



The Politics of Staying Poor: Exploring the Political Space for Poverty Reduction in Uganda

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Summary. — Despite claims that Uganda's recent success in poverty reduction has been significantly related to "getting the politics right," there are concerns that the poorest may not have benefited from this form of poverty reduction or the types of politics that have helped shape it. Employing the analytical framework of political space reveals that although some of the poorest groups are represented within the political system, political discourse reveals a strong bias toward the "economically active," leaving the poorest excluded from poverty programs. Significantly, there is an increasing divergence between the regime's political project of "modernization" and the international poverty agenda, with important implications for the poorest.

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1. INTRODUCTION

(President) Museveni does not ask himself "who is left behind," but thinks of the common or garden poor person. (Bilateral donor official, Kampala, January 2003)

Uganda offers a particularly interesting case study for the political analysis of poverty reduction, given that its success in reducing poverty over the 1990s has been closely associated with "getting the politics right." Its homegrown Poverty Eradication Action Plan and political leadership on pro-poor issues such as Universal Primary Education the reduction of HIV/AIDS prevalence has led observers to laud the *Government of Uganda's* "ownership" of the poverty reduction agenda, creating the impression that Uganda offers a showcase for the type of politics that can underpin pro-poor policy reforms. However, this paper deploys recent research to argue that the poorest groups in Uganda are both under- and misrepresented in the forms of politics that shape the government's poverty reduction policies and broader development project.¹

The paper begins by discussing recent approaches to analyzing the politics of representation in international development, and argues

that the notion of political space offers a potential way through problems associated with these approaches. Next, it briefly outlines the current state of chronic poverty and poverty reduction strategies in Uganda, and also the political context. The subsequent sections examine the representation of chronic poverty and the chronic poor in three different ways, namely within: the national political system; political discourse; and the current poverty policy agenda. The final section locates Uganda's approach to poverty reduction within the broader development strategy being pursued within the current regime's political project.

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2. POLITICAL ANALYSIS AND REPRESENTING THE POOREST

The clearest way in which the international development community has tried to engage with the politics of achieving poverty reduction over the past decade has been through the notions of good governance and social capital (e.g., [World Bank, 2001](#)). Here good governance is associated with the accountability and responsiveness of political systems, to be achieved through reforms such as democratic decentralization. However, although some have claimed that such concepts amount to “putting the politics back into development,” this approach has been subject to a sustained critique, particularly concerning the extent to which it has actually depoliticized approaches to development. In particular, rather than extending our understanding of how politics relate to poverty reduction, the good governance agenda is more clearly concerned with correction and control ([Abrahamsen, 2000](#)). This agenda tends to prioritize the technical over the political, and focus on state efficiency, rather than issues of “state reform” or “social and political change” ([de Alcántara, 1998, p. 107](#)). Social capital has similarly been beset by the charge that it fails to capture the politics of collective action (e.g., [Putzel, 1997](#); also see [Cleaver, this volume](#)).

The problems with trying to understand the politics of representation in these ways appear to deepen when these concepts are brought together in attempts to explain how states and citizens interact. A particular problem here concerns the supply/demand rubric that underpins debates on “voice” and “responsiveness” ([Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001](#)), and the [World Bank’s \(2001\)](#) dual focus on “social capital” and “decentralized governance,” brought together under the rubric of “empowerment.” This approach posits an economic model of political engagement between citizenry and states that fails to capture the more complex ways in which political forms of agency and structure interact, and is unlikely to uncover the underlying politics and power relations that shapes interactions between the state and citizenry within and around the formation and implementation of pro-poor policy. As studies of the links between decentralization and poverty reduction have shown (e.g., [Crook & Sverrisson, 2001](#); [Francis & James, 2003](#)), the relative success of such reforms is related not simply to processes of institutional reform or the presence of local associations, but to forms

of political rule (e.g., patronage), issues of local political economy, central–local power relations, and the political sociology of political parties.

The notion of “political space” developed by [Webster and Engberg-Pedersen \(2002\)](#) seeks to incorporate a sense of the power relations that shape the complex relationships between politics, poverty, and poverty reduction. Contrary to neoliberal versions of political analysis within international development (see [Bracking, this volume](#)), the political space approach is embedded in Gramscian and Foucauldian understandings of power, and consists of three key dimensions. The first concerns the institutional channels through which policy formulation and implementation can be accessed, controlled, or contested by the poor. These include popular assemblies, elections, hearing procedures, and special representative structures. The second dimension concerns the political discourses in which poverty and poverty reduction are significant issues, not just within policy processes and debates but also within popular discourse more broadly. This resonates with recent research that reveals the tendency for political elites to differentiate between the poor as either “deserving” or “undeserving” ([Hossain & Moore, 2001](#)), with particular problems for the poorest ([Hossain, this volume](#)), and also the extent to which some forms of poverty are deemed “acceptable” and are thus perpetuated ([Green & Hulme, this volume](#)). The third element comprises the “social and political practices of the poor,” which may be a basis for influencing decision making, agendas, policy, and program implementation. Such practices are often founded on collective memories of historical attempts to access and contest political processes, involving social movements and small associations.

Institutional channels incorporate the “policy spaces” within which debates and decisions around propoor policy reform, a notion that usefully draws attention to the locus within which different actors and forms of poverty knowledge interact ([Brock, McGee, & Ssewakiryanga, 2002](#); [Cornwall, 2002](#)). A particular focus concerns the extent to which spaces are “claimed” by popular participants or spaces into which they are “invited,” the implication being that the former are likely to have more empowering outcomes than the latter. However, while this increased appreciation of the politics that lies behind policy processes has produced some useful insights (e.g., [Foster &](#)

Mijumbi, 2001; Norton & Elson, 2002), the notion of political space demands that the underlying (immanent) political processes that shape (imminent) poverty policies and programs become the key focus. As Villarreal notes (2002, p. 83), “antipoverty” interventions are rarely straightforward responses to poverty, but respond “to a larger arena of contestation where other issues are at stake and both national and international actors have a large say.” Key concerns here include the need for such programs to reflect the prevailing development ideology of the regime and/or key donor agencies; to secure stability and control, perhaps by securing the “participation” of potentially oppositional forces and distributing resources to troublesome areas; and to secure legitimacy and a legacy for political leaders.

Overall, political space locates the politics of staying poor within particular political histories and places, and with an understanding of politics as resulting from an ongoing series of contests and conflicts over how society should be organized. Such contests are played out across multiple and interlocking spaces. The key ways in which the poorest are represented in Uganda are explored here in relation to the *institutional channels* through which the chronic poor and their representatives can gain access to national policy processes; the *political discourses* within which the chronically poor are represented; the politics that operates within and around *pro-poor policy spaces*; and the ways in which political imperatives within Uganda’s broader *political space* shape such policy debates.²

3. CHRONIC POVERTY, INEQUALITY, AND POLITICS IN UGANDA

(a) *Staying poor amidst poverty reduction in Uganda*

Uganda achieved significant levels of poverty reduction during the 1990s. According to general household surveys, the income poverty headcount fell from 56% in 1992 to 44% in 1997–98 (Appleton, Emwanu, Kagugube, & Muwonge, 1999) and then to 35% by 2000 (Deninger & Okidi, 2002). Impressive social development outcomes include the significant reductions achieved in HIV/AIDS prevalence (Okidi *et al.*, 2002), and establishment of universal primary education (McGee, 2000). Such successes saw Uganda rise nearly 15 places up

the UNDP’s Human Development Index over 10 years to a position at 147 out of 173 (UNDP, 2003).

However, there are serious doubts as to whether the growth-led success in poverty reduction of the 1990s can be repeated. During the early 1990s, a low Gini-coefficient allowed for a high level of “elasticity” in the relationship between growth and poverty reduction (Okidi *et al.*, 2002), and with growth concentrated in the newly liberalized and labor intensive coffee sector (Blake, McKay, & Morrissey, 2002), the conditions for propoor growth (Hamner & Naschold, 2000) were effectively met in Uganda during this period. However, the poverty-reducing effects of the growth since 1997 has been highly uneven in terms of distribution. During 1997–2000, the pattern of growth was urban biased, benefited the richest 10% to more than double the extent that it benefited the poorest, and did nothing to ameliorate the regional inequalities that affect the North in particular (Okidi & Kempaka, 2002, p. 8). During the period between 1999–2000 and 2002–03, the percentage of the population living below the poverty line increased from 34% to 38%, thus standing “in contrast to trends in the 1990s, where growth was stronger and appeared to be broadly shared” (UBOS, 2003, p. x).

As elsewhere (Ravallion, 2001), such unequal patterns of growth are likely to exacerbate the high level of intractable poverty in Uganda. Okidi and McKay (2003, p. 1) argue that,

...the chronic poor appear not to have benefited much from the market-oriented development policies that have been responsible for much of Uganda’s macroeconomic success over this period.

Panel datasets carried out in 1992–93, and 1999–2000 reveal a national level of chronic poverty in Uganda as 18.9% (Lawson, McKay, & Okidi, 2003, p. 7), with a strong association between depth and severity (Okidi & Kempaka, 2002). In spatial terms, chronic poverty is disproportionately and unequally experienced by those living in rural areas (91.9% of the chronic poor) and in the conflict-affected North (30.1%), where nearly 40% of the population are experiencing chronic poverty. Here, and alongside the fatalities, disablement and abduction associated with rebel activities, settlement patterns have been subject to repeated disruption, with large-scale displacement and widespread insecurity (MFPED, 2002a).

Qualitative research suggests that chronic poverty in Uganda is strongly associated with

asset depletion as a result of multiple shocks (Bird & Shinyekwa, 2003). Land and health emerge as key assets here, with the landless lacking the means to generate livelihoods (Nabbumba Nayenga, 2003), and poor health playing a key role in trapping households in long-term poverty (Lawson, 2003). In social terms, people with disabilities (Lwanga-Ntale, 2003), and the elderly (Najjumba-Mulindwa, 2003) are particularly vulnerable to becoming trapped in poverty over time. Finally, successive participatory poverty assessments have revealed that unequal gender relations are perceived as a key reason for the perpetuation of poverty (Lawson *et al.*, 2003).

With social and spatial inequalities further deepening in Uganda, Presidential claims that the majority of Ugandans constitute a single class with little economic differentiation have become yet more suspect. As discussed below, this claim has been used to justify the maintenance of a no-party system pending the possibility of class- rather than sectarian-based parties (Kasfir, 1998, pp. 14–16). From a political perspective, then, it is important to analyze the ways in which particular forms of economic development policies become represented in political and policy discourses as the dominant approach, a point returned to later.

(b) *Contemporary politics in Uganda*

The links between politics and development in Uganda are inextricably entwined with the particular form, programmatic focus and historical trajectory of the ruling National Resistance Movement, and also with its leader, President Yoweri Museveni. Successive postcolonial regimes in Uganda during 1962–85 were characterized by high levels of political instability and violence, authoritarian rule, and ineffectual development policies (Mutibwa, 1992). Following a period of sustained guerrilla warfare the National Resistance Movement (NRM) took power in 1986, and has held power thereafter under a form of “no-party” democracy. This system aims to incorporate three key elements, namely parliamentary democracy, popular democracy, and a decent standard of living (Kasfir, 1998, p. 54). However, this attempt to combine representative and participatory forms of democracy in ways that reduce poverty has come under increasing pressure in recent years.

Political party activity is closely circumscribed in Uganda, with all elections contested on the basis of individual merit. While some

argue that the NRM effectively operates as a single-party state, it is more accurate to characterize Uganda’s political system as a “hegemonic party system,” whereby “political supremacy (is) exercised by a single organization, with smaller opposition groups not able, so far, to put up any significant challenge” (Carbone, 2003, p. 487). At the national level, presidential and parliamentary elections have been held every five years since 1996, preceded by a referendum that questions whether or not the country should maintain this system of rule (Bratton & Lambright, 2001). The 2005 referendum will contain a second question, concerning whether or not the President should be allowed to contest for a (currently unconstitutional) third term (New Vision, April 23, 2004). In the face of this presidentialist and populist approach, Parliament—the “representative” aspect of democracy in Uganda—is somewhat marginal.

The legitimacy of such a system rests heavily on the claim that participatory democracy serves the country better than the sectarian character of the previous multiparty system. This “participatory” democracy is institutionalized through a devolved system of local governance, with regular local elections and a relatively high degree of local autonomy, and emerged from the Resistance Councils that formed the bedrock of the NRM’s political struggle for power during 1981–86 (Regan, 1998).³ The rationale for maintaining the current system includes the argument that Uganda must first undergo a process of “modernization,” after which the economic differences that provide the basis for political party mobilization in Western multiparty democracies will become more salient than the sectarian and ethnic cleavages that currently predominate (Kasfir, 1998, p. 60). This is a highly problematic argument, not least because it offers the current system little inherent democratic legitimacy other than as a staging post to a far from certain future state.

Nonetheless, “development” has been a core concern within the Movement’s political discourse and programs, with its Ten Point Program focussed specifically on achieving rapid economic transformation. In his first speech to Parliament in 1986, Museveni stated that “I do not want a country of peasants,” and the Movement’s new Fifteen Point Program re-endorses this aim, recognizing “the urgency of speeding up industrialization and the modernization of agriculture” (NRM, 1999,

p. 20). Furthermore, it is arguable that the system of no-party rule has assisted Uganda's development trajectory. According to *Morrissey and Verschoor (2003)*, the no-party system has allowed the NRM significant latitude and autonomy in pushing through a propoor reform agenda without opposition. Successive policy reform agendas—from structural adjustment to poverty reduction strategies—have taken hold within Uganda, which is credited with having the first “homegrown” Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP). A poverty focus is particularly well institutionalized within the “super” Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPED), leading some to argue that “ownership” of the poverty agenda in Uganda is real but narrow (*Brock et al., 2002; Hickey, 2003*).

Although most commentators agree that the NRM regime has done much to reverse the institutional decay and terror that characterized politics in Uganda under previous regimes, there remain serious challenges regarding the fulfilment of socioeconomic and political rights of Uganda's citizenry (*Dicklitch, 2002*). Conflict continues to shape the political, social, and economic experience of those living in large parts of the North. The rebel insurgency undertaken by the Lord's Resistance Army constitutes the longest running and most severe of the several politically related conflicts that have broken out in postcolonial Uganda, and which have contributed to the pervasive sense in which political space in Uganda is heavily militarized. The most prominent political figures in the country are all closely linked to the military and or conflict, while the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) is politically represented by quota throughout the political system. Although largely “civilized” (*Okoth, 1995*), the informal political influence of the army is all-encompassing.

Furthermore, there are growing signs that the types of political rule—excessive presidentialism, corruption, neopatrimonialism—that have failed other states in sub-Saharan Africa, are increasingly characterizing politics in Uganda (*Hickey, 2003*). This has important implications for civil society in Uganda, which many commentators perceive to be weak and frequently compliant with the regime (*Brock et al., 2002*). As argued throughout this article, it is these underlying forms of politics that *shape* rather than merely *contextualize* the prospects for reducing chronic poverty in Uganda.

4. VOICES OF THE CHRONICALLY POOR? INSTITUTIONALIZED CHANNELS FOR CHRONICALLY POOR GROUPS IN UGANDA

One of the ways by which the state in Uganda could be said to “connect” its form of direct democracy to poverty reduction is through the system of representation for specific interest groups at each level of the political system (*Kasfir, 1998, p. 57*). Through this system, several opportunities present themselves to chronic poor groups, such as the Constitutional provision for a minimum of one-third female representation on local councils, and Council Secretaries for Women, and for People with Disabilities (PWD), throughout local government.⁴ At the national level, there is a Caucus system for special representatives within Parliament, involving five “special interest” groups, including Women (56 seats, one per District) and people with disabilities (PWD; three seats).⁵ Caucus members are not elected by popular suffrage but by an electoral college composed of the leaders of the Local Councils (*Goetz, 2003, p. 117*).

However, the PWD Caucus in Parliament has yet to have any significant influence on the policy process. Its only apparent gain was to ensure that the Parliament buildings were adapted for wheelchair access, a law yet to be extended to other public buildings in Kampala. The Women's Caucus has been more influential, the highlight being a central role in strengthening women's rights within the 1995 Constitution (*Khadiagala, 2001, p. 62; Tripp, 2000, pp. 77–78*). However, this advance was followed by defeats on two key issues, namely the 1998 Land Act and the 2002 Domestic Relations Bill. The last-minute presidential withdrawal of the “co-ownership” clause placed within the Land Act (*Khadiagala, 2001, p. 62*), was of particular relevance to chronic poverty given the tendency for many widowed women to enter long-term poverty traps as a result of the asset stripping that follows the death of their husband.

These apparent defeats suggest that while a voice in policy-making processes is available to some marginal groups in Uganda, this may not be sufficient to alter the power relations that underpin long term or what *Iiffe (1987)* called “structural” poverty. As noted by *Goetz (2003)*, the inclusive character of Uganda's political system toward marginal groups was offered as a favor by the regime rather than

claimed as a right, and has yet to transcend the politics of patronage from which it emerged. This further supports Cornwall's claim that "invited" policy spaces may be processes of incorporation rather than empowerment (Cornwall, 2002). In addition, the fact that large numbers of the chronically poor—including the elderly, landless and people with mental disabilities—remain excluded while groups such as the army and workers do receive quotas is significant. The representation of interest groups was established during the Movement's Luwero days (Mamdani, 1996, p. 209), and the current system reflects the fact that political representation in Uganda is not organized according to socioeconomic criteria, but in recognition by the regime of the role played by certain groups during the guerrilla struggle that gained it power, and electoral concerns.

More broadly, it is important to recognize the limited extent of Parliamentary influence over poverty-related policy making in Uganda. As elsewhere in Africa, parliament has been effectively sidelined in the poverty reduction strategy process (Elberlei & Henn, 2003). Although the powers of legislative oversight held by the Parliamentary Budget Office since 2001 has established a base around which parliamentarians can effectively engage with issues of poverty-related policy and expenditure, there is little evidence as yet of any significant influence, and relations between Parliament and the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPED, the key poverty-related ministry) are poor, with one key civil servant within that Ministry stating that

Parliament are a confused group and I would not take them seriously. They have no broader perspective and never come out with an issue on livelihoods—just what affects them.

As such, the extent to which the representative channels of democracy at the national level in Uganda are currently increasing the political space within which chronic poverty can be reduced is highly limited.

However, the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development (MGLSD) does constitute an emerging channel through which the interests of the poorest groups in Uganda are being articulated within national policy spaces and discourses. MGLSD is responsible for "promoting the rights of vulnerable and poor groups," and operates more as a lobbying and advocacy than a service-delivery agency. Its focus on trying to mainstream policies and

approaches across line ministries in ways that benefit vulnerable groups has recently achieved some success regarding the promotion of a "social protection" agenda. So, although lacking formal institutional power, and following a chequered history involving at least four different names and mandates since 1988, the Ministry is actively seeking to widen the political space within which the poorest are spoken of and for.

5. POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND THE POOREST GROUPS IN UGANDA

The representation of poverty within political discourse forms a key dimension of political space for poverty reduction (Engberg-Pedersen & Webster, 2002, p. 9), and the links between chronic poverty and two key dimensions of political discourse in Uganda are examined here. The first concerns the availability of scientific data on chronic poverty, the second the way in which issues related to chronic poverty and the chronic poor themselves are represented within political discourse. Here, poverty data are seen as an "ideological resource" or a form of "political capital" that can be employed by representatives of the poor to influence policy debates and political discourse (Birner & Wittner, 2000).

(a) *Poverty data as an ideological resource*

The extent to which it is possible to discuss, analyze (speak of), and develop policies in relation to chronic poverty relies to a large extent on having adequate data for this purpose. The conceptualization of chronic poverty as a temporal phenomenon that can be both measured objectively and experienced subjectively (Hulme & Shepherd, 2003) requires that a mixture of quantitative panel datasets and qualitative data sources are available for its analysis. Such requirements are generally well met in Uganda, which has two good waves of panel datasets and houses the paradigm model for participatory poverty assessments (PPA) (Yates & Okello, 2002). More specifically, the second round of Uganda's PPA (2001–02) included a direct focus on "poverty dynamics" and vulnerable groups. Therefore, and although few policy actors currently differentiate between the "transient" and "chronic" poor, Uganda's PPA has contributed toward an acceptance that *different* poverties exist in Uganda, with this

understanding increasingly encompassing the temporal dimension that underpins chronic poverty.⁶ Some forms of policy research have also played a role here; for example, one report on vulnerable groups from researchers at Uganda's premier economic policy research center (Foster & Mijumbi, 2001) is cited by several policy actors as opening their eyes to a more differentiated understanding of poverty.

However, data relating to inequality remain insufficient. Poverty data are rarely disaggregated socially (e.g., by gender) and can only be disaggregated spatially by region not by district, which under decentralization is a key political and administrative unit for development. Although the UNDP "deflates" regional level data to produce figures for districts, the use of this data is limited to parliamentarians eager to see how their constituency is doing (Brock *et al.*, 2002, pp. 30–31). Given the key role of inequality in underpinning long-term poverty, this constitutes a severe limitation on the ways in which chronic poverty in Uganda can be understood and represented.

(b) *Political discourse and poverty policy:
elite constructions of the chronically
poor in Uganda*

At first, poverty was so massive that we just came up with blanket coverage, and aimed for everyone. Now we realise that some people have been left behind and that we need some other types of intervention. (Government official in MFPED, September 2002)

The growing debate in Uganda concerning those who did not benefit from the poverty reduction successes of the 1990s tends to invoke the language of marginalization, characterizing them as those "left behind." This locates those who stay poor as somehow outside the wider socioeconomic experience of most Ugandans during this period, and reflects a "residualist" approach to poverty analysis rather than the "relational" view, the latter of which is arguably better attuned to uncovering chronic poverty (Green & Hulme; Harriss-White, this volume). This popular conceptualization of poverty, reinforced by the absence of strong data on inequality, has important implications for the ways in which the poorest in Uganda are represented within political discourse, and also the policies designed to reduce poverty.

Political elites in Uganda make a close association between long-term poverty and a failure to be "economically active." The use of this

term is pervasive throughout policy actors in Uganda—both state and civic—and although invested with different meanings by different actors, a predominant effect appears to be both the exclusion of the poorest groups from key poverty reduction programs, and a sense in which the poorest are both stereotyped as "unproductive" and somehow blamed for the overall problem of poverty in Uganda. This is apparent not only in Presidential speeches (see below), but also in the statements of civil servants, politicians, and other political elites at local and national levels, whereby the poor are largely considered "unable" to benefit from economic growth or poverty programs. For example, Woodhouse (2003) describes how the poorest members of communities are excluded from rural development programs, as they are seen as "drunkards" who will waste the opportunity.

In policy terms, the effects of this discourse are most apparent within the GoU's flagship poverty reduction program, the Plan for the Modernization of Agriculture (PMA). The PMA seeks to raise the incomes of the poor, primarily by increasing agricultural productivity and market share for subsistence farmers through interventions such as agricultural advisory services, rural finance, and agroprocessing. The overall aim is to transform subsistence agriculture into commercial agriculture. The primary intended beneficiaries will be those "economically active" and "progressive" farmers with existing assets and good links to both agricultural extension agents and the local government officials responsible for delivering the program (Woodhouse, 2003). The key architects of PMA admit that the poorest people in rural Uganda were not necessarily the target in the first place. According to one,

...the poorest are deficient in agricultural assets, which brings into question whether or not the PMA will make any difference to the poorest... we envisaged that after initial successes with commercialization the poorest would provide labor on maize farms and agro-processing factories. But this was as a wish statement. (Architect of PMA, September 2002)

This lack of a clearly defined link between PMA and the poorest groups in Uganda is explicable not with reference to problems within the poverty reduction agenda *per se*, but to its at times contradictory location within a broader development strategy that emphasizes a particular form of modernization. In

the discourse of the dominant international poverty agenda, the poor are cast as agents of their own recovery, knowledgeable about their circumstances and able to author their own development through participation in local governance and labor-intensive growth (Booth & Mosley, 2003). In Uganda's national development discourse, however, the poorest are framed as part of the problem, lacking the level of economic activity to drive through the transformations required to move Uganda out of being a "backward" agricultural economy. For example, in a recent Presidential speech aimed at (re)articulating the Movement's underlying project of development, Museveni argued that most of the 85% of Ugandans engaged in the agricultural economy "are stepping on top of each other and not doing anything useful."

This political construction of the "idle peasant" as a central problem for agricultural development has a historical resonance with successive epochs of development policy in sub-Saharan Africa, and lies at the heart of political contestations over work, economic activity, and development (Whitehead, 2000). In one sense, this may form a useful stratagem for elites whereby the failings of the poor are exaggerated in order to justify their continued dominance over poorer groups (Gupta, 2001), and reflects something of a Malthusian approach to rural populations. However, as Whitehead (2000, p. 42) notes "Discourses about lazy rural African men... appear in specific political circumstances." In contemporary Uganda, the discourse concerning who is "economically active" illustrates a wider tension between the Movement's underlying political project of "modernization" (importantly, Arthur Lewis' representation of underemployed male workers in 1950s, was a key part of modernization theory (Whitehead, 2000, pp. 30–32)) and contemporary international poverty reduction strategy. As discussed in the final section of this article, the politics driving this divergence has ambiguous implications for the poorest groups.

6. HEGEMONIC STRUGGLES OVER UGANDA'S POVERTY REDUCTION POLICIES: CIVIL SOCIETY AND "ALTERNATIVE" REPRESENTATIONS

A prevalent conception within contemporary development theory is that alternative perspec-

tives on issues of development are more likely to come from civil society than the state. However, an examination of the most contested recent debate on poverty policy in Uganda suggests the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding the role of civil society within both policy spaces and political space more broadly.

The recent revision of Uganda's PEAP—undertaken to set the priorities for 2004–07—became swiftly embroiled in a highly contested debate between different policy actors.⁷ This debate tended to revolve around questions of whether the level of social spending aimed at achieving poverty reduction should be increased to a level that would make the achievement of PEAP goals feasible, as against the argument that the macroeconomic stability required for economic growth would be compromised by significant increases in government borrowing and spending. The debate focused in particular on health, arguably the key policy issue for the chronically poor (CPRC, 2004). The advocates on either side of this debate closely resembled Kanbur's (2001) distinction between the Group A and Group B policy constituencies that tend toward forceful disagreements concerning economic growth, inequality, and poverty. As outlined in Table 1, the "Finance Ministry tendency" (Group A) in Uganda includes some who work in MFPEP and for the international financial institutions, officials in the Bank of Uganda, and private sector pressure groups. Group B, the "Civil Society tendency," consists of analysts and advocates in NGOs, officials in social sector ministries and some departments within MFPEP, and some who work in UN agencies, bilateral and multilateral donors. The debate was framed most sharply between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Health, with one official from the latter claiming that "The Ministry of Finance is currently building the ceilings for government expenditure on poverty reduction beneath the floor" (Interview, January 2003).

The debate took place over the terrain of several policy spaces, including the sector working groups,⁸ academia, and the media. Group B have produced successive policy papers on this issue—one of which directly argues "The Case for a Bigger Budget for the Health Sector"—and has been particularly keen to counter the entrenched hegemony of Group A within policy processes by engaging in wider political spaces.⁹ For their part, Group A advocates

Table 1. *Advocates for the poor in Uganda? The key players*

Group A: "the Finance Ministry" tendency	Group B: "the Civil Society" tendency
MFPEd: Macroeconomic and Budget departments	MFPEd: Poverty Monitoring and Analysis Unit
Overseas economics advisors	Ministry of Health
IMF	Ministry of Gender, Labor & Social
World Bank	Development
Bank of Uganda	DFID, United Nations Development
Uganda Manufacturing Association	Program, World Health Organization
	NGOs: e.g. Uganda Debt Network

argued that an increased budget carries the risk of adverse macroeconomic consequences, particularly through exchange rate appreciation, the crowding out of private sector borrowing, and raising the debt burden to unsustainable levels (Davis, 2002).

The superior capacity of Group A to represent their case becomes particularly apparent when debate is enjoined in the same space. For example, the Macroeconomics Sector Working Group is chaired by an MFPEd official and includes a representative from Uganda Debt Network (UDN), the country's premier advocacy NGO. According to the Director of UDN,

We attend—but the quality of the input is what counts. Some of our representatives find the debates too technical and might revert to the local issues that they know with regards poverty. So you delink at that stage.¹⁰

However, what was most remarkable about the debate was that the range of disagreements between these two groups was so narrow in scope. For example, one official within MGLSD argued that, "the neoliberal model has been proved right...it is now about integrating a human perspective." This resonates both with Pieterse's (1998) claim that "development alternatives" have become narrowed to a thin divide between the Bretton Woods' institutions options of pure economic growth or growth with a human face, and also Porter and Craig's (2003) notion of "inclusive liberalism" with, it is argued below, significant consequences for reducing chronic poverty.

(a) *Maintaining hegemony: the absence of alternatives*

The current economic reforms are likely to lead to greater inequality in rural areas...this is defensible as there is no other alternative. (Key Macroeconomics Adviser, September 2002)

... there is no-one in Uganda currently articulating a model of propoor growth...it just isn't happening. (NGO director, January 2003)

If politics consists of the art of the possible, it is remarkable that the boundaries concerning what can be imagined and represented in poverty debates in Uganda are so closely circumscribed. Several explanations are possible for this, at both international and national levels. For example, the international financial institutions play a "central role in defining and promoting development orthodoxy" (Wilkes & Lefrancois, 2002, p. 8), using both material (debt leverage and conditionality) and discursive strategies (e.g., the World Development Reports; Mawdsley & Rigg, 2002) to offer the orthodoxy a sense of infallibility and to discredit alternatives. Within the PRS process, this sense of inevitability is closely reinforced by efforts to ensure that the participation heralded by PRSPs does not extend to issues of macroeconomic policy, which are effectively determined before being brought to the table (WDM, 2001). At the national level, the political space for considering alternatives in Uganda is further circumscribed by the ways in which the no-party Movement-based system has systematically captured both the progressive agenda and many of the country's high-capacity policy actors. The GoU's apparent high level of ownership of the poverty agenda, and hegemonic capture of political space in Uganda has left NGOs little room to interpret and develop the poverty reduction agenda in alternative ways (Brock *et al.*, 2002). Although some NGOs are consulted on poverty reduction issues, these tend to either lack the capacity to engage or offer acquiescent voices (Lister & Nyamugasira, 2003).

Importantly, the analysis presented here regarding the struggle within the poverty agenda between different "Groups" suggests

that a more politicized frame of analysis for understanding state–civil society relations in Uganda is required here. Most analyses tend to flounder around the assumption that these two institutional arenas should ideally be autonomous and distinct from each other (e.g., Brock *et al.*, 2002), and promote the same liberal democratic notion of civil society promoted within international development more generally (Howell & Pearce, 2001). However, there is little evidence that such a form of civil society is emerging in most African polities, and observers are increasingly suggesting that it is more appropriate to conceptualize civil society in Africa not in the de Tocquevillian sense that is generally promoted within the aid industry (Whaites, 2000) but in a Gramscian (Gramsci, 1971) sense as a contested terrain over which the state and other actors seek to secure legitimacy for their political, social, and economic project (Howell & Pearce, 2001; Lewis, 2002).

Through this lens, the alignment of different actors concerning how the poorest and poverty reduction are represented in Uganda becomes more amenable to analysis, and allows for the fact that different elements of state and civil society can be lined up with and/or against each other in different configurations around different struggles. It is this Gramscian understanding of power and discourse that underpins the notion of “political space” (Engberg-Pedersen & Webster, 2002), and which is arguably more effective at exploring the “contested political space in which different groups, organizations, and individuals seek to influence public policy” (Lewis, 2002, p. 583).

Nonetheless, the broad agreement between the state and civil society in Uganda concerning poverty and poverty reduction cannot be explained simply in terms of convergence around a project of inclusive liberalism (Porter & Craig, 2003) or even the lack of capacity amongst the potentially “counterhegemonic” forces of civil and political society in Uganda. Rather, this marks a genuine convergence around a broader project of development that centers on rapid growth and the structural transformation of the economy. This has been embedded within the political trajectory of Uganda’s ruling regime since it attained power in 1986, and, has been largely consolidated through the establishment of a “hegemonic” party system (Carbone, 2003). Despite suggestions that there has been a loss of ideological unity within the NRM resulting

from the co-optation of various political opponents into government (Kasfir, 1998, p. 59), President Museveni’s dominance over policy strategy has maintained the coherence of this project. Moreover, the current focus and direction of this national development strategy, as shaped by electoral concerns and the growing politics of patronage, is moving in a direction that has ambiguous implications for the reduction of chronic poverty in Uganda.

7. FROM THE POLITICS OF POVERTY POLICY TO DEVELOPMENT AS A POLITICAL PROJECT

(a) *Development as the political project of the NRM*

The President’s views on poverty have shifted; disappointed that the economy has not “taken off,” he has returned to his old view of development being about industrialization. He does not see agricultural development as the same as development. (Senior MFPED Advisor, January 2003)

In a potent reminder that poverty policy needs to be analyzed as part of a broader political project undertaken by specific regimes in particular times and places (Villarreal, 2002), the NRM regime in Uganda is increasingly returning to an emphasis on the model of development that it intended to pursue from the day it took power, and which remains a key ideological justification for Uganda’s model of democracy (Kasfir, 1998, p. 60). In a speech to Cabinet Ministers in June 2002, the President re-iterated the Movement’s project of “modernization,” based on strategies that: “add value to our raw materials so that we get more forex; create more employment, widen the tax base, stimulate and support PMA... (which) will, inevitably, transform our society from being a pre-industrial society to an industrial one,” an agenda further stressed in his Seven-Point Agenda for 2003 (The *New Vision*, 01/01/03). The acquiescence of “alternative” voices with this overall project of modernization is striking, as revealed by the following quote from the director of a leading NGO:

Why is poverty so pervasive in our case? Because we don’t have a capitalized economy. An African peasant life is no life—the life of a dog—are we saying that Africa should not get capitalist development? (January 2003)

In one sense, this convergence between state and civil societies reflects a broader moment within contemporary development theory and policy where the precepts of modernization have returned by default in the guise of neoliberal prescriptions on the market economy, liberal democracy, a responsive state, and strong civil society (Brett, 2000). Although the end of socialism came quickly in Uganda—structural adjustment began in 1987 after a brief attempt to establish bartering terms of trade with Cuba and China—it is argued here that the loss of “emancipatory alternatives” (Brett, 2000) to the neoliberal project may prove to have negative implications for the poverty reduction agenda in Uganda. In another sense, the policies emerging from the Movement’s renewed focus on “modernization”—based on exports and privatization—reflect an increasing divergence with the international poverty agenda, with similarly ambiguous implications for the poorest (see below).

(b) *Toward modernization in Uganda:
divergences with the international
poverty agenda*

Museveni is distracted from the poverty agenda with regards economic growth—he is convinced that exports are the way forward. (Bilateral donor official, January 2003)

Budgetary resources in Uganda have been increasingly directed toward an ambitious export-oriented strategy (MFPED, 2002b), rather than flagship poverty programs. The shift to an export-oriented strategy has been heralded in successive Presidential speeches, and has taken particular shape around the Strategic Export Initiative (SEI). What is particularly striking is how this new policy approach differs from the current international poverty agenda, in terms of both content and style.

Despite the title of 2002–03 budget report—“Enhancing Production and Exports for Poverty Eradication” (MFPED, 2002b)—the SEI appears to have few propoor credentials. There is no evidence of any systematic effort to relate this strategy to pro-poor outcomes. A recent study of SEI in terms of its likely “Poverty and Social Impact” (ODI, 2002) found that SEI was poorly integrated with mainstream poverty policy, and that little attention had been paid to the distributional implications of such policies at the household level, where it was likely that the most vulnerable groups would

not benefit. In some instances, as with the focus of SEI on textiles, it is possible that there will be negative consequences for the poor.¹¹ In terms of the associated policy process, the highly selective strategy employed by the SEI is further at odds with the PRSP-associated dictum that public policy making and implementation should be “consultative” and “transparent.”

To apply the ubiquitous policy troika of “security, opportunity, and empowerment” (World Bank, 2001) to Uganda’s current approach to development policy deepens further the sense of divergence. Where the “empowerment” agenda frames the poor as agents of their own recovery, here peasants are to be proletarianized and transformed. Where “opportunity” emphasizes human-intensive growth, the SEI is capital-intensive, focusing on large- rather than smallholders.¹² Where the “security” agenda increasingly highlights the risks of engaging with the global economy, and the need for safety nets to protect the vulnerable, Uganda is adopting an export-led strategy while doing little to develop systematic forms of social protection.

This suggests that the current poverty agenda may be distracting attention from other development strategies that might be required to attack long-term, structural forms of poverty. Bryceson and Bank (2001) have argued strongly that international development policy toward Africa has effectively been “post-modernized,” to the extent that the structural economic transformations currently being planned for in Uganda—and once adhered to within successive phases of modernization, dependency and neoliberal development theory—are now off the poverty reduction agenda. For the poorest countries the key policy responses have become risk management in the face of uncertain world market forces, safety nets, and a celebration of the diversity of microlevel livelihood strategies that locals employ to get by. Economic liberalism is promoted as a means of opening local markets to global trade rather than in any expectation that this strategy will allow countries on the periphery of the world economic system to move toward the core. Here, “. . . long-standing development concepts are being undermined by a post-modern insistence on the recognition of diversity and incomparability” (Bryceson & Bank, 2001, p. 18).

Following the suggestion by Green and Hulme (this volume), that a focus on *chronic* poverty can serve to re-connect current thinking on poverty with more sociopolitical debates on the causes of structural poverty, a similar

shift is arguably required in terms of policy debates and the means of achieving development. This entails taking a longer-term view of “poverty” in relation to the broader structural cycles of uneven development, and recognizing the extent to which whole countries might be considered chronically poor (Gore, 2003). Debates on “transformations” remain alive and well in countries such as Uganda despite efforts by international development institutions to pluralize policy options and direct attention away from challenging global patterns of inequality (Pieterse, 2002).

8. CONCLUSION

Employing the concept of political space reveals close insights into the ways in which chronic poverty and the chronic poor are represented within Uganda. The Uganda case suggests that a system of direct democracy has enabled a more sustained period of propoor policy reform and greater inclusion of marginal voices throughout the political system than is generally the case under multiparty representative democracy. However, although the chronically poor and their concerns are included

within this political space, there is a sense in which this currently amounts to a politics of inclusion rather than “influence” (Brock *et al.*, 2002, following Goetz), or, perhaps more importantly, of justice. Significantly, political elites in Uganda tend to frame the poorest people as responsible for their enduring malaise, and re-direct poverty policy accordingly.

In examining poverty policy as fundamentally political in rationale, content, and form (Villarreal, 2002), it becomes clear that there is little opportunity in Uganda to frame debates about long-term poverty within discussions of inequality and alternative policy responses to the current project of “inclusive liberalism,” comprising economic liberalism and palliative safety nets (Craig & Porter, 2003). Moreover, the regime’s re-engagement with a project of “modernization” represents a significant divergence with the current approach of poverty policy toward chronic poverty. This reflects a wider moment within international development theory and policy whereby emancipatory alternatives and structural transformations have been erased from what is considered to be politically possible for development, despite a strong sense in which the chronically poor countries and people cannot afford to lose such options.

NOTES

1. This paper draws on research carried out in between May 2002 and January 2003, with funding from the DFID-resourced Chronic Poverty Research Centre, and specifically from 40 semistructured interviews with key informants at the national level.
2. As such, this paper does not directly discuss the “sociopolitical practices of the poor,” a dimension to be pursued in future research.
3. However, the extent to which genuine democracy prevails at this level has been strongly challenged (Francis & James, 2003), as has the recent tendency of the center to place high levels of conditionality on local government expenditure (Craig & Porter, 2003).
4. For reasons of space, the representation of special interests within the local government is not examined here. Others have argued that this system diverts minority concerns from the main arenas of decision-making power into less influential “cul-de-sacs” (Brock *et al.*, 2002).
5. Youth (5), Workers (5), and the Army (10) also have specific representatives within Parliament.
6. However, civil society groups who might represent the chronically poor rarely employ these data, viewing it as a Government resource (Brock *et al.*, 2002).
7. For more on the PEAP revision process, see: http://www.finance.go.ug/peap_revision/.
8. The Sector Working Groups (SWG) constitute important policy spaces in Uganda. They include civil servants, parliamentary, donor and civil society representatives. The SWG process embeds a propoor bias within the budgetary process, with all SWG budgetary plans passing through the Poverty Eradication Working Group (Interview data January 2003, Foster & Mijumbi, 2001).
9. In particular, see Uganda Health Bulletin (2002) and UDN (2002, p. 3).
10. This problem is well captured by Wilkes and Lefrancois (2002).

11. For example, the related subsidies to cotton farming have gone to large- rather than small-scale farmers (*The East African*, January, 2003).
12. Recent research also stresses that pro-poor growth in Africa must be based within the agricultural rather than industrial sector (Hammer & Naschold, 2000).

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