



# Civil society participation key to true sustainable development

With the 2015 deadline for the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) upon us, there is recognition for the fact that the commitment of UN member states to the MDGs heralded an unprecedented global effort towards addressing poverty. However, concerns over Africa's, and more specifically South Africa's, uneven (and at times poor) progress in meeting MDG targets have been widely noted, maintain *Shirin Motala et al.*

**T**hese concerns have focused the debate on what shape the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda should take and, more importantly, identifying the lessons learnt that must inform the transformational shifts required to deliver radical change in pursuit of the goal of ending extreme poverty by 2030. Fundamental change is thus called for.

## **A need for strong partnerships**

The Millennium Declaration, ratified by 189 countries in 2000, emphasised the need for governments to develop strong partnerships with the private sector and civil society organisations (CSOs) in pursuit of attaining development and poverty eradication goals.

We conducted a scoping study on behalf of the National Development Agency (NDA) to assess the nature and extent of CSOs' engagement with the MDG processes in South Africa.

Through a desktop literature review and qualitative key informant interviews with CSOs and other relevant stakeholders, the study provided a cursory synopsis of the experiences of CSOs' engagement in MDGs in South Africa and importantly, in identifying mechanisms by which CSOs participation could be enhanced as the post-2015 agenda begins to take shape.

An overarching finding from the study was the acceptance that attainment of MDGs could not be realised by governments alone, but in partnership with CSOs. There was consensus that CSOs added value in articulating needs and aspirations of the poor; in filling crucial service delivery gaps,

and in modelling and innovating good practices. This was particularly relevant in the context of ensuring that MDGs were localised within the country context as a means of achieving national development priorities.

### Creating an enabling environment for CSO engagement

Tom Fox and others of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) USA identified five roles that government should fulfil to enable effective CSO engagement.

Mandating refers to the legal and regulatory environment within which CSOs operate. Government should play a facilitating role where it incentivises CSOs as service providers or easily provides information and in an acceptable format. Resourcing refers to the direct funding of CSO work. Partnering is where both parties gain mutual benefit through collaboration. Endorsing refers to actions by government that recognise the contribution of CSOs, one such example is the work of the NDA in supporting CSOs through grant funding, training and capacity building.

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The desktop study pointed to the Zambian Civil Society for Poverty Reduction's (CSPR) CSO engagement process as a potential model for CSO engagement in that it demonstrated that an effective consultative process was continuous rather than episodic, and that it needed to be interactive and iterative rather than linear. In Zambia's experience, this reportedly facilitated greater transparency and accountability in public policy-making on poverty.

Global practices in the preparation of country reports revealed fairly divergent experiences, with CSOs being core members of report drafting teams from the outset in some countries, while in other instances they were invited to provide briefings to the drafters of the report. It was generally noted that the process that unfolded was more often a top-down approach, mainly aimed at ensuring that CSOs were informed of the process but not actively encouraged or enabled to participate directly.

### CSOs driving MDG participation

The study findings showed that CSOs' engagement with MDGs processes in South Africa had been generally poorly co-ordinated. Where there had been significant CSO participation in MDGs, it appeared to have been largely driven by the CSOs themselves.

The 2010 MDG Country Progress Report noted that while the process of drafting the report had been widely designed to be consultative, the reality was that the process was largely led by government with sporadic CSO participation.

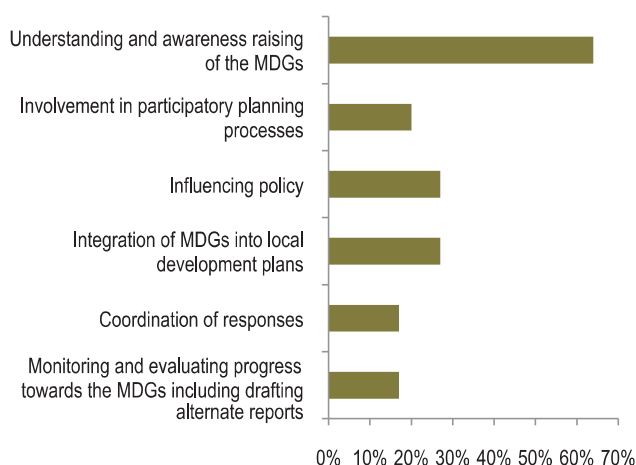
This serious limitation was subsequently addressed following a briefing session that President Zuma held with CSOs and an MDG summit convened by CSOs, with resolutions and recommendations from CSOs being incorporated into the 2010 report.

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Strengthening CSO engagement with MDGs requires the political will of government. This is a challenge, particularly when the relationship between government and CSOs is complex and often adversarial, and with the recognition of the vast differentials in power that exist between the state and CSOs.

As seen in Figure 1, more than 60% of the CSOs surveyed reflected a high level of awareness and understanding of the importance of MDGs. A total of 27% of the CSOs indicated their involvement in influencing policy and in the integration of MDGs into local development plans, and a little less than 20% had engaged in monitoring and evaluating progress on the MDGs, including participation in the drafting of MDG country reports.

Figure 1: Aspects of MDG processes in which CSOs were involved



Source: HSRC 2014

### Towards enhanced CSO engagement

Two key recommendations that emerged from the study as means for strengthening CSOs' engagements with MDGs and in developing processes in the post-2015 agenda were:

- The establishment of a CSO co-ordination body to promote stakeholder engagement on MDGs to enabling effective participation.
- The mobilisation by government of resources for CSOs to effectively contribute towards MDGs beyond an implementation role, towards influencing the policy and design of interventions and monitoring MDG progress.

These recommendations resonate with those that emerged from an international consultation held in November 2014 where the HSRC participated in a conference on *Citizens' Participation and Inequality: Beyond 2015*. This international conference brought together approximately 200 civil society representatives in Copenhagen with the objective of taking stock of the post-2015 agenda and the global goals for sustainable development, and with developing recommendations for fostering enhanced citizen participation in the SDGs agenda after 2015.

Equality was at the core of the key recommendations from the conference. A call was made for a strong commitment to tackling inequalities through the post-2015 agenda by addressing inequalities through the lens of CSO participation, specifically:

- Governments and the United Nations should create an enabling environment for the inclusive participation and meaningful engagement of all CSOs and citizens in decision making, implementation, monitoring and accountability, to address the inequality of the realisation of civil and political rights.
- A global participatory monitoring and feedback network

should be formed to ensure input and feedback from all citizens, especially the most marginalised.

- There should be a peer review mechanism to monitor implementation of the SDGs.

The implementation of these proposals would be particularly crucial for engagement and participation in the development processes in the post-2015 agenda. Only by engaging citizens in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of goals and targets will the post-2015 agenda result in equitable sustainable development. ■

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*The article reports on a study conducted for the National Development Agency aimed at understanding the relevance and contribution of CSOs in South Africa to the realisation of the MDGs' targets. The full report is available on [www.hsrc.ac.za](http://www.hsrc.ac.za): Civil Society Organisations' engagement in the Millennium Development Goal processes in South Africa.*

## Hearing the voices of the poor: the state of poverty in three provinces

With a population of approximately 54 million people, Statistics South Africa (2014) reports that about 12 million people live in extreme poverty in South Africa, meaning they survive on R335 per person per month. *Evans Mupela et al* report on a study to profile the state of poverty and its manifestations within communities in South Africa, commissioned by the National Development Agency (NDA).

The study involved a desktop-based assessment of poverty, followed by a participatory element that explored the perceptions of the poor in three of the poorest provinces in South Africa, i.e. Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo.

The participatory element, or qualitative aspect, was aimed at understanding poor people's perceptions of the multidimensional nature of poverty. Understanding poor people's perceptions of poverty, rooted in their experiences, is a key component of developing effective poverty-reduction strategies.

The authors selected a small group of people living in poverty, who were beneficiaries of NDA-funded development intervention projects located in the three provinces, namely Vukuzenzele Weaving and the Zamokuphila Piggery Farming Co-operative in the Eastern Cape (EC), Asisukume Msinga Agricultural Co-operative in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and RASEKO Agricultural Co-operative in Limpopo.

In each of the projects 15 participants were interviewed, representing men, women, youth, older people and a group of people living with disability.