



CONCEPT NOTE

Empowerment: A conscious intervention in existing power relations in favor of vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalized people

1. Background

Reviewing experience and approaches, empowerment can be seen as a process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to participate, make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Empowerment aims to **redistribute power**. This also includes the degree of **resilience** of vulnerable actors in the sense of the ability to perform even in adverse and difficult circumstances.

In terms of the competences achieved once disadvantaged actors are empowered, empowerment has a variety of components: the sense of self-worth and identity; equal access to rights, resources, opportunities and social protection, the right to have the power to control own lives, and the ability to influence the direction of social change to create a just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. Therefore, the **right and capacity to participate** – free from threat - in political debate and the definition of social and political rules and institutions also belongs to the set of empowerment objectives.

Power is exercised overtly or covertly. It may be subtle and intangible, but crucial for the ones who suffer from the decisions and the violence threat. A subtle and pervasive force field connecting individuals, communities and nations in a constant process of negotiation, contestation and change. Development, at its heart, is often seen as the redistribution of power by citizens against the institutionalized state power linked to the monopoly of force. Therefore, empowerment aims at the checks-and-balances between the power of civil society organizations and the power of the state.

Much of the standard work on empowerment focuses on institutions and the world of formal power – can people vote, express dissent, organise, find decent jobs, get access to information and justice? These are all crucial questions, but there is an earlier stage that refers to the internalized beliefs and behavioural patterns. The very first step of empowerment takes place in the **hearts and minds** of the individuals who ask: Do I have rights? Am I a fit person to express a view? Why should anyone listen to me? Am I willing and able to speak up, and what will happen if I do?

Asking, (and answering) such questions is the first step in exercising citizenship, the process by which men and women engage with each other, and with decision-makers; coming together to seek improvements in their lives. Such engagement can be peaceful (the daily exercise of the social contract between citizen and state), but it may also involve disagreement and conflict, particularly when power must be surrendered by the powerful, to empower those 'beneath' them.

Empowering citizens does not, of course, always lead to victory – what determines its chances of success? The analysis of case studies in several countries identified some common elements such as:

- The importance of a minimal democratic space for voice and participation
- Diverse, nationally grounded coalitions between different affected stakeholders

- Strong issue related alliances between CSOs and other sectors

The interaction between state and citizen – more or less organized - is perhaps the most important relationship in policy development and institutional change. Effective, accountable states empower citizens through everything from promoting norms of inclusion and non-discrimination, ensuring birth registrations and guaranteeing freedom of association, to ensuring states' own transparency and accountability, and the rule of law.

States can also curb the power of big players in society. But a lot of states are increasingly doing the exact opposite. They try to limit participatory rights and direct the resources to privileged dominating groups, in this way repressing rather than empowering their citizens and civil society organizations. There is a narrow corridor for liberty, free speech and justice where corruption, despotism and manipulation are omnipresent. The threat emerges usually from a small powerful oligarchical group that exercises control over social, economic and political issues. When these groups are not ready to share their power, they may also defend their power position with violent repression.

A growing number of governments now treat the concept of civil society as a code word for powerful political subversives, usually assumed to be doing the bidding of the West. Power holders often fear NGOs more than they do opposition parties, seeing the former as nimble, technologically-savvy actors capable of activating sudden outbursts of mass protest.

More than 50 countries in recent years have enacted or seriously considered legislative or other restrictions on the ability of civil society to organize and operate. In part this backlash is testament to the growing power of citizens' movements.

The nightmare scenario for power holders in many countries is waking up one morning and learning that thousands of ordinary citizens have gathered in the main square of the capital demanding justice, vowing not to go home until they get it. Using diplomacy to deter governments from closing down civil society space, and supporting the long-term building blocks of citizens' empowerment, such as the women's movement or trade unions and others, may be more advisable than seeking to trigger violent conflicts.

2. The Concept

Empowerment refers broadly to the **expansion of freedom of choice** and action to shape one's own life. In development cooperation terms, empowerment is used to denote an ongoing process that strengthens the self-confidence of disadvantaged sections of the population (defined by socio-economic, gender, age, and cultural attributes), enables them to articulate their interests and participate in the community, and provides them with access to and control over resources. In this context, the term *resources* covers both material resources (time, funding, people) and immaterial resources such as participation in political decisions, capacity of resilience, access to basic services like health and education, and legal protection.

Empowerment is the **process of obtaining basic opportunities** for marginalized people, either directly by those people, or through the help of non-marginalized others who share their own access to these opportunities. It also includes actively thwarting attempts to deny those opportunities. Empowerment also includes encouraging, and developing the skills for, self-sufficiency, with a focus on eliminating the future need for charity or welfare in the individuals of the group. This process can be difficult to start and to implement effectively.

A growing body of evidence points to linkages between empowerment and **development effectiveness** both at the society-wide level and at the grassroots level. Empowerment approaches can strengthen good governance, which in turn enhances equality and growth prospects. When citizens are engaged, exercise their voice, and demand accountability, government performance improves and corruption is harder to sustain.

Empowerment focuses on the **strengths and potentials of people** and requires trust in the ability of individuals, groups, and organisations to learn. Therefore, empowerment processes initially concentrate on the creation of appropriate framework conditions, in order to promote self-reflection, voice and initiative. Additional steps towards access to resources and equal participation in negotiation processes are determined by the people themselves.

The main objective of an **empowerment process** is that individuals, groups and organisations develop the abilities to overcome the paralysing condition of vulnerability; these abilities include:

- to critically reflect on the present situation and own identity
- to strengthen the resilience in the sense of the ability to perform well even in adverse circumstances
- to formulate own needs and interests
- to organise in order to express and negotiate own interests
- to shape one's life situation, together with others
- to actively gain access to rights, participation in decision making, resources, knowledge, and services, to be able to use them for one's own benefit

Like communication and interaction produce new knowledge that none of the communicators had beforehand, so empowerment is a process that establishes a new authority in the partners of the process of empowerment. Their respective potentialities are in fact actualized by understanding where there is equality and where there is difference amongst them. By valuing these differences in a spirit of equal dignity, they act, reciprocally and simultaneously, as the actor who empowers and the empowered people.

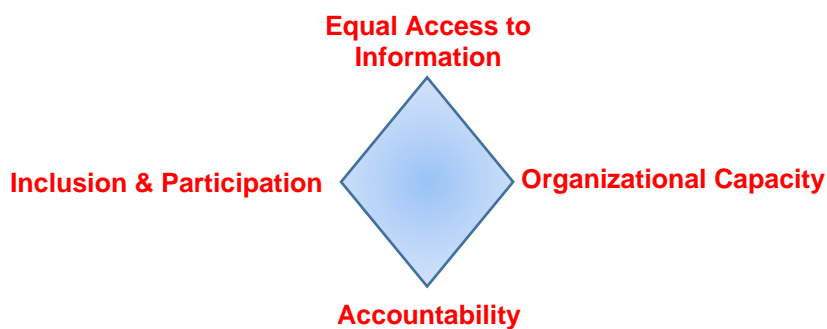
Empowerment cannot be given in the same way that education cannot be delivered and participation cannot be bought. It is a process that requires communication and interaction and that it is possible only as far as the empowering and empowered partners are acting in a reciprocally manner. It is possible to act in a reciprocally modality only if there is reciprocal trust and the partners believe that they would benefit much more acting in a positive sum game modality rather than in conflictual manner. Persons, communities and institutions act in reciprocally empowering manner when they believe that their authority is reinforced by the authority of the others. A typical form of institutional empowerment is the practice of subsidiarity.

3. Four Key Elements of Empowerment

Because state actions create the conditions in which disadvantaged people and powerful stakeholders make decisions, empowerment approaches should primarily focus on institutional reforms to build inclusive institutions, improve basic services and social protection systems, enhance citizen engagement and participation on local and national levels, and ensure equal access to justice.

Macroeconomic policy and institutional reforms are areas that are just beginning to open to societal engagement. While the ultimate decisions, like all development decisions, involve technical expertise, discussion with those who are affected offers multiple advantages. It helps clarify the causal links and assumptions underlying policy trade-offs and choices; it leads to discussions about the institutional capacity needed to implement reforms, and alliances that will have to be built with different parts of society; it builds social consensus on the importance of the reform; it gives the reformers room to manoeuvre against narrower political interests; it educates all involved in the process; and it helps identify and develop needed compensatory mechanisms for the poorest and most adversely affected citizens. Some progress has been made in demonstrating the value of information tools in the public domain as well as consultative processes. Progress on linking information collected to mechanisms of accountability to poor people and citizens' groups is just beginning

Although there is no single institutional model for empowerment, experience shows that certain elements are almost always present when empowerment efforts are successful (see: Poverty Net: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS.html>) - The four key elements of empowerment that must underlie institutional reforms are:



(A) Equal access to information

Information is power. Two-way information flows from government to citizens and from citizens to government are critical for responsible citizenship and responsive and accountable governance. Informed citizens are better equipped to take advantage of opportunities, access services, exercise their rights, negotiate effectively, and hold state and non-state actors accountable. Without information that is relevant, timely, and presented in forms that can be understood, it is impossible for poor people to take effective action. Information dissemination does not stop with the written word, but also includes group discussions, poetry, storytelling, debates, street theatre, and soap operas-among other culturally appropriate forms-and uses a variety of media including radio, television, and the Internet. Laws about rights to information and freedom of the press, particularly local press in local languages, provide the enabling environment for the emergence of informed citizen action. Timely access to information in local languages from independent sources at the local level is particularly important, as more and more countries devolve authority to local government. Critical areas include information about rules and rights to basic government services, about state and private sector performance, and about financial services, markets, and prices. Information and communications technologies can play important roles in connecting poor people to these kinds of information, as well as to each other and to the larger society.

(B) Inclusion and Participation

An empowering approach to participation treats poor people and other excluded groups as co-producers, with authority and control over decisions and resources devolved to the lowest appropriate level. Inclusion of poor people and other traditionally excluded groups in priority setting and decision making is critical to ensure that limited public resources build on local knowledge and priorities, and to build commitment to change. However, an effort to sustain inclusion and informed participation usually requires changing the rules so as to create space for people to debate issues and participate directly or indirectly in local and national priority setting, budget formation, and delivery of basic services. Participatory decision making is not always harmonious and priorities may be contested, so conflict resolution mechanisms need to be in place to manage disagreements. Sustaining poor people's participation in societies with deeply entrenched norms of exclusion or in multi-ethnic societies with a history of conflict is a complex process that requires resources, facilitation, sustained vigilance, and experimentation. The tendency among most government agencies is to revert to centralized decision making, to hold endless public meetings without any impact on policy or resource decisions. Participation then becomes yet another cost imposed on poor people without any returns. Participation can take different forms. At the local level, depending on the issue, participation may be:

- direct or through elected representatives, by selecting representatives from membership-based groups and associations
- expressed by a lively fabric of CSOs based on state guaranteed freedom of association
- information-based, with data aggregated and reported directly or through intermediaries to local and national decision makers
- based on competitive market mechanisms, for example by removing restrictions and other barriers, increasing choice about what people can grow or to whom they can sell, or by payment for services selected and received

(C) Accountability

The concept refers to the ability to call public officials, private employers or service providers to account, requiring that they be answerable for their policies, actions and use of funds. Widespread corruption, defined as the abuse of public office for private gain, hurts poor people the most because they are the least likely to have direct access to officials and the least able to use connections to get services; they also have the fewest options to use private services as an alternative.

There are three main types of accountability mechanisms: political, administrative and public. **Political accountability** of political parties and representatives is increasingly through elections. **Administrative accountability** of government agencies is through internal accountability mechanisms, both horizontal and vertical within and between agencies. **Public or social accountability** mechanisms hold government agencies accountable to citizens. Citizen action or social accountability can reinforce political and administrative accountability mechanisms. Accountability is ensured through transparent procedures and agency internal systems of checks and balances.

A range of tools exist to ensure greater accounting to citizens for public actions and outcomes. Access to information by citizens builds pressure for improved governance and accountability, whether in setting priorities for national expenditure, providing access to quality schools, ensuring that roads once financed actually get built, or seeing to it that medicines are actually delivered and available in clinics. Access to laws and impartial justice is also critical to protect the rights of poor people and pro-poor coalitions and to enable them to demand accountability, whether from their governments or from private sector institutions.

Accountability for public resources at all levels can also be ensured through transparent fiscal management and by offering users choice in services. At the community level, for example, this includes giving poor groups choice and the funds to purchase technical assistance from any provider rather than requiring them to accept technical assistance provided by government. Fiscal discipline can be imposed by setting limits and reducing subsidies over time. Contractor accountability is ensured when poor people decide whether the service was delivered as contracted and whether the contractor should be paid. When poor people can hold providers accountable, control and power shifts to them.

(D) Organizational Capacity

Since time immemorial, groups and communities have organized to take care of themselves. Organizational capacity refers to the ability of people to work together, organize themselves, and mobilize resources to solve problems of common interest. Often outside the reach of formal systems, disadvantaged people turn to each other for support and strength to solve their everyday problems. Citizen's organizations are often informal, as in the case of a group of women who lend each other money or rice. They may also be more formal, with or without legal registration, as in the case of farmers' groups or neighbourhoods or national unions. Around the world, including in war-torn societies, the capacity of communities and CSOs in general to make rational decisions, manage funds, and solve problems is greater than generally assumed.

Organized communities are more likely to have their voices heard and their demands met than communities with little organization. Poor people's membership-based organizations may be highly effective in meeting survival needs, but they are constrained by limited resources and technical knowledge. In addition, they often lack bridging and linking social capital, that is, they may not be connected to other groups unlike themselves or to the resources of civil society or the state. It is only when groups connect with each other across communities and form networks or associations that they begin to influence government decision making and gain collective bargaining power with suppliers of raw materials, buyers, and financiers.

4. Empowerment as a Process

Empowerment processes can be seen as strengthening the demand side of governance, focusing on creating framework conditions that enable citizens to interact effectively with their governments. Such an approach invests in educating and informing citizens, in creating institutional mechanisms for their sustained inclusion and participation, and in facilitating and promoting the emergence of strong poor people's organisations and citizens' groups. There are at least five key areas where empowerment approaches can be applied.

- **Organizational strengthening:** Discriminated, disadvantaged and marginalized people use to reproduce their behaviour pattern and thus contribute to the persistence of deficits in participation and access to resources. These patterns need to be broken and replaced by self-confidence and capacities of self-reflection to strengthen their identity and restore their dignity. On this basis organizational strengthening can become effective in terms of capacities to mobilize, organize and resources management.
- **Access to basic services:** This refers to improving poor people's access and effective use of basic services such as health care, education, access to financial services, and infrastructure.
 - Informing about the performance of government services in the public domain

- Designing mechanisms for inclusion and participation
- Promoting social accountability and local organisational capacity
- **Local governance:** Improving local governance is critical for better service delivery and greater responsiveness to citizen's priority problems. Empowered local governments emerge from empowered local communities through mechanisms that increase citizen access to information, enable participation and enhance accountability of local governments.
- **National governance:** Since national processes and policies determine people's access to resources and opportunities, it is critical that these processes incorporate the four key elements of effective empowerment. This requires strengthening the capacity of people's capacity to organize, voice and coordinate with other civil society groups so they can keep national governments responsive and accountable (e.g., through participatory budgeting, expenditure tracking, public evidence-based debate).
- **Pro-poor market development:** Economic growth is crucial to reduce poverty and vulnerability. However, it cannot be sustained if a large percentage of the population is excluded from optimal engagement in productive activities. Poor people are often excluded from equal access to economic opportunity because of regulations, discrimination, and lack of information, skills, credit and organisation. Hence, empowerment in this context is helping to overcome these barriers that prevent poor people's entry into markets.
- **Access to justice and legal aid:** Rule of law and a functioning judicial system are important for protecting poor people and their livelihoods, as well as for a sustainable investment climate. Therefore, creating a legal environment for accountable governance and empowering poor people by increasing their access to justice is critical.

Resources

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