

Walter Eberlei (2007): *Accountability in Poverty Reduction Strategies: The Role of Empowerment and Participation*. (= World Bank, Social Development Paper, 104). Washington D.C.

This paper is part of a research project analyzing the participation of stakeholders beyond the drafting process of *Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS)* — i.e. in implementation, monitoring and revision. Starting with a brief explanation of 'institutionalized participation' as the analytical framework for the research, the findings of the various background papers prepared on the project are synthesized. Participation is potentially "meaningful" if it is rights-based, integrated in structures within the political environment of a given country, and if it has empowered and legitimate stakeholders. In most PRS countries, these standards are at best only partially fulfilled. The institutionalization of participation is still in its infancy. A number of constraints impede meaningful participation in the majority of the countries. However, exceptions to the rule showing a number of 'good practices' demonstrate that meaningful participation in PRS processes is possible and has been strengthened over the last years. Based on these findings, four core challenges for embedding stakeholder participation in the living political environment of PRS countries are discussed.

1. The principle of *country ownership* including *domestic accountability* has so far been realized in handful countries only. Governments in many PRS countries are still concerned primarily with meeting the conditions imposed by donors and/or are dominated by the interests of the non-poor elite. These are major impediments to meaningful participation.
2. A development orientation of 'the state' — including an openness for poverty reduction politics and societal participation — cannot be assumed automatically. There is plenty of evidence that politics in a number of the poorest countries is still permeated by 'neopatrimonial' practices.
3. The relationship between a society and its political system as well as the role of civil society in this interplay is poorly understood in many PRS processes. Using Habermas' discourse theory, the paper advocates a review of the conceptual framework for participation: Civil societies have a crucial role to play, translating the interests of the people into 'communicative power'. But the transformation into 'administrative power' (executed by governments) has to take place in the democratically legitimized bodies, especially in parliaments. Furthermore, the participation agenda has been overloaded in many of the poorest countries, while the necessary conditions to enable stakeholders' participation have not been realized. The framework of institutionalized participation might help to match realistic roles to current conditions.
4. 'Powerlessness' is a form of poverty and a major cause of poverty. The distribution of power is therefore a highly relevant topic for poverty reduction debates. The findings underline the urgent need to start 'empowerment initiatives' and to discuss the underlying issues.

The paper concludes with strategic recommendations to strengthen domestic accountability, institutionalized participation and empowerment. A breakthrough in the fight against poverty needs a coalition of stakeholders in the civil societies and political forces in the legislative bodies of PRS countries, unfolding 'communicative power' to point 'administrative power' in the pro-poor direction.