

Evaluation of the Poverty Reduction  
Strategies in Latin America – 2007  
Executive Summary Honduras

# International Cooperation and National Execution





# Preface

The PRS Process was a response to widespread concern about persistent and high levels of poverty in many developing countries and about the apparent ineffectiveness of aid in addressing this problem. At the center of the PRS Process was the idea of using a participatory process involving government officials and civil society to develop a national strategy for reducing poverty in each country. Donors committed to support these strategies with aid resources delivered as debt relief and programmatic aid. They also committed to align their aid programs with the national poverty reduction strategies.

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) asked the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague to conduct a study to monitor and evaluate the PRS processes in three countries of Latin America that are eligible for debt relief: Bolivia, Honduras, and Nicaragua. The study was conducted over five years, beginning in 2003. Since 2003, the PRS process has taken different paths in the three countries. For example, while the PRS continues to be an important document in Honduras, in Bolivia no one talks about the PRS process anymore. Adapting to these changes, the annual reports have touched on topics beyond the strict confines of the PRS process, also addressing issues of concern for poverty reduction more generally.

Five reports are published each year: three country reports about recent developments in the PRS process, one regional report that presents a comparative analysis, and one thematic report on a topic chosen in consultation with Sida each year. The annual reports and the executive summaries in English and Spanish are available on the ISS website ([www.iss.nl/prsp](http://www.iss.nl/prsp)). The ISS website also includes background reports about gender, rural development, and education, which contributed to the analysis in the annual country reports.

All of the reports are based on data analysis, a review of available literature, and interviews with national and local-level actors involved in the PRS process. The ISS team has had complete independence in the process of designing, implementing, and financing the studies. The opinions and conclusions expressed in the reports are those of the authors and are not necessarily the opinions and conclusions of Sida.

The 2007 reports, as the final reports in this series, are somewhat different from the reports of previous years, in which recent developments in the PRS process were presented in great detail. The 2007 country reports and regional report present a longer-term view of the

PRS experience, and thus take into consideration the entire PRS period as well as the years preceding the start of the PRS Process. The goal has been to draw lessons and identify trends in foreign aid during the last 12 years. The thematic report also takes a longer-term view on rural development policies in each country and, as a result, does not discuss in detail all of the most recent developments in this sector.

We hope that the 2007 reports will help provoke and deepen discussions about the limited impact of the PRS process in the region and about how to better attack the problem of persistent poverty in Bolivia, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

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Project Coordinator  
January 2008

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Evaluation of Poverty Reduction Strategies in Latin America

Honduras Country Report 2007 Executive Summary

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# Introduction

Honduras prepared its Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) or *Estrategia para la Reducción de Pobreza* (ERP) in 2000–2001, as a prerequisite for receiving interim debt service relief in the context of the 1999 Enhanced HIPC Initiative. Debt relief became final in April 2005 when the country reached the Completion Point.

PRS processes dovetail perfectly with donor efforts to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of assistance by modifying the ways in which it is delivered. The primary objective of this report is to examine whether these initiatives have been carried out as anticipated in Honduras.

As this is the fifth and final study in this series, we ask ourselves what the general outcomes of the PRS process in Honduras have been. We examine whether the process – and the donors’ focus on poverty – have improved the willingness and the capacity of governments to reduce poverty and whether this effort has in fact contributed to poverty reduction.

## **Sociopolitical Context**

Four consecutive democratically elected administrations have governed Honduras during the period selected for this study (1995–2007). Two important features of the first of these, the Carlos Roberto Reina administration (1994–1997), had a direct impact on the PRS: (i) the continuity of the reforms included in the State modernization program; and (ii) the independence of the Legislature vis-à-vis the Executive. The latter was reflected in the approval of the “Statutes” (“Estatutos”) of the influential teachers’ and doctors’ unions, which increased the annual cost of these sectors and ultimately affected the PRS budget structure.

Hurricane Mitch wreaked enormous damage on the country during the Carlos Roberto Flores administration (1998–2001). In response, the donor community created a space for dialogue called the Consultative Group to coordinate emergency assistance based on national priorities. These priorities were established jointly by the government and civil society and subsequently set forth in a Master Plan for National Reconstruction and Transformation. Honduras was declared eligible for HIPC in 1999 and proceeded to develop its PRS, the final version of which was approved in 2001.

The Ricardo Maduro administration (2002–2005) proposed to reach the Completion Point of the HIPC process in order to secure the release of the debt relief resources needed to finance PRS programmes. This



goal was reached only belatedly, in 2005. It therefore fell to this administration to begin implementation of the PRS, but under significant budget constraints.

The current administration of Manuel Zelaya (2006–2009) started off with high expectations raised by the announced external debt relief. It established the Presidential Commissioner of the PRS which, in practice, has become the administrator of the Decentralized PRS Fund approved by the Legislature during the controversial 2006 budget process. It has had to confront growing public insecurity, pressure from the teachers' union, and the crisis of the state-owned electricity and telecommunications companies. Substantial budget increases for security and to fulfill agreements with the teachers' union have been charged to the PRS fund, causing consternation among important civil society organizations.

### **Has the PRS Changed Assistance?**

There are no figures on grants and external debt relief received prior to 2000. The available data show a decline in grants (from over US \$300 million annually in 2000–2001 to 139 million in 2006) accompanied by an increase in external debt relief resources (from US \$10 million in 2000 to \$138 million in 2006), which reflects a certain degree of substitution of external assistance.

Honduras received US \$200 million annually in concessional loans from 1995 to 1998. Disbursements tripled following Hurricane Mitch, reaching US \$558 million in 1999, although the increase was only temporary. Concessional loans also increased in 2004 in relation to the signing of an agreement with the IMF and, possibly, to donor support for Honduras to reach the HIPC Initiative's Completion Point. This was again followed by reductions in subsequent years.

The years for which data are available for the three categories of external assistance reflect an increase in per capita assistance from US \$82 in 2000 to US \$104.6 in 2001 (due to larger concessional loan disbursements and more external debt relief), followed by a sharp reduction in 2002. Assistance increased once again to over \$100 per capita in 2004, followed by reductions the next two years. Relative to the GDP, it peaked in 2001 (10.7%), compared to 5.2% in 2006. Moreover, external assistance accounted for nearly half of public expenditure in 2002, compared to less than a quarter in 2006. This past year, 10% of total public expenditure was funded through external concessional loans.

A cursory examination of "programme aid" suggests that, contrary to expectations, a larger portion of total public expenditure was funded through concessional loans in the form of budget or balance of payments support prior to 2000 than during the PRS period. Only in 2004 was a temporary increase in programme aid observed.

Most grants and donations continue to come from bilateral government sources, although their relevance has declined since 2002, as the contribution from multilateral institutions has risen. Bilateral relief is more recent than that from multilateral sources and in 2003 and 2004 accounted for the bulk of total relief granted. In contrast, multilateral relief increased significantly in 2005 and 2006 to become once again the primary source of external debt relief.

Multilateral creditors have been the main source of concessional loans granted to the central government, particularly in recent years. Multilateral disbursements increased substantially in 1999 and again in 2004. An increase in bilateral disbursements also is observed from 2002 to 2004.

An examination of a sample of external assistance agreements suggests that after 2001 less attention is paid to structural adjustment and more to social sectors. They generally reflect a stronger alignment with poverty reduction policies than previously and some of the more recent agreements include more conditions, most of which must be met prior to any disbursements. With the exception of one outcome-related condition (a stable macroeconomic framework) all of the conditions are formulated in terms of processes.

### **More Efficiency and Effectiveness Thanks to Programme Aid?**

Presumably, programme aid, such as general and sectoral budget support (BS), can help avoid (some of) the drawbacks of project aid. It should also entail lower transaction costs, greater alignment and coordination of assistance, the use of – and support for – national systems, and results-orientation.

Prior to disbursing (general) BS, donors generally require that the government complies with certain prerequisites such as macroeconomic stability, a poverty reduction strategy and evidence of its implementation, and confidence in public finances management. These conditions are not always met in practice, however, which has led donors to condition BS itself to ensure their influence over policy. In practice, progress toward programme aid appears to be modest.

*General Budget Support, government systems and capacity.* The World Bank, the IDB, and the European Commission have different systems for providing BS and the conditionality has little to do with the ERP because the original version was not sufficiently specific. Donors also have their own priorities.

Different general BS programmes have included conditions – some of them quite detailed – related to the installment or strengthening of systems (e.g. SIAFI and SIERP) and capacity. Often the type of conditionality imposed is similar to that required for the structural adjustment loans of the 1990s.

Donors have reacted in various ways to the government's total or partial noncompliance. Some have reduced payments, while others have changed the conditionality or may even change the type of assistance (i.e. from general to sector-specific BS).

The subsectoral Education for All (EFA) Programme was developed in 2003, but was not funded until 2005. Eleven donors signed the General Framework Memorandum of Understanding for the EFA, all of whom participate in the Round Table of Donors in Education and six in the Common Fund. This group frequently has very detailed discussions. The Ministry of Education requests that the donors decide on operational expenditures. Various governmental committees coordinate and supervise the programme.

While it is still too early to observe the plan's outcomes and impacts, at this time it is possible to identify certain aspects or provisional outcomes that may have an influence on impact indicators:

1. There appears to be only a limited degree of ownership of the EFA plan.
2. Donors frequently engage in micromanagement. There are several reasons for this: (i) not all Common Fund donors are convinced that the conditions are appropriate for such a fund; (ii) there has been considerable interference from donors outside the Common Fund; (iii) there has been no pressure against this micromanagement due to the lack of ownership, as well as a lack of government leadership.

3. Up to now, EFA transaction costs have been high for the government and donors alike. There are two main reasons for this: (i) donors want to influence because they believe their standards are higher; (ii) on the government side, government officials do not always have a clear grasp of how to work with programme aid or may be uncertain themselves.
4. While the donors' ideas to improve the quality of primary and pre-school education seem to be good overall, there have been problems with text book distribution and it was not clear whether they were of a logistical or political nature, or corruption-related. Probably as a response to these problems, the donors have requested that EFA implementation be decentralized.

### **Donor Commitments: Has the PRS Process Changed Anything?**

*Commitment to poverty reduction.* More attention has been paid to poverty reduction at the level of discourse since the PRS process began, or perhaps since the 1999 Stockholm Declaration. Many donors have considered this attention a central condition for external debt relief and it has also been a condition (whether implicit or explicit) in most of the loan or grant agreements examined for this report.

International cooperation agents perceive that poverty-related spending remains high on the public debate agenda although they also point out problems with funding disbursement. This raises the concern that, in practice, the actual commitment may not live up to the discourse. Some of those interviewed felt that the PRS process raised the level of debate from the outset, while others disputed that contention. In terms of statistical data, respondents acknowledged that the PRS process had improved donors' disposition towards data collection, although in practice there has been little support for the National Statistics Institute (INE).

*The commitment to government ownership and leadership.* The PRSP drafting process enabled donors to move towards improved coordination of external aid. Nonetheless, in the implementation of the strategy, progress towards effective, government-led coordination remained modest, and was limited to information sharing about programmes and projects either in progress or in the planning stage and coordinating donor missions to the country. It would appear that in practice each donor continued to pursue its own priorities. Obviously such practices did not contribute to an appropriate climate to foster governmental leadership and ownership of policies.

Sector-specific round tables on poverty reduction policies were organized with the participation of the government, civil society and international cooperation. In recent years, however, there has been no progress in the functioning of these sectoral round tables. This suggests that in practice government-donor dialogue in the PRS framework has failed to enhance government ownership of poverty reduction policies or to improve the effectiveness of its leadership in coordinating external assistance.

As stated earlier, a process to update the PRSP was initiated in 2006 with IDB support. There are however, questions about the degree of governmental leadership and ownership of this process.

In general, donor rhetoric gives the impression of alignment with government policy, of a commitment to national ownership, and of better coordination of assistance under government leadership. The experience on the ground, however might lead to a different conclusion.

*Potential tensions between the objective to support poverty reduction and the alignment objective.* Discussions of this issue with several governmental and international cooperation officials in Honduras elicited some viewpoints that questioned the alignment of some donors while others questioned the government's authority to request it. Ultimately, this might be indicative of the weakness of the Honduran State in envisioning the development horizon it hopes to achieve.

### **Government Commitment, Capacity, and Outcomes**

Our assessment of the government's commitment to the PRS process is based on the accomplishment of goals to ensure (i) the fiscal space for priority spending on the PRS and (ii) the political sustainability of this process through the efficiency, effectiveness and coherence of government actions to implement the ERP. In order to create fiscal space, the PRS process includes goals related to GDP growth (a minimum real growth of between 4.5% and 5.5% annually beginning in 2006), tax and current revenues of at least 17% and 18% of the GDP respectively, and increases in public social expenditure (PSE) (to at least 50% of total public spending beginning in 2005) and of poverty-related spending (PRS spending) of no less than 9% of the GDP.

*Creation of the fiscal space.* In 2006 and 2007, GDP growth neared 6% in a favourable regional and international climate. There are however threats related to structural and short-term situational factors. These include the country's excessive dependence on economic activities which are very sensitive to changes in the international context or in family remittances (which accounted for 25% of GDP in 2007 but are declining), growing fuel prices, internal corruption problems, political clientelism, forecasts of fiscal deficit (3% of GDP in 2007 according to the IMF forecast), environmental degradation and extreme vulnerability to natural disasters.

Tax revenue goals have been met particularly as a result of two important tax system reforms promised in the PRS framework: (i) the Financial Equilibrium and Social Protection Law ("Ley del Equilibrio Financiero y Protección Social") (2002) and (ii) the Tax Equity Law ("Ley de Equidad Tributaria") (2003). In 2006, current revenues had reached 19.5% of GDP and tax revenues 17.9% of GDP. Despite these reforms, the tax system retains certain regressive features. The reforms feature less participation from foreign trade generated revenues, expanded coverage and strengthening of the VAT, less significant modifications to income taxes – with more of a corporate than an individual focus – and tax simplification by targeting the most profitable taxpayers. These reforms resist relying on individual property taxes to finance social spending and to achieve greater equity and universal coverage of public services.

PSE is distinguished from PRS spending in the sense that the former includes expenditures not directly linked to the poverty reduction objective (spending on higher education, for example) while PRS spending includes rural infrastructure programmes excluded from PSE. During the 1990s, PSE represented (on average) 35% of total public expenditure and 7% of the GDP. Beginning in 1999, however, it rose sharply, reaching 51% and 11.8% respectively in 2004. PRS spending also rose from 2001-2005. Currently it hovers around 8% of GDP (compared to a target goal of 9%) and it is anticipated that it will, at minimum, remain constant throughout the PRS period. The source for these resources in 2006 was as follows: national resources (64%), debt relief funds (18%), loans (13%) and grants (5%).

Both PSE and PRS spending have been criticized for their poor quality. Education and health programmes accounted for 34% and 18% respectively of the strategy's original budget structure. These percentages were 45% and 18% respectively in 2006, and preliminary figures for 2007 are even higher. This means that the real priority of the PRS is education, an area whose real benefits will only be observed in the long term. Moreover, educational quality indicators reflect little progress. Salaries account for a high percentage (an average 40% in the 2001–2005 period) and this may continue to increase due mainly to pressures from the teachers' and doctors' unions. Meanwhile, the relative importance of capital transfers and investments is on the decline. The spatial and social distribution of PRS resources is better than that of PSE. According to the ERP, its actions prioritize the most neglected areas and vulnerable groups in the country. Extremely relevant PRS programmes such as the Honduran Social Investment Fund (FHIS) and the Family Allocations Programme (PRAF) target their investments based on a poverty map and in 2006, the National Congress set aside 700 million lempiras from the PRS fund for direct transfer to the municipalities. The transfer, however, proceeded slowly due to bureaucratic red tape and poor capacity for implementation in most municipalities. The decentralized funds have served to give the PRS an image of being closer to the rural poor. Moreover, World Bank and government evaluation showed that 24% of the resources was assigned to the poorest quintile of the population while the nonpoor also have received significant education, health, and even social assistance benefits. In synthesis, PRS spending is headed in a progressive direction, although several programmes require fine-tuning in terms of their ability to target the poor population.

*Government efficiency and effectiveness.* Quality public spending requires actions directly related to government efficiency, effectiveness and coherence. This was acknowledged in the original ERP and led to proposals to develop a Programme for Efficiency and Transparency in Government Procurement and Hiring (“Programa de Eficiencia y Transparencia en las Compras y Contrataciones del Estado”); support Audit offices and social audits; stimulate quality and efficiency in public service; design a National Policy Management Evaluation System (“Sistema Nacional de Evaluación de la Gestión”) to monitor public policies, programmes, and projects; and promote decentralization and civil society oversight entities to monitor transparency in government, improve the justice system and combat corruption.

Very few studies have evaluated the measures listed above but they do concur that reforms have proceeded slowly, have been only partial, and have largely failed in terms of efficiency, coverage, and legitimacy. The World Bank and IDB have been the most relevant donors in funding public sector modernization reforms, and yet their programme evaluations have rated achievements as being poor. While the UNDP believes that significant progress has been made in the institutionalization of justice, it laments that the majority of the population has yet to perceive those changes. Under the Zelaya administration, there have been three relevant modernization measures: the launching of a results-oriented management system, the Transparency and Access to Public Information Law, and the Forestry Law. Short term challenges facing the current administration are the crisis of the two state-owned enterprises – ENEE (electricity) and HONDUTEL (telecommunications) – and the need to reduce the size of the bureaucracy and instability in the civil service career.



*General Outcomes of the PRS process.* Up until 2005, various information sources concurred that poverty indicators did not improve. From 2001 to 2005, approximately 65% of households were living below the poverty line, while households living in extreme poverty remained at nearly 48%. In rural areas, these percentages soared to slightly over 70% in the case of general poverty and 60% for extreme poverty. Poverty rates began to decline in 2006, dropping to 60% in 2007. While these outcomes are promising, they are still well below the goal of 57.6% set for 2005. Extreme poverty (36% in 2007) surpassed the goal of 38.5% in 2005. This indicates that, relative to 2005 figures, extreme poverty is declining faster than general poverty, but the drop is more pronounced in urban rather than rural areas.

Inequality indicators have worsened, leading the Technical Support Unit (UNAT) to conclude that the PRS has not improved household income distribution. Social policy appears to be having little redistributive impact. Since this is a core objective, it could be argued that it is indicative that social policy is having little effect on poverty reduction. Likewise, it seems that recent achievements in poverty reduction could be attributed to economic growth more than to social policy.

Encouraged by the outcomes achieved as of 2005, the Zelaya administration prematurely (2006) proposed a review of the PRS geared to improving project targeting and quality, through policy guidelines based on an “assets focus.” In last year’s report, we showed some sympathy for this new approach, but warned of the need to maintain coherence between theoretical constructs and budget programming. Contrary to its pledges, the government has delayed in presenting a final version of this proposal, creating the impression that it will not be forthcoming or, should it actually appear, the timing will be less than desirable given its proximity to the 2009 electoral process.

## **Main Conclusions**

Available figures for the 2000-2006 period show a reduction in grants accompanied by increases in external debt relief, indicative of a certain substitution of external assistance. Concessional loan disbursements rose temporarily in 1999 and again in 2004. Apparently, more of the total public expenditure was funded through concessional loans in the form of budget support or balance of payment support prior to 2000 than during the PRS period. Only in 2004 has there been a temporary increase in programmatic support.

At this time, reservations about providing programme aid and using the Common Fund in a (sub)sectoral programme appear to be realistic.

There has been no fundamental change in the type of conditionality.

When the government has failed to meet all or part of the conditions, donors have reacted by reducing the amount of payments or by modifying the conditionality or even the type of assistance.

The ERP contains a series of commitments made by the Honduran State and compliance with them is the best indicator of its intention and capacity to reduce poverty. These commitments fall into two categories: to create a fiscal space for priority spending and to undertake reforms to modernize the State and improve its performance capacity. The first generally has been accomplished, although the process remains weak and is threatened by structural and short-term situational factors. The PSE and poverty-related spending have reached acceptable levels, but the same is not true of the quality of disbursement, which has prioritized recurrent expenditure, provided deficient services and generally should

be more effectively targeted toward the poor. The second area of commitments has been accomplished only to a lesser degree, despite several significant reforms. State modernization efforts have proceeded at a slow pace. Even so, reforms to create an appropriate framework for the effective implementation of the ERP have been a relevant aspect of the process, albeit insufficient to achieve the desired quality in service provision.

The first five years of the PRS bore little fruit, failing as they did to achieve poverty reduction goals. The panorama improved beginning in 2006 as indicators of general and extreme poverty fell, although they have only barely approached the goals set for 2005. Moreover, worsening indicators of inequality in the PRS period lend themselves to the conclusion that the poverty reduction observed recently may be due more to economic growth than social policy.

This panorama leads us to conclude that the future of the ERP depends first on the national will to maintain the strategy and second on whether that will transcends rhetoric and is translated into redoubled efforts to take advantage of a favourable economic climate and substantive improvements in the implementation of social policy by enhancing the capacity for execution and ensuring better-targeted, higher-quality services. Should the PRS review process promised by the government in 2006 be coherent in terms of theory and operationalization and if it is implemented soon, the country would be sending the best signal that it wishes to continue along the path of fulfilling the commitments it has made to its poor.

## **Recommendations**

We recommend that international cooperation adhere to the nature of the PRS as a State policy, which means that it should negotiate its interventions based on the PRS and the MDGs.

We further recommend that it support processes to monitor and evaluate public policies and the institutions responsible for them. In the case of the PRS, institutions particularly deserving such support include UNAT, INE, SIERP, the Planning and Policy Evaluation Units (UP-EGs) and key civil society stakeholders, including those participating in social audits.

Finally, the 2003 Report recommended that "...insofar as the international community believes that there are insufficient guarantees for budget support, it should lend its firm backing to administrative training processes." (Cuesta 2003:102-103). This recommendation is still valid.







*Halving poverty by 2015 is one of the greatest challenges of our time, requiring cooperation and sustainability. The partner countries are responsible for their own development. Sida provides resources and develops knowledge and expertise, making the world a richer place.*



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