The Issue: As far as the national objective of export development is concerned, the roles are clear. The public sector establishes the business environment and facilitates private sector initiative. The private sector seeks and acts upon export opportunity as it sees fit. NGOs hover on the periphery with micro-to-small scale ‘self-help’ programmes.

The roles also seem set for the national goal of poverty reduction. Various public sector agencies devise and implement poverty reduction programmes and endeavour to incentivize the private sector to address developmental issues, such as poverty reduction, in parallel with commercial and profit considerations. The private sector, again, acts as it sees fit. The NGO community seeks to balance grassroots support to poverty alleviation, with high-level advocacy and the need to ensure its own financial viability.

From the standpoint of each national objective – export development and poverty reduction – the roles are being discharged at a passable level of effectiveness.

But when it comes to combining the two objectives, and directly reinforcing the export development – poverty reduction linkage, the performance of the three players is not as impressive. Something needs to be done. The orchestra is in ‘solo mode’. Roles need to be reviewed.

The Proposition: Reinforcing the linkage between export development and poverty reduction requires a concerted and cohesive effort that aligns the roles, objectives, orientations, preoccupations, and ways of operating of all the players.

The orchestra needs to play in harmony. And to do so, it needs ‘sheet music’, i.e. a strategy that will ensure that each player is playing together and in tune.

Focus of the Debate: The debate will address the following questions:

1. Is it necessary to align (or realign) the roles of the public sector, the private sector and the NGO community before the export sector’s direct contribution to poverty reduction can be increased? Indeed, given the differing mandates and preoccupations of the three players, is it realistic to even attempt realignment? For example, how can the poverty reduction objective be accommodated within the private sector’s drive for profit and ever-greater competitiveness?

2. Who is going to write the ‘sheet music’ that will bring the three players into better harmony? Is a strategy required? If so, what are the essential features/initiatives of such a strategy? What has the national experience been?

3. What is the role of the business association/chamber of commerce in reinforcing the export development and poverty reduction linkage? Advocacy within its membership? The launching of specific initiatives? Coordination with NGOs? Are there examples of successful initiatives?

4. Is it realistic to assume that NGOs, working at the grassroots level, can directly impact the export development-poverty reduction relationship? What should the NGO’s role be with respect to its interface with government, with the private sector, and with its target beneficiaries? What are the examples of effective grassroots programmes that combine the export development and poverty reduction objectives? Are these replicable?