Understanding and operationalising empowerment

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1. Introduction

This paper presents an overview of the different definitions of and conceptual approaches to empowerment. It has been produced for SDC following the publication of an independent evaluation of SDC's application of empowerment approaches in its development programming.

Discussions around empowerment are commonly limited to activities associated with 'economic', 'social' and 'political' empowerment (see Box 1). Transforming power relations does require intervention in these different dimensions and levels, but this paper takes the debate beyond such a sectoral approach to explore a number of conceptual issues that have practical implications for the operationalisation of empowerment. The main issues covered by the paper include:

- The recent history of the use of the term 'empowerment' in development

- Different definitions and conceptual approaches to empowerment;

- Various operational implications of these debates, including:
  - Whether empowerment is viewed as a process or an outcome
  - How power operates
  - Strategies for inclusion
  - Implications of working on empowerment with partners.

Box 1: Various dimensions of empowerment

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT
Economic empowerment seeks to ensure that people have the appropriate skills, capabilities and resources and access to secure and sustainable incomes and livelihoods. Related to this, some organisations focus heavily on the importance of access to assets and resources.

HUMAN AND SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT
Empowerment as a multidimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities and their society, by being able to act on issues that they define as important (Page and Czuba, 1999).

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT
The capacity to analyse, organise and mobilise. This results in the collective action that is needed for collective change. It is often related to a rights-based approach to empowerment and the empowering of citizens to claim their rights and entitlements (Piron and Watkins, 2004).

CULTURAL EMPOWERMENT
The redefining of rules and norms and the recreating of cultural and symbolic practises (Stromquist, 1993). This may involve focusing on minority rights by using culture as an entry point.

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2. The history of debates surrounding empowerment

Since the 1980s, the theme of empowerment has become central to the work of many development organisations. SDC (2004) conceptualises empowerment as an emancipation process in which the disadvantaged are empowered to exercise their rights, obtain access to resources, and participate actively in the process of shaping society and making decisions. However, there is a range of definitions and approaches used by different organisations (see Empowerment Note 2). To some, empowerment is a political concept that involves a collective struggle against oppressive social relations. To others, it refers to the consciousness of individuals and the power to express and act on one's desires. These differences stem from the many different origins and uses of the term.

In addition to these differences, the term 'empowerment' does not translate easily or equally. The Spanish word *'empoderamiento'* implies that power is something provided by a benefactor to a beneficiary, a clear example of 'power over' (see Table 1, below, which explores different types of power relations). According to the dictionary of *La Real Academia de la Lengua Española*, *'empoderar'* is an obsolete word. Garcia Moreno (2005) asks why *empoderamiento* is used as the translation by development agencies instead of *apoderamiento* or *fortalecimiento*, which come from verbs in current use. He suggests that the term *'empoderamiento'* allows the perpetuation of an ambiguous discourse, permitting institutions with different ideologies to establish their own agendas. Bucheli and Ditren (2001) describe how one workshop discussion in Nicaragua led to a consensus that the term *'participacion social'* better reflects the English use of the word. In both German and French, the English 'to empower' can be translated into two different verbs: *'ermächtigen/autoriser'* (which suggests 'power over') on the one hand, and *'befähigen/rendre capable'* ('power to') on the other. There are a number of other possibilities for a French translation: the Quebec French dictionary uses the word *'autonomisation'*; the World Bank (2000, in Doligez, 2003) uses the words *'demarginalisation'* and *'intégration'*. Empowerment is also found in the literature as *'renforcement des capacities'* and *'participation'* (Doligez, 2003). In order to promote a common understanding on empowerment, both terms may be necessary to encompass not only the formal, legal strengthening of entitlements, but also the *capacity* to make practical use of these formal entitlements.

> *The roots of thinking on empowerment lie in feminist theory and Popular Education, which stressed the personal and inner dimensions of power*

The two main alternative roots of influence to the empowerment 'philosophy' today appear to be the work of Paolo Freire and the feminist movement. The concept of 'Popular Education' of Paolo Freire was developed in the 1960s and became influential in development in Latin America in the 1970s, particularly associated with literacy projects (Freire, 1970). In the 1980s,

empowerment was seen, for the most part, as a radical project of social transformation, to enable otherwise excluded social groups collectively to define and claim their rights.

Table 1: Implications of different dimensions of power

Type of power relation	Implications for an understanding of empowerment
Power Over: ability to influence and coerce	Changes in underlying resources and power to challenge constraints
Power To: organise and change existing hierarchies	Increased individual capacity and opportunities for access
Power With: increased power from collective action	Increased solidarity to challenge underlying assumptions
Power from Within: increased individual consciousness	Increased awareness and desire for change

The actual term 'empowerment' was first commonly used in association with the women's movement, within a discourse of feminism which drew on the influence of Popular Education and focused on the role of the individual in politics[1]. In contrast with other debates in feminism, which are dominated by northern thinking, much of the writing on empowerment and gender emerged from the south. In the mid-1980s, the 'empowerment of women' became an important part of the debate on gender and development. It has had much influence in subsequent wider development thinking. The concept of empowerment was propelled further by feminist critiques of development. The Women in Development (WID) approach, which sought to include women in development for efficiency purposes, was now accused of not questioning the underlying reasons for female subordination.

> *Empowerment is associated with the Gender and Development approach and challenging the way in which the inclusion of women in the development process can increase their work burden*

The Gender and Development (GAD) approach, which developed in reaction to the WID approach, was concerned with the way in which the inclusion of women in the development process increased their work burden or displaced it elsewhere in the family. In so doing, the GAD approach explicitly addressed the dynamics of gender relations and social context, value systems and, above all, power. Empowerment was very much connected to the emerging GAD approach with its associated actor-orientated and bottom-up methods.

Owing to a heavy association with gender, many organisations only use the term 'empowerment' within the remit of gender issues. Others, however, are clear that empowerment is not only a gender issue but that it concerns a whole host of marginalised groups, encompassing a range of social differentiations such as caste, disability and ethnicity. For example, SDC works on empowerment of minority Roma groups in Serbia and Montenegro in order to integrate them equally into the official education system, at the same time as keeping their identity and cultural heritage alive.[2]

Empowerment in the black and civil rights movement of the US was mainly understood in terms of racial empowerment through the growing influence of African-Americans in political and social participation (Calhoun-Brown, 1998). Similarly, recent ethnic minority movements, such as the indigenous organisation Inca Atahualpa in Ecuador, have been analysed with an empowerment perspective that emphasises the political role these movements play in articulating demands for the recognition of those such as the Quechua population (Cervone, 1997).

In the 1990s, with increasing democratisation in Latin America and the retreat of the state, notions of participation and empowerment, previously the reserve of social movements and NGOs, were reformulated and become a central part of the mainstream development discourse (Van Dam et. al., 1992). At the same time, the term 'empowerment' was enthusiastically adopted by international development agencies, influenced by the ideas of Sen (1992) and the promotion of his 'capabilities approach'. However, many schools of Latin American literature today associate empowerment with neo-liberal policies and the World Bank's development agenda in the region (Caccia Bava, 2003). Some authors see empowerment as an attempt to co-opt social movements and popular initiatives for democracy (Larrea, 2005). Others feel that excess enthusiasm for empowerment, adopted by some international NGOs who work with and support social movements in the region, has had a detrimental effect on the consolidation of democratic institutions that are able to build consensus (Toranzo, 2006).

The view of empowerment in some of the French literature is equally critical. Authors such as Olivier de Sardan (1992) and Grignon and Passeron (1989) discuss the ambivalence between *'populisme'* (as seen in writers such as Chambers (1983) who idealise the poor) and *'misérabilisme'* (those who devalue the capacities of the poor, and therefore advocate for interventions of outsiders on their behalf). Olivier de Sardan's critique of the populist approach refers to the ambiguity and depoliticisation of terminology, for example in the categorisation of the 'poor' as moral and the tendency to project simple stereotypes (discussed further in Brown, 1998).

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[1] According to FRIDE (2006), the current use of the term "empowerment" actually appeared for the first time in the book Black Empowerment by Salomon (1976), where it was used to describe a social work methodology with marginalised African-American communities.

[2] See http://www.swisscooperation.org.yu/en/Home/Our_Programme_Lines/Education/IFRC_Social_Welfare_Programme.

The recent popularity of the concept of empowerment has brought wide concern that the focus has not brought about any fundamental changes in development practice. Some critiques go further, suggesting that the use of the term allows organisations to say they are tackling injustice without having to back any political or structural change, or the redistribution of resources (Fiedrich et al., 2003). Many claim that the emphasis on personal and collective struggle has been diluted: 'the dissonant elements fell away as it came to join words like 'social capital' as part of a chain of equivalence that stripped it of any political potency' (Cornwall and Brock, 2005). They point out the irony lying in the fact that the feminist emphasis on the politics of the personal and the neo-populist agenda have been readily taken up by those advocating the positive role of individualism and free market ideology.[3] Empowerment's wholehearted adoption by the World Bank has added to this suspicion.

3. Empowerment as a process or as an outcome?

Many view empowerment as both a process and an outcome. Others take only an instrumentalist view of empowerment, focusing more narrowly on the importance of process. On the other hand, those who take a transformative approach question the way in which participation alone can be empowering without attention to outcomes. These distinctions have obvious operational implications. An emphasis on process leads to a focus on organisational capacity building or an increase in participation of previously excluded groups in the design, management and evaluation of development activities. An emphasis on outcomes leads to a focus on economic enhancement and increasing access to economic resources.

A framework developed by Longwe (1991) provides some useful distinctions between different degrees of empowerment (with the numbered list below moving up towards increased empowerment):

1. The **welfare** 'degree': where basic needs are satisfied. This does not necessarily require structural causes to be addressed and tends to view those involved as passive recipients.

2. The **access** 'degree': where equal access to education, land and credit is assured.

3. The **conscientisation and awareness-raising** 'degree': where structural and institutional discrimination is addressed.

4. The **participation and mobilisation** 'degree': where the equal taking of decisions is enabled.

5. The **control** 'degree': where individuals can make decisions and these are fully recognised.

The Longwe framework stresses the importance of gaining *control* over decisions and resources that determine the quality of one's life and suggests that 'lower' degrees of empowerment are a prerequisite for achieving higher ones.

4. Understanding power

Achieving empowerment is intimately linked to addressing the causes of disempowerment and tackling disadvantage caused by the way in which power relations shape choices, opportunities and wellbeing. There is a range of debates about the concept and operation of power and its operation, which results in a variety of interpretations of empowerment. Again, insights from gender theory into the empowerment debate have increased clarity over this issue, most notably that power is about more than just 'power over' people and resources. Rowland's (1997) categorisation of power is of great analytical and practical use here. She categorises four types of power relations to stress the difference between **power over** (ability to influence and coerce) and **power to** (organise and change existing hierarchies), **power with** (power from collective action) and **power within** (power from individual consciousness) (see Table 1).

Empowerment based on a view of power as **'power over'** emphasises the need for participation in existing economic and political structures but does not involve changes to those structures. If power is defined as **'power over'**, it is seen as something that is wielded by those who are dominant and can be bestowed by one person on another. It is also seen to be in finite supply (zero-sum) and that the only way to gain it is to take it from the more powerful. For example, a zero-sum approach to political empowerment might focus on increasing the political representation of the poor relative to the rich, so that voting rates are inclusive and representatives who reflect poor people's interests are elected. One way of doing this is through public financing of campaigns and secret ballots to stop the non-poor from dominating political processes. A 'positive-sum' approach, on the other hand, would focus on increasing political participation and the demands that voters have on political candidates over the management of public interests and policies (Knack, 2005). The feminist approach emphasises that empowerment is not about replacing one form of power with another: they do not want a 'bigger piece of the cake but a different cake' and the increased choice (or 'cake') that power brings should not reproduce social inequalities or restrict the rights of others (Kabeer, 2001).[4]

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[3] Others take this further to suggest that the empowerment agenda has become a means to control the social protests and movements of those whose lives have been negatively affected by neo-liberal trends (Falquet: 2003; Lautier, 2001).

[4] Equally, just as if women can be empowered without disempowering men, men could be freed from the image of being an oppressor (Batliwala, 1995).

'Power with' stresses the way in which gaining power actually strengthens the power of others rather than diminishing it, as occurs with power over. This raises the distinction between personal and collective empowerment. However, definitions of empowerment are often couched in individualistic terms, with the ultimate aim being to increase individual choice and capacity for self-reliance.

The CapDev Butterfly (see Figure 1) makes a distinction between competencies accruing to the individual, to the group and to organisations as well as to networks and systems. The metaphor of the butterfly is effective, as it shows the need for attention to **all** of these components for empowerment to be achieved. Collective and organisational development may depend not only on individuals' competencies but also on relationships with other institutions. Poor women, for example, may not be able to participate in 'collective' empowerment activities before they are able to tackle the power dynamics at the household level that constrain them. For many, however, collective organisation is seen as an essential element of empowerment. Oakley (2001) stresses the importance of 'apex-organisation building', where networks and alliances are able to connect vertically to enable lobbying for marginalised groups at higher levels, and in so doing can bring about the 'institutionalisation' of legally based rights.

Figure 1: The CapDev Butterfly, emphasising the importance of coordinating the various scales at which empowerment can occur
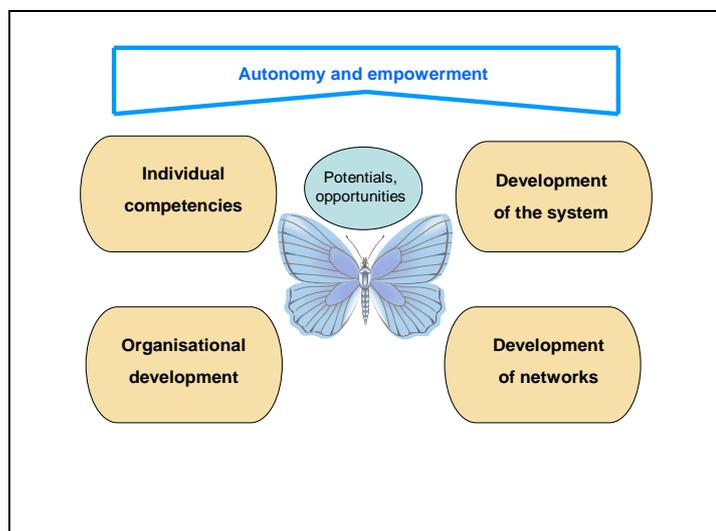
(*Source*: SDC, 2006)

'Relational' empowerment moves beyond the concept of individual or collective empowerment to include a consideration of the importance of individuals (or groups) developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationships with other institutions.

A focus on **'power to'** has led to an emphasis on access to decision making, whereas an emphasis on **'power within'** has led to a focus around building self-esteem. The process of acquiring such power must start with the individual and requires a change in their own perceptions about their rights, capacities and potential.

Table 2 teases out some of the operational implications of the different definitions of power in relation to different assets, with reference to the DAC poverty capabilities (OECD, 2001).

5. The agency approach versus an emphasis on structure

At the root of these different categorisations of power is the debate about whether change is brought about or constrained by forces beyond peoples' control (social structures such as class, religion) or through individual and collective action (agency) (see Box 2). On the one hand, some people argue that individual people have a great capacity for acting freely. On the other hand are those who argue that social systems greatly constrain, or determine, the actions of individuals. Many dismiss this dichotomy and claim that structure and agency are complementary and dynamic forces: structure influences human behaviour, and humans are capable of changing the social structures they inhabit.

Box 2: Agency and structure explained

The term **'agency'** refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. The term **'structure'** covers the rules and social forces (such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, customs, etc.) that limit or influence the opportunities that determine the actions of individuals.

Much thinking about empowerment originated at the grassroots level and was based on the core elements of agency and the importance of self-esteem. Many writers lay a special emphasis on self respect: 'There is a core to the empowerment process which consists of increases in self-confidence and self-esteem, a sense of agency and of "self" in a wider context, and a sense of *dignidad* (being worthy of having a right to respect from others)' (Rowlands, 1997: 129-30). This led to a focus on transformation through education and organisational capacity building.

More recently, however, there has been increased recognition of the need for an explicit consideration of structural inequalities that affect entire social groups rather than a focus only on individual characteristics. It is this focus that is often combined with a rights-based approach (see Empowerment Note 1). The operational implications of these different approaches are outlined in Table 3.

Table 2: Examples of outcomes on assets (capabilities) of the different definitions of power at a variety of scales (individual, household, group etc.)

Type of power relation	Economic capability	Human and social capability	Cultural and psychological capability	Political and legal capability	Protective capabilities
Power Over: the ability to coerce and influence the actions and thoughts of the powerless	Women gaining increased control over income from loans, saving and household production Ethnic minorities increase their ability to challenge discrimination in access to resources and markets Wives gain control over productive assets and property	Women increase control over household consumption and decision making	Immigrant groups are able to challenge cultural perceptions at community and household levels	Involvement of ethnic minorities in formal decision making Engagement with positions of authority by low caste groups	Children increase their individual ability to defend against violence
Power To: the capacity to act, to organise and change existing hierarchies	New immigrants increase their access to income and microfinance The burden of unpaid work and childcare on women is reduced	Increased literary skills among Afro-Caribbean boys Improved health and nutrition status among those with HIV Urban migrants increase their awareness of, and access to, public welfare services	Increased mobility and access beyond household for the disabled	Knowledge of legal and political processes and removal of formal barriers suffered by low caste groups	The reduction of risk, vulnerability and insecurity for the over 70s
Power With: increased power from collective action, social mobilisation and alliance building	International women's groups collectively challenge discrimination	NGO coalitions develop joint action for increased public welfare provision	Increased status and dignity among *dalit* groups	Participation in movements by informal sector workers to challenge subordination National networks of community forestry groups lobby for their interests	Access to networks by the disabled which provide support in times of crisis Joint action ethnic minorities groups to defend others against abuse
Power from Within: increased individual consciousness, self-dignity and awareness	Increased levels of self-esteem and recognition of individual economic contribution among immigrant groups Desire by women for equal rights to resources	Increased confidence and happiness of the over 70s Desire by the disabled to take decisions about self and others Desire by informal sector workers for equal wellbeing	Increased assertiveness, self-esteem and sense of autonomy among sex-workers Recognition of the need to challenge cultural subordination by *dalits*	Desire of immigrants to engage in cultural, legal and political processes Recognition of the need among ethnic minorities to challenge legal discrimination and political exclusion	Increased resilience for low-income groups to shocks, disasters, economic crises

(*Source*: adapted from Mayoux, 2001: 161)

Table 3: Comparing objectives from an agency and a structural perspective

Type of power relation	An 'agency' approach to empowerment	Transforming 'structures' for empowerment
Power Over: the ability to coerce and influence the actions and thoughts of the powerless	Changes in power relations within households and communities and at the macro level, e.g. increased role in decision making and bargaining power	Respect equal rights of others, challenge to inequality and unfair privileges
Power To: the capacity to act, to organise and change existing hierarchies	Increased skills, access and control over income and resources, and access to markets and networks	Increased skills and resources to challenge injustice and inequality faced by *others*
Power With: increased power from collective action, social mobilisation and alliance building	Organisation of the less powerful to enhance abilities to change power relations Increased participation of the less powerful	Supportive organisation of those with power to challenge injustice, inequality, discrimination and stigma
Power from Within: increased individual consciousness, self-dignity and awareness	Increased confidence and awareness of choices and rights; widened aspirations and ability to transform aspiration into action	Changes in attitudes and stereotypes; commitment to change

(*Source*: adapted from Mayoux, 2003: 16)

The debate is reflected in the choice of interventions and activities chosen to bring about empowerment. For example, it is common for empowerment projects to have economic objectives such as attracting capital and integrating small producers into the global markets. However, these projects often ignore structural issues and this can lead to an assumption that access to resources leads automatically to increased choice and therefore to empowerment. Behind the delivery of microcredit programmes, as an example of one empowerment activity, is the assumption that improving women's access to income-earning opportunities will increase their decision-making powers in both the household and the public sphere, through their greater economic autonomy. However, it is not the delivery of microcredit in itself that may empower but the **context** in which it is delivered that might enable women to get control over resources and increased bargaining power (Oxaal and Baden, 1997). Work by Goetz and Gupta (1996) in Bangladesh shows that a large percentage of women's loans were controlled by male relatives; women had to mobilise funds elsewhere to repay them.

Equally, supporting capacity building of local organisations is a common approach to promote empowerment but it may not automatically serve the interests of the poor. A number of commentators (Mosse, 2005; Alsop and Norton, 2004) question the focus on the development of village-level associations, suggesting that such associations can become dominated by more affluent and more powerful members of society, thus perpetuating existing power structures and limiting the capabilities of the poor.

On the other hand, focusing only on transforming underlying power structures, such as the promotion of democracy or equity in political participation, is meaningless unless people are in the condition (in terms of health or economics) to take advantage of the opportunities (Larrea, 2005). In some cases, it has been shown that democratisation and participation projects bring empowerment predominantly to the middle classes.

Fulfilling immediate needs may be a necessary first step to enable other forms of empowerment. This suggests that care should be taken not to overemphasise the separation between structure and agency and that attention should be paid to a combination and a sequencing of both forms of approach.

6. Three 'continuums' of power: the power cube

Gaventa's (2003) Power Cube (see Figure 2) presents a dynamic understanding of how power operates, how different interests can be marginalised from decision making, and the strategies needed to increase inclusion. It describes how power is used by the powerful across three continuums, those of:

1. **Spaces:** how arenas of power are created;

2. **Places:** the levels and places of engagement; and

3. **Power:** the degree of visibility of power.

Figure 2: The Power Cube
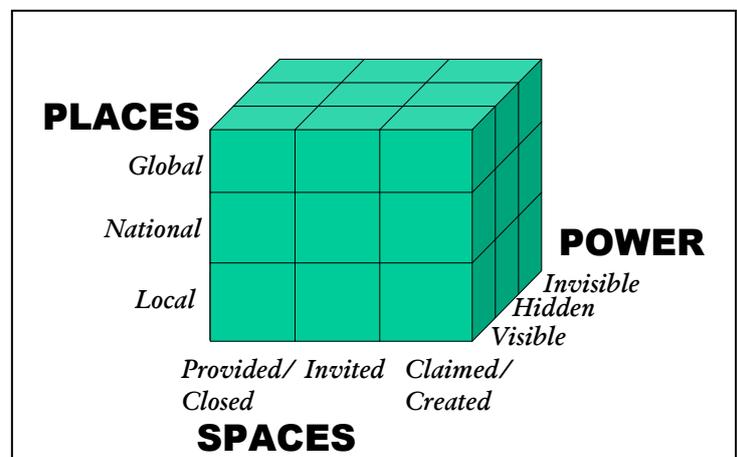
(*Source*: Gaventa, 2003)

The use of a cube helps to emphasise that different types of power are a continuum, rather than presenting power in the oppositional way that it is often conceptualised (the powerful versus the powerless; the included versus the excluded, hegemony versus resistance). (Empowerment Note 3 provides more details and examples of the use of the Power Cube.) The Power Cube also stresses the importance of the ability to **exercise** power rather than merely its **possession**.

1. By the term **'space'**, Gaventa refers to the different arenas in which decision making takes place and in which power operates, and how these spaces are created. Understanding these can help identify entry points for change and encourage self-reflection on the power that different actors exercise. He distinguishes between three types:

a) 'Provided' or 'closed' spaces: spaces which are controlled by an elite group. These may exist within many government systems, the international finance institutions (IFIs) or institutions such as the WTO. Many civil society efforts focus on opening up such spaces, through greater public involvement, transparency or accountability (Gaventa, 2005).

b) 'Invited' spaces: with external pressure, or in an attempt to increase legitimacy, some policymakers may create 'invited' spaces for outsiders to share their opinions. This may offer some possibility for influence but it is unlikely that these spaces will create real opportunities for long-term change. In extreme cases, it may act to legitimate the *status quo* or perpetuate the subordination of those who are delegated with 'power'.

c) 'Claimed' spaces: these can provide the less powerful with a chance to develop their agendas and create solidarity without control from power-holders. An example of this is the participatory budget process in Porto Alegre (Empowerment Note 3 traces through the way groups such as commercial sex workers and ethnic minority groups operate in the different 'spaces' of power).

Depicting these different arenas as falling along a 'continuum' suggests that moving up from 'closed' to 'open' spaces creates new spaces but does not necessarily close old ones (as zero-sum theory might suggest). Power gained in one space, through increased capacity and experience, can be used to enter other spaces.

> *Decision making takes place in a variety of arenas or 'spaces'. Distinguishing between different spaces helps identify entry points for change*

2. The Power Cube emphasises the importance of understanding interaction between levels of power and the 'places of engagement' and particularly distinguishes between the international, national and local levels or 'places'. In so doing, the Power Cube helps us to understand how global forces can be both enhancing and marginalising of livelihoods, depending on the circumstances. This is important, as some approaches

to empowerment lay a heavy emphasis on the local[5]. The Power Cube helps us to understand how, in addition to this, global forces can both enhance and marginalise livelihoods depending on the circumstances. Parpart et al. (2002) discuss the way in which globalisation can lead to increased opportunities for some marginalised groups, such as increased opportunities to engage in markets. However, the authors also highlight the way in which shifts in trade have led not only to opportunity but also to the feminisation of some labour sectors, which can result in additional work burdens for women.

On a global scale, women own little property and are rarely in control of financial and export flows of global enterprises (Marchand and Runyan, 2000). They therefore tend to be involved in globalisation through access to labour markets (as is the case for Filipina domestic workers) rather than through financial or production markets. A big question remains as to how those who are currently marginalised can be empowered to take advantage of markets they cannot access. Gaventa (2003) is also keen to avoid the 'false dichotomy between evil global power holders and virtuous social movements' as, he points out, both can suffer from unequal power relations. By emphasising the various levels, the Power Cube helps us to understand the way in which the local is intimately embedded in national and global 'places'.

> *Understanding the distinctions between visible and less visible forms of power enables one to explore the way in which laws and institutions may be perpetuating repressive social norms and values*

3. The Power Cube also distinguishes the degree of visibility of power:

a) Visible power: this is the conventional understanding of power that is negotiated through formal rules and structures, institutions and procedures (see Box 3 on positive discrimination). Strategies for empowerment focus on policies, the legislature and the courts, and tools such as lobbying, media and litigation.

b) Hidden power: this focuses on the **actual** controls over decision making, and the way certain powerful people and institutions maintain their influence over the process and often exclude and devalue concerns and agendas of less powerful groups. Strategies for empowerment might include leadership development, movement building and the development of organisational strength and voice.

c) Invisible (internalised) power: this operates by influencing how individuals think of their place in society and explains why some are prevented from questioning existing power relations. Strategies for empowerment focus on strengthening confidence and increasing a sense of rights.

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[5] Parpart et al. (2002), for example, claim that an overemphasis on the local 'encourages a rather romantic equation between empowerment, inclusion and voice that papers over the complexities.'

Box 3: Tackling discrimination – the pros and cons of using 'visible spaces'

The concept of discrimination is an example of where entrenched differences in power affect the access that certain groups may have to economic or political resources. In many contexts, discrimination is historically perpetuated and based on ethnic, cultural, economic or political features of the group. Using 'visible spaces' to put forward positive anti-discrimination policies might be temporarily empowering but this often does not tackle the structural roots of the problem. In some cases, it can even help reproduce differences between groups. For example, where development programmes are targeted at indigenous populations this can result in 'being indigenous' being associated with 'being poor' (Diaz-Couder, 1998). Positive discrimination policies can also increase resistance from groups that are not targeted. For example, in reaction to the establishment of quotas for scheduled castes in India, other low castes protested violently (Braunholtz, 2006). In other cases, anti-discrimination policies have had positive results, but it can be argued that such policies are only an instrumental tool for empowerment, not a transformative one.

> *An important feature of oppression is the way in which it can be internalised: power can operate through consent as well as coercion*

The main effect of oppression and disempowerment is that they prevent people from even considering that there can be an alternative to the situation they are in. Power can operate through consent as well as coercion. For example, many women who are abused for holding certain opinions will soon start to suppress them. A practical implication of this is that, as women internalise cultural subordination, their own perceptions cannot be trusted, and change can only occur with some external influence.

> *The role of outsiders in empowerment: the need to challenge internalise oppression while at the same time avoiding external 'manipulation' of the agenda and the process*

Related to the distinctions in the different definitions of empowerment and forms of power, there is some debate over the extent to which outsiders can actually empower others, either at an individual or at a group level. Many of those perceiving empowerment as a capacity or agency-led process believe that it is problematic to attempt to empower from the outside. Therefore, devising any form of external programme is problematic, owing to the danger of manipulation.

> *The power relations behind disempowerment make it unrealistic for the disempowered to tackle inequality and disempowerment alone*

On the other hand, by its very nature, disempowerment creates disadvantages through the way power relations shape choices, opportunities and wellbeing. Owing to the internalisation of oppression, the process of demanding increased rights or change cannot be expected to emerge spontaneously from within and to easily challenge entrenched inequalities, discrimination and structural causes of disempowerment.

Those who advocate external intervention suggest that it is the role of external institutions to facilitate these necessary internal strategic and practical change processes. This puts the development agency or facilitator in a difficult position: on the one hand, it must challenge the disempowered to change their values and behaviour; on the other hand, it should not be perceived as imposing its own values and the potential for disempowerment that this brings. This links into the discussion of cultural imperialism and the right of outsiders to push for change of an existing cultural form,[6] a debate that is particularly pertinent for the issue of female circumcision.

7. Empowerment and the implications for partnership

So, what are the practical implications for the way we work of the wealth of ideas and definitions surrounding the term 'empowerment'? The wide scope of activities and outcomes encompassed by the concept means that the sharing of common principles (not prescriptions) and generalised outcomes is an important prerequisite for healthy partnerships. For organisations striving to promote empowering relationships, the lack of a definition or clear principles can be considered disempowering, as it does not allow important accountability dynamics among the donor, their partners and target groups. There is much concern in the literature, particularly that from the south, about the 'misuse' of the concept of empowerment; much of this can be blamed on the 'fuzziness' of the term. However, this does raise the question of how the clarification of these common principles should take place with partners. This question is also pertinent for relationships with government partners and partnerships with other donors.

On the other hand, some organisations stress that an ambiguous definition is an active strategy related to the desire not to impose centralised thinking onto operational partners and country offices.[7/8]

There are a number of key issues concerning the criteria and profiles of partnerships for any agency endeavouring to promote empowerment. These issues include:

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[6] This is a common dilemma in the human rights field: do rights-based approaches 'impose' western values?
[7] CARE International accept that there are many different concepts and definitions of empowerment and specifically does not provide an official definition.
[8] Fiedrich et al. (2003: 17-18) suggest that '"empowerment" is better understood as a set of metaphors that have normative value and symbolic power for the would-be "empowerers"', rather than as a factual description or theoretical explanation of changes in the lives of the 'empowered'.

- The behavioural and operational competencies of the partner;
- How shared values on empowerment can be developed. A shared approach towards poverty and power is vital, but an important concern is how the donor can avoid manipulation of the approach.

An increased emphasis on advocacy may require different competencies from partners

If the approach to empowerment that is taken requires particular attention to be paid to power structures and relationships within a system, an increased emphasis on aspects of advocacy may be needed. Such aspects require capacity for dealing with conflict, facilitation, mediation, leadership and analysis. A shift from a focus on partnerships with grassroots service delivery to advocacy can have implications for the credibility and impact of an organisation. As a result, there is a tendency by most organisations to stress the importance of maintaining some direct service delivery.

The context influences the feasibility of certain empowerment activities and partnerships

Lessons from the introduction of a rights-based approach in UNICEF suggest the importance of programme strategies that suit specific contexts (Theis, 2004). This owes partly to regional variations in civil society and the availability of types of partners. In Latin America, with stronger government institutions and better developed civil society, UNICEF focuses at the national level on working with legislative, policy and institutional reform, and on analysis of public spending. In East and Southern Africa, it is felt to be more strategic to work at the community level, because there are fewer institutions and resources to implement political decisions and the delivery of services is weaker.

The way in which empowerment is approached needs to be adapted to the cultures and histories of the context. Analysis of a partner's own conceptualisation of empowerment can pre-empt possible cultural and value-based tensions. There is also a question about the degree to which the partners themselves should be involved in strategy development. A decentralised approach and definition can result in a stronger sense of ownership and more creativity, but also in a lack of coherence across the organisation.

Contextual risk assessment is needed to ensure that partners are in a position to make an informed choice about the nature of the risks that they are likely to face

All organisations recognise the risks of a political empowerment approach exposing both partners and vulnerable members of the community. In extreme circumstances, there are examples of the killing or arrest of human rights defenders and those who challenge traditional power bases; addressing the political causes of poverty can lead to many forms of retaliation. Therefore, there is a need to operate differently according to the political context in which one is working.

8. Empowerment: a multidimensional approach to poverty reduction

Despite the multiple ideological roots to the concept, empowerment can be broadly defined as 'a progression that helps people gain control over their own lives and increases the capacity of people to act on issues that they themselves define as important'.

A failure to clearly define what is meant by 'empowerment' can weaken its value, either as an agent for change or as a tool for analysis. A lack of distinction between the types of power and clarity about the appropriate strategies to address such imbalances can mean that many empowerment-focused interventions fail to explicitly address power. Being aware of the different forms of power and their dynamic nature helps in understanding the multiple ways in which voices can be marginalised from (or included in) decision making. Understanding this helps to identify the kinds of strategies needed to shift unequal power dynamics.

SDC conceptualises empowerment as an emancipation process in which the disadvantaged are empowered to exercise their rights, obtain access to resources and participate actively in the process of shaping society and making decisions. The activities of SDC are therefore designed to strengthen the poor through bolstering self-confidence and ability to develop potential solutions of their own. However, SDC's commitment to empowerment also involves a political dimension, which aims to tackle those development models, interests and power relations that are the causes of injustice and poverty (SDC, 2004).

Taking a multidimensional approach requires defining empowerment in terms of both individual capacities and collective action to address inequalities that are the causes of poverty. A focus on empowerment emphasises that poverty not only is about low incomes, but also emanates from social exclusion and the lack of access to power, voice and security.

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