



# ***Maitreyee***

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Dear HDCA Members,

The mission statement of HDCA reads as follows:

[It] shall promote high quality research in the interconnected areas of human development and capability. It shall be concerned with research in these areas across a broad range of topics where the human development and capability approaches have made and can make significant contributions, including the quality of life, poverty, justice, gender, development and environment inter alia. It shall further work in all disciplines - such as economics, philosophy, political theory, sociology and development studies - where such research is, or may be, pursued. While primarily an academic body, the Association shall bring together those primarily involved in academic work with practitioners who are involved in, or interested in, the application of research from the fields of human development and capability to the problems they face.

As members of the Association, most of us are in one way or another involved in academic research, with the hope that our research will have an impact on the world we live in. The capability and human development approach does obviously not naively believe that there is an immediate correlation between research and policy change. If sound academic research provides the evidence that, for example, the female/male birth ratio is much lower in India and China than the natural ratio in other parts of the world, it does not automatically follow that policies will be enacted so that the disproportionate, unnatural, premature deaths of girls is prevented. If academic research shows scientific evidence that global warming will have disastrous consequences, it does not follow that actions will be taken to mitigate these consequences. The interface between research and politics, and a better understanding of the translation of research findings into policy actions is crucial in human development research.

John Harris opens our 'Insights' section by arguing that most of current poverty research ignores the political dimensions of poverty. He urges researchers to 'bring politics back into poverty analysis' and to include in poverty evaluation the political, economic and social processes which give rise to poverty. Mark McGillivray, impact of politics on data availability.XXXX

'In the practice' looks at two concrete examples of how political factors affect the effectiveness of research findings to generate social change. Marianne T. Hill tells us the tale of a Women's Commission which has been set up in the state of Mississippi, following research that showed that the state had the worst indicators of human development for women in the US. And Brahim Mansouri reports the case of fiscal reforms in Morocco, and how the government relied more on bureaucratic interests than existing research evidence to implement its reforms.

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## *Insights*

### **Bringing politics back into poverty analysis<sup>1</sup>**

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Mainstream poverty research, even after experts had generally accepted the need for a multi-dimensional view of poverty, has generally failed to address the dynamic, structural and relational factors that give rise to poverty. There is a great deal of technically sophisticated research, much of it based on household surveys, that has provided ever more detailed profiles of poverty in different countries and regions. However, little, if any, of this research aims to address the questions of how and why it is that the factors that are considered are distributed in the way they are through a society. These are questions of the political economy of contemporary capitalism, and of cultural politics. That they are largely ignored shows that poverty research plays a part in depoliticising what are in essence political problems. It is a part of what James Ferguson (1990) memorably described as the 'anti-politics machine'. Poverty research in international development shares in 'the idea that scientific knowledge holds the key to solving social problems', which, as Alice O'Connor says, 'has long been an article of faith in American liberalism' (2001: 3). If only – the implicit reasoning runs – 'we' can build a good scientific understanding of poverty then 'we' will be able to solve the problem.

Green and Hulme (2005) argue that through the way in which it is conceptualised in mainstream poverty research, poverty becomes a tangible entity, or a state that is external to the people affected by it: individuals or households fall into it, or are trapped in it, or they escape from it. It is not seen as the consequence of social relations or of the categories through which people classify and act upon the social world. Notably the way in which poverty is conceptualised separates it from the social processes of the accumulation and distribution of wealth, which depoliticises it. Poverty is a kind of a social aberration rather than an aspect of the ways in which the modern state and a market society function.

Poverty knowledge, and the apparently scientific task of counting the poor, is itself profoundly political, as is shown up so clearly in contemporary debates over poverty trends in India in the 1990s (Deaton and Kozel, 2004) following the liberalising economic reforms. Different perceptions have become highly politicised in circumstances in which the gap in terms of the measure of average consumption derived from the National Accounts on the one hand, and from the results, on the other, of the regular household income and expenditure surveys run by the National Sample Survey Organisation has grown wider, and the reporting periods used in the sample surveys for different categories of consumption have been changed. One set of changes in reporting periods in an experiment conducted by the NSSO increased estimates of per capita incomes by 15-18 per cent, thus halving the numbers of the poor. Those who are supportive of the economic reforms prefer one interpretation of inconsistent data sets, while the critics of reform prefer another. Deaton and others have attempted a considered reconciliation of the data, but the debate as a whole shows just how sensitive measures of poverty are to statistical problems and the different ways in which these problems are addressed.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a shortened version of the paper 'Bringing politics back into poverty analysis', *Q-Square Working Paper* 34, April 2007, available at <http://www.q-squared.ca>. It has been condensed by Séverine Deneulin.

There are very strong similarities between the history of poverty research and policy practice in the context of international development, and that of 'poverty knowledge' in the United States, as this has been analysed by Alice O'Connor (2001). Her argument starts with the observations that 'The idea that scientific knowledge holds the key to solving social problems has long been an article of faith in American liberalism [and that] Nowhere is this more apparent than when it comes to solving the "poverty problem"' (2001: 3). O'Connor shows that although early work on poverty in the United States linked it with unemployment, low wages, labour exploitation and political disenfranchisement – 'and more generally (with) the social disruptions associated with large-scale urbanization and industrial capitalism' (2001: 18) – it was quite soon turned away from these matters of political economy. Latterly this has been associated with the influence of research foundations and government agencies, which have provided large amounts of funding for poverty research, and have been able to set the agenda. They have required that research should be 'policy relevant', 'scientific' and free from ideology – but in all the work that they have financed poverty has never been defined as anything other than an *individual* condition. Poverty knowledge rests on an ethos of scientific neutrality, but it is very clearly distinguished by what it is not: '(C)ontemporary poverty knowledge does not define itself as an enquiry into the political economy and culture of late twentieth century capitalism; it is knowledge about the characteristics and behaviour, and, especially in recent years, about the welfare status of the poor. Nor does it much countenance knowledge honed in direct action or everyday experience ... (which) kind of knowledge does not translate into measurable variables that are the common currency of "objective", "scientific" and hence authoritative poverty research' (2001: 4). The technically very sophisticated survey research on poverty that has been carried on has by now built up a very accurate statistical portrait of poverty in America, but the results of the interactions between politicians and policy makers, research foundations and researchers have been to ensure that poverty is seen as the failure of individuals or of the welfare system '... rather than of an economy in which middle- and working-class as well as officially poor Americans faced diminishing opportunities' (2001: 241).

Very similar features characterise poverty knowledge in the international context as well. Here too early studies of poverty – such as Dadabhai Naoroji's *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901) which sought explanation for endemic poverty in India in the political economy of colonialism – were concerned with the structural conditions that caused the effects of poverty, but the poverty research industry that became established in the 1970s has turned to analysis primarily of the characteristics of the poor and of the correlates of poverty. Studies of the causes of poverty, or latterly of 'poverty dynamics' establish correlations between the characteristics of individuals and households and poverty – generally understood in terms of consumption flows. Such studies have tended to highlight much the same broad set of factors: features of households; assets; education; nature of occupations; sometimes factors related to ethnicity and/or geography – and the significance of crises or of other idiosyncratic factors which in turn highlights the general problem of the lack of insurance. What international poverty research has *not* done very much has been to explain how and why these factors have the effects they do, in the context of an analysis of the political economy of the locality and of the state. Poverty research does not usually address the processes of accumulation in contemporary capitalism and evades the problems of the distribution of economic resources and of political power, apparently offering technical solutions to the problem in a way that is not threatening to the elites who benefit from existing structures and relationships. The current mantra about the role of 'private business' in 'pro-poor growth' and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals is only one, particularly egregious instance of how language matters. International poverty research, too, aims to be 'objective' and 'scientific' and has not much countenanced knowledge deriving from direct action or

everyday experience. By reducing the problem of poverty to the characteristics of individuals, abstracted from class and other power relationships, the poverty research industry has the effect of depoliticising it.

Alice O'Connor concludes her history of poverty knowledge in the United States by suggesting some steps to reconstruct poverty knowledge:

- Shifting from explanation of individual deprivation to explanation of inequalities in the distribution of power, wealth and opportunity;
- Recognising that studying poverty is not to be equated with 'studying the poor';
- Getting away from the research industry model;
- Challenging the privilege attached to hypothesis-testing models of enquiry;
- Recognising that the ideas of value-free social science and of finding scientific 'cures' for social problems are chimaeras.

All points are entirely apposite in the case of international poverty research. Very significant amounts of money and of intellectual resources continue to be poured into household surveys for the production of poverty headcounts based on detailed expenditure surveys that are prone to enormous errors. To what end? They can never provide definitive answers to a question like that of 'what has been the impact on well-being/ill-being of liberalising economic reforms?', and they actually provide very little information on the causes of poverty. In so far as it is important to monitor trends in income and its distribution then there may be simpler and cheaper methods, such as collecting visually-confirmed data on the consumer durables owned by households, or by collecting information on the education of all household members.

Rather than devoting international poverty research to the refinement of measurement, it will be more productive to redirect research so as give greater attention to the analysis of the social processes, structures and relationships that give rise to poverty – recognising that the creation and re-creation of poverty is inherent within the dynamics of capitalism (Harriss-White 2006). Such research will often be based on strategically selected case studies, in which researchers build up familiarity with social practice in particular contexts – and desirably will help people themselves to question the relations of knowledge and power that give rise to poverty.

Examples of such type of research can be found in the analysis of what was labelled 'semi-feudalism' in West Bengal and which has been concerned with the relationships that give rise to poverty rather than with measurement. This is a context in which the large majority of rural people who own very small holdings of land, or whose livelihoods are based upon agricultural and other forms of casual labour, depend upon their relationships with the small class of larger landholders who are themselves subordinate to the overarching power of the numerically tiny but economically overwhelmingly preponderant group of rice-millers. Bhaduri (1973) shows how relationships of dependence ensure that the class of larger landholders comes to control most of the product of the region through rents from share-cropping and interest on loans for subsistence and for production, so that they are then able to earn speculative profits from trading in rice. The wealth of some is causally linked to the crushing poverty of others.

I have also shown how, in spite of changes in the rural economy that followed from the modest land reforms that had been brought about by the then recently elected Left Front government of West Bengal, the reproduction of households depended upon the same mechanisms (Harriss 2006). The research described how a variety of non-crop agriculture based activities, and some non-farm activities, were involved in the survival of 'poor peasant' and agricultural labour households ('livelihoods analysis', according to the more recent terminology). More recent work has shown how agrarian reform in West Bengal, the institution of panchayats and (in some instances) political mobilisation of agricultural labour,

have been instrumental in relaxing the conditions of ‘semi-feudalism’ and in bringing about higher levels of agricultural productivity and the reduction of income poverty – with the development of rural capitalism (see Harriss 2006 for a short review of literature).

To conclude, the preoccupation with measurement abstracts poverty from its context in the way in which a particular capitalist economy is functioning, and fails to examine the social and political-economic relationships that bring about the effect of poverty. I have argued that the earlier and now largely disregarded literature on the development of capitalism in rural economies does develop the analysis of these relationships – that is so strikingly lacking in mainstream research on poverty in international development. Such type of research seems more likely to be conducive to practical action (including ‘policy’) to address the causes of poverty.

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## *In the Practice*

### **Can Women’s Commissions facilitate social change? A view of Mississippi’s experience**

**Marianne T. Hill**

**Mississippi’s Coalition for Women, United States**

The story of the creation and subsequent problems of the Commission on the Status of Women in Mississippi illustrates many of the pitfalls for grassroots organizers of choosing as a goal the creation of commissions whose members will be appointed by elected officials. The Women’s Commission was intended to “ensure that no individual is denied the opportunity to succeed and make positive contributions to Mississippi’s quality of life because of gender,” according to the 2001 legislation that created it, but it has had difficulties in obtaining a quorum at its meetings and is struggling to find funding. I will briefly narrate the history of the efforts to create the Commission, the work of the Commission to date, and draw some conclusions.

“Power to the people!”, a popular slogan in the 1960s in the U.S., was echoed in slogans of the women’s movement. As women across the country banded together in new and on-going women’s organizations, they devised various strategies to increase their power and

influence. The demand for the formation of official, publicly-funded women's commissions, whose purpose would be to improve the status of women, was one goal that achieved widespread approval. The President's Commission on the Status of Women, appointed by John F. Kennedy in 1961, was one of the first Women's Commissions; many more commissions were subsequently formed at the state and local levels across the country. The Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor was a leader in this effort. Such commissions continue to be formed, and as of May 2007, the National Association of Commissions for Women (NACW) reports that it has 71 active Commissions as members in the country.

Mississippi, the state with the lowest per capita income in the country, also has the lowest ranking when it comes to the status of women. The nonprofit, independent Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) estimates indexes of women's status in five different categories to arrive at overall rankings of the 50 states. Among the variables used to obtain rankings in the category of Political Participation, for example, is "percentage of elected officials who are women"; among the variables in the area of Economic Autonomy is "percentage of women with four or more years of college". High poverty levels in Mississippi contribute to, but do not fully explain, why Mississippi has consistently ranked at the bottom of the states.

The first IWPR study ranking the status of women in the 50 states was in 1998, and the data, with Mississippi at the bottom, were eye-opening for many in the state. However, the report received almost no media attention in Mississippi. Several women who served on the Advisory Panel for the report in the state, myself included, decided that a way of both publicizing the findings of the report and of responding to the need to improve the status of women would be to organize a conference. Letters of invitation to serve on the conference organizing committee were mailed out to presidents of all women's organizations for which names and addresses could be found. At the first meeting of the organizing committee, members of the now-defunct Women's Political Network also suggested that we work for the formation of a Women's Commission. Although women in Mississippi had successfully lobbied the [Governor](#) to appoint an (unfunded) Women's Commission in the 1960s, after a few years and a few reports, it had ceased to function.

The conference committee became the Mississippi Coalition for Women; our number one action item was to work for the establishment of a women's commission. In these efforts, we received support from across the country as well as within the state. After a year of intensive networking, with lobbying efforts largely organized and carried out by retired women who had long been active in statewide women's volunteer organizations such as the League of Women Voters and the American Association of University Women, the State Legislature passed a bill establishing a Commission on the Status of Women. This was a significant accomplishment, even though no funding was provided. Women legislators had been proposing the creation of a women's commission off and on for several years, unsuccessfully. The initial opposition of some influential groups had to be overcome: for example, the Mississippi Manufacturers' Association was apparently concerned that higher wages for women, increased family leave time or other measures with a price tag might become goals of the Commission. To combat these powerful special interests, letters, phone calls and personal contacts with legislators across the state, which has a population of 2.9 million, had to be orchestrated.

In drafting the legislation creating the Commission, I followed the recommendations of the President of the NACW at that time. She had warned that state commissions whose members were all appointed by the Governor underwent sea-change with every change in Administration; it was better, she said, if appointments were made by several officials, and if terms of Commission members were staggered (that is, appointed for perhaps five-year terms

which began in different years). The Chair and officers were to be chosen by the Commission itself, not by elected officials. There should be no more than 15 members, to facilitate discussion and co-operation. The Commission should be able to accept and use funds from non-public sources, such as donations and grants, if used for purposes for which the Commission was established. These principles were adhered to in the legislation as adopted. A preamble was written to the bill which contains the only language in the state code that indicates the intention of the Legislature that no one should be discriminated against because of gender. Such Legislative intent statements become hard guidelines for future public policy efforts.

Interest in the Commission was high, and women across the state wrote volunteering to serve on the Commission. However, the state officials appointing Commission members (namely, the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, the Speaker of the State House of Representatives and the Attorney General), did not share the urgent sense of mission of those who had worked to establish the Commission. Nor, apparently, did several of the women appointed to the Commission.

According to the establishing legislation, the Commission was to make policy recommendations to the Legislature. An interagency council was established that would report to the Commission annually regarding each agency's actions to improve women's status. The Commission would issue an annual report on the status of women, and would promote consideration of qualified women for all levels of government positions.

In the first year of its existence, 2001 – 2002, Commission members worked to set a common agenda. The Commission held hearings across the state to determine the main issues of concern to women and issued a report on its findings, with travel, printing and incidental expenses funded by a grant from the Women's Bureau. Commission members, however, were in general agreement that more funding and a stable source of income was needed before they could take on the necessary daily tasks of coordinating networking, publicity and related actions. Such organizing, of its nature, involves hours spent communicating and planning and there was no paid staff.

The Commission was reluctant to rely on the Mississippi Coalition of Women who had led the effort to found the Commission to do this work. It was felt that relying on the Coalition would give it too strong a voice in the direction taken by the Commission. This was seen as an undesirable threat to the independence of the Coalition, although the Coalition consisted of a very diverse grouping of about 40 women's organizations across the state who shared little more than a desire to establish the Commission and improve the status of women. Tension between the Coalition and the Commission has lessened over time, and the Commission continues to call upon the Coalition from time to time to do carefully delineated work for them related to publicity, fund-raising, lobbying and other tasks. In the meantime, there is seldom a quorum for the Commission's meetings: one reason for this is that several appointees must drive two or three hours to reach the meeting, but also, despite the fact that the legislation calls for Commissioners to have "a proven record of efforts to improve the status of women", several Commissioners do not have a history working on behalf of women's issues.

Moral number one of this tale: a Women's Commission will be greatly influenced by the intentions of those making the appointments to the Commission, as well as by the mix of women who are in fact appointed. It will reflect the broader political and social context in which it exists. If appointments are made for political purposes unrelated to advancing women's interests, the chances of achieving an effective Commission are greatly reduced.

There have always been some well-connected women with a strong commitment to improving women's status who have succeeded in obtaining appointment to the Commission, and their presence has been vital to keeping the Commission and its mission alive. The

Commission is now writing grants and will likely receive funding for some worthwhile projects to help women. Also, if the wife of the next governor decides to once again call an annual governor's conference for women, the Commission will likely influence the content of that conference to include some consideration of women's issues – something that previous governor's conferences for women have largely avoided. The Commission is also keeping alive awareness that women organized around women's issues are a political force in the state, and the network of the women's movement in the state has been strengthened. The Commission has legitimacy, access to the media and is typically willing to speak on behalf of women's issues when approached by statewide women's organizations.

A Commission can only be as effective as its members, and the officials appointing those members, make it. The breadth and depth of experience of the women's networks in the state are important factors influencing these key players, but experience is gained only gradually. Organizers seeking to mobilize women will benefit from clarity regarding the attitudes and experience of the women and men with whom they work and the institutionalized limitations they face. There are, of course, many avenues available for ensuring a higher profile for women's issues in state legislatures -- another women's organization of strategic importance, for example, is the caucus of women legislators that exists in many states; women in the media also have organizations that can impact coverage of women's issues by the press. Moral number two, then: clarity regarding the feasibility and purpose of achieving a goal is basic in designing the appropriate one.

For more information on women's commissions, visit [www.nacw.org](http://www.nacw.org).

Website of the Mississippi Coalition for Women: [www.coalitionforwomen.org](http://www.coalitionforwomen.org).

Website of the Mississippi Commission on the Status of Women:

[www.geocities.com/mississippiwomen2002/about.html](http://www.geocities.com/mississippiwomen2002/about.html)

For the text of the legislation creating Mississippi's Commission on the Status of Women, go to [www.ls.state.ms.us](http://www.ls.state.ms.us) and choose Bill Status, Regular Session 2001, House Bill 797.

## **Why the Moroccan government does not use reliable research when implementing fiscal policy reforms<sup>1</sup>**

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This case is an extension of a research financed by the Ford Foundation under the Middle-East Research Competition (MERC) Program, managed by The Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies. On the basis of our empirical results, the paper aims at understanding why the Moroccan government does not rely on comprehensive policy research when implementing fiscal policy reforms.

Specifying more comprehensive models and using advanced econometric tools, our research shows that:

- even if fiscal deficits crowd-out private consumption, the impact is due to current public consumption rather than to other public spending components;
- public capital expenditures are seen to crowd-in private investment and to boost economic growth while current public consumption exerts adverse effects;

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<sup>1</sup> This is a case study gathered under the 'Bridging Research and Policy' programme at the Overseas Development Institute. Further information about the programme can be found at [www.odi.org.uk/rapid](http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid).

- there is a short and long-run positive bi-directional causality between fiscal and external surpluses;
- in comparison with public investment, current public consumption is seen to substantially deteriorate external surpluses;
- decision-makers tend to adjust external accounts, relying heavily on cutting public investment (paradoxically, current public consumption, which exerts the most substantial impact on external surpluses, has been reduced only slightly);
- fiscal deficits endanger the current account deficit, and the latter appreciates real exchange rate.

Despite these interesting findings, policy-makers continue to conduct inefficient fiscal policy reform. Fiscal and external adjustments have been often driven by dramatic reductions in public investment (in proportion to GDP), undermining opportunities for long-run economic growth. In this sense, policy-makers seem to consider fiscal adjustment as a pure accounting exercise. Less attention is reserved to the structure of public spending and to its effects on the economy as a whole.

What are the reasons behind this inefficient macroeconomic policy reform? Why do decision-makers not use reliable and more comprehensive research when they design and implement fiscal policy reforms? Recent interviews with collaborators of decision-makers reveal the following factors explaining inefficiency of fiscal policy reforms:

- inadequate knowledge and training of decision-makers;
- the widespread idea that policy research is extremely theoretical and vague;
- bad dissemination of reliable research in fiscal policy research area.

While these factors may be essential in determining why decision-makers do not use reliable research in this area and why reforms are inefficient, aspects relating to governance and interest pressures matter more. The case reveals that the government often relies on generalizing policy research that is politically feasible and easily practicable. More comprehensive and reliable researches are often rejected because of the lack of governance and the impact of rent-seeking groups. According to one of interviewed collaborators, 'generally, there is no confidence on academic research, practice matters more. While bureaucrats have short-term visions, researchers have long-term horizons. The staff in the Ministry of Finance has forgotten economic and political theories. In the administration, we seek to manage the "day-to-day" issues not to read academic research'.

It is important to underline that a purely economic study of fiscal policy reforms is not sufficient to better understand the reform process because it neglects political and institutional factors. In other words, it does not account for political economy analyses. When implementing fiscal policy reforms, decisions are decomposed and implemented by public servants at a lower level of the government hierarchy. Interviews with certain collaborators of decision-makers show how the quality of feedback in the bosom of the hierarchy matters for efficient fiscal policy reforms. Such efficiency may occur only if

- Signals which decision-makers transmit to their collaborators are clear. When signals are confused, contradictory or timid, they will not be able to mobilise public servants who are in charge of rendering reforms effective;
- Decision-makers have the willingness and the power to convince and arouse efforts of those who are in charge of implementing fiscal policy reforms. Often, the minister of Finance has the good intention to attenuate fiscal imbalances through raising some public revenues and reducing some public expenditures, but he is sometimes unable to gain the support and cooperation from some central directors;
- An effective structure of incentives for bureaucrats is set up so they will have no interest in hindering fiscal reforms initiated by decision-makers.

For the government to use reliable policy research for efficient fiscal policy reforms, public institutions must function well. Such good functioning depends on administrative and institutional factors such as: efficiency in collecting data; efficacy in organising decision-making; efficiency in distributing tasks among agencies in charge of the implementation of policy reforms; transparency of financial decisions of the government, including audit. Administrative reforms in these fields are essential to enhance capacities of the state in the long run and to consolidate competencies for efficient fiscal policy reforms.

Another problem concerns the control of decision-makings. For an appropriate rationalisation of public expenditures, the minister of Finance and the Governor of the Central Bank should have public interest in mind, must be well trained in economics, be honest and not interested in short term political issues. The training profile of the minister of Finance and his collaborators may largely determine the scope for technical errors in fiscal policy reforms. One believes that decision-makers have the required training to understand the finest issues in economics. However, in some cases, certain decision-makers have little theoretical and/or empirical knowledge in this field.

Even if the Minister of Finance and his collaborators have the required technical competencies to design appropriate fiscal policy reform programmes, other ministers and central directors may constitute a real interest group, resisting efficient reforms. A fiscal policy reform using reliable and more comprehensive policy research to efficiently reduce public expenditures may induce positive results only in the medium and long term. Economic and social costs of efficient fiscal reforms are often higher in the short term. Democratic regimes cannot survive long term to get reform results. Under the influence of lobbies, democratic governments risk abandoning efficient reforms in favour of unsustainable tax and fiscal policies.

Using reliable research for efficient fiscal policy reforms requires resisting bureaucratic interest groups. In Morocco, corruption may render the bureaucracy a powerful interest group, well positioned and aligned against efficient fiscal reforms. Even with the absence of corruption, bureaucrats may also suffer from political inference.