

Poverty Reduction in Zambia: A Conceptual Analysis of the Zambian Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper

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Poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) present a recipient country's program of intent for the utilization of World Bank loans and grants to alleviate debt under the bank's programs of action for poverty reduction in highly indebted poor countries (HIPC). This article argues that structural transformation is a prerequisite for poverty reduction in Zambia. However, the Zambian PRSP is largely informed by mainstream thinking on poverty and livelihoods. It champions a neoliberal program constructed on the sanctity of the market and seeks to maintain the very structural processes that engender poverty. Because it fails to break, conceptually and methodologically, from past program failures, the PRSP is likely to be just the latest installment in the ever-changing fashionable semantics of the "development community." The article examines the conceptual and methodological failures of the Zambian PRSP particularly with respect to the measurement of poverty and the concept of participation.

Keywords: *sustainable development; poverty alleviation; debt relief*

The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) Process in Poor Countries

PRSPs were introduced in 1999 with a primary objective of ensuring efficient use of resources freed from debt payment obligations under the World Bank's enhanced highly indebted poor countries facility (HIPC). Successful preparation and observance of benchmarks agreed within the PRSP process with international finance institutions (IFIs) should procedurally lead to the HIPC "completion point," which

then entitles the recipient country to "substantive" debt relief under the World Bank's poverty-reduction support credit and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s poverty-reduction and growth facility (Booth, 2003). The resources released from debt relief are, within the PRSP framework, supposed to be used for poverty-reduction programs.

Since 1999, the majority of countries in sub-Saharan Africa have adopted PRSPs. PRSPs have become a precondition for adjustment lending from the IMF and concessional lending from the World Bank. However, it is critical to view the PRSP process within the broader historical relationship between indebted poor countries and IFIs. In the mid-1980s, IFIs devised structural adjustment programs (SAPs) as a mechanism of "restarting sustainable growth" in poor countries (Allen & Thomas, 1992; Gills, Radelet, Snodgrass, Roemer, & Perkins, 1992; Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999). Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa indicates that SAPs have failed to restart growth and even contributed to the exacerbation of poverty in these countries (James, 2000; Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999). Therefore, the emergence of PRSPs is in part a reluctant recognition of the failures of previous attempts at multilateral economic management programs in poor countries.

It is therefore critical to interrogate whether the PRSP process qualitatively departs from previous failed attempts at national economic management under the tutelage of IFIs. How PRSPs perceive the dynamics of poverty in poor countries will largely determine their success as a poverty-reduction strategy. Particularly, PRSPs must entail a radical departure from previous conceptual and methodological pursuits that have not been successful in the past. Fun-

damentally, this conceptual and methodological departure entails a complete ideological reconfiguration of the neoliberal agenda and its concomitant social relations (Peet & Watts, 1996b).

Of course, the assumption we make here is that IFIs are genuine in their intentions for poverty reduction in poor countries (World Bank, 1997). However, this assumption is by no means a foregone conclusion. Some scholars have argued that IFIs have contributed to the creation and perpetuation of poverty in poor countries¹ (James, 2000; Kortern, 1994). Indeed, as O'Connor (1989) argues, the dynamics of international capitalist expansion proceeds on the basis of "uneven development," a process that progressively and systematically impoverishes poor countries (Redclift, 1987). IFIs have been an integral mechanism in the international expansion of capitalism particularly in the era of "globalized capitalism" and the triumph of neoliberalism (James, 2000).

However, it has been suggested in the development community that PRSPs represent a qualitative change in the perception and resolution of poverty in poor countries. Booth (2003) argues that

PRSP initiatives represent, at least potentially, a non-trivial change in the way international support to poverty reduction in developing countries is framed and delivered. We believe that it provides an opportunity to address some critical problems in both the governance of poor countries and the institutional framework of development assistance. In particular, it could be the solution to the chronic tendency of much aid for poverty reduction to undermine the conditions of its own success, by weakening the capacities of government and other national institutions to act for themselves. (p. 132)

Whether the PRSP process represents a nontrivial change in the international development discourse and practice is largely an empirical issue. Indeed, whether the PRSP process can reduce poverty in poor countries is also an issue that can be determined in practice. However, preliminary methodological and conceptual concerns can be raised about the efficacy and nature of the PRSP as a poverty-reducing tool.

In general, PRSPs have five key features. These are

(a) Policy making for poverty reduction should take the form of a country-led strategy process, in which government engages in dialogue with

other constituents of the national society, resulting in a greater national ownership of the decisions taken, (b) It (PRSP) should be results and outcomes-oriented, starting from an analysis of poverty and its causes and working backwards to the design of appropriate policies, (c) The thinking should be comprehensive in coverage of different macro, sectoral and cross-sectoral issues that affect poverty reduction processes and prospects, (d) The basis for international support should be in a form of partnership, in which all funding sources are drawn together in a co-ordinated way around a strategy developed under the leadership of the recipient government; and (e) This (PRSP) is visualized as a medium to long-term process, implying a need for medium-term commitments as well as careful consideration of appropriate timing, performance criteria and monitoring arrangements. (p. 136)

The defining feature of PRSPs is the concept of "country ownership." Country ownership of the PRSP is critical for several reasons, including the building of national consensus about poverty reduction. Furthermore, through a national participatory process, country ownership guarantees the representation of a broader spectrum of views including those of civil society. Accordingly, the PRSP process is grounded in the need for broader participation of the general citizenry in the formulation of the poverty-reduction programs. In fact, the principle of broader public participation has been heralded as one of the distinctive features that separate PRSPs from previous programs such as SAPs.

However, the country-ownership credentials of the PRSP process are questionable. It must be understood that PRSPs are not an initiative of poor countries. PRSPs are an initiative of IFIs (World Bank and IMF) and were subsequently made a precondition for concessional lending and adjustment lending to poor countries. For instance, the successful development of a PRSP is a requirement for accessing resources under the World Bank's poverty reduction and growth facility (PRGF). Furthermore, successful development and implementation of PRSP (reaching the HIPC completion point) entitles the country to substantive debt relief. Donor countries also require that the recipient country be "on track" with IMF and World Bank programs before disbursing their assistance. It can therefore be argued that for all meaningful purposes, PRSPs

are yet another creation of IFIs imposed on poor countries (Erdmann & Simutanyi, 2003).

Zambia was scheduled to reach the HIPC completion point in December 2003. However, due to overexpenditure on civil service wages, government failed to meet the various benchmarks necessary under the PRGF agreement. Consequently, the World Bank and the IMF withdrew financial support from government, thereby constraining resources necessary for poverty reduction programs. In the 2004 budget, government responded to the need to meet the HIPC completion point by imposing a wage freeze on civil service salaries (Government of Zambia, 2004). Under these conditions, it is questionable to what extent Zambia "owns" its poverty-reduction programs when it has constantly to answer to IFIs. In fact, Zambia's poverty-reduction programs depend almost entirely on how well it upholds the conditions set by IFIs and donor countries.

Proponents of PRSPs argue that country ownership of the programs is demonstrated in the enthusiasm and willingness with which national governments embraced the new concept. Although it is true that PRSPs have experienced little resistance compared to traditional SAPs, it should be recalled that poor countries have never successfully resisted IFIs' global development programs (Booth, 2003). Experience shows that new program discourses are quickly embraced and religiously pursued by recipient countries under the tutelage of IFIs. Although poor countries may occasionally default or even abandon IFIs' programs, such occurrences are often transitory. It is usually a matter of time (very short time indeed) before the "rebel countries" revert to IFI programs, only this time the austerity programs would be more severe as the money lenders make up for lost time.²

The second most critical feature of the PRSP process is the concept of participation. It is envisioned that the PRSP is a product of wide consultation so that it has "deeply grounded its ownership in the country" (Government of Zambia, 2002b, p. 12). However, PRSPs are essentially a predetermined agenda in which public participation is a cosmetic exercise designed to lend legitimacy to ideas promulgated by IFIs. Government officials are dispatched from ministries of finance to explain to stakeholders the importance of the recipient country qualifying for concessional lending and debt relief consequent upon the development of PRSPs. Within this participatory framework, stakeholders are urged to have an input in

the PRSP process. However, the relevance or indeed the very essence of the PRSP itself is never questioned.

Do PRSPs represent a qualitative change in the relationship between poor countries and IFIs? This question can only be resolved empirically, given the recent emergence of PRSPs. The practical impact of PRSPs on poverty in poor countries can only be meaningfully assessed after the process has endured some reasonable time frame. However, preliminary conceptual observations can be engaged to assess the efficacy of PRSPs as a poverty-reduction framework. Conceptual assessment is critical in determining whether the PRSP process departs from the fundamental failures of past programs. By such a determination, a verdict can be rendered as to whether PRSPs constitute a qualitative change in international development. More important, the potential of PRSPs to reduce poverty in poor countries can be investigated.

Conceptually and methodologically, the PRSP process retains many of the features of previous failed attempts at development programs under the auspices of IFIs. Essentially, the PRSP process is devised by IFIs who then use their power over the control of resources to pressure poor countries into devising their own country-led PRSPs. Although individual countries are supposed to develop their own poverty-reduction programs, the identical nature of PRSPs in sub-Saharan Africa is striking. The similarity encompasses both the form and content of PRSPs in sub-Saharan Africa. This similarity in PRSPs often extends to such mundane features as chapter outline and layout of the "country-led" documents. How such diverse countries with diverse poverty dynamics can design identical poverty-reduction programs unless they are under the same tutorage extremely stretches rational explanation.

The qualitative import of the PRSP process must be judged within the broader history and experience of poor countries with IFIs. Every so often, a new terminological fashion emerges that is pushed to the fore of the development discourse by IFIs. In the early 1980s, the classical SAPs programs were heralded as the panacea to sub-Saharan Africa's "development crisis" (World Bank, 1981). After a decade of faithful implementation of SAPs, it became clear that social and economic conditions in sub-Saharan Africa were not improving (Stephen, 1988). It is now generally agreed that the 1980s constitute Africa's "lost decade" in terms of improving the livelihood conditions of its population.

In the late 1980s, “adjustment with a human face” became the organizing principle of economic relationships between poor countries and IFIs (Cornia et al., 1987). During this era, the concept of targeting service delivery to those sections of the population who are marginalized by the economic adjustment process became an integral component of SAPs (Booth, 2003). Thus emerged “social safety nets” as important national programs designed to cushion those people (the poor) who carry a disproportionate burden of adjustment.

IFIs thus belatedly admitted (what even bourgeois economics should have alerted them to) that the costs of adjustment fall on the poor. To address the increasing poverty-creating impact of SAPs, terminologies such as “growth with redistribution,” “broad-based growth,” “smart growth,” “pro-poor growth,” and so on were invented to provide ideological justification for the continuance of SAPs (Imboela, 2004). It was argued that in principle, there is no conflict between economic growth and equity (Gills et al., 1992). Ideologues of SAPs justified the persistence of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa by the “something wrong with Africa thesis” exemplified by Howard and Killick’s (2001) argument that “economic growth reduces poverty but Africa under performs.” In this discourse, the fundamentals of neoliberal economic pursuit are essentially held to be the right tools for poverty reduction in Africa. In fact, the poverty-reducing impact of neoliberal economic policies is perceived to be self-evident and natural (Baker, 2000). Accordingly, neoliberal economic policies are not conceived as the problem, but rather, the only problem is that there is something inherently wrong with Africa!

Yet another decade has passed since the emergence of the adjustment-with-a-human-face thesis. The conditions of living for the majority of the population in sub-Saharan Africa continue to decline. In fact, the gains recorded in living standards in the pre-SAP years have constantly been eroded (United Nations Development Program, 2003). It is chronologically, therefore, that time of the decade when a new terminology in the development discourse is due. PRSPs have emerged to fulfill this chronological sequence as a new terminology in the IFIs’ development discourse.

Fundamental commonalities underlie the various development strategies implemented under the tutelage of IFIs. First, they are all informed by a neoliberal ideology that propels the market to a dominant sphere in human society. Second, they are initiated from outsiders and imposed on poor countries, often with a

promise of rewards after meeting ever widening benchmarks, decision points, or completion points. Third, these programs become a conversion point for donor countries (cooperative partners, in acceptable parlance) who tie their programs to a recipient country’s being on track with IFIs.

The PRSP process should therefore be seen as the latest installment in a long sequence of economic management programs promulgated by IFIs in poor countries. Although the PRSP specifically targets poverty reduction as the main priority, it has retained neoliberal methodological and conceptual underpinnings reminiscent of its predecessors. The articulation of poverty as a primarily economic problem has entailed that PRSPs rely on economic instruments as a poverty-reduction tool. As in the past, economic programs (particularly neoliberal economic programs) have been incapable of reducing poverty in poor countries. In fact, countries in sub-Saharan Africa that scored well on SAPs implementation had incidences of increases in poverty (Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999).

In the context of Zambia, an unconditional implementation of economic reforms throughout the 1990s has resulted in higher poverty levels (Government of Zambia, 1998, 2002b; see also Government of Zambia, 1990-2002a). In Mozambique, neoliberal economic reforms have resulted in increased poverty levels particularly in rural communities (James, 2000). The experience and evidence from sub-Saharan Africa clearly challenges the dominance of neoliberal economic strategies as a poverty-reduction mechanism. The expectation placed on the PRSP process to reduce poverty is therefore essentially a matter of ideological faith rather than any structural analysis of the dynamics of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa.

For the PRSP process to introduce a qualitative change in poverty-reduction programs in poor countries, it needs to radically divorce itself from the methodological and conceptual approaches of past efforts. This entails a fundamental rethinking of the neoliberal economic platform as the engine of development. In fact, it entails the total deconstruction of the neoliberal economic agenda that has to a large extent transformed hitherto sustainable communities into vulnerable and poor caricatures of their former selves (Imboela, 2004; Peet & Watts, 1996a).

At a general level, therefore, the conceptual and methodological approach of the PRSP process fails to abandon the economic reductionism of past programs. Within the PRSP framework, the resolution of poverty is still primarily perceived as an economic problem

despite rhetorical recognition of the multidimensional character of poverty (Government of Zambia, 2002b). Conceptually, the PRSP process does not introduce a new quality in the comprehension and necessary instruments for poverty reduction.

At the systemic level, there is no indication that the PRSP has introduced a qualitative change in the relationship between IFIs, donor countries, and poor countries. This relationship is still predominantly based on power, resource control, and dominance that enable these institutions to impose their programs on poor countries. It is difficult, therefore, to conclude that the PRSP process introduces a qualitative change in the discourse and practice of international development. Indeed, extrapolating from history and experience of international development programs under IFIs, the PRSP is not any better equipped to reduce poverty in poor countries than its predecessors.

The PRSP Process in Zambia

The first phase of the PRSP in Zambia is from 2002 to 2004. The Ministry of Finance and National Planning is in charge of overseeing the implementation and monitoring of the PRSP through the newly created Planning and Economic Management Department. The draft PRSP document was discussed at the PRSP National Summit in October 2001, where stakeholders accepted the general thrust of the document (Government of Zambia, 2002b). Chronologically, the PRSP in Zambia has entered its final year of implementation. Government is in the process of reviewing the PRSP with the intention of initiating its second phase.

As suggested in its title, the PRSP is a poverty-reduction program. However, the methodological and conceptual treatment of the dynamics of poverty in the PRSP is problematic. Although the PRSP accepts that poverty is multidimensional in character, its conceptual and methodological framework is based on money-metric measures of poverty. These measures are based on poverty datum lines determined by the Central Statistical Office on the basis of a "basket of food" for a family of six (Government of Zambia, 1998, 2002b). The PRSP observes that although poverty cannot be adequately captured by income measures, other measures of poverty present endemic problems. The advantage of money-metric measures of poverty is therefore the ease of measurement.

The reliance on money-metric measures of poverty raises fundamental questions about the ability of the PRSP to comprehend the dynamics of poverty in Zam-

bia. First, it is problematic that the comprehension of poverty, a phenomenon that affects 72.9% of the population, can be determined by measurement and methodological conveniences rather than a genuine attempt to unmask the real "reality of the poor." It can be argued, therefore, that the aspects of poverty that are reflected in the PRSP are only those that render themselves amenable to money-metric measures.

This methodological inadequacy raises fundamental concerns about how well the PRSP presents the Zambian poverty profile. If this critical methodological issue is not resolved, the policies that are designed on the basis of the PRSP's representation of poverty in Zambia are likely to be inappropriate. Poverty-reduction policies must, as a precondition, be a product of a critical understanding of poverty. This entails a willingness (on the part of researchers) to transcend methodological stereotypes and explore alternative approaches (difficult as these may be) that may yield a more critical understanding of the causes and perpetuation of poverty. The PRSP lacks this methodological inventiveness, preferring instead the convenience of money-metric measures of poverty.

Second, poverty must be comprehended as a product of structural processes, not a simple aggregation of quantifiable social and economic attributes (Chambers, 1997). The sustainable livelihoods framework (SLF) posits that lack of "productive assets" is an attribute and cause of poverty (Imboela, 2004). There is no disagreement that productive assets are critical in the evolution of poverty; neither is there disagreement that poor people lack capital³ (Ashley, 2000; Carney, 1998).

However, the lack of assets or capital is simply a descriptive attribute through which poverty becomes visible. The relevant originating question in this context is therefore not what poor people lack, but why they lack what they lack. For instance, why do poor people lack assets or productive assets? When the question is posed this way, its interrogation requires methodological transcendence beyond money-metric understanding of poverty. In fact, framing the question in this format challenges whether so much effort should be expended toward measuring poverty as opposed to investigating why, in a world of so much abundance and productive capacities, 1.2 billion people are poor and 11 million children die every year from poverty-related causes (United Nations Development Program, 2003).

Productive assets are incontestably critical for poverty-reduction programs. However, it is a heroic

simplification to argue that poor people are poor because they lack assets. Yet, in the same vein, they lack assets because they are poor. Followed to its logical end, this argument leads to remarkable tautological conclusions that poor people are poor because they are poor. A fruitful point of inquiry is the investigation of the structural processes that inhibit poor people from accessing assets in the first place. It is these structural processes, entrenched in history, sociocultural dynamics, social relations, and gender, that fundamentally determine the livelihoods context of poor people. It is these same processes, therefore, that are the underlying causes of the condition of poverty.

Chambers (1997) argues that poverty is a condition of powerlessness. A comprehension of poverty, therefore, has to be conceptualized within the dynamics of power. It is the structures of power that define and perpetuate the condition of poverty (Bwalya, 1984; Hildyard, Hegde, Wolvekamp, & Reddy, 2001). Conceptualized in this manner, it becomes possible to understand why poor people do not possess productive assets. In Kenya, rural poverty is to a large extent caused by the commodification of peasant land perpetuated by the governing elite (Tangiri, 1985). In Mozambique, James and Ashiwini (2000) found that neoliberal policies were the fundamental cause of urban and rural poverty. In India, Shiva (1994) shows that rural poverty is perpetuated by structural and gender relations engendered by the project of development. In Zambia, poor people observed that liberalization policies were the major cause of poverty (Government of Zambia, 2002b). At a systemic level, Peet and Watts (1996b) argue that the process of development has transformed structural relations in developing countries there by “transmogrifying” these societies into vulnerable and unsustainable social entities.

Poverty, therefore, is fundamentally a product of processes of power. Here, power is understood as the ability to define and impose the environment in which other social groups construct their livelihoods. At the systemic level, this power lies with globalized capitalism that has transformed poor countries into appendages and reservoirs of capitalist accumulation (O’Connor, 1989, Redclift, 1987). In the contemporary era of neoliberal globalization, this power is exercised by IFIs. At the national level, the governing elites, often under the tutelage of IFIs, impose neoliberal policies that perpetuate resource transfer to international capitalist metropolises through, for instance, debt payments and predation of natural and

human resources (Lensink, 1996; Orjiako, 2001). At the rural level, rural elites, often maintaining their status due to their contacts with the governing elites, are the final lubricant in the engendering and perpetuation of rural poverty (Bwalya, 1984).

Poverty, therefore, should be understood in its relational context, a context that is primarily defined by underlying relations of power. The analysis of poverty must, as a primary condition, also investigate the sociopolitical relations of the nonpoor social class. To comprehend the livelihood dynamics of the poor, it is conceptually critical to analyze the conditions of the nonpoor. As Murray (2002) observes,

The trajectories of change for individuals or households in one social class are related to trajectories of change in other social classes. In other words, while the declared preoccupation of policy may be how to achieve a reduction in poverty, the use of livelihoods research to analyse the causes and experience of poverty specifically requires attention to the livelihoods of people who are not poor. This implies an understanding of poverty in structural or relational terms, in order to achieve an appropriate emphasis, which is otherwise often deficient, on the social relations and the inequalities of power that heavily influence the respective trajectories of the better-off and the poor. (p. 490).

The analytic linkage between the poor and the nonpoor within the Zambian PRSP process is entirely missing. This missing link leads to a conceptual tragedy about the understanding of poverty in Zambia. Because the understanding of the poor requires, as a prerequisite condition, the understanding of the nonpoor, it follows in the context of Zambia that essentially nothing is known about the poor themselves who are supposed to be the “target” of the PRSP. The presentation of the poverty profile in the PRSP is not relational, structural, or historical. Although fairly elaborate descriptive attributes are presented, the PRSP fails to comprehend the social, structural, and historical dynamics of poverty in Zambia.

Because the Zambian PRSP is entirely focused on the poor as an independent social class, it cannot address the relational aspects of poverty. The political and power dynamics that condition poverty, the powerlessness of the poor, and the social inequality generated by structural processes are outside the analytic and conceptual scope of the PRSP. Analytically, the

Zambian PRSP can therefore not be anything other than an overelaborate descriptive exercise of what poverty looks like, but still it leaves us not any wiser about the causes and persistence of poverty.

The Zambian PRSP argues that participation of the citizenry is a crucial requirement for poverty reduction (Government of Zambia, 2002b). The virtues of participation include formation of a national consensus about poverty reduction, increased involvement of the public, particularly civil society, in the policy discourse about poverty, and ensuring that the views of the voiceless are represented. Of course, these are laudable objectives. However, in the pursuit of these objectives as reflected in the Zambian PRSP experience, it is necessary to transcend conventional conceptualizations of participation.

The concept of participation in the development discourse is not a particularly novel innovation of the PRSP process. Chronologically, participation is argued to have emerged out of the dissatisfaction with top-down development strategies; ineffective, externally imposed programs; and the dominance of expert-led planning (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). By the mid-1980s, development institutions were starting to adopt participation as an important exercise in development practice. The general aim of participation is to make people central in making decisions about matters that affect them. Broadly, participation is about encouraging "sustainability, relevance and empowerment" (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Some scholars have pointed to a more subtle origin of participation in development practice. Hailey (2001), in a study of south Asia, argues that U.S. nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) institutionalized the practice of participation in an attempt to wrestle the stranglehold of Marxists on community development. In this context, participation is essentially a conservative tool designed to maintain the constellation of power relations rather than an alternative development practice. Indeed, contemporary practices of participation seek to depoliticize the process of community development (Ferguson, 1994).

Within the Zambian PRSP, participation was undertaken through a series of "awareness workshops," seminars, and consultations that culminated into the PRSP National Summit in October 2001 (Government of Zambia, 2002b). Membership to this consultative process consisted mainly of government, business, academia, churches, NGOs, professional associations, and representatives of donors. At the provincial level, 10 delegates from each district were invited to provin-

cial PRSP workshops. These delegates consisted of administrative district heads, a few sector experts, representatives of traditional leaders, NGOs, and churches. The selected delegates were then constituted into a provincial consultative conference on PRSP.

It is critical to note that the PRSP does not offer an alternative articulation of the process of development. It takes for granted the necessity of the project of modernization within the construct of the market as the engine of development. In this context, participation becomes a tool for co-opting the poor into schemes that serve the interests of the powerful. Esteva (1992) argues that in the current development discourse, participation "is converted into a manipulative trick to involve [poor] people in struggles for getting what the powerful want to impose on them" (p. 8). In a study of Mbeza, Imboela (2004) found that the rich rural elites periodically employ the poor to advance their interests, particularly with regard to the Mbeza Irrigation Project.

Once the parameters of consultations have been predetermined, participation simply becomes an exercise that lends legitimacy and credibility to the PRSP process without challenging the underlying structural causes of poverty. IFIs and their government corroborators already predetermined the preferred outcome of the PRSP consultations. In fact, participation was a precondition set by IFIs as a requirement for formulating an acceptable PRSP in Zambia (Erdmann & Simutanyi, 2003). It is therefore critical to understand that within the PRSP process, participation was not a local initiation but rather a precondition set by IFIs.

Participation by its very nature should entail the dominance of the local in setting the agenda and the parameters of the discourse. It should be a process that is initiated and defined by local communities. More important, participation should engage the prevailing social relations so that participants have real power to articulate alternatives to contemporary conditions of livelihoods. Participation is fundamentally a conflict scenario through which the powerless engage the conditions of their subordination. IFIs and the donor community cannot externally dictate such a transformative process.

However, within the Zambian PRSP, participation is conceived within the harmony model of power. Within this framework, it is possible to empower the powerless without disempowering the powerful. Consequently, the powerful social categories (i.e., IFIs, donor community, government) essentially predeter-

mined the outcome of the Zambian PRSP's participatory process. This predetermined outcome is clear with respect to the poverty of small-scale farmers. Whereas small-scale farmers conceived neoliberal agricultural policies as a fundamental cause of poverty (Government of Zambia, 2002b; Imboela, 2004), the PRSP concluded that

there is little disagreement within Zambia presently that the policy of liberalization is correct for revitalising agriculture. There is consensus that the government's pricing and marketing policies during the pre-reforms period failed to provide sufficient incentives for increased output by farmers, and also discouraged private sector-led agricultural development. (Government of Zambia, 2002b, p. 55)

However, the consensus over agricultural liberalization in Zambia simply reflects the viewpoints of IFIs and their government corroborators. Imboela (2004), in a study of Mbeza in the southern province of Zambia, found that neoliberal policies, especially in the agricultural sector, are the primary causes of livelihoods vulnerability and poverty. Even within the Zambian PRSP, it is evident that small-scale farmers' call to government to provide agricultural subsidies and markets is an indictment of the failure of neoliberal policies. There was, however, no doubt from the onset of the PRSP as to what type of policy prescriptions it would contain and whose viewpoint it would represent.

Chambers (1997) argues that experts espouse a different social epistemology from the poor. This epistemological distinction makes it difficult for experts to represent or comprehend the reality of the poor. In fact, the different worldviews make it difficult for government and outside experts to engage the poor in a genuine participatory process. Even if it is assumed (and this is a fairly contestable issue) that experts seek a genuine dialogue with the poor, they can neither understand nor represent the reality of the poor (Chambers, 1997). For a genuine dialogue to be engaged with the poor, Chambers calls for a "deschooling" of experts, a process that should lead to the birth of "a new professionalism" (Clever, 2001). The new breed of professionals should discard their expert socialization, be willing to listen and learn from the experiences of the poor, and be prepared to act as facilitators, not lecturers.

However, Clever (2001) draws attention to the impossibility of the task of the new professionals and their participatory credentials. He observes that

the investigating outsiders have a dual and ambiguous status: cast as facilitators, learners and consultants; equipped with the paraphernalia of authority and status of more conventional professionals, four wheel drive vehicles, clipboards and baseball caps, they clearly also represent to their hosts the power and resources of the state and its international patrons. (p. 50)

The process of participation is therefore fundamentally a relationship of resources and power (Hildyard et al., 2001). Government agents and their international patrons possess the resources and power to determine the outcome of the participatory process. Within the Zambian PRSP process, government officials dictated the terms of the process of participation. This is clearly demonstrated in the membership to the provincial consultative conferences that consisted mainly of government officials and selected experts. Within such a participatory environment, it is difficult to expect the outcome to be anything other than the preferred government position. The conclusion that the PRSP reflects the opinions and intentions of government and IFIs is therefore not far-fetched.

Several conclusions can be deduced from the Zambian PRSP process. It is critical to note that the conceptualization of poverty largely through money-metric measures is a fundamental weakness of the Zambian PRSP. Although money-metric measures provide a neatly quantifiable set of values, they tend to be inclined toward measurement convenience rather than the reality of how poor people live and the structural causes of poverty. This methodological and conceptual predisposition toward numbers leads to what Clever (2001) calls "the tyranny of the mean." Although the Zambian PRSP details the description of poverty, it leaves us none the wiser about the structural causes of poverty. If this key diagnostic question is not resolved, how can we expect our prognoses to work unless by pure chance?

The Zambian PRSP fails to conceptualize poverty within its relational context. It assumes rather naïvely that focusing almost exclusively on the conditions of poor people can attain reduction of poverty. However, as Murray (2002; see also Murray, 2000) argues, poverty reduction strategies require an understanding of

nonpoor people. Essentially, poverty is thus a socially constructed relationship between social groups that is grounded in power. The situation of poverty implies the dispossession of the power to determine one's conditions of livelihoods. By focusing exclusively on poor people, the Zambian PRSP fails to unmask the social and relational dynamics that are fundamental in the construction and perpetuation of conditions of poverty.

It is also critical that poverty is understood as a condition that afflicts social groups or social categories of people, not simply a problem of individuals. Within the Zambian PRSP, poverty is perceived primarily as a problem of individual poor people. Accordingly, poverty-reduction strategies are aimed at individual poor people (i.e., social safety nets such as the public welfare assistance scheme and fertilizer support program). The individualization of poverty presents fundamental conceptual problems. First, by focusing on individuals, the relational and structural dynamics of poverty and livelihoods vulnerability are lost (Whitehead, 2002). Second, the individualization of poverty blurs the social struggles of poor people against the conditions that engender poverty and livelihoods vulnerability. These struggles are social in character, involving collectives of social groups whose livelihoods are dislocated by neoliberalism (Ayupan & Oliveros, 1993).

Accordingly, programs for poverty reduction must reflect this social-relational context. Poverty-reduction programs must focus on the transformation of the structural processes that engender conditions of poverty. This entails calling into question the contemporary neoliberal agenda and the social relations it constructs in poor countries (James & Ashiwini, 2000). The Zambian PRSP, however, seeks to maintain the neoliberal agenda as the principal organizing ideology of society. The PRSP is crafted to be consistent and supportive of the neoliberal market ideology promulgated by IFIs.

Participation is critical to the process of poverty reduction in Zambia. However, the Zambian PRSP conceptualizes the process of participation in a naïvely innocent way. It is assumed that the mere assembly of people results in participatory outcomes that are representative of the views of stakeholders. Research on participatory development show that the outcomes of workshops, stakeholder meetings, focus group meetings, and so on are not often participatory. These outcomes tend to reflect the views of the powerful (Cooke

& Kothari, 2001; Imboela, 2004). The Zambian PRSP thus, despite its participatory claims, reflects the views of the powerful, who also are the nonpoor (i.e., government and its international patrons).

The prerequisites for poverty reduction require a more fundamental engagement with the structural processes that engender conditions of poverty in poor countries. This engagement transcends the fashionable concept of participation within the current development discourse and practice. It involves the fundamental transformation of underlying sociopolitical processes that inhibit the poor from determining the conditions of their livelihoods. This process of sociopolitical transformation should be grounded in the collective consciousness of the marginalized social groups.

Do PRSPs offer a new quality in the administration of international development programs in poor countries? Although PRSPs offer a new visibility to the issue of poverty in poor countries, they share fundamental characteristics to past failed programs under IFIs. Particularly, PRSPs share conceptual and methodological identities to traditional SAPs. The PRSPs also share the ideological belief in the sanctity of neoliberalism as the panacea to all development problems, including poverty reduction.

The article has argued that conceptual and methodological transformations will be necessary in order to comprehend the reality of the poor. Poverty should be conceptualized as a social construct primarily predicated on unequal relations of power. The deconstruction of structures and processes that engender these relations of social inequality should thus be the primary focus of poverty-reduction programs. Programs such as the PRSP process that are constructed on neoliberal ideology are conceptually and in praxis ill equipped to address the conditions of poverty in poor countries.

Notes

1. See also Orjiako's (2001) provocative title, *Killing Sub-Saharan Africa with Aid*.

2. In 1989, the Zambian government abandoned the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-World Bank program, citing intolerable suffering of its people. Within a year, the government reverted to the same program. In fact, since the mid-1980s, the Zambian government had been involved in a stop-go relationship with the IMF, each time going back to a program considerably more severe than the one it abandoned.

3. The concept of capitals in livelihoods research has been criticized as an attempt to penetrate neoclassical economic language

into rural livelihoods and thus conveniently avoiding a discussion of social relations as a dominant determinant of conditions of living. For a critique of the usage of the concept of capitals in rural livelihoods, see Imboela (2004)

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