



Empowerment as a target and a critical driver of poverty reduction

Tania Rohrer, February 2013

“Inequity and power imbalances, adverse employment conditions and the lack of economic opportunities or control over assets are all manifestations of peoples’ disempowerment and contribute to their poverty” (1, p.15).

Empowerment is closely linked to power, participation, ability and potential, autonomy, rights, choice and freedom. From a pro-poor growth point of view it is important that people living in poverty are involved in changing current power relations, and learn how to exert influence over the political, economic and social processes that determine and all too often, hamper, their livelihood opportunities. Empowerment and pro-poor growth are closely linked and form a virtuous cycle. *“Mutually reinforcing economic, social and political aspects of empowerment allows people to move out of poverty through participating in, contributing to and benefitting from growth processes on terms which recognise the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible for them to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth” (1, p.21).* Still today, women and men living in poverty have the least voice and influence over decisions taken at local, national or global level.

We know that it is particularly through people’s own decisions, actions and behaviour that sustainable improvements in their lives and livelihoods are brought about. However there is still a huge gap between the theory of empowerment and its practices. To help bridge this gap and provide guidance to donors and implementing partners the OECD/DAC Network on Poverty Reduction (POVNET) recently published the Policy Guidance Note “Empowerment for pro-poor growth” including a collection of ten Good Practices Notes which consider the casual relationship between empowerment and pro-poor growth (1). Additionally a set of stories has been gathered drawing upon the practical experience of donors (including SDC) working in different areas of empowerment and describing real-life empowerment in the words of those involved (2).

Even though the empowerment of poor men and women is both a target and a critical driver of poverty reduction it is essential to be aware of the risks empowerment can involve. *“Empowerment processes change existing power relations and are characterised by contestation and competition for influence and control over opportunities, resources and assets that have real and significant value to those involved” (1, p.44).* Empowerment processes may also challenge cultural/traditional patterns or religious interpretations. A family that decides against following the practice of genital mutilation in a country such as Mali may be scorned and rejected by their community. Their daughters, considered impure and loose women, run the risk of being raped. A different story known worldwide is that of Malala Yousafzai, the 14-year-old Pakistani girl who was shot in the head by Taliban activists for campaigning for the right of girls to education. National and international staff members of a UN-organization have been killed in Afghanistan for promoting democratic elections.

Although there may be some risks for donors or implementing agencies, the ones most at risk will always be the least powerful – the poor and marginalised people whom development interventions are seeking to benefit. Conflicts and violence are no argument to stop empowerment processes, but one to make sure that all concerned are fully aware of these risks. Well developed conflict sensitive approaches and risk mitigating measures exist, and need to be consistently applied.

References

- (1) OECD (2012). Poverty Reduction and Pro-Poor Growth. The Role of Empowerment, OECD Publishing.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264168350-en>
- (2) For a full list of “Stories of Empowerment”, see
<http://www.oecd.org/dac/povertyreduction/storiesofempowerment.htm>