the impact of recent World Trade Organisation (WTO) talks, and the negotiations surrounding the PRSC and the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) – are therefore being subjected to much less public debate than is desirable. This is also the case with gender issues: a key figure in the women's movement describes how the movement has begun to feel marginalised, pushed back into the civil society domain and incapable of attracting government attention or ownership.

International thinking on decentralisation and poverty reduction has clearly had an impact, encouraging the opening up of local spaces, both governmental and extra-governmental, on the premise that the nearer to poor people decisions are taken, resources are controlled and services are delivered, the more likely it is that poverty reduction will ensue. Some of this impact is couched in notions of empowering local people by putting them in control of resources – notions which appear idealistic when explored through field research at decentralised levels (see Adong *et al.* 2002). Donors and government differ in their thinking on how much of this local control should rest with District government – central government’s preference in many cases – and how much with lower levels of government and with non-governmental actors. There are in any case widely recognised capacity constraints in local government which limit the degree to which it can host effective policy spaces, but a firm belief in the potential of these local-level policy spaces for poverty reduction objectives is leading some key donors to support generously the Local Government Development Programme which aims to strengthen this capacity while also providing resources for governance and poverty reduction activities at the sub-county level.

Ideals aside, central-level actors are beginning to recognise that the “bottom-up participatory practices” at the local level, on which the central-level discourse of participatory policy and decentralised governance rest, are flawed. The UPPAP findings and process, in particular, have challenged assumptions and assertions about what happens lower down the system, revealing, according to one interviewee from a UPPAP partner NGO, that:

Promoting participation as a key aspect in planning processes is talked about a lot but practice is much weaker than what is said. Not because government doesn’t want to do it but because it doesn’t know how. Especially at the District level: when people there tell you that they have used a participatory approach and you ask them what they actually did say ‘We bring the people and we sensitise them’.

It is even acknowledged by some Kampala-based actors that the very structures which are meant to facilitate these participatory processes tend to be exclusionary. The system of separate and parallel Councils for Women, People with Disabilities and Youth, created because these actors were seen as marginalised within normal Council spaces, is seen as a cure worse than the illness, at least with regard to addressing women’s concerns at local level. Being parallel and weakly linked to the LC system – where real power resides at local level – and being imperfectly connected to the national-level women’s political machinery, the local-level Women Council structure effectively hives off women’s concerns into a political cul-de-sac and ensures that LCs remain dominated by men and their concerns.

Even the participatory policy spaces most acclaimed at the national level are beginning to attract critical scrutiny. The PMA, supposed to be designed as an inherently participatory and widely owned initiative, in some commentators’ views fails to provide a good environment for local or national-level participation or to protect against the abuses of the spaces it opens, because the PMA concept ‘is not homegrown’. It was ‘done and dusted before it was presented to a workshop’ and its development has

particularly lacked input from local government, despite the central role that local government would need to play in successful implementation. On the PEAP process, ActionAid Uganda has begun to foster a process of critical reflection, asking what kind of participation was actually achieved and to what end. At a meeting hosted by AWEAPON, a network of Southern African advocacy organisations advocated a disengagement by CSOs from the PRSP process in Uganda and other neighbouring countries, largely on the grounds that the participation allowed to them was a legitimating device wielded by governments and IFIs, rather than an opportunity to transform either the status quo or the neoliberal orthodoxy of poverty reduction policies. Emergent perspectives such as these are calling attention to the real scope and real constraints of the spaces currently available to non-government actors to participate in poverty reduction policy processes.

**4.2 Assessing policy spaces: constraints and scope for impact**

The emergence in Uganda of nascent critical perspectives such as those mentioned above enjoins a closer examination of the real scope and real constraints inherent in the poverty reduction policy spaces that are opening up. Among these there is a preponderance of what we have called elsewhere “invited” spaces, where government invites non-governmental actors to give opinions or feedback or to comment on draft policies (see Brock *et al.* 2001). While government frames many of these as participation, the civil society “participants” frequently deem them to have been opportunities for consultation only.<sup>16</sup> Box 4.1 describes some examples of poverty reduction policy spaces that have opened up lately, at international and national levels.

**Box 4.1 A series of openings: emergent spaces for participation in policy processes**

If changes in views on who counts as a policy actor can be measured in terms of the number of policy processes in which spaces for participation are opening up, then a sea change has occurred in Uganda in the past decade. As the following examples show, this is true for both processes involving international policy, relations and actors, and processes of national policy-making and -shaping.

The Ugandan Government delegations to the **World Trade Organisation conferences** in Seattle in 1999 and Qatar in 2001 included CSO members. The CSO member of the Seattle delegation felt that her status on the official delegation made her presence more effective than it would have been as an independent CSO participant, by allowing her access to official discussions.

The annual **Consultative Group (CG) meeting** traditionally involved only GoU and donors and creditors. It has always been a policy space which offers opportunities for donors to present and promote their own agenda, for example on governance issues, which are increasingly gaining profile in CG meetings. But the nature and composition of actors attending the CG meeting has changed considerably in the last two to three years, reflecting broader changes in the attitude of the GoU and donors to civil society’s role in the policy community. Civil society now plays a significant part in the CG. Some NGO and networks, building on the ground they have gained and lessons they have learnt in the CGs of recent years, have elaborate strategies for

<sup>16</sup> This is a distinction commonly made in analyses of the range of kinds, intensities or building blocks of participation. Such analysis is often in the form of “ladders of participation”; see, for example, Arnstein (1969); Pretty (1995).

preparing for CGs, including the identification of key allies in government and donor agencies, briefing donors on NGO positions, information-sharing, and the prior development of negotiating stances. In the May 2001 CG, CSOs were invited by both donors and government to contribute to shaping the meeting agenda. Government's stance for this CG, in contrast to previous ones, was to enable a broad dialogue with civil society rather than tolerate confrontation with some vocal NGOs. The NGO Forum played a central part, coordinating the session on Poverty; and UDN led the session on Corruption, bringing people from rural Uganda take part in this and other CSO sessions.

The first **Poverty Eradication Action Plan** (1997) was formulated with limited inputs from non-official sources: some inputs were commissioned from academia and limited consultations were held with selected Kampala-based NGOs. When the PEAP was revised in 2000–1, the process and the number of actors involved were very different. The identification of policy priorities for PEAP 2 drew on the findings of UPPAP, which had consulted hundreds of poor people in nine Districts about their views on poverty and its solutions. As a draft was being prepared, Kampala-based CSOs organised themselves into a "Civil Society Task Force" (CSTF) and set up sector-focused groups, parallel to the government's Sector Working Groups, to discuss and critique the draft. Using donor funding the CSTF ran consultation meetings in four regions of the country for the public to learn about and discuss the draft revised PEAP. Views expressed were gathered, systematised and presented to government in a published report, as well as widely publicised in the media. The result is a greater general awareness among Ugandans of the revised plan, and a realignment of poverty reduction policy priorities to reflect to some extent what poor people identify as important. Donors were also able to use the new openings in the PEAP revision process to insert their own priorities, partly through creating its own backstage opportunities: DFID, by spending a considerable sum on tea parties, managed to place a consultant in the drafting team which, it maintains, enhanced the quality of the exercise and the product.

In 1999 as part of the development of the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework, the MFPED set up cross-government **Sector Working Groups** in priority sectors, to work on mainstreaming poverty concerns throughout the budget process. Established as spaces with a technocratic function, these spaces have nonetheless been affected by the tendency towards opening up the policy processes. Despite being conceived originally along purely sectoral lines, the influence of the UPPAP team led to the formation of an additional, multi-sectoral **Poverty Eradication Working Group**, on which there are several civil society representatives. Throughout the revision of the PEAP the Sector Working Groups were enjoined to open up to inputs from the CSTF sectoral groups.

But perhaps changes in views on who counts as a policy actor cannot be measured in terms of the number of policy processes in which spaces for participation are opening up. The civil society member on the official Seattle delegation informed government delegates of some differences in opinion in advance, to try to ensure that this inclusion did not lead to cooptation. Government delegates nonetheless put forward their own position, conflicting with the civil society delegate's position, as that of the whole delegation; but were in any case shouted down by other East African delegations whose position was closer to that of the civil society delegate. Despite the sense of success that their current degree of involvement in CGs has created among CSOs, a donor suggests that notwithstanding all these changes, still 'the CG is not dialogue'. Members of the CSTF reflect with hindsight that the extent of their input was to generate findings from consultation and feed them in, to be adopted or discarded; and that they did not fundamentally alter the course of the process or the Plan. NGOs involved in the PEWG are lamenting their lack of impact to date and resorting to training courses provided by donors to try to acquire the technical knowhow they need to take part effectively.

One policy, the **Plan for the Modernisation of Agriculture**, the GoU's mechanism for the eradication of poverty through the commercialisation of subsistence agriculture, brings together many of the contradictions visible in other processes. On one hand, the Steering Committee which guides the implementation of the PMA has civil society representatives sitting on it, although these perceive considerable restrictions on raising their voices, particularly to communicate dissenting messages (see below for detail). On the other hand, however,

their inclusion in this space belies the closed nature of the earlier stages of formulation of this policy. Although the PMA document itself outlines a series of stages through which the PMA has passed, including some "District Consultations" following the formulation and revision of the PMA, and makes reference in the text to the "views of farmers",<sup>17</sup> interviews reveal that the process of formulation was dominated by the political interests of different branches of government and the thematic interests of different configurations of donors and creditor agencies.

Despite this, key informant interviews make frequent use of the word "consultation" in describing the evolution of PMA process.<sup>18</sup> In this case, however, the "consultative" process being referred to describes not the invitation of different actors into the policy space of the PMA, but the way in which different actors within government, and within the donor and creditor community, contributed at different stages. Given the PMA's origins in Museveni's 1996 election campaign, major differences in the ways that different actors interpret the term "modernisation", intra-governmental differences concerning the ministerial location of a cross-sectoral implementation process and different international discourses of agricultural development, the creation of an "invited space" for civil society actors or poor people whose voices may have created an extra layer of dissonance was not, it seems, an option. As a result, the PMA is a policy document of mixed messages, in which the President's need for a political slogan, the IFI's need for a programme of liberalisation and privatisation and DFID's need for a livelihoods approach to rural development are all reflected, garnished by the selective use of "the perspectives of poor farmers". Findings from research in Districts (Adong *et al.* 2002) reveal that in the early stages of implementation, many farmers were struggling to see how the privatisation of extension and the introduction of a complex system of resource allocation under the PMA were in any way relevant to their own needs.

Invitations to non-governmental actors to step into government-created spaces, while probably better than no invitations at all, are always on pre-established terms which are often loaded against participants from civil society or the general public. The high degree of formality and protocol which characterises official meetings, the trappings of power and hierarchy which shape the space: all deter genuine and confident engagement by non-governmental actors, and especially by people from poor backgrounds with low levels of formal education. One NGO tells of its experience in this regard, accusing government of taking refuge in its cumbersome bureaucratic and hierarchical traditions from the challenges that real participation could present:

The establishment must change its way of working, so that it isn't always CSOs fitting into the complex committee structures of government. Why on earth can't a meeting start until an agenda has been established and circulated, the room has been called to order, the minutes of the last meeting have been reviewed and agreed – and only then you get to Matters Arising and Any Other Business? Why can't some of these things change? [We] did a study last year in Entebbe and Soroti municipalities on civic participation in municipal governance. It looked at what it means for normal people to go to the municipal offices. In one village a man went to the municipal offices to lodge a

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<sup>17</sup> While some of these "perspectives of poor farmers" are sourced to UPPAP, others are not clearly sourced; and in neither case are the "perspectives of poor farmers" contextualised.

<sup>18</sup> At the time of the research, the PMA was in the very early stages of pilot implementation in some Districts; but the policy itself had been formulated. Key informant interviews were retrospective and focused mainly on the formulation stage.

complaint. He got to the door of the Town Clerk's<sup>19</sup> office and saw a huge office with wall-to-wall carpet and red sofa set, like he had never had in his home. He was unsure how to go on. So he took off his shoes and walked across the carpet to the man's desk in his socks. By the time he got there he had totally forgotten what he was going to complain about. But you see this in parliament, in the government Ministries, everywhere. The aura is intimidating even to many CSO representatives.

This sort of insight into power dynamics, common among those civil society actors disadvantaged by it, is rare among the official actors with whom they interact in invited spaces. These show remarkably little awareness of power dynamics therein. This same tendency for those advantaged by the unequal power relationship to be unaware of it is also noted by Ugandan gender equity advocates in respect of the systemic relationship between men and women, by decentralisation advocates in respect of the relationship between central and decentralised government in the governance system, and by participation advocates in respect of in the relationship between local political "representatives" and those they are supposed to represent.

When CSOs accept invitations into government spaces, how much accommodation occurs, and on which side? As mentioned above, a network which is outspoken in its criticisms of government's stance on agricultural market and trade liberalisation nonetheless accepted a government invitation to provide a CSO representative for the government delegation to the WTO conference in Seattle, running the risk that the civil society member's position would get submerged under the official line. In the spaces where CSOs interact directly with government much seems to get lost in the search for consensus, or at least in the obligations of mutual politeness that regulate these political spaces as they do social spaces. The CSO representatives on the PMA Steering Committee sat quiet while decisions and conclusions they profoundly disagreed with passed through the committee, and then published an angry and trenchant critique of the PMA in the daily press, to the fury of government members of the same steering committee who could not understand why they had not voiced their concerns at meetings and perceived this use of media channels as treacherous. This manoeuvre may have been tactical, or simply what the CSO representatives felt most comfortable with: official meetings offer a constrained space for keeping informed and being seen to take up opportunities for engagement with government, whereas the press offers a more open space for expressing dissent.

The space offered by the press, though, is neither autonomous nor invited but commoditised, and thus saleable to actors of any kind. There is a pattern emerging of critics of government buying column or advertisement space to express their critique of a policy or programme, and government buying space in a subsequent issue to rebut the critique. It is a pattern which allows contrasting views to be aired, but does not make of the press an autonomous space for debate. GoU can normally afford to buy space to air its views more easily than its critics. Moreover, when expressing their own opinions, media actors often exercise self-censorship. Both factors constrain the depth and quality of press debates.

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<sup>19</sup> Equivalent in a municipality to a Chief Administrative Officer in a District – that is, the highest-ranking civil servant at that level.

Even in the few relatively autonomous spaces opened up by civil society, a tame attitude prevails, by the admission of CSO actors involved. In the PEAP revision process where civil society took the initiative and presented to government its own plans for its own role, the major plank of its “participation” was the mirroring of government sector working groups with Civil Society Task Force working groups. These were not there as interfaces with people outside government but to feed their own contributions into central government. The model suggests the same centripetal tendency among civil society as was noted over the usage and ownership of UPPAP findings. That conflict and confrontation are not a commonly-used tactic among advocacy NGOs probably relates to the nature of the Ugandan political space outlined above. Yet many NGOs, when asked to explain it, do so purely in terms of the origins of most Ugandan CSOs, located firmly in service delivery rather than in advocacy. Indeed, many explain their incursion into the terrain of advocacy purely as a logical extension of their service delivery roles and recognise that delivering services under government contract while simultaneously advocating for policy change implies certain limitations on the latter activity.

An exception to this general tameness seems to be emerging in the form of the newly-revitalised Uganda NGO Forum. This promises to introduce more polemic and polarisation into the dialogue between government and civil society. In its Annual Report 2000 it published a strongly worded rejection of government’s NGO Registration (Amendment) Bill, which it claims is the product of extensive consultation among members. Where the Bill stresses regulation, control and suppression, the NGO Forum proposes alterations which would turn the Bill into a supporting framework for the enhancement of NGOs’ potential roles and effectiveness, pushing government to recognise them as partners rather than as targets for censorship and control (Uganda NGO Forum 2000).

On the question of whether the prospects for their advocacy efforts to make an impact were better in the invited or the autonomous scenario, many CSO actors take the middle ground. They see that they cannot work independently of government because it is “the biggest stakeholder” and will always be there to engage with; but see the conditions of the “partnership” as crucial in determining the scope for impact. These conditions, they recognise, are currently flawed in many cases. Even when invited spaces are opened up in response to civil society pressure, the “participation by invitation” model excludes the many who are not invited; and also enables government to select those likely to endorse its own line, and to rein in “loose cannons” and mute dissenting voices by incorporating them. Invited spaces have prescribed agendas which render subjects such as the nature of the political system, defence spending, or hardcore macro-economic policy unmentionable, however germane these might be to the policy issue in question. Decisions are often taken outside of, before or after invited opportunities to participate. Whoever opened the space can close it at will, declaring the subject adequately debated. Advocacy done in autonomous spaces follows an agenda set by the advocates, but on the other hand runs the risk of dismissive attitudes on the part of government, and often meets with challenges from government about whose views it actually represents and why it should be taken seriously by an elected government.

The more critical and reflective voices in the NGO community are calling for efforts to clarify the differences in nature between the sorts of policy spaces on offer to CSOs, to enable them to think

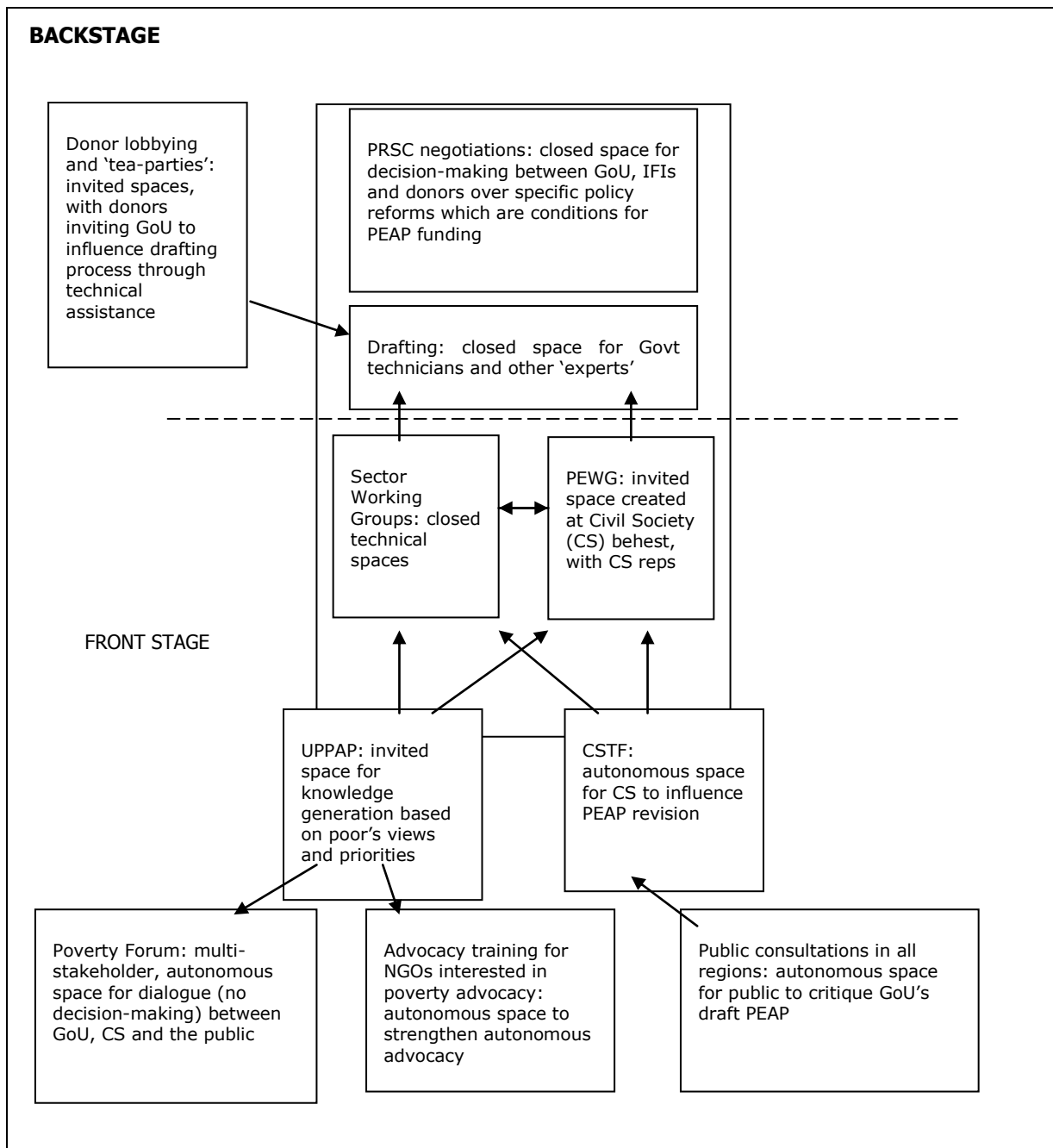
through consciously and strategically which specific engagement is most worthwhile. Being relatively new to the whole area of advocacy, Ugandan NGOs are tending to jump at every chance to enter invited spaces, without thinking about the potential opportunity costs *vis-à-vis* creating their own spaces. Many do not make explicit choices about their advocacy roles, and cannot articulate the full range of roles they might play nor identify the roles they actually play and the possible unintended effects of these (Lister and Nyamugasira 2001: 13). Invitations to consultations are seen as ‘opportunities no matter what’; attendance is a foregone conclusion because ‘we always put our voices there, to put it on record’; yet this approach results in a costly dispersion of energies and a constant struggle to field a participant in every meeting and keep up on every topical issue. As the invitations multiply, some NGOs are beginning to experience a tension between the need to participate in invited spaces and the need to speak outside them, and are likely to need a sharper sense of how invited and autonomous spaces can, or do, interrelate in one and the same policy process.

A diagrammatic representation (Figure 4.1) of the set of policy spaces arising in and around the PEAP II formulation process helps to illustrate the multiplicity of these and to emphasise the need for the actors involved to develop a clearer sense of the interrelations of different kinds of space.

What is significant here is that at the very heart of the PEAP II formulation process, held up as a model for participatory policy-making in Uganda and elsewhere, lie several spaces which were entirely closed to civil society participation or scrutiny, even by those CSOs which had been heavily involved at other points in the process. Drafting took place within the MFPEd, anchored in a small technical team with technical assistance from an expatriate consultant supported by DFID. The Poverty Reduction Support Credit negotiations took the form of a month-long visiting mission of approximately fifty World Bank staff, during which they analysed documents, met with Ugandans from all sectors and parts of government involved in the PEAP and with donors supporting the PEAP financially and, on the basis of this, updated the policy matrix which is the Bank’s monitoring tool for the PEAP/PRSP. There are accusations – hard to substantiate because of the closed nature of the PRSC negotiations – that during them the Bank pushed for and achieved the inclusion in the policy matrix of certain policy conditions which are not discussed in the PEAP and whose consistency with the poverty reduction objectives set out in the PEAP is controvertible (Nyamugasira and Rowden 2002). The energy and zeal with which Ugandan and INGOs participated in the “invited spaces” of PEAP II did not extend to scrutinising the closed PRSC process from the outside, nor critiquing the inconsistencies between the PEAP and the PRSC in terms of both process and policy content. While this might be because government gave the PRSC process a lower profile than it did the “invited spaces”, it may also raise important questions for advocacy CSOs about the opportunity costs of devoting resources to participating in the public, welcoming spaces, and the relative strategic value of lobbying instead for the opening up of those spaces which remain closed and non-transparent.



**Figure 4.1 Policy spaces in the PEAP II formulation process**



Note: direction of arrows indicates direction of information flow and also, in the case of UPPAP and related activities, where the stimulus for the activities came from

In sum, poverty reduction policy spaces in Uganda are currently numerous and increasing in number, diverse in nature and scope, and fragile in many cases. The use of them is in rapid evolution: as the number and kinds of space evolve, so does the complexity of the relations between them and the dynamics within them, and so too do various actors' uses of them become more conscious and complex. Civil society consultation is now understood to have important regional dimensions, spaces for public scrutiny are beginning to open in policy areas such as the budget which were previously closed, civil society actors are questioning their own roles and behaviour, recognising the constraints of the spaces they

occupy, and are using these more effectively by recognising tradeoffs and thinking strategically. What remains to be seen is whether a continuation of this developing critical consciousness among non-government actors will prove compatible with the Ugandan government's discourse and use of models of participatory policy processes.

## 5 Conclusions

The contemporary poverty reduction policy context in Uganda holds a number of opportunities and a number of risks. These are all the greater precisely because of the strength of political will behind the poverty reduction agenda and because of the extent of positive reforms which have taken place since the mid-1980s in the realms of economic upturn, governance and state responsiveness. We have attempted to throw into relief the risks and opportunities, however, because our analysis of the current scenario reveals that these achievements and advances are less thoroughgoing and irreversible than they appear in oft-repeated optimistic accounts of the Uganda success story.

There is, undoubtedly, a fundamental contradiction between the nature of the national political space and the Government of Uganda's enthusiastic and energetic role in opening up so many new policy spaces and facilitating their occupation by a range of diverse actors. Without discounting the power of international influence in honing the GoU's new approach to the poverty reduction policy process, at the national level the approach itself might be best interpreted as a "political technology", a device which 'advance[s] by taking what is essentially a political problem, removing it from the realm of political discourse, and recasting it in the neutral language of science' (Brock *et al.* 2001: 6) – in this case, the science of modern governance, wherein the introduction of participatory policy is a device developed and adopted to service and sustain the Movement system.

Two developments in prospect pose conceivable threats to the continued effectiveness of this device: the exhaustion of the Ugandan electorate's patience with the limitations of the Movement system; and the nascent critical consciousness – albeit tentative and fragile – among some of the new policy actors about the dynamic in which they are playing a part. In either prospect, Ugandans – the general public or those who engage with government on their behalf – may draw on comparative analysis of other countries' governance systems with their own to reject this contradiction, and withdraw their goodwill by ceasing to return Museveni and the Movement to power, or by ceasing to flock willingly into the invited spaces which legitimise and lubricate the cogs of this political technology.

In respect of the alignment of forces behind Ugandan poverty reduction discourse, there is a disconnection between on the one hand the international—national alliance operating in Kampala, and on the other, the relationship between Kampala and the rest of the country. The shifts in modes of donor cooperation, while cementing an already close relationship between donors (especially bilateral) and the GoU, has also led to a tendency, admitted even by those thriving in the new Kampala-centric configuration, for the "Ugandan" poverty discourse to become self-referential and divorced from realities beyond the capital. This tendency is compounded by the fact that the decentralisation process is currently at a moment where sub-national-level policy actors have the capacity and the instructions to absorb the narratives of decentralisation and participation emanating from Kampala without having yet attained the capacity to use these policy spaces to their advantage or to develop a creative tension between decentralised discourses and practices and those dominant at the centre. In the light of these contradictions and disjunctures, the "Uganda model" needs to be reassessed, and questions posed as to

how far the model is a vehicle for more effective poverty reduction and how far it is an indispensable figment of central government and international donors' discourse of "poverty reduction based on bottom-up participatory planning".

The state of flux of poverty knowledge in Uganda offers much room for optimism about how the "new poverty experts", sub-national actors and others outside the GoU–donor nexus might affect the course of policy in future. At the international level, the value of poverty knowledge generation, ownership and use by multifarious actors within the poor countries themselves is at last beginning to be recognised. UPPAP, in particular, has demonstrated the scope for generating nuanced, location-specific poverty knowledge which can enhance the effectiveness of policy, especially policies mediated by decentralised government. Yet to date this scope seems under-utilised, subjugated to the centre-level dynamic of aggregating the voices of the poor and garnering political capital on national and international planes from the image of a "listening" central government. The key challenge at this point is to turn the attitude of listening into one of responsiveness, and appropriate responses need to be developed and delivered more at the sub-national level than has been possible to date.

By drawing on the substantial experience that we have reviewed, Uganda is in an exceptional position to turn to its advantage the broad tendency of the diversification and nationalisation of poverty knowledge and emerge both as a pioneer in innovative approaches to poverty knowledge and as a successful case of adoption of evidence-based poverty reduction policies informed by a qualitatively different, more comprehensive kind of evidence. This position attracts much interest and critical scrutiny. At a time when cracks are starting to appear in the supranational narrative of the "voices of the poor" as the lodestar of development policy, Uganda is something of a laboratory in which poverty knowledge dynamics – including any signs of "selective listening", filtering, reifications, suppressions and ventriloquism of these voices – can and will be observed close-up. When UPPAP delivers to policy-makers and the public the findings from its second round of field research,<sup>20</sup> the fortunes of these as they seek entry to the policy process will be watched more closely and shrewdly, both outside of Uganda but, more importantly, within the country, than was the case with the first round.

Civil society actors, and especially NGO poverty advocates, will be central among those watching it. In this narrow respect and more broadly, they are at a critical juncture. As the possibilities for engagement with policy processes continue and expand, advocacy organisations can carry on lending their services as heckling members of the cast in the government's poverty reduction theatre, or they can write their own script and stage their own work. Should they carry on doing a little of both in the ad hoc way which has characterised their engagement to date, their impact will remain limited. Choosing one strategy over the other will imply a revision of the relationship of civil society poverty advocates not just with government but with key donors. It will also imply a revision of several kinds of relationship within civil society: between members and networks, between Ugandan and international NGOs, and for individuals between the multiple roles they currently juggle as civil society advocates, government contractors and local

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<sup>20</sup> Ongoing at the time of writing.

government officials. The international NGOs which have already to reflect self-critically on their advocacy activities might play a useful role in facilitating this reorientation and learning process among the advocacy community at large, but the process itself will inevitably cast into sharper relief than hitherto the heterogeneity of “civil society” and the tensions between its component parts, including those between national and international actors.

The transformative potential of strong government ownership of a broad-based, participatory poverty reduction policy agenda is nowhere so clear as in the Ugandan case. Yet at the same time, where the powers and capacities for interpreting and developing this agenda are so unequally distributed between the different parties involved, such strong ownership is perhaps not the best scenario that can be reached. Our conjectures as to the future of poverty reduction policy processes in Uganda amount to a call to non-governmental policy actors in Uganda to reclaim from government and its partners in the donor community the territory of participation, and to make it more their own again, albeit in the new realm of policy.

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