

# Development Observatories as Potential Citizenship Fora

**Maputo, 14 April 2009**

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## **eighth session**

of the central Development Observatory, a platform for interaction between civil society and Government where the two parties assess the country's progress in its fight against absolute poverty, took place on the 18th of this month. Launched in 2003 as a government initiative to establish a permanent mechanism for hearing the concerns and aspirations of civil society organisations, the Development Observatory gradually expanded to the provinces and in 2008 for the first time meetings were held in all provincial capitals.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), that has been providing technical assistance to the Development Observatories through the Ministry of Planning and Development, has just published the results of an independent study it commissioned, on the experience and lessons to be learned from the operation and effectiveness of this consultation mechanism.

The study assesses the socio-economic and political context when the Development Observatory was first launched in the country in 2003: how it operated both at central level and in the provinces and the relevance and effect of its findings. The study concludes by suggesting measures to strengthen the observatories and to make their recommendations more effective.

## **Nature and Relevance of the Development Observatories**

The study starts by noting that from the very beginning the Development Observatories (initially called Poverty Observatories) were created by the government as an instrument for consultation with its cooperation partners, monitoring and evaluating implementation of the Action Plan for the Reduction of Absolute Poverty (PARPA).

When the first Observatory was launched in April 2003 it was not anticipated that this consultation mechanism would be extended to the provinces. This started to happen in 2005, apparently as a "voluntary" initiative by some Provincial Governors in response to proposals by local civil society organisations.

Assessing the relevance and impact of the findings of both the Central and the Provincial Observatories, the above-mentioned study raises some pertinent questions, including issues such as the institutional setting, the technical capacity and representativity of civil society with its diversity that reaches down to rural communities, decision making or recommendation process and the subsequent follow-up, among others.

The study starts by considering one of the most frequently discussed aspects of these issues ? the great potential of the observatories for the creation of more participatory mechanisms in the implementation and monitoring of strategies to fight poverty. It emphasises that their potential as a mechanism for strengthening citizens' participation in monitoring PARPA and other public policies and programmes can be very positive, if the current constraints debate were to be overcome.

According to the study, one of the main factors in the weakness of the Development Observatories stems from their origin, when they were launched as "merely" consultative bodies such that their recommendations are not binding on any government institution.

A second consequence of this "congenital problem" is the lack of thematic or sequential links between the sessions of the Provincial Observatories and those of the Central Observatory. In other words, there is no way that the provincial concerns, findings and recommendations with potential national impact can be channelled to the Central Observatory and from there find echo in the PARPA Joint Review processes, where the budget support donors also intervene.

The report details the experience gained through the Provincial Observatories. For example, it points out that their meetings are irregular, with no fixed timetable, and depend on the agenda of the Provincial Governor. Also at this level, the study finds that the participants and their respective roles vary considerably. In some cases all the District Administrators participate whereas in others they are virtually absent and Provincial Directors predominate. The study also says that the level and quality of the sessions have been weak mainly because of the weak technical quality of the documents and the fact that most participants do not know their content until the opening session.

However, it seems that by far the most common criticism by civil society organizations interviewed during the study is that, as the district is the basis of all planning and the theatre for most of the PARPA interventions, the District Consultative Councils should be more involved in the Provincial Development Observatories - which is not the case at the moment.

As regards the ability of civil society organisations to interpret and discuss the content of technical PARPA documents, the study rejects the argument that they do not have the necessary technical capacity. It considers that, on the contrary, it is the duty of the government and its cooperation partners to prepare documents for public discussion with a language that is accessible to everyone.

As regards the institutional setting, the study compares the situation in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region, where these mechanisms for monitoring the fight against poverty have been established under the leadership of a variety of different bodies, from ministries to Offices of the President of the Republic or even independent research institutions.

One issue raised by the study and apparently the subject of much controversy concerned whether or not civil society organizations should or should not benefit from state budget funding of their activities. Some are looked upon as "the long arm" of Government as they provide goods and services to rural and urban communities, while others have advocacy activities in the field of the citizens' fundamental rights. Although the vast majority of government officials questioned reject this possibility, some CSOs feel that access to state funds in order to undertake activities for communities should not be considered out of the ordinary, as it is common practice in Mozambique's donor countries.

## **Main Recommendations**

Given the study's above-mentioned findings it recommends the institutionalisation of Development Observatories so that they are no longer informal consultation mechanisms but take on the nature of relevant sources of opinion in the PARPA formulation, implementation and monitoring process and in public policies.

Another recommendation is that District Consultative Councils should be included in the monitoring road map for PARPA and other public policies. This would mean better technical preparation of these community structures that at the moment concentrate mainly on managing the local investment fund, commonly known as the "7 million".

The study recommends that the Provincial Observatories should observe a rigid, pre-determined calendar that is in some way linked to that of the Central Observatory with preparatory sessions to introduce civil society participants to the reports and topics to be discussed in a single planned

plenary session. Indeed, the fact that the Provincial Observatories only last one day is also questioned by the study that considers this to be insufficient time for a profound debate with full participation by everyone.

Nevertheless, it is reported that some of these recommendations are being covered by a Guide to Development Observatories that was recently concluded by the Ministry of Planning and Development. Among other aspects it stipulates that establishment of calendars for sessions of the Provincial Observatories.