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Brief No 10 – Equity and Empowerment

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1. Introduction

*‘The historical development of the concept of **empowerment** helps explain why there is no universally accepted definition of empowerment. Although it means different things to different people, countries, and cultures, the concept does share certain common characteristics: (i.) it applies to the individual and the collective/community; (ii.) it addresses the issue of power and control over resources and the direction of one’s own life; (iii.) it addresses issues of capacity and confidence-building of both individuals and communities; and (iv.) it sees active participation as necessary but not sufficient contribution.’*

(Source: Rifkin, 2003)

*‘We, heads of State and Government, have gathered at United Nations Headquarters in New York from 6 to 8 September 2000, at the dawn of a new millennium [...] We recognize that, in addition to our separate responsibilities to our individual societies, we have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of **human dignity, equality and equity** at the global level.’*

(Source: UN Millennium Declaration)

This paper introduces the concepts of empowerment and equity and discusses how interlinked these two concepts are. It then highlights the benefits of a development agenda that focuses simultaneously on empowerment and equity, and suggests what such an agenda might look like. Empowerment of poor and marginalised people and equity contribute to both wellbeing and the achievement of equality. They also tend to reinforce one another, as both contribute to addressing inequalities, which in turn drive imbalances in power. Empowerment and equity can be seen as ends in their own right, from a moral or social justice perspective, and also as processes or principles that contribute to development’s core goals of reducing poverty and inequality. The following discussions of empowerment and equity are based on Luttrell and Quiroz (2009) and Jones (2009).

1.1. Empowerment

Empowerment emerged as an important theme in development in the 1980s, in particular in relation to gender, thanks to the influence of feminist movements focusing on women’s empowerment. These movements were interested in addressing the underlying causes of women’s lack of power and political influence, going beyond participation of women in development projects. Empowerment also has strong roots in Latin American movements, for example the mass literacy programmes of the 1960s and 1970s, which drew on Paulo Freire’s ‘Popular Education’ concept, and a variety of social movements in the 1980s, which sought to enable marginalised groups to demand their rights and radically transform society. More recently, the term has been used in relation to other marginalised groups, e.g. ethnic minorities, the disabled, members of particular castes or even simply ‘the poor’. In the 1990s, ‘empowerment’ became part of the language of mainstream development. This has led to criticisms from some social movements that the term has been co-opted to refer to increasing participation of the poor or marginalised in existing structures, rather than the radical transformation of those structures.

To be able to effectively promote empowerment, it is critical to understand different kinds of power and power relations in a society and how they are expressed. Rowlands (1997) categorises power into four types, with different implications for what empowerment might look like (Table 1).

Table 1: The four kinds of power

Type of Power	Definition	Empowerment focus
Power over	Ability to control or influence the actions and thoughts of others (the powerless)	Increasing representation of certain groups in existing economic and political structures
Power to	Capacity to act, organise and change existing hierarchies	Increasing access to skills, resources, markets and networks by marginalised groups

Type of Power	Definition	Empowerment focus
Power with	The ability of the less powerful to increase their power through collective action	Supporting and facilitating alliances and building their capacity
Power from within	Individuals' awareness of their rights, confidence, aspiration and knowledge to demand change	Awareness-raising and education programmes; tackling stigmas and stereotypes attached to particular groups

(Source: Rowlands, 1997)

It is also useful to distinguish between two different approaches to tackling discrimination and disempowerment; those which focus on structure and those focused on agency. A **structural approach** focuses on ways in which people's actions are constrained by systemic forces beyond their direct control and seeks to change these, for example by: tackling unfair privileges in society; rebalancing laws, policies or institutions that disadvantage certain groups; targeted actions for marginalised groups; and efforts to change discriminatory attitudes. An **agency approach** focuses on enabling individuals and groups to drive change for themselves. This includes enhancing the ability of marginalised groups to participate in decision making (this might be at household, local or national level), improving their access to skills, resources and markets, supporting them to organise and act collectively and enhancing their awareness of their rights and confidence to demand them.

The two approaches are closely interlinked and mutually reinforcing, as people's actions both create the context in which they live and are influenced by it. Giddens (1984) argues that *'structure is not "external" to individuals' because 'in and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible'*. With particular reference to empowerment, Waddington and Mohan (2004) argue that *'the development of political consciousness and confidence [...] is inseparable from the institutional level and power structures governing access to it'*. Development approaches that take a dynamic combination of both structure and agency approaches are likely to be most effective, and these should be based on an analysis of the constraints to change in a given setting.

It is important to distinguish between different groups or categories of 'agents', which often have highly unequal positions in society. Discriminatory structures are maintained by powerful hegemonic groups, while the actions of the most marginalised have relatively little influence as long as oppression by the powerful continues. Efforts to support empowerment therefore need to be informed by an understanding of the power relations and political economy that underlie discriminatory structures.

Empowerment is something that comes from within, and cannot be achieved solely by the actions of outsiders. There are important roles for development agencies, however, in promoting societal change that supports empowerment and creates opportunities for the marginalised. External actors can also play an important role in changing mindsets as a first step to empowerment. One feature of disempowerment is often the 'internalisation of oppression', whereby powerless individuals become unable even to conceive that their situation could change, and suppress those opinions that led to their oppression. In these situations, it is argued, change will not happen without some outside influence. Donors need to assess from what angle, and how, they can best support empowerment.

1.2. Equity

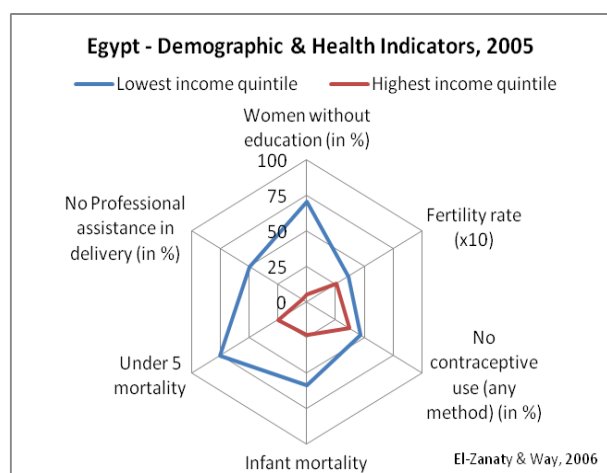
Equity is increasingly stated as a core goal of development agencies' work. Equity has its roots in the theory of moral equality, which states that all people should be treated as equals. At societal level, this translates into three core principles, which should govern the distribution of goods and services and the way in which access to opportunities is determined:

- Equal life chances: life chances should not be determined by factors for which people are not responsible, such as where they are born, their parents' income or their race;
- Equal concern for people's needs: necessary goods and services should be distributed only according to the level of need;
- Meritocracy: positions in society and rewards should reflect differences in effort and ability, based on fair competition.

Equity thus relates to the social contract between a state and its citizens. While equity is often cast in economic and social terms, for example access to resources and services, it also has civil and political dimensions in terms of access to justice and political opportunity and redistribution. Figure 1 shows human development outcomes for the top and the bottom income quintile in Egypt. It clearly shows, for example, that the under-five mortality rate is three times higher for the poorest 20% of the population (lowest income quartile) compared with the highest income quartile (top 20% of income earners). Access to education for women equally depends on income – the poorest 20% are much less likely to attend school than the richest 20%.

It is important to distinguish the concepts of equity and equality. Equality refers to the distribution of goods or outcomes among individuals or groups (for example their comparative incomes or life expectancies), whereas equity is about processes of fair treatment, including how resources and opportunities are distributed. The two concepts are somewhat overlapping in practice, with cause and effect relationships in both directions.

Figure 1: Human development outcomes for the poorest and the richest income quintile in Egypt, 2005



(Source: El Zanaty and Way, 2006)

Most developing countries are characterised by both high levels of inequity and deeply entrenched inequalities, which tend to persist from one generation to the next (see Box 1). Poor and marginalised people are usually relatively powerless to challenge or change how society is run, so cycles of inequality and inequitable governance are maintained. Empowerment of the poor and marginalised is argued to be one way to break out of this cycle, by enabling them to demand change.

Box 1: Intergenerational transmission of poverty

Children of poor parents are likely to become poor adults and remain poor. Intergenerational transmission of poverty (IGT) occurs as a result of household factors which tend to be associated with poverty and which, in turn, disadvantage children and mean that they are likely to stay poor in adulthood.

Key household factors that contribute to IGT include:

- **Divorce and widowhood:** children are likely to grow up in poverty and may lose inheritance rights.
- **High dependency ratios:** the costs of education, health care and food can keep families in poverty.
- **Poor health:** a key reason for staying or becoming poor, resulting from lost labour and treatment costs.
- **Productive assets:** lack of assets at parents' disposal affects children's welfare and inheritance.
- **Education:** Educated parents are less likely to be poor and are more likely to educate their children.
- **Parenting quality:** Children benefit from healthy care-givers who have both time and control over resources within the household.

IGT can be exacerbated by non-household factors, such as experiencing conflict, belonging to a class, caste, religion or ethnic group that faces discrimination or marginalisation or other cultural factors.

IGT is not automatic, however, and it can be interrupted by external interventions. Early child and maternal nutrition and health are critical, alongside broader efforts to enhance the resilience of poor households so that if shocks are experienced they do not push a household (or child) irreversibly into poverty. Female education also helps to break the cycle because educated women are likely to have lower fertility, lower rates of infant mortality and better household welfare, as well as being more likely to send their own children to school.

(Source: Bird, 2007)

A major feature of inequity is power imbalances in access to, or interactions with, key formal and informal institutions. This includes markets, credit institutions, public sector and service delivery bodies, electoral processes and the legal system. These imbalances may be driven by economic factors (for example, those with little starting capital cannot raise credit); political factors (certain groups lack voice or representation in key political institutions); or socio-cultural drivers (such as discrimination or different cultural values attached to different groups or categories, e.g. women). The latter relates to processes of social exclusion. This term is often used to refer to particular minority groups, but in reality many of the poor are excluded from societal decisions, processes and opportunities, access to resources and quality services.

These drivers of inequity are often interrelated and mutually reinforcing, leading to inequality traps, so it is important for development agencies to identify key interventions to 'break the cycle'. Female education and maternal health are two such interventions. Targeted efforts in relation to marginalised groups, for example by tackling discrimination, should also be a priority. Group-based (horizontal) inequalities are particularly persistent and, if deep enough, are unlikely to be addressed by equal opportunities policies alone (Bowles et al., 2007). Further, they make conflict more likely (Stewart, 2007).

2. Empowerment and equity: conceptual linkages

Empowerment of poor or marginalised people contributes directly to the achievement of equity. Agency aspects of empowerment enable people to make greater demands on government and service providers for equitable treatment in policy and in practice. Empowered people are better equipped to demand a fairer distribution of assets, wealth and political power at different levels (within households, communities or countries), to demand class and gender equality and to respond to opportunities. Structural aspects of empowerment promote equity by offering greater economic and political opportunities for disadvantaged groups through, for example, affirmative action programmes.

However, the most marginalised may be unable to benefit from political empowerment without first

achieving a degree of economic empowerment, as severe poverty, insecurity or poor health prevent people from taking advantage of new opportunities for political engagement and voice. Better and more equitable access to basic services for excluded groups is therefore critical to empowerment, in addition to efforts to create space for political participation. Provision of basic services and access to these opportunities is often highly inequitable in developing countries, however, both in spatial and in social terms. Only a small proportion of spending on basic services typically reaches the poor. In Nepal, for example, 46% of education spending benefits the richest fifth of the population, whereas the poorest fifth receives just 11% (World Bank, 2003).

These inequities in access to basic services perpetuate inequality in future opportunities. The lower availability and poorer quality of education and health provision for the poor, for example, constrain their future life chances. These inequities in service provision may have proximate causes which do not seem to relate to power – such as resource constraints, geographic factors or ability to attract frontline staff to poor and remote areas – but they are usually underlain by political dynamics and power relations, which need to be tackled in order to change the status quo. Fundamentally, inequity is related to the lack of political power and influence of marginal poor communities compared with vocal educated elites, and their inability to demand change or hold governments accountable for inequitable policies and practices.

Equity in access to social and political opportunity, justice systems and other accountability mechanisms are also clearly at the heart of empowerment. Equitable (free) discourse, access to justice and rule of law create an enabling environment in which people can empower themselves and where civil society advocacy, media and other democratic processes have a chance to transform discriminatory structures and achieve social change.

There are thus clear synergies between empowerment and equity, and interventions focused on these two goals will often overlap in practice. This is reflected in current approaches to gender equality and women's empowerment, such as gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming is *'the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes'*, with the aim of ensuring that inequalities between men and women are not perpetuated (ECOSOC, 1997). Increased participation of women in decision making is key to understanding the likely impacts of new policies or programmes on women, and to embedding a focus on equitable outcomes for women.

One important tool for operationalising gender mainstreaming is gender-sensitive budgeting, which analyses both expenditure and methods of raising money for their particular impacts on women and girls as compared with men and boys, taking into account their different needs and priorities, and at the same time seeks to increase participation of women in budget debates (UNDP, no date). Gender-sensitive budget

analysis also enhances accountability on gender issues, as it can be used to check whether budget allocations are in line with policy commitments and are having their intended impact.

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) Gender Equality Framework is one of the more sophisticated attempts by a development agency to operationally link empowerment and equity, focusing on female education.

Box 2: The Gender Equality Framework

The GEF developed by USAID explicitly links equity and empowerment in relation to gender equality in education. It is based on the idea that *'achieving gender equality necessitates a transformation of the power dynamics between boys and girls'*. This reflects recognition that improving girls' education will do little to improve opportunities for women if women remain marginalised and powerless in society. The GEF identifies four dimensions of gender equality in education:

- Equality of access;
- Equality in the learning process;
- Equality of educational outcomes;
- Equality of external results.

Many of the measures proposed to address these relate to empowerment, for example that schools themselves should *'challenge harmful gender norms'*. The GEF also provides a *'continuum of approaches'* – an operational tool to identify interventions that will have most impact on transforming gender relations and achieving gender equality. It categorises strategies as:

- **Aggravating:** creates, exacerbates or ignores gender inequalities in pursuit of project objectives;
- **Accommodating:** maintains existing gender dynamics and roles while pursuing project objectives;
- **Transforming:** seeks to actively change gender inequalities; create positive, healthy relationships between males and females; and promote gender equality while achieving project objectives.

(Source: USAID, 2008)

The above framework from the field of gender show how empowerment and equity are in principle mutually reinforcing. However, the links between equity and empowerment are more complicated in situations where democracy is weak or where patron–client relations dominate politics, for example in ethnically based political contexts. In these cases, efforts to empower marginalised groups are unlikely to lead to more equitable distribution of resources unless there is a fundamental change in state–citizen relationships, because preferential treatment of the leader's support base (which is by definition inequitable) is the basis of their power. Good contextual political economy analysis is therefore critical, to understand the drivers of decision

making and to identify opportunities and strategies to influence the reform process (odcp, no date).

As well as being ends in their own right, both equity and empowerment play an important role in poverty reduction – the central goal of the development agenda. Reductions in inequality alongside growth are the driving force of poverty reduction. With lower initial levels of inequality, growth is more effective at reducing poverty (Jones 2009), while efforts to promote empowerment of poor and marginalised people are crucial to ensure that economic growth has more equitable, pro-poor impacts (OECD-DAC, 2006a). Empowerment of more people to participate in markets and act entrepreneurially – in particular the opening up of economic opportunities to women – also fosters pro-poor growth (World Bank, 2002). Where women are denied opportunities for skilled work because of social and cultural norms, not only do women and girls suffer from wage inequality, lower job security and a high likelihood of IGT, but also the wasted opportunities for productive work by women place a drag on economic growth (OECD-DAC, 2006b). Higher social equality is also associated with more inclusive markets, deeper labour markets and more reliable patterns of national demand, which are key ingredients for sustainable long-term growth that is resilient in the face of external shocks (Jones, 2009).

Both equity and empowerment are also inseparably linked with the process of improving governance and tackling corruption. Poor governance is bad for growth and is linked with social inequality. Conversely, high levels of equality are associated with high levels of trust and social cohesion, which tend to promote economic success. Empowerment tends to reduce corruption, in particular by increasing access to information, political channels and legal systems that enable people to make demands on government and hold them to account.

Finally, there are clear synergies between an agenda focused on equity and empowerment and rights-based approaches (RBAs). RBAs aim to 'integrate the norms, standards and principles of the international human rights system into the plans, policies and processes of development' (UNHCHR, 2001). This means prioritising equity, as rights are universal, with particular attention to ensuring the rights of the marginalised and vulnerable and empowering these groups to claim their rights through both structure and agency approaches.

3. Empowerment and equity in development

Box 3 sets out the priorities for development agencies adopting an agenda focusing on equity and empowerment. Selected points are then explored in more depth below.

Box 3: Priorities for an equity agenda and an empowerment agenda

Priorities for an equity agenda:

- Universal public services: focus on universal access, quality of services and affordability;
- Targeted action for disadvantaged groups, e.g. budgets, targeted services, quotas;
- Social protection to ensure no one falls below a basic level of welfare;
- Redistribution through appropriate taxation and land reform and universal access to quality social services;
- Challenge embedded power imbalances through empowerment and accountability.

Priorities for an empowerment agenda:

- Strengthen civil society and an independent media, but be aware that advocacy can be dangerous and that civil society may be captured by powerful elites;
- Support decentralisation but be cognisant of the risks (see Box 4);
- Sequence interventions appropriately, for example people require adequate health and security to travel to a polling station;
- Focus on both structure and agency aspects of empowerment;
- Promote participation in development programmes but with caution; superficial participation can merely entrench existing power relations or place a further burden on poor and marginalised people;
- Engage elites as well as supporting 'bottom-up' policy change through empowerment.

(Source: Jones, 2009; Luttrell and Quiroz, 2009)

Universal public services underpin equity and, to a large extent, also empowerment. As well as expanding coverage to underserved areas or groups, it is important to promote an adequate and consistent quality of services. This may involve strengthening the institutions and infrastructure they depend on and ensuring law and order. Jones (2009) and many others argue that services should be free at the point of delivery wherever possible; if not, provisions must be made to ensure the poor are not excluded. Universal provision often needs to be accompanied by **targeted action for disadvantaged groups** to ensure that they gain access. Examples include girls' education programmes and employment quotas for groups facing endemic discrimination.

In addition to ensuring access to services, **social protection** should be prioritised to maintain a basic level of welfare for all, preventing people falling into traps where poverty and inequality become chronic. There are a wide variety of instruments for social protection. For more discussion of these approaches and how to make social protection most effective, see among others

Barrientos (2007), Conway et al. (2000) and Holmes and Jones (2009). There are also important synergies between social protection and equity-enhancing pro-poor growth; social protection enables poor people to take part in economic growth while protecting them in a downturn (Farrington et al., 2007; OECD-DAC, 2009). When combined with measures to improve employment opportunities, including in the informal sector, and targeted action to increase the employability of poor people, the benefits are multiplied (ibid).

Redistribution policies improve equity by directly reducing inequality. This could mean an overall progressive tax regime, but specific measures such as lowering the tax on essential goods and land reform are particularly important. It is also important to consider the distributional impacts of other new policies, to ensure that these impacts are equitable or at least neutral. The World Bank's Poverty and Social Impact Analysis (PSIA) and the ex ante Poverty Impact Assessment developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) are two tools that have been developed to assess the distributional impacts of policies, programmes and projects (Ludi, 2007; OECD-DAC, 2007).

Enhancing the **accountability** of public institutions enables citizens to demand more equitable policies and budgets and a better quality and availability of services. There are synergies here with RBAs, which emphasise 'the accountability and transparency of institutions responsible for economic policy making' and support access to justice and accountability mechanisms for poor people (Foresti et al., 2010).

Supporting civil society and independent media should be a central activity of donors interested in empowerment. When these are strong, they can advocate effectively for change, mobilise people around equity goals and hold politicians to public account. In particular, donors can support them to undertake effective advocacy. However, it is important to remember that in some contexts advocacy is a dangerous activity and organisations may be shut down or staff imprisoned for undertaking such activities. Donors have to be sensitive to these risks and decide how best to use their influence and support in such situations. VeneKlasen (2007) provides guidance on advocacy 'for people and organisations grappling with issues of power, politics, and exclusion', including donor agencies, focusing on how to build the voice and capacity of the most marginalised but also including tools to analyse power and political relationships. It remains important to support and build up civil society, even when its activities are highly constrained, so that organisations survive difficult periods and are able to take advantage of opportunities for influence or policy engagement when these eventually arise. Donors must also remember the risk that civil society organisations can be captured by interest groups, who are not necessarily representative of marginalised societal groups or communities, or who may be primarily interested in their own empowerment (see Box 4).

Box 4: Decentralisation in Pakistan

Decentralisation is premised on the idea that, by bringing governance, decision making and provision of basic services closer to the people, government can be made more efficient and responsive. In 2001, Pakistan introduced the Local Government Ordinance (LGO), aiming at providing positive measures to enable marginalised citizens – women, workers and peasants – to access and participate in formal politics. One particular measure was to provide electoral 'affirmative action' granting legitimacy to women as political actors with voice and agency by granting them a 33% representation through reserved seats at local government level.

Seven years after the introduction of the LGO, it became apparent that many of the women councillors were proxies for men (e.g. relatives, *Nazims* (elected officials of a local government) or landholders). Many women councillors were unable to function effectively because they were held back by the *Nazims*' unwillingness to share power (i.e. information, resources, decision making, political capital). Other factors limiting the ability of women councillors to perform were lack of education and literacy (around 50% of elected women were illiterate); age (60% were younger than 45 years and thus in childbearing/rearing age); the fact that 75% had never held an elected position before; lack of council funds; lack of cooperation from male councillors; and lack of permission from husbands or male relatives to participate in council meetings. As most of these women councillors held reserved seats, they remained marginalised, voiceless and deprived of agency, by virtue of their gender and the fact of holding reserved seats on the lowest and least significant councils. They were also relegated to projects and roles considered appropriate for women, such as education, health and social welfare. This segregation ghettoised women in few areas. A further problem of true decentralisation and representation is that, although local governance provides for 33% representation of women, the same has not been maintained at provincial and national level. Finally, laws do not ensure women's representation in decision-making bodies and policymaking fora.

A number of systemic, organisational and personal factors have been identified. Among the *systemic* factors are legal issues (while the Constitution provides for equal treatment, legal practices are quite different); political issues (political instability, insecurity, corruption, lack of political awareness, lack of political skills and poor implementation of policies); and cultural issues (norms, societal traditions and customary behaviour which ascribe different roles to men and women and place women in subordinate positions). *Organisational* challenges include gender streaming (streaming women into roles considered appropriate), limited training, lack of gender-friendly policies, absence of women from decision-making bodies and important meetings and insufficient mentoring and networking. Among the personal factors that limit women's participation are demographic factors, e.g. education, and familial factors.

Measures to improve participation of women in policymaking and governance beyond simple representation include: ensuring that gender perspectives are an integral part of the legislation; allocating specific amounts of funding to women's development plans; raising awareness of gender issues at all levels of government; building the capacity of new entrants in local governance; increasing women's participation and due representation in decision-making bodies beyond the local level; strengthening networks and safety nets to allow organisation; and addressing structural and cultural barriers to allow women to genuinely participate in governance.

(Source: Jabeen and Jadoon, 2009;
Khan and Bibi, 2008)

Alongside an increasingly active civil society, decentralisation has the potential to enhance both empowerment and equity, by bringing decisions closer to the people. This should improve participation in local politics, strengthen accountability and also improve the political representation of minority groups. However, there is no guarantee that decentralisation in itself will improve governance and accountability; checks and balances remain very important. There is also a risk that minority groups that become powerful under decentralisation may act in profoundly undemocratic ways and oppose equitable national policies. Donors need to be aware of these risks and take steps to mitigate them, by ensuring they have a good understanding of local power relations and engaging with these powerful groups.

Ensuring the **participation of marginalised groups in development programmes** can contribute to empowerment by building their capacity and increasing their voice in decision making. However, participation must be based on a good understanding of local power dynamics, as there is a risk that superficial participatory processes may entrench and even offer legitimacy to existing power imbalances. It is also important to be realistic about how transformative these processes are likely to be; at the very least, they must avoid simply placing further demands on the time and resources of already disadvantaged people and groups.

Sequencing of interventions is important for empowerment. As mentioned above, interventions to improve the welfare of marginalised groups may be needed before they can seize economic or political opportunities. However, interventions should not stop there – improving welfare alone is unlikely to be very empowering.

Finally, donors should not expect 'bottom-up' empowerment efforts to bear fruit in terms of policy change in the short term, but should simultaneously **engage elites** and promote pro-equity policies at the political level. Empowerment needs champions among the powerful, if any space is to be opened up for the marginalised. There are links here with the experience of proponents of a RBA to development. It is well

established that promoting rights involves both a struggle to empower rights-holders to claim their rights (related to the agency side of empowerment) and efforts to push and enable duty-bearers to fulfil their obligations (which relates to the structural side of empowerment) (Boesen and Martin 2007; Foresti and Ludi, 2007).

4. Conclusions

Equity and empowerment underpin poverty reduction, and are particularly important in tackling severe and intransigent chronic poverty and inequality. They are also important in their own right and in accordance with internationally recognised principles of human rights and social justice. By focusing on these twin concepts, development agencies can make a meaningful contribution to human development. Equity and empowerment are also good starting points when it comes to the need to improve 'enabling environments' – often a vaguely defined concept – as they relate to improving access to opportunities in society and enhancing democratic processes.

In practice, this means engaging governments in pro-equity policy dialogue and challenging discrimination and structural barriers to empowerment on one side, and working to build the capacity of civil society and decentralised levels of government on the other. Different approaches will be more effective in different contexts, and it is important to recognise the limits to what both donors and civil society partners can achieve. For this reason, it is critical to identify, cultivate and support champions within powerful groups. It is also important to consider sequencing of interventions. Improving the welfare of disadvantaged groups, for example, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for empowerment.

There are few easy answers to the question of how to achieve equity and empowerment. It is essential to undertake good analysis and assess options for influence. Donors have an advantage here in that they are likely to be in a strong position to engage the powerful as well as the powerless. Providing support to civil society, the media and decentralised levels of government has great potential, but also carries risks that donors need to be aware of and make efforts to mitigate.

As well as such specific activities, a focus on equity and empowerment would mean examining all interventions through this lens. Some activities may not contribute positively to these goals, but they should at least avoid creating or exacerbating inequities and power imbalances. Explicit attention to equity and empowerment would reduce the likelihood of unforeseen negative effects, and place principles of fairness and social justice clearly at the heart of development agencies' work.

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