

Parliamentary Oversight as a Mechanism for Accountability

-- Steven Langdon

1. Introduction: Throughout the world in the last 15-20 years, there has been a marked expansion in the profile and significance of Parliaments in governmental frameworks in most countries. As the complex governance web of interacting institutions and social forces has expanded and deepened in many societies, Parliaments have often become key bridging structures that contribute linkages amongst the disparate actors now involved in shaping the decisions and directions of nations and broad regions. From Nigeria to Brazil to Indonesia, some of the world's largest countries now feature newly powerful and assertive parliamentary institutions -- and reform and renewal have been on the agenda in many parliaments to build new leverage and capacity to influence policies and state actions.

It is possible to identify broad themes in governance improvement which many parliaments have stressed -- from increased transparency in providing information to citizens and the media, to widened participation by all strata of society in the governance system, to strengthened respect for the rule of law enforced by a truly independent and capable judiciary, to improved accountability by executive authorities with respect to their actions, to tougher actions taken against corruption. There are examples to cite of many parliaments taking initiatives to achieve such results, often in conjunction with civil society groups.

One crucial challenge which parliaments face is how their increased influence, and these governance improvements, can contribute to the overwhelming policy priority of countering poverty. Many studies show that poverty has persisted, and sometimes even increased, even as parliaments have become more significant.ⁱ

The focus of this paper is the parliamentary oversight process, as it focuses on poverty reduction priorities. The basis of its thrust is the experience emerging in various parliaments that suggests that effective oversight can greatly increase social accountability of governments, and thereby contribute to significant results from poverty reduction policy goals. Reducing poverty becomes more than rhetoric as a consequence.

2. Poverty and Policy Priorities: The dynamics and texture of persistent poverty are coming to be better analysed in many country settings in this new millennium. Widespread and detailed micro studies are being combined with new theoretical considerations of factors that have been neglected in the past (from environmental dimensions of deprivation, to gender imbalances, to the importance of the social capital encompassed in the web of community interconnections.) The simple perspective of the past claimed that economic growth was the crucial answer to reduce poverty -- so priorities became foreign capital inflows, increased domestic savings and maximized exports to raise average incomes per capita. But the new insights from careful micro analysis and broader thinking suggest structural changes, deliberate equality efforts and widespread community-based reforms must be combined with growth to overcome poverty.

The new approaches can be seen in some of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers that countries are adopting as the new basis of their relationships with the international financial institutions (the World Bank and the IMF.)

So far the countries moving ahead with defined PRSPs are all continuing to see economic growth as important -- but the *quality of that growth* is the fundamental focus of their policy analyses and plans:

- Uganda, for instance, has stressed that achieving improvements in equality of income distribution will be essential to reducing poverty levels, since the gains from most export increases are concentrated in limited regions of the country, and not shared with other regions -- or even with that part of the rural population that relies mostly on food crop production;
- Burkina Faso in West Africa identifies the same lack of connection between export gains in a few key regions -- and increased poverty among food crop producers and cattle farmers in most other regions; women are seen to be particularly disadvantaged, in education, in access to health facilities, and in ability to take advantage of credit opportunities for income gains; so the policy mix stressed looks to reorient spending in health and education so that it is aimed more at disadvantaged rural areas, making use of community control mechanisms -- and special instruments are established to spread income opportunities to women, especially through small-scale credit;
- Bolivia is another case where economic growth has been taking place -- but poverty has been worsening, in urban areas (especially for non-Spanish speaking Indians,) and particularly in certain rural areas where concentrated populations occupy tiny plots where environmental degradation is worsening; redress of land distribution inequalities, measures to improve environmental conditions, and more balanced access to urban services all become policy priorities in this context;
- Nigeria (where PRSP analysis is still ongoing) is a case where massive petroleum revenues brought high rates of economic growth -- but also heavy biases against rural development (where most people were living) and

inflation increases (and service declines) that took poverty levels from 45% of the population in 1985 to 66% in 1999; the revival of oil revenues under the new democratic government after 1999 has been managed more carefully, and is being prevented from destabilizing the economy in as major a way -- even as revenues are being allocated to the redress of rural deprivations in a changed set of policy priorities.

Dominique Njinkeu underlines these patterns in a careful review of the main components in the first five agreed PRSPs from African countries, comprising the "pro-poor policies" that have been brought together to make up the basic packages that have emerged in these cases:ⁱⁱ

- Agricultural development initiatives are a central focus, stressing stronger rural credit mechanisms, improved research and extension services, repair and extension of rural roads, wider availability of agricultural inputs, improved market access, and irrigation investments (all aimed at achieving more balanced equality;)
- Human capital investment is a crucial priority, via greater access to better quality primary schools, improved cost-sharing to reduce financial barriers for the poor, reduced drop-out rates, and greater involvement of the poor in program design; greater access for girls is also stressed;
- Health provision improvements are also stressed, through better delivery systems, health education and greater orientation to rural areas;
- Governance and security provisions are also widely stressed, with better policing, increased transparency and stronger local governments commonly noted as themes (contributing to more community-level social development;)
- Macroeconomic stability is emphasized in all the PRSPs, with policies against inflation stressed, and extra-budget aid resources seen as the crucial basis for financing initiatives (rather than domestic budget deficits or highly variable export-based tax revenues.)

Overall, there is a broad new perspective on the realities of poverty within these patterns.

First, poverty in many poorer countries is seen as a function of deep discontinuities in economic and social structure -- of socio-economic segmentation that means that growth and change in dynamic parts of the economy do not easily spread in positive ways to the rest of the society. Unlike the complex, interconnected economics of most OECD countries (for instance,) income and production gains in one sector do not translate through a whole series of linkages and income flows throughout the whole economy. Thus some sectors and regions can prosper dramatically, while large parts of the population are left without direct income opportunity gains. Hence, market forces cannot be expected to simply transfer national economic growth gains to most people -- instead deliberate policy measures must be adopted.

Second, this relatively thin slice of many economies within which dynamic economic impulses have their impact means that external shocks (negative or positive) can have very marked macroeconomic effects quite quickly. Large export revenue gains can very quickly set off large price increases as monetary inflows hit a relatively narrow range of monetary policy factors -- or capital outflow increases can quickly destabilize foreign exchange rates and domestic credit institutions (as in Asia in 1998.) Macroeconomic stability emerges as a major policy priority -- and in the context of heavy reliance on key export sectors (such as petroleum) so does stabilizing the economy against revenue ups and downs by contingency funds that externalize revenue bonanzas for later use.

These are structural and macroeconomic planning concerns. Access to assets represents another crucial area -- not just in the sense that is true in the Bolivia case noted above (where land reallocation seems crucial,) but even more in the context of human capital. Equitable access to high quality education emerges as one of the most fundamental reform issues in reducing poverty over time.

Fourth, reallocation issues emerge strongly -- on rural-urban lines, but also within rural and urban areas. This is also likely to be an area where state effectiveness is a critical focus, since achieving reallocation has proved to be much more difficult to do in practice than on paper. The defensive protection of their privileged access to state resources by large civil service establishments becomes a key blockage in many cases to institutional reforms that can improve service delivery so that education and health care actually reach the poor.

State-manipulated privileges can also be at the core of extensive self-serving accumulation by minority power groups (as documented in certain Indian States, in the Indonesian public sector, or within the business and political elite in Kenya.)ⁱⁱⁱ This often underlies widespread discrimination with respect to gender, and neglect of environmental considerations to safeguard the longterm land assets to which the poor do have access. Social norms in various contexts also make it difficult to see that land conservation becomes a priority and that the myriad ways are overcome in which women are disadvantaged.

Empowerment of the poor at the community level is a concept to which policy, it seems, must ultimately move to achieve serious improvement. Service delivery can be decentralized in hopes of redressing imbalances; educational improvement can be made a goal; environmental security can be emphasized more in national policies. But there are too many examples of practice on the ground resisting efforts in national plans (or the equivalents of PRSPs.) Indian studies, for instance, show how electricity, water and other service agencies of government failed the poor in Bangalore (providing better service to middle-class citizens at lower prices.) Uganda district officials similarly failed to pass government financial help on to poor schools for which it was designated. Zambia health and education fees fell especially hard on poorer rural farmers

and their children, because they were due during periods of heavy farm production expenditure.^{iv}

Only community-based organizations where the poor can safeguard their rights seem to be able to enforce fairer allocations. Some evidence of such local empowerment working can be seen in cases in Bolivia at the municipal level, in Tanzania in certain village settings, in Philippines local government reform (to small-sized “barangays,”) and in Gujarat state in India where a key local civil society group monitored budgets closely to help assure money got to the poor “tribal” peoples for whom it was intended.

Overcoming poverty, then, is no easy task. The record shows that policy failure is common. But serious policy change may be able to make a difference -- when it is built on challenging existing economic structures and social power concentrations, stresses macroeconomic strategy as well as changing social spending, aims at overcoming gender and environment imbalances, and helps empower the poor at the local community level.

3. The Challenge of Successful Oversight: The challenge for Parliaments is to take such fundamental thinking about poverty reduction into the process of ongoing financial oversight work.

Is it realistic to think that Parliaments can meet such a challenge?

Certainly there are those who would seriously question such a possibility. It is common to hear major objections to a significant parliamentary role in economic policy making: 1) Parliamentarians lack the technical expertise to be able to participate in economic planning and analysis, and therefore cannot be expected to be real players in the financial policy process; 2) M.P.s are pushed by the pressures of local constituency interests and will seek to increase spending in their areas -- thus accelerating spending in general and distorting overall budgets; 3) Parliaments are too subject to political party dominance that prevents the exercise of significant oversight responsibilities on the executive, and can make M.P.s subservient to partisan priorities in analysing resource allocation and service delivery issues.

Such points cannot simply be dismissed, since there are certainly examples of such limitations evident in various countries. But these problems also represent institutional constraints that Parliaments can work to overcome through reform and capacity building. And there is considerable evidence of an increasing number of developing-country Parliaments that can and do become important independent factors in the broad budget cycle process.

The most important ongoing instruments of effective parliamentary action on financial policy have been parliamentary committees. Finance or budget committees have been especially important with respect to budget planning, to

reviewing budget allocation details and to pursuing financial reporting goals. Public accounts committees have been especially crucial in evaluating the effectiveness of programs, checking out financial probity, and initiating sanctions against corruption. Specific poverty reduction committees have also been emerging in some parliaments, such as Niger and Ghana. And committees on gender, on women or on social affairs have increasingly developed oversight initiatives that focus on raising gender equity concerns in the poverty reduction context.

In many cases, the activities of such committees have been becoming more significant. In Ethiopia, for instance, the budget committee receives budget proposals some weeks before Parliament, and is able to discuss priorities and policy approaches in detail with the executive before the budget takes its final form -- Mexico, too, has seen movement toward more agreement on budget matters since the traditional governing party lost its majority in the lower house of the Congress. The Finance Committee in Ghana has also been very effective. It insisted on public hearings in implementing a new value-added tax in the country, over executive objections, and brought in a resulting tax that was somewhat broader but at a lower rate, and much more acceptable to people than previous proposals had been. That committee also pressed successfully for much fuller financial reporting that has provided better guides to Ghanaians of what is actually happening in the economy. And the committee has been instrumental in insisting on openness on the conditions involved in the assistance provided by international and regional financial institutions. Public Accounts Committees have also become quite active and influential in certain countries. The PAC in Ghana has been able to take its own initiatives and tighten financial administration of local school authorities. In Tanzania, government has now accepted that opposition members should head the PAC to give it more credibility. And in Uganda, the Committee has increased its activism dramatically by taking many more financial irregularity suspects to the courts.

However, confronting the fundamental structural and distributional issues that shape ongoing poverty will require Parliamentary actions on a broader level. More activism in the traditional areas of work for M.P.s will not be enough. Reviewing the details of ministry-by-ministry resource allocations, improving the details of a new tax that is being implemented, enforcing stronger sanctions against cases of abuse of public office -- these are all important tasks for M.P.s to do well in the context of the ongoing budget cycle. But the challenge of poverty reduction calls for greater impact in a wider context.

One of the most important new elements providing greater potential for such poverty reduction impact through the budget cycle process is the shift taking place in many countries toward MTEF -- the system of medium term financial allocation and planning that sets the budget in a three-year context, and ties spending and revenue generation to the achievement of specific results. The fundamental goal is to require government and financial management to

think about the reasons for raising and spending funds, to establish benchmarks to measure whether results are in fact being achieved over time, and to provide a longer timeframe within which shifts in priorities and program implementation can occur designed to achieve the results specified.

Such a longer timeframe and clearer outline of results to be achieved -- combined with regular updates on financial data and on indicators of results -- should provide much greater transparency in the governance system, and permit more effective ongoing oversight and policy input by Parliament.

Thus the MTEF process becomes the lens through which the changes are specified clearly in results to be achieved as a consequence of the poverty diagnosis and new policy determinations -- and the financial implications are worked through in integrated detail to shift resources toward those goals (and therefore away from other possible results.) The MTEF process, if it is working as expected, should also assure that the macroeconomic context of the timeframe is consistent with the levels of spending and revenue set out within a poverty reduction plan.

How can this MTEF process specifically influence the financial oversight responsibilities that rest with Parliament, especially with respect to poverty reduction?

A Ghanaian MTEF expert, S.E.K. Anipa, has suggested that the new framework should lead to three new sets of steps:^v

- This more strategic budget approach means that parliamentary oversight of the process, to be effective, has to be wider-ranging than in the case of the more routine, incremental budget-making processes of the past. Parliament and its Finance Committee should play a role during the policy analysis and review phase, where the basic economic policy choices are now being made in many respects, and therefore where accountability, transparency and participation concerns are most important to concentrate -- if they are to be effective in influencing and improving budget performance, and increasing participation by the poor;
- since the budget cycle is now a more comprehensive, rolling-plan process, more regular appearances by ministries and agencies before Parliamentary committees are also appropriate, so as to explain their priorities and implementation choices -- and to permit parliamentary input and scrutiny on these matters, especially in light of poverty reduction directions set;
- chief directors should also be drawn before Parliamentary committees, because part of the MTEF process includes their own setting out of personal performance commitments; the assessment of outputs achieved should include the reviewing of such performance commitments -- and this process, Anipa says, should include review by the relevant parliamentary oversight committee, so that the ultimate authority of parliament in budget matters is maintained.

Implementing MTEF institutional reforms can be a difficult process. In practice, for instance, Ghana failed in its initial implementation efforts. As Armah stresses in his review of Ghana, “The rapid introduction of the MTEF process has compromised the quality of implementation, as reflected in the formulation of strategic plans. The key reason is that the technical complexity of the process requires that more time is needed for it to be internalized.”^{vi} The macro-framework has failed to provide credible estimates, too, and lack of contingency funding has meant external shocks (such as changes in cocoa export and oil import prices) could not be offset.

Thus MTEF initiatives are a crucial tool for improved parliamentary oversight in the poverty reduction context -- but they must be implemented well if they are to improve transparency, increase effective participation, and lead to better achievement of results. One fundamental concern of Parliaments should be to see that MTEF changes are well conceived and implemented -- so that the ongoing Parliamentary input to the process will have real impact.

4. Priorities of Poverty Reduction Parliamentary Oversight: Scrutiny of specific spending and revenue details, in themselves, are not sufficient areas where Parliaments should concentrate in working for the poor in the financial oversight context. There are four fundamental poverty reduction priorities that should also preoccupy Parliaments in many countries.

Priority 1: Participation of the Poor. The poor have considerable insight into the constraints they face and initiatives that would widen their opportunities. Consultations with poor people reveal that they attach high importance to reducing the risks associated with corruption, crime and lack of access to the justice system. Yet most parliaments show a certain reluctance to engage closely with the small, community based groups that best represent the poor. Parliamentary committees may engage national organisations representing the poor but keep their distance from community level groups. The new emphasis in poverty reduction strategies will require fundamental commitments to building links with civil society organisations at all levels. This participation by the poor is crucial to identifying priority areas for public action, and assessing effective mechanisms to impact those areas.

Priority 2: Public Service Implementation Effectiveness. Even where, as in some countries, the appropriate policies are pursued, poverty often endures. This may be the result of lack of capacity or commitment on the part of the government and the public service. As noted in a recent report of the Ministry of Health of Nigeria with respect to HIV/AIDS policy, “a substantial amount of planning has been undertaken, but what often fails is that these plans have not been implemented in most cases”. In developing poverty reduction policies, the great challenge is to actually get results from projects and programs so that they have a positive effect

on the poor. Oversight of program effectiveness is one of the most important parliamentary contributions in the fight against poverty.

Priority 3: Policy Impact Review and Poverty Monitoring. In most developing countries, the gravest shortcoming in the economic policy process is the lack of follow-up analysis of the effectiveness of policies, projects and programs that truly impact on social and economic conditions. Most accountability work in parliaments focuses on inputs (especially money spent) rather than on the outputs, the actual results that have been achieved. In part, this is because measurement of results in the public sector is conceptually difficult. Yet the scarcity of resources in many poorer countries and the fact that the poor face unusual obstacles in accessing what resources there are argues in favour of ensuring that expenditures that do reach the poor should be as beneficial as possible. This means that financial and other committees of parliaments need to be as aggressive and innovative as possible in probing the actual impact of given policies and programs to reduce poverty. Overall, this underlines the need for continual poverty monitoring.

Priority 4: Macro Economic Management. Failed macro-economic stability can set off extreme internal imbalances, destructively high inflation and crises in state finances. This in turn leads to the breakdown in essential public infrastructure and services. These issues should be a continuing focus of poverty conscious parliamentarians who should draw into their work local and external expertise to review and assess the policies being pursued and then report publicly on their findings so that the fullest possible debate and understanding of macro-economic policy is achieved.

This macro-economic area deserves further consideration, since it is often overlooked by Parliaments as a crucial anti-poverty factor.

The scope and direction of macroeconomic strategy will vary considerably, depending on the economic structure and nature of external linkages within any society, and also on the existing macro conditions in the economy (is there instability and disequilibrium in monetary and foreign exchange terms? is the situation quite stable with limited inflation and fiscal imbalances? is there stability combined with steady economic growth in the national economy?)

Thus there will be no single recipe for macroeconomic policy choices -- differences in these factors will call for varied responses.

But there are certain guidelines that can assist M.P.s in reviewing macroeconomic policy-making in the poverty-reduction context, as follows:

- Contemporary macroeconomic policy is usually based on technical work by forecasters using one or more macro models of the overall economy, and how it reacts to different external changes or policy initiatives; it is important

in most countries for government agencies (such as the Finance Ministry and the Central Bank) to co-operate together to co-ordinate the thinking and assumptions being used to build such a model -- and then to compare findings from that with what is being suggested by other models developed by private forecasters (in think tanks or universities, for instance.) Detailed knowledge of how the models are constructed is not crucial for M.P.s, but understanding what the models are showing can be (how will inflation increase if domestic government borrowing grows quickly, for instance? how will export revenue increases or decreases work their way through the different sectors of the economy, and either help or hurt the poor?)

- Macro analysis suggests that economic growth is needed to reduce poverty, but it is not enough; distribution of that growth matters a lot for the poor, so improving income and asset distribution seems essential to poverty reduction (through land tenure reform, pro-poor public spending, and measures to gain more access to financial markets by the poor;) growth in sectors where the poor are concentrated will also help (such as regions of the country where feeder roads would make a big difference to small-scale farmers there;)
- Macro instability, especially high inflation rates, and spending cuts that fall heavily on the poor, can greatly worsen poverty, so there is a strong case for prudent macro policies -- via avoiding rapid accumulation of debts, maintaining appropriate exchange rates that do not create illicit markets, and safeguarding sufficient international reserves to deal with external shocks without having to cut pro-poor spending;
- Fiscal policy choices need to consider the distributional results of tax policy and public spending, and can also improve conditions for the poor when fiscal reforms reduce corruption problems, improve the efficiency with which programs are delivered, and see to it that richer citizens pay their fair share of revenues through improved tax collection procedures; fiscal policies should also try to avoid spending patterns that follow (and therefore amplify) the business cycle ups and downs in the economy -- finding ways to “tie the hands” of public spending during boom periods (so as to avoid inflation,) and then having that cushion to cover periods of distress in which pro-poor spending would otherwise be cut; recent studies of PRSP macro policies show a general reluctance to use such latitude to maintain pro-poor spending – suggesting overly prudent policy positioning;^{vii}
- Policies should also aim to insulate the poor against adverse shocks -- by putting social safety nets in place when they are not needed, so that they will be available when the need arises -- and by then protecting the spending on those safety nets during periods of economic downturn and external (or environmental) pressures;
- Monetary and exchange rate policies are also important to manage carefully, with attention to anti-poverty priorities; changes in the money supply can affect output in positive ways in some circumstances -- although it is also true that overly-excessive expansion in the money supply can set off inflationary pressures, which at high rates can have negative effects on the rate of growth; similarly, the exchange rate regime can buffer external shocks (with

a devaluation, for instance, helping maintain more robust economic activity in the face of export price declines) -- though exchange rate changes can also have adverse distributional effects on the poor (as in Nigeria, where oil revenues led to high values for the naira, and urban purchases from abroad rather than from poor rural Nigerians -- in that case, holding far more of those revenues in reserves abroad could have safeguarded the economic stability of the country, and assured less damage to the rural poor.)

By following these sorts of guidelines, Parliaments can underline the importance of equity considerations in broad economic strategy -- and thereby help assure better sharing of economic benefits. They can also act as a watchdog against economic instability that would hit the poor particularly hard.

5. Working for Oversight Results: It is especially crucial that Parliaments recognize that achieving results against poverty requires a long-term strategy, and internal steps within Parliamentary institutions themselves.

A workplan will be needed with steps to give Parliaments the ability to sustain their interventions, bring significant independent expertise to bear, and exercise effective leverage in their oversight activities and policy initiatives with respect to the executive.

Certain steps can be taken at the national level of Parliament itself. Innovations that can be taken should include:

- formation of an institutional planning capacity to shape improvements -- such as a Board of Internal Development involving the Speaker and key elected leaders
- establishment of new committees (such as a Standing Committee on Poverty Reduction)
- new emphasis on overall watchdog committees such as Committees of Assurance
- establishment of well-paid research capabilities to serve Parliament
- changes in internal rules to permit tougher and more direct scrutiny of key executive leaders (eg. the Prime Minister in Tanzania cannot be asked questions during Question Period)
- strengthening of existing committees as part of this process, as well as consideration of staffing to serve these -- particularly in the case of committees dealing with financial oversight, and with key areas of service delivery relevant to the poor (such as education, health, roads and rural development support)
- encouraging of committees, party caucuses, and Parliament itself to work more actively on outreach to the poor.

Most M.P.s would agree with the conclusions of the 2001 Dakar Declaration on training matters: "Where necessary, upgrading programmes for Parliamentarians should build into them skills to enable Parliamentarians to

engage effectively on poverty reduction strategies. These courses should be supplemented with specially designed courses on basic economics and government budgeting skills because a significant portion of the resources for combating poverty must come from national budgetary provision. . . . Support is required for the conduct of workshops to enable Parliamentarians to share views on the problem of poverty.”

Of all the areas of Parliamentary strengthening, the building up of committee capacity seems to be at the heart of serious improvement in the contributions M.P.s can make.

Parliamentary committees can have an important impact in the context of financial oversight. But significant improvements in performance which committees work to achieve are often necessary to have such an impact. This reality underlies the efforts of Ghana’s economic policy committees to use a series of workshops and other initiatives to improve their effectiveness, the activities of Uganda’s watchdog committees to do likewise, and similar initiatives underway in Ethiopia, Tanzania, Indonesia, Cambodia, Kenya, Nigeria and elsewhere.

Efforts to strengthen parliamentary committees can include various programs and institutional innovations. Key points stressed in a variety of countries are:

- work on consensus-building and strategic planning within committees, so that they can develop leadership and priorities to be able to exert leverage effectively -- regular retreats, ongoing interchanges on key policy issues, and serious goal-setting and self-evaluation processes are main features of such work;
- building linkages with civil society organizations and independent policy-advisory institutions, on local and national levels, so as to strengthen information inputs, widen numbers of allies that can help in achieving transparency/participation/accountability goals, and deepen sources of political credibility that parliaments have by improving local-level perceptions of the institution;
- developing sources of expertise for committees, by improving systems of information resource access through skilled staff personnel, through broader societal linkages and through international connections via the Internet and regional (and wider) networks; and
- establishing institutional and legislative mechanisms to open up transparency, including strong Freedom of Information laws, improved staffing and more regular reporting from Auditors General, and greater institutional independence for public statistical agencies.

These initiatives are in turn reinforced by moves to improve the general credibility, access to information and widened linkages of Parliament in a more general sense. This is especially true with respect to the anti-corruption

impact of Parliamentary activity. Thus broad efforts are important to establish Codes of Ethics for M.P.s, to make campaign financing transparent, honest and constrained, and to broaden diversity of representation in parliaments.

6. Conclusion: An activist role for Parliament is a priority in achieving poverty reduction, in broad development terms and in terms of financial oversight. The direct ongoing links of Members of Parliament with the many poor people who elect them can give them credibility in working for poverty reduction.

That is not to say that Parliaments will always listen to, connect with, and work for the poor. Weak electoral systems, party structures run by wealthy and self-interested minorities, or constitutions that give power monopolies to the executive can all mean Parliaments become part of the problem for the poor, not part of the solution.

But this paper has stressed examples and cases that illustrate the potential for Parliament to carry forward poverty reduction reforms and initiatives.

In the broad poverty reduction strategy context in particular, Parliaments can have a crucial oversight role to play regarding development and implementation of strategies; M.P.s should take special responsibility for safeguarding the integrity of the participation process, particularly for the poor; Parliamentary review of financial implementation is fundamental; and M.P.s should be essential leaders in the monitoring and evaluation stage, given the need for scrutiny independent of the executive to assess results.

Such tasks, though, necessitate improved institutional capacities within most parliaments, where basic infrastructure is often missing. The challenge for Parliaments is to develop the workplans that will give them impact, and then use that influence to work for poverty reduction results.

ⁱ See, for example, *Voices of the Poor*, a special set of studies for the World Bank's World Development Report for 2000; Rajni Kothari also illustrates the increase of poverty in India in the context of strong parliamentary development there -- R. Kothari, *Poverty*, 1993.

ⁱⁱ D. Njinkeu, "Pro-Poor Policies in Selected African PRSPs," Presentation at the African Forum on Poverty Reduction Strategies, Dakar, Senegal, September 10-13, 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ There is extensive literature on these cases. For further reading see S.W. Langdon, *Global Poverty*, Garamond Press: Toronto, 1999, chap. 7.

^{iv} See the cases in "Citizen Feedback Surveys as a Tool for Civil Society Participation in Assessing Public Sector Performance: The Case of Bangalore, India;" "Uganda: Tracking Public Expenditures (PETS);" and "The Impact of PRA Approaches and Methods on Policy and Practice: the Zambia PPA," in *PRSP Sourcebook*, World Bank, 2000.

^v Economic Concerns and National Integrity, A Discussion Guide to Issues and Policies, Based on the 1999 Akosombo Workshops of the Parliamentary Finance and Public Accounts Committees of Ghana, Parliamentary Centre (Ottawa,) presentation by S.E.K. Anipa, pp. 13-14.

^{vi} Bartholomew Armah, "The Medium Term Expenditure Framework -- A Case Study of Ghana," Presented to the African Forum on Poverty Reduction Strategies, Dakar, Senegal, September, 2001, p. 7.

^{vii} Ricardo Gottschalk, "PRSPs, Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction," Paper presented to Wilton Park Conference on Economic Choices for Poverty Reduction, June, 2004.