

Foreword

One of the key strengths of the Commonwealth is to bring together a diverse regional and cultural perspective on challenges that the membership is facing. This allows the sharing of lessons between nations and – where necessary – the promotion of change internationally. There is no greater or more important challenge facing either individual countries or the international community than reducing and eventually eliminating absolute poverty. This book is about the experience of four Commonwealth countries in the mechanics of meeting that challenge.

The way in which the international community engaged with the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of poverty reduction and development changed around the turn of the last century. The embodiment of this change was seen in two events. The first was the consensus on what was to be achieved, seen in the global commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015 at the Millennium Summit in September 2000. The second was the consensus on how these goals should be achieved, which was set out at Monterrey in 2002. These have guided – albeit imperfectly – international efforts in this area ever since.

This progress was mirrored in the international financial institutions (IFIs). The language of structural adjustment and conditionality was abandoned for a new commitment to country ownership and partnership. The introduction of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process in 1999 was emblematic of this new thinking. The stated aim was to create a comprehensive programme in which a country could articulate its priorities for poverty reduction and through which the international community could work to support those objectives.

Throughout the early years of the PRSP process, there was concern that this high aspiration was not being met in practice. There were multiple fears. First, that the content of PRSPs owed more to thinking in Washington than in countries themselves – a fear enhanced by the close association of PRSP design with eligibility for debt relief. Second, that consultation within governments and countries was limited. Third, was the fear that PRSPs were not being used effectively by donors, international institutions or governments. Finally, was the concern that a change of IFI language did not necessarily mean a change in mindset.

Since 1999, 18 Commonwealth countries have had at least one formal Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. The purpose of this book is to draw on that accumulated experience to understand how the PRSP process has worked in practice and what its impact on policy – and consequently the lives of the people in these countries – has been. The four case studies get beneath the rhetoric of the process to provide insights for all those concerned with the practice of promoting poverty reduction. Appropriately, it emerges from the analysis that there is no single set of common lessons for the creation and use of PRSPs and no single blueprint.

Nonetheless, it is also clear that it is through this comparative work that the international community can continue the constant learning essential to achieving the central goal of prosperity for all.

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