

More of the same – Niger's PRSP experience

In the vast Sahel country of Niger, the population has been growing faster than the gross domestic product. Niger has long experience of "stabilization" measures and structural adjustment programmes imposed from outside. Does the PRSP mark a fresh start?

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Twenty years after the first reform programmes were implemented in Niger, economic growth has demonstrably not been achieved in a sustained manner. Investment rates, rather than improving, have been on a downward trend. The deficits in the budget and the balance of payments, after a period of temporary calm, have once again been tending to worsen, and the debt burden has become unmanageable.

The social impacts have given rise to even more doubts and questions, not only at the level of decision-making on the national plan, nor only at the continental level and beyond, but also within international bodies such as the UN, which organized the Copenhagen Summit in a bid to have the social dimension taken into account.

In response to these criticisms, the international financial community, as part of its handling of poor countries' debt, initiated the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) as a lead scheme for promoting socio-economic development in highly indebted poor countries.

This is the context within which Niger opted to maintain, among its development priorities, the reduction of poverty in the medium term and its elimination in the long term. To convert this priority into an action programme, the Government has embarked on a process of preparing a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (*Cadre*

Stratégique de Réduction de la Pauvreté – CSRP) over the next fifteen years.

The world objective with which Niger is aiming to comply is to reduce by half, between 2000 and 2015, the proportion of the population living in extreme poverty. Thus, in drawing up this framework, priority has been given to a participatory approach.

However, although the social partners welcomed the principle of giving civil society the vice-chairmanship of each of the eleven thematic working groups, the participatory process turned out to be superficial. In fact, the definitive PRSP did not represent the contributions of the various social groups. Moreover, the variables that were taken into account were, more often than not, either manipulated to fit the pre-established theses of the IMF and the World Bank, or diluted by a unilateral reflection of essentially quantitative or even artificial visions on the part of the national leaders.

All of which led the social partners to note serious shortcomings of both process and substance:

Inadequate involvement of civil society within the process. It should be pointed out here that the appointment of the civil society representative within the PRSP permanent secretariat did not follow democratic ground rules, which would

have required that the civil society delegates elect their own delegate. Rather, the appointment was by unilateral decision of the public authorities. This goes against one of the basic principles of good political governance, namely the democratic participation of the various social groups in the PRSP process. Also, measures must be taken to ensure that the participatory structures are not used to undermine the social partners. Their independence and representativity within these structures are the only guarantees of their effective participation in the development process as a whole.

Inadequacy of the approach used to define poverty. It has to be said that, in Niger, it is the monetary approach that is used to define poverty in general. Thus, the dimension of poverty which comes to the fore is that of degrading, humiliating living conditions, in which the individual scarcely achieves an income of FCFA 75,000 (about US\$140) in the urban areas and FCFA 50,000 in the rural areas. So in Niger, priority has been given to the monetary-economic approach taken by the World Bank.¹ This gives only a partial account of the multidimensional nature of poverty.

The socio-economic partners who, due to this approach, are excluded from the category of the poor, are rather more in agreement with the analytical definition of poverty given by Professor Amartya Sen,² who argues that poverty should be generally understood as the lack of opportunities, for an individual or a group of people in society, to achieve a minimum acceptable basic living standard.

This presupposes the availability of basic facilities such as good food, clothing, decent accommodation and morbidity prevention, but also of more complex facilities such as participation in the life of the community, and the possibility of appearing in public without shame or any other similar sentiment. The ability to conceive of one's personal revenues in terms of capacities depends on a whole range of personal circumstances (notably age, gender, predisposition to illness, infirmities, etc.) and

on the social environment (particularly epidemiological characteristics, the physical and social environment, public health and education services, etc.).

Inadequacies in the chosen strategies for the struggle against poverty and for development. Niger's PRSP is part of a development policy framework that concerns all economic and social sectors. Turning poverty reduction into the backbone of economic and social development, the strategies contained in this instrument are articulated around the following main axes:

- The promotion of good governance
- The stability of the macroeconomic framework
- The development of the social sectors
- The development of infrastructure.

It establishes a direct link between debt relief and the strategic framework for poverty reduction, the aim being to increase social spending by means of the funds available within the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) Initiative.

Nonetheless, it has been noted that the PRSP includes the essential elements of the structural adjustment programmes and is rooted in the same macroeconomic neoliberal arguments which, as has been proved, contributed to the country's woes over the course of two decades.

A detailed examination of the macroeconomic and structural adjustment measures contained in Niger's PRSP demonstrates that there has been no questioning of the advice given within the framework of what is known as the "Washington Consensus".

For instance, in the education sector, the PRSP simply continues the policies and programmes that had already been followed. If the aim of this programme is schooling for all, through the creation of educational infrastructure financed by HIPC resources, it has numerous limitations because, in such a sensitive and strategic sector for the country's future, it implements the policy directions and the

decisions of the international financial institutions. To cite just one aspect of this, the employment policy for teachers, within the framework of labour market deregulation, is based on contracting. It derives from a World Bank thesis, behind which is the idea that the quality of teaching depends neither on the training received by the teachers nor on their employment status. This translates into the replacement of trained teachers with untrained supply teachers on temporary contracts.

This approach results in a serious decline in educational standards and turns Niger's schools into reproducers of inequality, given that the great majority of those attending school, and ultimately being ejected from school, are the sons of the poor.

The PRSP takes no account of this educational attrition, instead focusing purely on developments in primary school enrolment rates. This example shows that, as far as options for poverty reduction are concerned, the PRSP reproduces some which are to the detriment of the poor, and which have not been discontinued or revised.

Notes

¹ The exact poverty threshold, as defined by the World Bank, is US\$1.08 per person per day, corresponding to the median of the ten lowest poverty thresholds in a group of poor countries.

² See Sen, A. 1984. *Resources, Values and Development*, Harvard University Press, reprinted edition 1997.