

Strengthening Parliamentary Involvement in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Process and the Millennium Development Goals



Legislative-Executive Communication on Poverty Reduction Strategies



Parliaments and Poverty
Series
Toolkit No. 1

**LEGISLATIVE-EXECUTIVE
COMMUNICATION ON POVERTY
REDUCTION STRATEGIES**

*Strengthening Parliamentary Involvement in the Millennium Development
Goals and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Process*

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The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the UN's global development network, advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life. They are on the ground in 166 countries, working with people on their own solutions to global and national development challenges. As they develop local capacity, they draw on the people of UNDP and its wide range of partners. UNDP's Bureau for Development Policy provides technical leadership and policy guidance in priority areas of development, including democratic governance.

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The handbook emerged from pilot activities designed to strengthen the capacity of legislatures and civil society to participate in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Process (PRSP), a process that is intended to be country-owned and participatory, including civic and legislative involvement in planning and monitoring phases. In practice however, legislative involvement in PRSP mechanisms varies widely from country to country. To strengthen legislative involvement, UNDP partnered with NDI in 2001 and 2002 to conduct capacity-building activities with members of parliament and PRSP commissions in Malawi, Niger and Nigeria. Based on the experience with these three PRSP pilot programs, and drawing on their experience in democratic development programming with legislatures around the world, NDI developed, in partnership with UNDP, a series of handbooks that are intended to provide resources for MPs, parliamentary staff, civic leaders, social networks and the international community on legislative involvement in poverty reduction. The series includes:

- *Legislative-Executive Communication on Poverty Reduction Strategies;*
- *Legislative Public Outreach on Poverty Issues; and*
- *Parliamentary-Civic Collaboration for Monitoring Poverty Reduction Initiatives.*

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QUICK REFERENCE FOR ACRONYMS IN TEXT

- CAS** **Country Assistance Strategy.** The CAS describes the World Bank's assistance strategy for a country, indicating the level and composition of assistance to be provided based on assessments and the country's portfolio performance. While key elements are discussed with the government, it is not a negotiated document.
- HIPC** **Heavily Indebted Poor Country.** The HIPC Initiative is an agreement among official creditors designed to help the poorest, most heavily indebted countries escape from unsustainable debt.
- IDA** **International Development Association.** IDA, part of the World Bank Group, helps countries reduce poverty by providing "credits," which are loans at zero interest with a 10-year grace period and maturities of 35 to 40 years.
- IFIs** **International Financial Institutions.** This term includes the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Inter-American Development Bank.
- IMF** **International Monetary Fund.**
- I-PRSP** **Interim PRSP.** The interim report is submitted by countries to satisfy eligibility requirements while a full PRSP is still under development. Interim PRSPs must include an assessment of existing poverty reduction strategies and specify a road map for the production of a full PRSP in a timely fashion.
- MDGs** **Millennium Development Goals.** The United Nations' agenda for reducing poverty and improving lives, as agreed on by UN member states at the Millennium Summit in September 2000. For each goal one or more targets have been set, most for 2015, using 1990 as a benchmark. The agenda includes guidance for incorporating the MDGs into national priorities, achieving targets and emphasizing good governance.
- MP** **Member of Parliament.**
- NGO** **Non-Governmental Organization.**
- PRGF** **Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility.** The IMF's low-interest lending mechanism. Loans through the PRGF are based on the content of the PRSP.
- PRSP** **Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper.** Originally introduced by the IFIs in September 1999, poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) are strategic economic documents intended to establish a multi-year framework for national poverty reduction. PRSPs provide the basis for assistance from the Bank and the IMF, as well as debt relief under the HIPC Initiative. PRSPs are intended to be country-drafted, comprehensive in scope, partnership-oriented, and participatory. In general a country only needs to write a PRSP every three years, but changes can be made to the content in the Annual Progress Report on the PRSP.

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty Reduction and Legislative-Executive Communication

In many countries, poverty reduction is one of the most important issues facing elected officials. As a list of internationally agreed-upon global development targets, the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are policy goals that require substantial legislative-executive collaboration at a national level. In many countries, the World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process further necessitates effective communication between these two branches of government.

As the branch of government charged with passing legislation and national budgets, a national assembly requires information from the executive on national poverty reduction priorities and planned initiatives. While the technical relationship between national and global poverty reduction initiatives and goals may be alien to constituents, voters care deeply about poverty and their own quality of life. Legislatures have an important role to play by articulating the needs of their constituents in the national debate on poverty reduction initiatives. Members working to represent their constituents on these issues may find it useful to review how MDG and PRSP initiatives interrelate in order to leverage international interest in poverty reduction and ensure the legislative body is included in strategic policy-making processes.

THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were developed and accepted by the UN member states at the turn of the millennium, and serve as broad mutually agreed-upon development objectives. They seek to:

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger;
- Achieve universal primary education;
- Promote gender equality and empower women;
- Reduce child mortality;
- Improve maternal health;
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases;
- Ensure environmental sustainability; and
- Develop a global partnership for development.

These goals shape the content and process of national and international development programs and projects by focusing global efforts on eight specific objectives and establishing a timeline for accomplishing them. (For more information on MDGs, please see Appendix I).

THE PRSP: NATIONAL ROADMAPS

If MDGs represent international consensus on economic and human development goals, then the international community and developing

countries have together created a series of blueprints in the hopes of attaining these goals. Originally introduced by the international financial institutions (IFIs) in September 1999, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) are country-drafted, strategic economic documents intended to establish a multi-year framework for national poverty reduction. PRSPs serve as the basis for debt relief and concessional lending in roughly 70 countries that meet certain economic criteria. They provide a framework for the use of resources freed through Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) debt relief initiatives, as well as a basis for concessional financing through the Bank's International Development Association (IDA) and the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The PRSP process itself is based on six core principles. The PRSP should be:

- **country-driven**, with broad participation by civil society and the private sector;
- **results-oriented**, focused on outcomes that benefit the poor;
- **comprehensive**, recognizing the multi-dimensional nature of poverty;
- **prioritized**, so that implementation is feasible, financially and institutionally;
- **partnership-oriented**, coordinated with bilateral, multilateral, and non-governmental development partners; and
- based on a **long-term perspective**.

Though the specifics of each PRSP will vary by country, PRSP processes involve four main phases, which often overlap:

Poverty diagnosis: This includes a comprehensive evaluation of the root causes and symptoms of poverty—Who are the poor? Where

do they live? What factors perpetuate current poverty levels in the country?

Poverty policy formulation: Based on the poverty diagnosis and a country's vision of its development, what are the national priorities for poverty reduction? What policies should be put in place and included in the country's PRSP?

Poverty policy implementation: This phase involves implementing policies included in the PRSP; for parliaments this often means the passage of necessary legislation and appropriate budgets.

Monitoring and evaluation: Have the policies and strategies in the PRSP worked? If parts have not worked, how can the PRSP be improved?

Alongside the PRSPs, a number of other strategic plans are generated by the World Bank, IMF and various bilateral donors regarding their own assistance. International donors are, however, increasingly relying on the assessment and analysis conducted for the PRSP process as a basis for their own country-specific assistance strategies or programs.

BENEFITS OF LEGISLATIVE-EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATION REGARDING POVERTY ISSUES

The MDGs were partly conceptualized as a way of harnessing or coordinating global efforts to achieve more rapid human development. As such, MPs may wish to consider the PRSP as one mechanism by which each country coordinates its internal efforts to reduce poverty and improve standards of living consistent with the MDGs. The PRSP is often the largest, most comprehensive economic policy plan that any single government or parliament will need to manage. Because it is so comprehensive and typically requires the passage of enabling legislation and relevant appropriations, a fruitful PRSP process revolves around the smooth exchange of information between the executive and legislative branches.

In addition to facilitating progress on poverty reduction, improved communications on these issues may also have a number of other positive effects for legislators. These include:

- **Establishing positive precedents:** The World Bank and the IMF require the PRSP to be developed in a participatory process, a fact MPs can leverage to improve overall communication between the branches of government. Given the breadth and depth of the PRSP process, positive patterns of communication established in this context can help institute precedents for improved legislative-executive communication in other areas.
- **Building national consensus:** By their nature, discussions or debates about PRSP programs cover a broad range of national developmental priorities. Dialogue on these issues within parliament, and between parliament and government, creates a platform for national debate that includes *all* potential political leaders. Such debate increases the chances of building national consensus on economic development policy that is politically sustainable, even if there are changes in government.
- **Generating public support:** Economic conditions are politically important in all countries. As a result, governmental and parliamentary involvement in the PRSP is likely to be covered by the media. Elected officials seen as actively engaged in anti-poverty debates are also more likely to be

considered responsive to their constituents. Economic reforms also require time to have a positive impact; a public constructive dialogue between the legislature and the executive can also help build public understanding about the pace of reform.

- **Increased policy knowledge and political information:** Public opinion polling is a part of many political campaigns. Knowing which parts of the country are concerned about particular issues helps a political party determine the issues on which to base its campaign. If regions that traditionally support a party express great concern over electricity shortages, it is logical for that party to campaign on a platform that advocates infrastructure investment. Although this information typically comes from campaign related research, poverty diagnostics (or data on poverty distribution and perceptions) may contain similar information. Access to this data may be of political use to all parties in the parliament.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is designed for those (MPs, parliamentary staff, political leaders, government officials, and international actors) who work with parliaments to strengthen national ownership of the PRSP by building better bridges between legislative and executive offices. The handbook is divided into a series of critical issues for MP consideration during the process of developing smooth inter-branch communication on MDG and PRSP issues.

SECTION TWO

Challenges to Smooth Legislative-Executive Communication

Despite the importance and the potential benefits of smooth legislative-executive interaction, communication regarding the PRSP is often problematic. Legislatures and executive branches rarely share the same perspective, and diverse political parties may have different ideas about how or where poverty reduction initiatives should be implemented. In addition to these natural differences, the technical nature of the PRSP process itself possesses a number of characteristics that can make communication more difficult:

- **Scope of PRSP:** The PRSP is such a large policy initiative that coordinating the volume of information can be a serious challenge for countries that lack well-functioning mechanisms for exchanging information within the government, within the parliament and between branches. It typically involves most ministries and most parliamentary committees.
- **Resource allocation:** PRSPs entail the allocation of a country's scarce national resources. Because resource allocation is often the most politically sensitive issue faced by governments and parliaments, these decisions can put additional stress on the legislative-executive relationship.
- **Constraints on external actors:** Because so much of the international donor community now relies on national PRSPs to inform their own funding strategies, PRSP development,

implementation and monitoring typically includes significant coordination with external actors (e.g., World Bank, embassies or donor agencies, UN agencies, IMF and others). Consequently, constraints on those actors' behaviors can affect the PRSP process in the recipient country. For example, in light of the way IFIs have traditionally interpreted their charters, the financial institutions interact primarily with representatives of each country's executive branch, putting parliaments at a disadvantage in communicating on PRSP issues. MPs in several countries report that this history has caused some difficulty when their committees or colleagues request information on the PRSP.

BEING PROACTIVE

Because administration of development and economic policy is primarily a mandate of the executive branch, and because the international donor community deals primarily with the executive branch of government, parliaments must often be proactive in initiating a role in the PRSP. Although the PRSP sets the framework for budgets and laws, it is neither a budget nor a law, and can therefore be created, approved, and initiated without parliament's involvement. If parliament does not take the initiative on PRSP involvement early enough, however, it is often difficult for the parliament to conduct meaningful, constructive oversight on the PRSP later. Similarly, parliaments that have not been involved in the PRSP may find themselves with fewer practical options when considering budgets and legislative proposals based on the PRSP.

WORKING WITH PRSP TIMELINES AND SCHEDULES

The timeline on which PRSPs must be conducted is heavily influenced by the international donor community. Legislative timetables, however, typically move at a different pace than individual ministries in the executive branch, and so sufficient time must be built into the process to allow for genuine legislative debate on key issues. As countries move through the PRSP process, the timing becomes more critical. For example, if a country's PRSP is to be finalized by November, parliamentary input on the PRSP's overall approach and priorities in October is too late for there to be a meaningful shift in the direction of the PRSP. It may however, be the appropriate time for parliament to review the final document, recommend minor changes, and consider whether to pass a resolution in support of—or in opposition to—the final document.

The PRSP Cycle and Timing of Parliamentary Involvement

For all countries, the PRSP follows a standard cyclical order: Poverty Diagnosis → Poverty Policy Formulation → Implementation → PRSP Monitoring and Evaluation, after which the cycle repeats itself. For optimum impact, parliamentary requests for information or provision of feedback must be aligned with the timeline for each country's PRSP cycle. The flow chart, Figure I, on the opposite page indicates some of the points at which specific types of legislative-executive interaction typically have the most productive effect.

For example, once the country enters implementation phases, deputies may find it easiest to focus on the relation of legislation to

the PRSP, rather than lodging complaints about already established priorities. Throughout implementation, it may be appropriate to advocate for the revision of PRSP priorities in advance of annual progress reports or when new PRSPs are prepared.

The Challenges of a PRSP Timeline

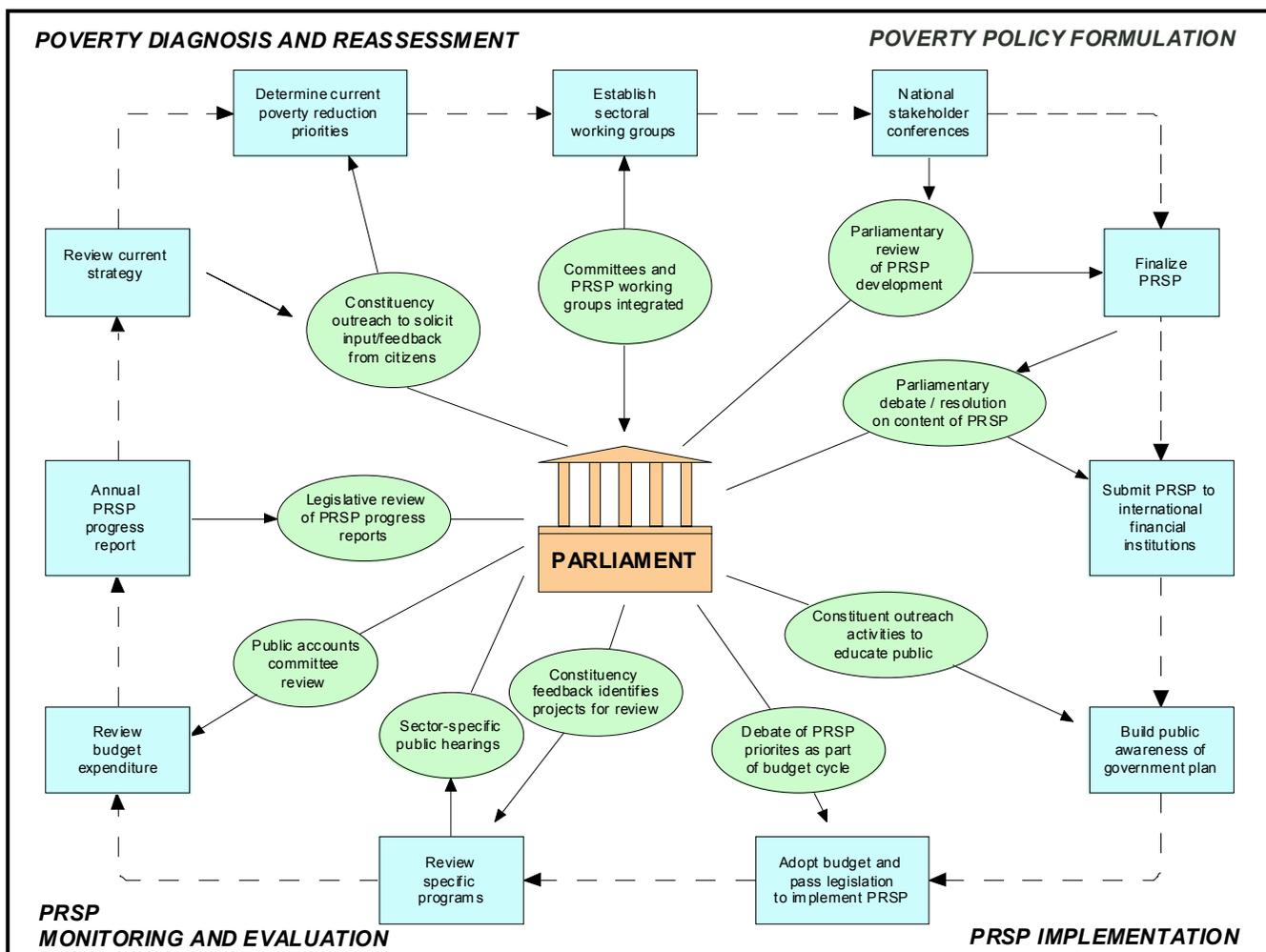
If a country is to meet various deadlines for the development and implementation of its PRSP, both legislative and executive offices must respect the time needed by each branch to complete its respective tasks. Before every deadline, executive officials not only need time to research, draft, and develop policies, but to also incorporate revisions or feedback. Parliaments need adequate time to review and debate policies or budgets in order to provide constructive remarks. Legislatures can ensure this time is shared reasonably by requesting advance notice of upcoming PRSP deadlines or draft documents, and reviewing or debating issues within reasonable timeframes. Executive offices can ensure that they have adequate time for revision and packaging by regularly providing information to parliaments and requesting feedback in advance of deadlines.

HOW IS THE PRSP RELATED TO THE BUDGET?

Because parliaments have to debate and pass a national budget to implement the PRSP, it makes sense for the legislature and executive to begin communicating about the PRSP well in advance of the introduction of an annual budget. A parliament that has been regularly informed and consulted about the government's anti-poverty policies and initiatives is more likely to approve those portions of the national budget in a timely manner without excessive amendments or debate.

FIGURE I
SYNCHRONIZING LEGISLATIVE-EXECUTIVE COORDINATION
WITH SPECIFIC POINTS IN THE PRSP CYCLE

Certain parliamentary interventions are more useful than others at specific points in the PRSP process.



SECTION THREE

Cultivating Awareness of MDGs and Clarifying the PRSP Process

As a framework within which to coordinate global development efforts, the MDGs are widely discussed and information is broadly available to interested officials. A recently launched UN campaign to promote understanding and pursuit of the MDGs will only increase the availability of information regarding national MDG progress and initiatives.

Because the PRSP may be seen as an organizational or technical element of the national pursuit

of MDGs in many countries, legislatures hoping to participate constructively in national poverty reduction policy may need to become more familiar with the PRSP process, its history and the nation's current PRSP status. Unfortunately, in many cases, MPs lack basic knowledge about the PRSP process, due in part to the fact that IFIs coordinate primarily with the executive branch in an effort to target policymakers with concentrated economic authority. This lack of familiarity can handicap the potential for meaningful legislative-executive dialogue.

In these cases, members of parliament may benefit from periodic briefings on the PRSP. An initial briefing would typically have two main goals:

- Ensure that a broad number of MPs have enough information about their country's PRSP process to hold a meaningful debate on the contents of the PRSP and the process used to develop it; and
- Establish groundwork for a future, functional relationship between parliament and relevant executive officials.

While the agenda for an initial briefing must obviously be tailored to each country's political context, it would generally cover: the PRSP process as a whole; the PRSP process to date in that

LOCATING COUNTRY-SPECIFIC INFORMATION ON THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Although the MDGs are intended to serve as global targets for pro-poor reform, there is a significant amount of country-specific analysis available. The UNDP maintains offices in 166 countries around the world (a list and links to the respective country office web-pages is available at <http://www.undp.org/dpa/coweblinks/index.html>), many of which have their own set of country-specific resources on the MDGs. For example:

- *The Albanian Response to the MDGs*
- *Challenge 2015: The Cambodian People United Against Poverty*
- *Morocco: Regional Targeting for Poverty Reduction*
- El Salvador and the MDGs online reference: <http://www.desarrollohumano.org.sv/>
- *Millennium Development Goals: Progress Report for Kenya*
- *The UNDP Annual Human Development Report*
- *UNDP National Human Development Reports*

country; the content of the draft or final PRSP (or I-PRSP); and options for legislative involvement in the process going forward. Sessions that offer both valuable information and space for fruitful debate typically:

- Are facilitated by an appropriate parliamentary leader (committee chair for a committee briefing, parliamentary caucus leader for a caucus briefing, etc.) in accordance with parliamentary procedure;
- Include presenters with a range of perspectives such as PRSP commission members, appropriate government officials, IFI representatives, other donor agencies (multi- and bi-lateral) and national or international NGOs with expertise on poverty reduction issues;
- Are tailored to the needs of the target legislative audience (*e.g.*, key committee members, committee chairs or members of a parliamentary group);
- Provide enough background information to enable a substantive discussion of the PRSP;
- Allow significant time for questions; and
- Are scheduled to permit parliamentary feedback before the next PRSP deadline.

Although PRSPs differ among countries, it is often appropriate to begin by ensuring that MPs understand the context of the PRSP initiative. An initial briefing will typically cover the following topics:

- **Introduction and overview of the PRSP process:** When was the PRSP process initially created? For what purpose, and based on what values or objectives? This is a good time to explain the six core principles of the PRSP, note the number of countries currently participating in the process, provide an overview of how the process typically proceeds,

and highlight relevant facts about PRSP activity/progress in the region or sub-region.

- **Country-specific history of the PRSP process:** When was the PRSP process begun? Has the country submitted an I-PRSP? What comments have been given by the IFIs and the donor community?
- **Degree of participation:** What is the composition of the PRSP commission? In what ways did the PRSP commission include citizens or other non-executive branch actors in the process of developing the PRSP?
- **Content of the PRSP:** Has the PRSP commission prioritized the content of the PRSP, or does it read like an all inclusive list of development projects? What has been the public/IFI response to drafted documents to date?
- **Future timelines:** What timeline is the country looking at for PRSP completion? Will drafts be made publicly available? How would parliament receive a copy? What processes are there for comment or review? When is the next annual progress report due?

It may make sense to invite a representative of the World Bank or IMF to describe the PRSP initiative as a whole. This allows them to be present at the briefing and to be available should questions arise. The presence of IFI officials can also help parliament observe differences in views among the IFIs and government on PRSP issues. Typically, it would then make sense to ask the chair of the country's PRSP commission to discuss the national PRSP, including content of the document and the planned timetable going forward. It is appropriate that national officials, rather than the international donors or consultants, describe the content of the PRSP. NGOs may be able to provide additional perspectives on the content of the PRSP, as well as information about the extent to which the PRSP has been transparent and participatory.



CHECKLIST I

INTRODUCING THE PRSP TO MPs THROUGH AN INTRODUCTORY BRIEFING

- ☑ Establish deputies' level of interest and previous engagement with the PRSP. If the goal is to broaden MP awareness, it may be useful to draw on those MPs that have been involved to share their experience with others that lack a background in the PRSP process.
- ☑ Decide on the target audience (key committees for poverty reduction, individual briefings by caucus, committee chairs, deputies from specific regions, etc.).
- ☑ Discuss timing with government, civil society, IFIs and other international donors (keep in mind PRSP timelines, the legislative calendar and MPs' schedules).
- ☑ Determine how legislative staff should be involved in preparing the briefing. Parliamentary staff may be more helpful if they are able to develop expertise on PRSP issues early on.
- ☑ Discuss the purpose of the briefing with the PRSP Commission. This is an opportunity to set legislative-executive communication regarding the PRSP on the right track.
- ☑ Determine the format of the briefing and decide who will chair the proceedings.
- ☑ Consider developing briefing materials for MPs in advance—make sure they are easily digestible by busy MPs who may not have a great deal of time to prepare for the briefing. Also, ensure they have copies of the PRSP in its most current (draft) form.
- ☑ Identify and invite appropriate individuals to the briefing, typically representatives from the IFIs and other international donors, the PRSP commission and NGOs. Consider inviting other members of the international donor community to observe—this can show that parliament is interested in poverty reduction and may help build support for parliamentary capacity building programs.
- ☑ Define the role of each presenter, establish mutual expectations, objectives, time limits, etc.
- ☑ Build in significant time for questions and opportunities to discuss next steps. Determine who will facilitate this portion of the briefing.
- ☑ Develop a media plan for coverage of the briefing. (Will media coverage of the event demonstrate MPs' interest in poverty reduction, or make them appear ignorant of existing programs and strategies?)
- ☑ Confirm and re-confirm participation of presenters and MPs.



SECTION FOUR

Information Categories and Legislative Resources on Poverty

In addition to numerous competing demands and limited time, MPs often lack sufficient staff to assist them in reviewing MDG issues and PRSP documents. However, there are ways for MPs to access the details necessary to deal with these issues. This section summarizes some of the basic categories of information that MPs may consider as they become involved in the PRSP process, as well as some basic sources for this information.

CATEGORIES OF PRSP INFORMATION

Information on the PRSP falls into five categories:

- **Basic PRSP process information:** What is the PRSP? How does it relate to debt relief under HIPC, or to assistance through IDA, etc.? Who is coordinating the country's PRSP process? Is there an established timeline for PRSP formulation?
- **Information on national poverty:** What is the status or conclusion of poverty diagnosis activities? Who has conducted these assessments? What geographic or demographic range did this assessment cover? Do official findings echo public perceptions of poverty?
- **Poverty policies:** What policy initiatives are planned to address specific needs? For specific locations/regions? How will (or are) specific policy initiatives being implemented? By whom and with what resources?

- **Resource allocation and budget priorities:** What sectors are targeted as priorities? How do these mesh with the MDGs? From which sources does the government anticipate obtaining needed resources? How will internal and international resources be allocated among the specific priorities?
- **Impact:** What has been the impact of a PRSP program on a specific region/population? What has been the outcome of a specific investment of resources? Should certain programs be considered models or successful pilot work? Should others be discontinued or changed?

Without access to information from each of these categories, MPs can often do little more than complain about the PRSP process. When members, committees, party groups or caucuses obtain these types of information, they can be a more powerful force in influencing policy.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

In obtaining this information, the executive branch often has a natural advantage due to staff size and more regular direct contact with IFIs and other international donors. Conversely, legislatures must often draw on multiple sources of information to make meaningful contributions to the PRSP process. These sources include:

- **Constituents:** Members of parliament who have built a relationship with their constituencies have the best access to factual information about poverty as it is experienced by citizens throughout their district. Is poor medical care in an area caused primarily by poor clinic facilities? A lack of drugs? A lack of trained medical staff at the clinic? Corruption requiring bribes at the clinic? MPs in close contact with their constituents may have better information than the central government with regard to these questions.
- **Civic groups:** Non-governmental groups that have organized around issues relevant to poverty (teachers' unions, farmers' groups, etc.) may have the most thorough information about a particular sector or initiative (such as numbers of available textbooks or irrigation projects). Acknowledging these groups' expertise can make them an asset to the deputy that treats them with respect; dismissing such organizations can create vocal opponents in the future.
- **Parliamentary staff:** Parliamentary staff can help conduct research, track constituency requests, or attend sessions on the PRSP. In systems with limited staff capacity, MPs can often use interaction with IFIs, donors and the government on the PRSP to successfully argue for increasing parliamentary staff to build this capacity over the medium term.
- **IFIs and donors:** Although the IFIs and donors can be a source of information on the PRSP, they often are used to working primarily with government. MPs in different coun-

tries have used a number of strategies to develop more direct relationships with the international donor community, rather than relying on getting this information indirectly from government.

- **Relevant executive or ministerial officials:** As with civic organizations, constructive interaction with executive staff or officials can give (even opposition party) MPs access to the data they need. The development of positive relationships with government officials, and judicious use of formal oversight mechanisms, can help MPs gain needed information from government.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER!

In dealing with the daily requirements of parliamentary work, it can be difficult for MPs to focus on the long-term institutional development of parliament. However, the PRSP process provides opportunities to make parliament a more effective institution:

- Leverage IFI and donor interest in the PRSP. International donors often recognize that parliaments need additional capacity to play an effective role in the PRSP and may be willing to support projects that build its capacity for fiscal and policy analysis.
- Include parliamentary development in the PRSP. PRSPs often contain a section on improved governance, recognizing that this is important for poverty reduction. Parliament may wish to amend this section to call for its budget to grow relative to the executive. For example, in some countries, the budget for parliamentary staff is a fraction of the budget for executive branch residences—shifts in budget priorities like this can be an important strategy in improving governance and reducing poverty.

SECTION FIVE

Actors and Interests at Work in the PRSP Process

A critical element of improving inter-branch communication regarding national poverty reduction efforts is recognizing the various interests of each party involved. Specific to the PRSP process, each of the actors involved will have its own unique outlook and concerns. Awareness of these different perspectives can help avoid misunderstandings and facilitate useful information exchange.

THE PRSP COMMISSION

In all countries, there will typically be an inter-ministerial commission or body established to coordinate the drafting of the PRSP. This commission of ministerial staff, economists, civil servants and sectoral experts will often report directly to the prime minister, the finance minister or another senior executive. Because the commission is responsible for drafting the PRSP, and is often a main contact of the IFIs, this body will generally have the most complete information regarding the content and status of the PRSP. Clear mechanisms (or motivations) for communication with the legislative branch may not be immediately evident. The commission may have been only recently appointed and may be unsure of its authority—it may also lack experience managing legislative-executive interaction. This commission is usually most concerned with meeting established IFI timelines and juggling the multiple components of inter-executive PRSP coordination.

RELEVANT MINISTRIES

The role of various ministries will depend on the organization of each country's PRSP process; intra-executive coordination can, in fact, be one of the greatest challenges to a successful PRSP. However, because implementation of the PRSP must be carried out through existing governing institutions, relevant ministries will almost always be involved in the execution of PRSP mandated initiatives in their sectoral areas. Consequently, they may have more detailed information on specific initiatives or policies than the PRSP commission, although they will not be able to provide cross-sector comparisons or overall information.

THE PARLIAMENT

A parliament's exact role will, of course, vary based on constitutional authority, tradition and the stage in the PRSP process. In some cases, where the constitution requires parliament to ratify multi-year economic plans, the parliament may debate and ratify the PRSP itself. However, the IFIs do not require parliamentary approval of the PRSP and approval by parliament is relatively rare. By their very nature, legislative bodies are likely to move slower, debate more extensively, have less economic expertise and voice more internal disagreement than a government or commission. Although these attributes are typical of any participatory process, they can also frustrate a PRSP commission trying to meet spe-

cific deadlines. Parliamentary participation falls into a few broad categories. For example,

- Contribution to the participatory nature of the PRSP through representation of constituents in debate and discussions on the content of the PRSP;
- Passage of legislation and budgets to implement or support the PRSP;
- Public education on PRSP initiatives through constituency outreach; or
- Review of PRSP processes or initiatives through parliamentary oversight mechanisms.

Individual MPs may also have geographic or issue-specific interests in the PRSP. However, interest and participation levels among individual MPs are likely to vary widely and will often depend on the nature of the electoral system. Moreover, although the involvement of individual MPs should be encouraged, it is not a substitute for institutional involvement—at either the committee or plenary level. For example, a **sectoral committee**, which has jurisdiction over issues that are emphasized in the PRSP, may wish to conduct public hearings on poverty issues, review subsequent legislation for PRSP compatibility, or invite relevant ministries to brief them on the impact of specific initiatives.

SECTOR-SPECIFIC NGOS

In some cases, NGOs may also play a key role in gathering or disseminating information. In Malawi, a civil society network has established itself as a valuable source of information on nationwide data concerning food relief efforts. The World Bank and IMF generally require a country's PRSP commission to consult periodically with NGO actors, although the breadth, depth

and impact of this consultation varies. The capacity and level of politicization among NGOs varies widely among countries. Nonetheless, NGOs—particularly those that provide services or have a broad membership base—may have very useful information on their members' views and priorities and may have access to basic data about issues within their mandate.

THE INTERNATIONAL DONOR COMMUNITY

Because the PRSP is a requirement for certain types of assistance from the IMF and World Bank (and is becoming a medium-term mechanism for bilateral donor coordination as well) the international donor community may also be a source of information about a country's PRSP. The UNDP, for example, has done much to support the participatory nature of the PRSP process in several countries, and is therefore a resource for comparative global information and technical assistance. Information gathered from the IFIs may also ensure that the PRSP commission has shared full and accurate details on the country's PRSP process, content and timeline.

Direct interaction between staff at the IFIs and members of national parliaments varies from country to country. For example, many resident World Bank staff feel that, due to the Bank's exclusively economic mandate, they must restrict their interaction with national officials to their counterparts in the ministry of finance or PRSP commission. In practice, this has meant that the IFIs can seem less willing to reach out to non-executive actors. In these cases, it may be easier for committees to approach the IFIs for PRSP information than for individual MPs to do so. Although IFIs are not required to testify before parliament, they are often willing to give informal informational briefings to the relevant parliamentary committees.

SECTION SIX

Assessing Available Communication Mechanisms

Mechanisms for legislative-executive communication vary widely by country and political system. Consequently, MPs are more likely to identify the mechanisms that will satisfy their PRSP communication needs after considering their particular national context and structures.

PRE-EXISTING AVENUES FOR LEGISLATIVE-EXECUTIVE INTERACTION

Are there already existing communication channels that may be used to exchange information about the PRSP? Here, it is important that information is able to flow both ways—if parliament expects regular communication from the government, the

parliament itself must also be able to communicate its findings with relevant government actors. Many systems of government designate a staff member in each ministry or executive agency as responsible for liaising with parliament. Such a position may be used to clarify or coordinate communication between the branches.

One way to ensure that parliamentary committees, ministries and the PRSP commission have a shared understanding of the lines of communication is to negotiate an informal or formal memorandum of understanding between the relevant actors. Often a signature recognizing the points of information exchange is unnecessary once the options have been discussed and agreed upon among colleagues.

CHANNELS FOR LEGISLATIVE-EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATION

There are numerous potential channels for legislative-executive communication, including:

- Individual parliamentary liaisons in each ministry;
- Joint taskforces or commissions;
- Meetings between ministries and committees;
- Official newsletters or other public records;
- Staff of relevant legislative PRSP committees;
- A designated parliamentary staff person to liaise with the PRSP Commission; and
- Periodic speeches to parliament by the prime minister or cabinet members.

POINTS OF COORDINATION OR MANAGEMENT

Executive Branch

While establishing mechanisms for parliament to obtain information on the PRSP is crucial, it is equally important to determine how parliament should communicate its findings to the government. Does it make sense to coordinate parliamentary input through the PRSP commission, the chair of the commission or the relevant line ministries? If communication has been an issue, this may be an appropriate area of discussion with the executive.

Legislative Branch

Similarly, it is helpful to have a coordinating body on the legislative side. Is there already a committee on poverty reduction whose chairs could coordinate the receipt and distribution of ministerial documents on the PRSP? If not, does this fall logically to some other office or committee (budget, finance, administration)? Might it be preferable to have a different liaison for each of the PRSP's sectoral priorities? In bicameral institutions, what mechanisms exist for exchanging information between the houses?

FORMAL AND INFORMAL COMMITTEES

In some cases, MPs interested in poverty reduction issues may consider institutionalizing a PRSP steering committee. Before reorganizing or creating a committee to deal specifically with PRSP or poverty reduction issues, however, numerous questions must be answered:

- Would the formation of a formal committee be advantageous, or would an informal steering committee or working group function equally well? How sustained will parliament's involvement be? Would the committee have responsibility for PRSP oversight or just PRSP formulation?
- What would be the jurisdiction of the committee? Will the focus be primarily the PRSP process or all poverty reduction issues? What impact will this have on the jurisdictions and mandates of other committees?
- What rule changes, if any, would be required to create the committee? Is there political support? How will this affect parliament's budget and staffing needs?

- Is it possible to include representatives of each main political faction without creating political deadlock within the committee?
- What skill sets should the committee collectively have (*i.e.*, public speaking, economic background, party influence, media contacts, etc.)?
- What geographic, political or issue-specific range should the committee attempt to cover in light of practical and political challenges? (*i.e.*, is geography a factor? How broad is the PRSP itself? How much time is a single MP likely to be able to devote to PRSP issues?)

Integrating MPs into Pre-existing PRSP Thematic Working Groups

The PRSP commission often forms thematic working groups to help formulate the sectoral components of the PRSP. These thematic working groups will generally include members of government, issue experts, members of civil society and occasionally MPs. One mechanism

CONSIDERING INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION NEEDS

Attempts to institutionalize information sharing regarding the PRSP can be pursued more easily if specific requirements or processes have been agreed upon by the relevant actors:

- Should the speaker or president of the assembly automatically receive copies of government PRSP documents as they are produced?
- Aside from a budget or finance committee, what other parliamentary groups could perform their jobs more effectively with regular PRSP updates?
- Is there a poverty alleviation committee? How should it be involved in the PRSP? What does this mean for sectoral committees (health, agriculture, etc.)?
- What mechanisms would ensure that all political parties have access to information on recent policies or pending legislation?

for increasing the exchange of information between government and parliament is to allow for representation of backbenchers or opposition members on these thematic working groups. If the MPs serving on the thematic working groups are also members of the relevant parliamentary committees, the committees would have additional background information on the historical development of the PRSP's sectoral components. Although participation by MPs on these sectoral working groups can help facilitate legislative-executive communication, it does place a significant burden on the individual MPs. It may be that this level of involvement is unrealistic given the other commitments of MPs. MPs who agree to serve on thematic committees, but are not able to participate fully due to other demands on their time, may send the message that parliament does not care about the PRSP. This can be especially problematic if this lack of participation is picked up by the media.

WORKING WITH STAFF TO PREVENT BOTTLENECKS IN PRSP COMMUNICATION

There are many ways an MP can work with his or her staff to keep legislative-executive communication mechanisms working smoothly.

- Assign specific individuals to facilitate communication on specific issues.
- Identify specific staff to maintain communication channels if the MP is traveling or is unable to participate in a particular event.
- Encourage staff to use e-mail or document distribution systems to ensure that all relevant parties receive the appropriate documents.
- Establish regular meeting times and reports.
- Work with ministerial staff, as well as with ministers.
- Ask staff to schedule carefully. This may mean building time into a weekly schedule for communication with relevant government agencies or ministries, or noting and responding to periods of time when MPs or government may have competing demands on their time; for example, during peak budget times or campaign periods.

SECTION SEVEN

Communication Tools for Parliamentary Committees

Since the PRSP is often organized by sector, the legislative committee system has a particular role to play in each country's PRSP process. Regardless of whether responsibility for PRSP issues has been assigned to a single committee (budget and finance, poverty alleviation, etc.) or divided among a number of sectoral committees (health, agriculture, budget, education, industry, etc.), the mechanisms for committee-led communication with the executive branch are often similar. Although these mechanisms will vary among different parliamentary systems, this section discusses three methods that committees typically use in interacting with the executive on PRSP issues: requesting briefings or reports, organizing public hearings and tabling committee reports.

BRIEFINGS OR INFORMATIONAL HEARINGS

Committee briefings or informational hearings are committee meetings at which representatives of ministries, civil society or other groups are asked to provide information on a particular issue. If a poverty alleviation committee exists or is formed, its members may wish to schedule quarterly briefings to receive updates on the progress of PRSP formulation and/or implementation. Sectoral committees may also desire specific briefings. For example, the transportation committee may request that the ministry of transportation brief them on plans for

a new highway and how the road will impact poverty in the region. In all cases, these briefings offer legislative committees a systematic mechanism to gather information from relevant executive officials that will later assist with the evaluation of government sponsored legislation.

MAXIMIZING BENEFIT FROM PRSP BRIEFINGS

Although the parliament is most visible in plenary, it is often most productive in committee. Consequently, committee members may have specific information requirements to scrutinize legislation or budgets appropriately. Particularly where the topic at hand is controversial, committee briefings are most easily kept on topic if the organizer bears the following in mind and reminds participating members as needed:

- The main purpose of the briefing is to gather information rather than to criticize policy.
- Briefings can often provide background for further actions or assist in focusing parliamentary involvement on key issues.
- Briefing sessions are not to resolve all the problems of the PRSP, but to provide more information on a specific issue.
- Speakers at briefings are representatives of organizations or agencies, but may not be empowered to answer all questions, particularly with respect to future policy or actions.
- Each political party caucus in parliament has a whip, or individual member responsible for enforcing discipline among the party's MPs. Party whips are not only able to instruct MPs to attend specific events, but can also often assist with scheduling.

Inviting executive officials or agencies to present information on national economic strategies demonstrates respect for the constitutional roles of both branches. However, in countries where the relationship between parliament and the government has historically been more confrontational, the briefings may require some significant preparation with both legislative and executive actors to ensure that PRSP information is exchanged without excessive acrimony.

Regularly Scheduled PRSP Briefings

While briefings are an obvious way for parliamentary committees to gather information about the status of poverty alleviation initiatives, each committee should consider how often these briefings should occur to best support smooth legislative-executive communication on PRSP issues. Factors in this decision would likely include: the constitutionally designated role of the parliament, the length of parliamentary sessions, pressing non-PRSP issues or events, and the parliament’s institutional capacity to digest information. There are both positive and negative aspects to holding regularly scheduled PRSP briefings:

- Pros: Provides frequent updates, allows opportunities for greater feedback before final decisions, and MPs can use acquired information to (where appropriate) inform constituents of PRSP developments.
- Cons: Requires a significant commitment of time and staff resources, and may create

unrealistic expectations about the influence of parliamentary committees on national economic strategies.

Additional Briefing Options

Regular written reports. Committees could request monthly or quarterly written updates on the activities of the PRSP commission. Committees may also specify which precise areas they would like to receive a report on (e.g., the status of the draft, public outreach activities that have been conducted during the period, incorporation of input, etc.).

- Pros: Similar benefits to regular oral briefings.
- Cons: Written briefings may skirt certain issues; MPs often find them less convenient than oral briefings; no opportunity for questions; reinforces a passive, reactive view of parliaments.

Automatic forwarding of public PRSP documents. During the PRSP process, the PRSP commission typically prepares a series of interim drafts, study papers, sectoral strategy papers, discussion papers, etc. Committees could request that they receive, as a matter of course, copies of all documents that are publicly circulated.

Ad hoc requests for information. Instead of formal quarterly briefings, committees could simply request prompt responses to ad hoc requests for information or briefings.

- Pros: Focuses on those issues parliament is most interested in pursuing; more practical for parliaments with limited staff or resources; demonstrates trust.
- Cons: May leave MPs unprepared when problems arise; ad hoc interaction means MPs may not become involved until decisions have already been made.

SPEAKERS TO CONSIDER FOR A PRSP BRIEFING OR PUBLIC HEARING

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| • PRSP commission | • Professional economists |
| • Sectoral ministry representatives | • State agencies |
| • IFIs | • NGOs |
| • PRSP working groups | • Service unions or networks |
| • UN organizations | • Bilateral donors |

PUBLIC HEARINGS

Procedures for public hearings vary widely among different types of legislative systems. In general, however, public hearings are typically used by parliamentary committees to hold up a proposed policy initiative for public review and comment. Holding a hearing on specific aspects of the PRSP may bring to light additional information about a policy or issue and alert the government to potential problems in the planned policy. For example, if one of the intermediate goals of a country's PRSP involves transportation infrastructure and the government has proposed a road building plan that may be controversial, a hearing could help clarify the obstacles involved—the relative needs of various regions of the country, concerns about the exact route of the road, the impact of the road on local businesses, etc.

MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF COMMITTEE REPORTS

- Present or recommend clear alternatives.
- Integrate the report into a larger communication strategy so that the message does not stop with the issuance of the report.
- Consider judicious use of sunset provisions for pending initiatives (“Unless extended by an amendment to this law, this program will terminate on December 31, 2004”). This helps to build in a mechanism for evaluation and further committee review.
- Establish reporting expectations or requirements. A committee can publicly request PRSP updates through a committee report.
- Provide international donor community officials with copies of the report. In some instances, sharing information and analysis with donors on PRSP projects may prevent committee recommendations or analysis from being ignored.
- Specify the expectations of the committee with respect to the implementation of specific proposals. This sets a benchmark that the committee and civic groups can use in monitoring implementation.

Public hearings are a useful mechanism for identifying alternative policy approaches, or potential improvements on existing proposals. However, they can also be particularly sensitive from the point of view of legislative-executive relations because they often involve more press coverage and can be used for partisan purposes. If those providing testimony at the hearing are critical of government policy, it may be viewed as a direct challenge. Committee members may wish to consider these impacts carefully, to communicate with the government in advance, as appropriate, and to ensure that multiple perspectives are represented at the hearing.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

Committee reports are usually drafted following a committee hearing or other investigation to provide the government with the committees' analysis and assessment of a proposed policy initiative. Not only are these reports a mechanism for communication with the executive branch and other MPs, they also provide a way to place new information or committee recommendations on the public record. The report need not be critical; in fact, it may support the government in implementing a difficult policy decision. In the case of the PRSP, information in committee reports may be difficult for the international development community and the government to ignore. For example, if a committee report calls for greater consultation with local officials in connection with a specific PRSP policy and the government ignores this recommendation, it may be difficult for the government to argue that the PRSP process has been participatory. Because committee reports are formal, written and difficult to modify, it may be appropriate to discuss key recommendations with government officials before the report is officially tabled—either to seek possible compromise or to avoid misunderstandings that might weaken the power of the report.



CHECKLIST II

ORGANIZING A PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE HEARING ON PRSP ISSUES

- ☑ Determine the purpose of the hearing (*i.e.*, what is the exact issue under consideration? Will general issues regarding PRSP priorities be discussed, or will the hearing be limited to a particular sectoral issue? Has the issue been covered by a thematic working group or the PRSP commission? If so, have the committee members been briefed on this?
- ☑ Establish an appropriate time for the hearing to take place (check with the committee, anticipated speakers, parliamentary leadership, whips and the relevant ministries). Make sure that it is a useful time in terms of the PRSP timeline.
- ☑ Establish an appropriate location for the hearing. While most hearings take place in the parliament itself, in some instances it may be appropriate to hold them in other locations. For example, a hearing on rural infrastructure programs may have greater impact if organized in less-urban areas around the country. Furthermore, such “traveling hearings” are an effective way to include citizens outside of the capital city in policy processes and make the parliament a more visible and accessible institution.
- ☑ Invite individuals to testify who can provide basic background information, particularly for those that may not be familiar with the PRSP process. Know roughly what they will say—make sure they have an understanding of the format for their presentation (*i.e.*, time limits, order, whether there will be questions, etc.).
- ☑ For individuals who have not testified before, explain the procedures for testifying, how they will be called, how they should address the chair, etc. Alert them of likely questions or issues of interest.
- ☑ Ensure that multiple sides of the issue are presented in the hearing. Determine if the political situation warrants including any other speakers (for ethnic, linguistic, religious, political, gender or geographic inclusiveness).
- ☑ Ensure adequate facilities for the hearing. Is the room the appropriate size? Are there facilities for the press? In multi-lingual countries, has translation been arranged? Is there a need for audio-visual aids, microphones, etc?
- ☑ Consult with the committee chair, or the member who will be moderating the hearing, to determine issues of particular interest and whether any decisions are expected to be raised for a decision or a vote by committee members.
- ☑ Have the appropriate notices been sent out in advance? Have media outlets been notified? If appropriate, has the resident international donor community been notified or invited? Concerned NGOs?



SECTION EIGHT

Communication Tools for the Individual MP or Party Caucus

Individual MPs and party caucuses also have an important role to play with respect to legislative-executive communication on PRSP issues. In particular, the use of parliamentary questions and interpolations can be significant in developing and shaping the PRSP process. As media coverage of parliamentary plenary meetings far outweighs coverage of smaller parliamentary groups, interaction through legislative plenary sessions is one of the more public (and often more confrontational) forms of legislative-executive communication.

Although procedures vary widely, individual MPs and caucuses can use questions and interpolations to obtain information on PRSP issues and influence government policy on PRSP issues. Although originating in the United Kingdom, and thus more prevalent in Westminster-style parliaments, nearly all modern legislatures have some recourse to pose questions to senior executive branch officials. As parliaments seek to define their role in an effective national PRSP process, parliamentary questions are an obvious way to influence the executive branch on poverty reduction policies.

Procedures for parliamentary questions are most easily categorized by the anticipated method of executive response, written or oral. Interpolations (or interpellations) are often more formal and generally precede a formal vote relating to the question posed. Because specific procedures

vary, the focus of this section is primarily on the general uses of these types of techniques in the context of the PRSP.

QUESTION TIME AND THE PRSP

Question time typically provides regularly scheduled opportunities for MPs to pose questions to executive leaders for verbal response. It allows ruling party MPs to provide a platform for the government to highlight its successful PRSP initiatives and allows opposition MPs to probe for information on problematic PRSP policies. Although policy issues about the PRSP can be raised in a number of ways, there are fewer op-

A STRONG, CONSTRUCTIVE PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION CAN IMPROVE THE PRSP BY:

- Creating reasons and opportunities for the executive to explain and promote its policies;
- Providing a political, non-violent outlet for airing political differences and giving a voice to politically marginalized groups;
- Suggesting policy alternatives, both to citizens and executive officials;
- Helping government to identify negative public perceptions of existing policies;
- Overseeing government implementation of the PRSP and questioning established bureaucracies; and
- Encouraging the executive to create responsive and effective poverty reduction policies by presenting itself as a credible alternative.

tions to address implementation questions. As a result, question time is often used to consider the progress that is being made on policy implementation. A parliament’s standing orders will often specify a number of procedural requirements for questions during question time.

Parliamentary questions rarely yield comprehensive, detailed answers. As such, question time is often more suited to making political points than obtaining concrete information. The role of the party caucuses, therefore, is critical. The role of opposition and ruling party caucuses will, of course, have very different objectives. While caucus whips from all parties must work with their members to prioritize questions, maximize limited time and assign key questions to their MPs, other aspects of preparation vary.

Governing Party Parliamentary Caucus
(leadership, whip, staff, MPs)

- Prepares for question time by strategizing about ways to highlight effective poverty reduction measures under current administration: What PRSP programs are running effectively? Where are the success stories? Which programs make the government look most efficient?
- Is most effective when: MPs have a strong sense of party identity and clarity about government priorities; there has been regular communication (or document sharing) between ministries and the caucus; and the caucus has held specific hearings on PRSP priorities and government plans for implementation.

Opposition Party Parliamentary Caucus
(leadership, whip, staff, MPs)

- Prepares for question time by strategizing about what aspects of PRSP implementation to question: Where are policy differences between their party and the ruling party most apparent? What information is the party try-

ing to get into the public record or in the media? Which programs place the opposition in the most flattering light?

- Is most effective when: Opposition members have clarity about their party platforms vis-à-vis the PRSP (e.g., whether the party has been advocating for different health plan priorities); the party has a clear alternative message to convey; and the caucus has been briefed on PRSP priorities and initiatives.

TABLING PRSP-RELATED QUESTIONS FOR WRITTEN RESPONSES

Requests for written responses are often more common and may yield more detailed information. However, many MPs complain that requests for answers to written questions are either not provided, are not complete or are not provided in a timely manner. Timelines in which the executive must respond vary by country, and can often only be enforced by political pressure (an issue that has prompted many MPs to complain that they have little recourse to force ministerial response to their questions or obtain sound information and straightforward replies.) When there is a response, however, the answer is often published in the official record.

MP OPTIONS WHEN THERE IS NO RESPONSE TO A REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

- Exert pressure through party caucuses.
- Press issues through committee outlets (hearings, investigation, tabling reports).
- Draft public letter of protest (copy IFIs, other concerned donor agencies and the media on repeated requests for PRSP information).
- Generate media coverage and pressure (public hearings, town hall meetings, press statement, media appearances).
- Re-pose question during verbal Question Time, indicating the government’s previous failure to respond.
- Document lack of response and seek support of IFIs or other donors.

There are a number of incentives for the government to provide complete, accurate information in response to written questions about the PRSP relative to other topics. The PRSP process is required by the IFIs to be participatory. It would be more difficult for a government to demonstrate that it has developed and implemented the PRSP in a participatory manner if requests from the parliament for information regarding the PRSP remain unanswered. Moreover, some of the information sought by MPs may be required by the international donors as part of the PRSP process, a commitment which the government has accepted by agreeing to implement a national PRSP process. If the government does not respond to targeted, legitimate, constructive requests for information on PRSP implementation, there are often other ways for parliament to obtain the information. Because of these incentives for the government to provide information regarding

PRSP implementation, however, it may be possible to obtain needed information without resorting to more formal means.

Interpolations

Interpolations (or interpellations) are similar to question time in that they are plenary sessions where members may question specific ministers. They are different, however, in that interpolations are intended to explore a single issue with a specific ministry in greater depth. They typically take place when the ministry in question is believed to have neglected or improperly handled a substantial issue. Although interpolations occasionally conclude with a parliamentary resolution requesting the resignation of the minister under question, government majorities often prevent such resolutions. Instead they are seen as a way of publicly addressing political issues raised by the legislative branch.



CHECKLIST III

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS ARE TYPICALLY MOST EFFECTIVE WHEN THEY:

- Have not already been answered in other publicly available documents.** Inquiries regarding location, duration or progress in the rate of implementation of a specific initiative are appropriate: “...to ask the executive what percentage of target villages has established medical facilities to date.” Once the PRSP has become a public document, asking the ministry of finance to enumerate PRSP priority sectors is less useful.
- Are brief, clearly worded and specific.** “...to ask the executive whether national health monitors have recorded a decrease in child mortality in the capital since the installation of a pre-natal care facility last year,” is generally more appropriate than asking “...whether people in the capital are more healthy now.”
- Are relevant to the public interest.** Once PRSP priorities have been established, questions regarding implementation or readjustment of poverty reduction initiatives are an effective way of monitoring the executive’s commitment to the PRSP: “...to ask the executive whether agricultural extension services have been established in rural areas to the north of the capital,” or “...to ask the executive whether textbook distribution has been expanded to include the southern portion of the country.”
- Fall within the purview of the executive office, cabinet of ministers or other immediate executive body.** It is important to know who has responsibility for which issues. Decentralization often impacts the nature and types of questions to be posed to the executive branch. If the question relates to expenditures at the local level, make sure that it is posed in a way that relates to the role of the national executive branch *vis-à-vis* local authorities.
- Ask for actual information without presenting a point of view or opinion.** Although questions will almost always have political application, questions of a clearly personal or political nature are often disallowed. In many systems, members may not ask why the ruling party has or has not supported an initiative, probe for information related to individual political scandals, or exhibit clear criticism. For example, it may be permissible to “...to ask the executive when it will begin the rehabilitation of public sewage networks in the river valley,” but not, “...to ask the executive when it will begin the rehabilitation of public sewage networks which should have been repaired last year.”



SECTION NINE

Media and Technology as Tools to Improve Communication

Since they are of great interest to international and domestic audiences, the PRSP process and poverty reduction issues can provide the legislature with greater political leverage to press for responsiveness from the executive branch. However, the increased amount of attention generated by PRSP processes and outcomes also means that MP interaction with the PRSP presents some risks to MPs. While public opinion or media pressure can be a strong asset in fighting for greater transparency, it is important to bear in mind that both legislators and executive officials are equally concerned about the impression their words and actions leave with all segments of the public. The fact that there are multiple audiences when statements are made to the media can be problematic for legislative-executive communication.

Because economic issues repeatedly top the list of citizens' concerns, MP involvement in poverty reduction initiatives is politically important. Although the political benefit of being seen work-

ing on poverty reduction initiatives may draw more MPs to participate in PRSP processes, it may also encourage MPs and government officials to manipulate the PRSP in a partisan manner. Often, the greater the publicity, the greater the level of partisan politics around it. This politicizing tendency can be somewhat moderated by maintaining a flow of factual (rather than political) information between legislative and executive actors, as well as stressing existing or desirable consensus on poverty reduction as a shared ideal.

POVERTY REDUCTION AND THE MEDIA

The media is often used by both executive and legislative leaders as a means of communication. Although extraordinarily public and often political, the media can be a tremendously effective way of both conveying and encouraging public concern, support or opposition. Given interest in poverty reduction issues, the PRSP lends itself easily to media coverage, but decisions about using the public space to communicate concerns or support must be made after considering the impact on all possible audiences.

Media outlets not only serve to transfer information between the branches of government and the public at large, but can also be used as a lever to pressure various officials or state bodies to be more responsive to specific demands.

INTENDED AND UNINTENDED MEDIA AUDIENCES

- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| • Government | • International donor community |
| • Legislature | • Foreign direct investors |
| • Ruling party | • Foreign journalists |
| • Opposition parties | |
| • General public | |



CHECKLIST IV

GENERATING MEDIA ATTENTION ABOUT POVERTY REDUCTION

- ☑ Solidify your message. What specifically are you trying to communicate to the public? Do you want to educate them? Call them to action?
- ☑ Decide if you are trying to reach the general public, or some more specific group of citizens (a target group).
- ☑ Be aware that a message may be interpreted differently by different groups. Think through the reaction of these multiple groups and, if necessary, modify your message or the method of delivering it accordingly.
- ☑ Determine what about your message would be appealing to the citizens you are hoping to reach.
- ☑ If the target audience is the public, avoid terms that may be viewed as jargon (*e.g.*, PRSP, Annual Progress Report) or that the public may not understand. Speak in terms of what the issue means to them.
- ☑ Conversely, if the target audience is the international community, tie the message to terms with which they are familiar (*e.g.*, MDG, priority sector). Be aware of the international community's development strategies for the country.
- ☑ Determine what forms of media are most easily accessible by the public (print, radio, television, etc.).
- ☑ After considering available resources, options, messages, and target audiences, formulate a media strategy.
- ☑ Anticipate what opposing groups will say about your message and try to head off criticism in advance by further refining your message.
- ☑ Establish and maintain constructive relationships with journalists who cover relevant issues and have a positive public image.
- ☑ When making a statement to the press, have a concise message that can be easily repeated, along with relevant supporting information.
- ☑ Be interesting—recognize that journalists cover items of public *interest*, not public information.
- ☑ Be positive, speak clearly, and repeat the most important point in as many ways as possible.
- ☑ Use press statements, press conferences, public announcements and public events to communicate the message.
- ☑ When voicing opposition publicly, expect an equally public defense. Where certain media outlets are controlled by specific political actors, learn to anticipate their representation of events or statements.
- ☑ Repeat the message consistently.



Common types of pressure exerted through the media include:

- Legislative pressure on the executive by criticizing aspects of the process or the PRSP content;
- Executive pressure on the parliament by noting a failure of the parliament to be sufficiently informed or to propose feasible solutions;
- Public pressure on both branches of government by highlighting unsolved problems; or
- Pressure on the IFIs and international donor community by voicing concern with the time line or other aspects of the PRSP process.

While the PRSP can be a unique tool for strengthening legislative involvement in economic policy development and improving executive-legislative communication, overly ambitious approaches or demands by the parliament can backfire when seized upon by media outlets. If the parliament initially requests a significant level of involvement, but then fails to follow

ALLIES IN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Because the IFIs and the donor community are also watching PRSP processes, the presence of the international community can be a useful tool to ensure that the legislature and the government work together to create a transparent process.

For example, if the legislature feels that the PRSP process has not sufficiently reflected the input of citizens (either through civic organizations or through their elected parliamentary representatives), the parliament may wish to make public statements to this effect, or to communicate those concerns to the donor community through an official letter. Because the IFIs have expressed a commitment to approving only sustainable PRSPs that have been developed through a participatory process, such a letter may have great impact on the acceptability of a document that has not been approved by parliament. Alternatively, the legislature may wish to table a resolution calling for specific improvements in the process.

through or offers opposition without constructive feedback, the legislature can lose credibility with citizens, executive offices and the international community.

APPLYING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY TO PRSP COMMUNICATION

One of the most tangible components of productive inter-governmental coordination is regular mechanisms for the PRSP commission, relevant ministries, the parliament, local authorities and the public to access current drafts or other documents related to the PRSP. Where resources exist or can be mobilized, the government and parliament may wish to consider how information and communication technology (ICT) can help meet this need.

Establishing Systems for Document Distribution

Complex legislative processes like the PRSP require extensive interaction between executive offices and national and provincial legislatures. Where resources are available for investment in the necessary hardware, ICT offers a number of tools for enabling more efficient communication among various offices. A networked drive within the parliament, internet access, e-mail systems or intra-governmental networks all allow for greater collaboration on poverty reduction programs.

- Where broadly used, **e-mail systems** provide an additional mechanism for legislative and executive bodies to exchange information or supplement formal communication. “Listservs” or mass e-mail distribution lists can be used to provide updated documents or notices of upcoming PRSP-related events.
- Where **text messaging** or SMS technology is widely used, systems can be set up to broadcast text messages to interested parties with updates on documents or upcoming meetings.
- **Internet access** facilitates legislative research on laws that implement the PRSP.

With 70 countries worldwide engaged in a PRSP process of their own, a great deal of PRSP expertise and experience is available via the Internet. Placing a country's PRSP materials on the Internet helps to share information between parliament and government, and also makes information available to local authorities, NGOs and the donor community.

- **Intra-governmental networks or systems** such as a bill drafting or tracking systems, scheduling programs, directories, databases, etc., provide organizational tools through which the complexity of PRSP communication may be managed. Parliament should be given access to relevant parts of this system.

**NON-ELECTRONIC SYSTEMS OF MAINTAINING
ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

Where IT solutions are not an immediate possibility, it is important to have a systematic method of obtaining and cataloging versions of relevant PRSP documents as they become accessible. If the parliament has a library or resource center, staff should have a briefing on the PRSP process so that they can obtain all relevant documents, catalog them appropriately and notify MPs of their availability. Alternatively, if sector-specific committees are assigned offices, committee staff or members may assume responsibility for gathering information on their sectors. Such efforts however, should be coordinated by a relevant committee (e.g., the money committees, the poverty reduction committees, etc.).

CONCLUSION

PRSP Precedents for Positive Legislative-Executive Communication

A positive legislative-executive relationship is only sustainable when both parties see benefits in the maintenance of mechanisms to exchange information regularly. While the PRSP offers an excellent mechanism for parliaments and governments to build precedents for efficient collaboration on key national policies, such mechanisms are sustainable only when they are based in mutual respect for the role each institution was created to fulfill. Particularly where legislative-executive relations have historically been confrontational, it may be even more critical to emphasize this respect for both parties' constitutional leadership roles when inviting relevant actors to the discussion table. Small gestures of respect to both sides during the planning stages of a PRSP can establish the right tone for longer-term cooperation.

To some extent, the relationship between any legislative and executive branch, or parliament and government, will depend heavily on the specific individuals occupying leadership positions.

However, regardless of the personalities involved, the establishment of communication mechanisms that demonstrate respect for the roles and responsibilities of each office make a significant difference in the institutions' long-term ability to collaborate effectively. Though parliaments and governments each include numerous actors and structures, some variables have a larger impact than others. Key elements of sustainable cooperation include acknowledgement of:

- The fact that parliaments and governments are mutually dependent: ministers rely on MPs to pass their policy proposals into law, while MPs depend on the ministries to implement legislation once it has been passed.
- The need to include all political elements in order to build multiparty consensus on poverty reduction issues.
- The critical role of non-partisan staff; many parliamentary and ministerial staff will remain in place after current officials leave office.

APPENDIX I

THE GLOBAL CHALLENGE: MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND TARGETS

Excerpted from: <http://www.undp.org/mdg/>

The Millennium Development Goals are an ambitious agenda for reducing poverty and improving lives that world leaders agreed on at the Millennium Summit in September 2000. For each goal one or more targets have been set, most for 2015, using 1990 as a benchmark:

1. ERADICATE EXTREME POVERTY AND HUNGER

More than a billion people live on less than US\$1 a day: sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and parts of Europe and Central Asia are falling short of the poverty target.

Target: Halve the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and suffering from hunger.

2. ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

As many as 113 million children do not attend school, but the target is within reach. India, for example, should have 95 percent of its children in school by 2005.

Target: Ensure all boys and girls complete primary school.

3. PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN

Two-thirds of illiterates are women, and the rate of employment among women is two-thirds that of men. The proportion of seats in parliaments held by women is increasing, reaching about one-third in Argentina, Mozambique and South Africa.

Targets: Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.

4. REDUCE CHILD MORTALITY

Every year nearly 11 million children die before their fifth birthday, mainly from preventable illnesses. That number is down from 15 million in 1980.

Target: Reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under five.

5. IMPROVE MATERNAL HEALTH

In the developing world, the risk of dying in childbirth is one in 48, but virtually all countries now have safe motherhood programs.

Target: Reduce by three-quarters the ratio of women dying in childbirth.

6. COMBAT HIV/AIDS, MALARIA AND OTHER DISEASES

More than 40 million people are living with HIV. Countries like Brazil, Senegal, Thailand and Uganda have shown that the spread of HIV can be stemmed.

Target: Halt and begin reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS and incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

7. ENSURE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

More than one billion people lack access to safe drinking water and more than two billion lack sanitation. During the 1990s, however, nearly one billion people gained access to safe water and the same number to sanitation.

Targets: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources; by 2015, reduce by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water; and by 2020 achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.

8. DEVELOP GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT

Many developing countries spend more on debt service than on social services.

Targets: Develop further open trading and financial systems that include a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction—nationally and internationally; address the least developed countries' needs, and the special needs of landlocked and small island developing states; deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt problems; develop decent and productive work for youth; in cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries; and in cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies—especially information and communications technologies.

APPENDIX II

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ORGANIZATIONS WITH ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- African Development Bank <http://www.afdb.org/knowledge/publications.htm>
- Asian Development Bank <http://www.adb.org/Publications/default.asp>
- Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/poverty>
- Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (CROP) <http://www.crop.org/>
- Department for International Development (DFID), UK <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/>
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) <http://www.fao.org/>
- HakiKazi Catalyst <http://www.hakikazi.org/>
- Institute of Development Studies Civil Society and Governance Programme: Policy Briefs
<http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/civsoc/PolicyBriefs/policysums.html#poll>
- Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) <http://www.iadb.org/>
- International Budget Project <http://www.internationalbudget.org/>
- International Monetary Fund <http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/facts/prgf.htm>
- Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) <http://www.unaids.org/en/default.asp>
- Medium Term Expenditure Framework <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/pe/mtef.htm>
- National Democratic Institute for International Affairs <http://www.ndi.org> and
<http://www.accessdemocracy.org>
- Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) <http://www.oecd.org>
- Overseas Development Institute Poverty and Public Policy Group <http://www.odi.org.uk/pppg/index.html>
- Parliamentary Centre <http://www.parlcent.ca/povertyreduction/index.html>
- Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty <http://www.ifad.org/popularcoalition/>
- United Nations Children's Fund <http://www.unicef.org/>
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
<http://www.unctad.org/Templates/Startpage.asp?intItemID=2068>
- United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) <http://www.unifem.org/>
- United Nations Development Group Devlink <http://www.undg.org/index.cfm>

United Nations Development Programme Human Development Reports (global, regional, and national) <http://hdr.undp.org/default.cfm>

United Nations Development Programme Millennium Development Goals <http://www.undp.org/mdg/>.

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) <http://www.unep.org/>

World Bank Development Forum: Poverty Profiles and Policymaking “PAC Talk” Discussion Board http://www.worldbank.org/devforum/forum_pac.html

World Bank Group <http://www.worldbank.org/>

World Bank Group Millennium Development Goals <http://www.developmentgoals.org/>

World Bank Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/>

World Trade Organization <http://www.wto.org/>

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