

UNDP Regional Service Centre to Launch Regional Support Initiative for CSO Engagement in PRS and MDG Processes

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The deepening poverty in Africa, exacerbated by HIV/AIDS, conflict and weak governance despite decades of development strategies and programs has motivated civil society organizations to reinvent themselves. A decade ago, CSOs' role in development was focused mainly on service delivery and emergency aid - providing social services to the poor and vulnerable due to the failure of the state and private sector to meet citizens' human development needs. They have recognized the need to influence policy and advocate for the poor and vulnerable to ensure that appropriate policies are in place to effectively reduce poverty on a sustainable basis. The Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS) and the MDG framework have opened up opportunities for CSOs and ordinary citizens to engage with government in policy formulation and, in some cases, decision making processes at various levels.

While governments have increasingly recognized the role of civil society organizations in shaping the development path of countries, many civil society organizations (CSOs) remain heavily constrained in their ability to make a significant impact on Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which now form the cornerstone of poverty reduction strategies in many developing countries. This inability stems from the limited capacity for policy research/analysis at many CSOs, as well as a lack of experience of policy monitoring tools, and inadequate technical capacity to engage in economic policy formulation. A lack of organization and a significant network has also kept many CSOs from significantly engaging in the PRSP formulation process.

This project, which will be executed by the United Nations Development Programme's Regional Service Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa, will therefore aim to strengthen the capacities of national civil society networks in Eastern and Southern Africa to influence national policies and programmes through effective monitoring of PRSP and MDG progress. It specifically has three objectives. These are to strengthen CSO capacity for evidence-based advocacy, to strengthen CSO capacity to monitor poverty and policies and to use results to influence poverty reduction strategies, and to facilitate joint action, knowledge exchange, and networking among CSOs.

In order to meet its first objective of strengthening CSO capacity for evidence-based advocacy, the project will conduct detailed case studies in three countries to assess cumulative impact of various economic policies at the community level conducted in three countries. It will use these studies to develop mechanisms to more effectively measure the cumulative impact of often-disparate policies, and document these studies and mechanisms in the form of advocacy materials that will be used to stimulate national dialogue and debate on policy formulation.

In order to meet its second objective of strengthening CSO capacity to monitor poverty policies and to influence strategies, the project will conduct training on policy monitoring approaches and tools conducted in three countries. It will also support piloting of three monitoring approaches target countries. These approaches will be, public expenditure tracking surveys, participatory poverty assessments, and citizens' report cards.

Finally, in order to facilitate joint action and knowledge sharing among CSOs, the project will build a network of information exchange among CSOs across the Eastern and Southern Africa region. It will also conduct a workshop to share best practices, and document the lessons learned from various CSOs across the region in a booklet of best practices, which will then be further distributed and used as an advocacy tool.

The project will be carried out in partnership with a variety of regional CSOs, as well as UNDP country offices and host governments. The time frame for completion of the project is 2007.