2012 Expert Group Meeting on Promoting people's empowerment
in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and decent work for all

Role of civil society in promoting empowerment of people
Untapped capacity: empowerment and the future of development
A working paper of the NGO Committee for Social Development

The concept of empowerment has become increasingly common in the discourse on sustainable development issues. The outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, for example, references the term no less than 17 times. Such prominence reflects a growing consensus that empowerment is indispensable in achieving a range of human-centered development goals, including the eradication of poverty, the furthering of social integration, and the provision of full employment and decent work for all.

Empowerment has often been primarily — and in its early years almost exclusively — associated with the quest for gender equality. In many senses this is appropriate, as women have long faced discrimination and marginalization, and represent over half the global population. But it is increasingly recognized that empowerment must be promoted on a much wider basis, particularly among other vulnerable populations such as families; indigenous peoples; migrants; older persons; vulnerable youth; persons with disabilities; and racial, ethnic or religious minorities. It has emerged as a key tool in counteracting the pernicious effects of social and economic inequalities.

In areas such as the establishment of legal frameworks, the transformation of institutional structures, the increase of access to services and resources, significant strides have been made. At the international level, notable institutional steps include the creation of UN Women and the development of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. More general achievements include the decline in the number of people living in extreme poverty, the 40-year trend of rising Human Development Index ratings, the increasing number of national reforms aimed at giving women equal rights before the law, and a host of smaller but nevertheless vital victories won by local and regional actors. But much work remains to be done.

Seeking to contribute to the preparations for the Fifty-First Session of the Commission for Social Development, this paper makes an attempt to examine the nature of the empowerment process, the actors involved, and several concepts we feel are critical to effective empowerment. It will also propose a working definition of empowerment, suggest specific policy recommendations and raise key questions for further consideration.

What is Empowerment?

Despite the currency of empowerment in development circles, little consensus has emerged around the exact definition of the term. One review of literature[1] found over 30 concurrent

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[1] Solava Ibrahim and Sabina Alkire, "Agency & Empowerment: A proposal for internationally comparable indicators," *OPHI Working Papers,* 2008

definitions. Some organizations also leave the term deliberately undefined to afford greater latitude to those working in the field. But while there can be value in having a measure of flexibility amongst varying actors, greater clarity will be needed if empowerment is going to become a viable and practical standard by which development can be assessed.

Definitions of empowerment tend to revolve around a cluster of interrelated concepts including choice, freedom, agency, capacity, participation, control over one's own destiny, increased resources and capacity, and improved quality of life. None of these ideas are directly synonymous with empowerment, but all contribute to a holistic environment in which empowering conditions more readily emerge. Points of emphasis may differ from one definition to the next, but most focus on developing the latent capacity of individuals and groups for the purpose of furthering human well-being and fulfillment.

Whether conceived of as a process, an outcome, or both — and thoughtful commentators come down on all sides of the question — it is clear that empowerment could be understood as functioning along a number of clearly defined dimensions. Among these are: social empowerment, which refers to the capacity of individuals and groups to foster the relationships and institutional interactions necessary for well-being and productivity; economic empowerment, which enables marginalized populations to exert greater control over their resources and choices in areas like health, housing and education; political empowerment, which refers to populations' ability to influence processes and decisions that affect their well-being; legal empowerment, which concerns strengthening individuals' ability to exercise rights and institutions' ability to respond to the needs of people[2]; and cultural empowerment, which pertains to people's development of a sense of self and place within a group.

Equally important, however, are the normative or "spiritual" dimensions of empowerment that are required for sustainable social advancement — things like ethical leadership, principled action and moral courage. Empowerment of this kind focuses not only on capacities and resources, but on the social ends toward which those resources will be directed. Its aim is to create leaders who not only work for the advancement of their constituents, but are able to withstand the temptations of corruption and graft; individuals who not only pursue their own economic welfare, but refute those prejudices that help perpetuate extreme inequalities of income and resources; communities that not only produce enough to meet their needs, but exercise the discipline to voluntarily limit consumption in pursuit of a more ecologically sustainable world.

In this regard, we would like to offer the following as a **working definition** of empowerment:

> *Empowerment is the expansion of the capacity, volition and vision necessary for people to become effective agents of human well-being.*

Deliberately wide, this formulation applies equally to individuals, groups and associations, thereby removing one source of potential difficulty. It suggests the importance of considering the ends to which empowerment will be turned. And it avoids the narrow self-interest implicit in

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[2] Draft Aide-memoire, Expert Group Meeting on Promoting people's empowerment in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and productive and decent work for all

those conceptions of empowerment that assume its only or primary outcome is disadvantaged populations advancing their own welfare and that of no one else.[3]

But most of all, it explicitly links empowerment with the advancement of human welfare and human well-being. If, as suggested in resolution 66/224 on people's empowerment and development, "people should be the focus of all plans, programmes and policies, at all levels," then people must also be the focus of empowerment at all levels. Empowerment touches many aspects of human endeavor, but its focus must always be people.

Because empowerment at its most effective is inevitably people-centered, a key enabling condition is full respect for human rights in all forms and expressions. Such a rights-based approach, grounded in an ethic of respect and equality, ensures the provision of basic services, provides access to health and education, and translates values into laws and legally binding obligations. Such steps are key to establishing an environment in which true empowerment can flourish.

As with any learning process, effectively incorporating empowerment into development efforts will benefit greatly from grappling with key questions at the levels of both practice and theory. Among these: How do prior conceptions of empowerment impact thought and action today? How do various dimensions of empowerment relate to one another? How can empowerment best be directed toward human well-being, as opposed to mere economic productivity, political representation, etc.?

A Vision of Development

Though empowerment is typically equated with generally positive conditions, it does not necessarily produce desirable results on its own. Empowering low-level government employees to more effectively take part in an entrenched system of graft, for example, yields little social benefit. To be employed as a tool for furthering human development, therefore, empowerment needs to be embedded in a holistic vision of social development. In particular, it is most constructive and socially beneficial when pursued within an ethic of service to the common good, and in light of the importance of "other-regarding goals."[4]

Central to any such vision of development will be understandings of, and assumptions about, human nature, both individually and collectively. In particular, implicit notions of "us" versus "them" will need to be exposed and addressed. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, many discussions of empowerment are still predicated on the idea that "empowered" members of society — generally assumed to be those with greater material wealth — will work to empower the "disadvantaged" poor. Though the impulse to rectify inequalities is unquestionably noble, such us/them dichotomies will only serve to perpetuate existing divisions. Careful thought will need to

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[3] "All existing agency measures focus on agency goals that relate to oneself, one's family or community or others with whom one has sympathy, or the political unity of which one is a part… [Yet] this view is more restrictive, because it cannot include people's commitments to other-regarding goals that they might have such as saving the rainforests or supporting hip-hop music or caring for orphans." Sabina Alkire, "Concepts and Measures of Agency," *OPHI Working Paper No. 9*

[4] see Sabina Alkire, "Concepts and Measures of Agency," *OPHI Working Paper No. 9*

be given to the question of how empowerment can be approached as a universal and shared enterprise, and not a service where the "haves" provide to the "have nots".

Vision is also important at the individual level. A constructive vision of oneself is crucial to empowerment, as a lack of psychological assets can be a key barrier to becoming an active agent of development.[5] In addition to gaining skills and access to resources and services, empowerment entails people perceiving themselves as able and entitled to take charge of the process of development. Marginalized populations often internalize cultural norms that minimize their capacity. The belief that every individual and community has both a role and a responsibility to play in the construction of a more just society — and that without this contribution, the well-being of the whole is diminished — is therefore central to the process of empowerment. Vision is also a key element in the creation of volition, that most critical quality which adds to the concept of agency the will, commitment and resolve to take concrete action.

Central to the articulation of a vision of development is the ability to identify and articulate the root causes of inequality within a society. Regardless of other empowering factors, if a population is unable to ascertain the structures and sources of injustice and inequity around them, they will remain unable to rectify those conditions. Empowerment must, therefore, include an explicit focus on reading one's social reality, identifying the strengths and shortcomings of that reality, and devising initiatives to bring existing conditions closer to a vision of a preferred future.

Questions to be considered: How can other-regarding goals be incorporated into evolving conceptions of empowerment? How can objective disparities and inequalities be addressed without falling prey to distinctions of "us" and "them"? How can populations be assisted to deal effectively with information rather than respond unwittingly to political and commercial propaganda?

The Role of Participation in Empowerment

Perhaps no concept is as closely entwined with empowerment as is the concept of participation. Conceptual links between the two were suggested as early as 1980[6], and many of the principles and values informing present views of empowerment find their historical antecedents in the idea of participation. Moreover, participation remains today the practical way by which empowerment is often measured and quantified.[7]

In many ways participation is power. Those who do not have a seat at the table have little to no voice in decisions that affect their lives and are effectively prevented from taking meaningful

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[5] "Although complicated and often ignored, psychological assets are particularly crucial for empowerment interventions and measurement. Actors need to be conscious about their possibilities to parlay their assets into the capacity to make choices or to become 'agents.'" R. Alsop, M.F. Bertelsen, and J Holland, "Empowerment in Practice: From Analysis to Implementation," 2006

[6] John M. Cohen and Norman T. Uphoff, "Participation's place in Rural Development: Seeking Clarity Through Specificity," *World Development*, Volume 8, Issue 3, March 1980

[7] John Mathiason, "The Imperatives of Empowerment and Participation," *Concept Note for the Expert Group Meeting on the Pritority Theme of the Commission for Social Development 2013-2014,* 2012

action to impact their future. Participation in the processes of society is an indispensable prerequisite of both empowerment and development.

To be anything more than window-dressing, though, participation must be substantive and creative. It must allow people themselves to have access to knowledge and encourage them to apply it. It is not enough for people to be engaged in projects as mere beneficiaries, even if they have a voice in certain decisions. Offering populations a choice among pre-selected top-down options is participation only in the most limited sense. To participate in real terms with meaningful results, the beneficiaries themselves must be involved in the formulation of the options.

Integral to meaningful participation are opportunities to impact all points of the decision-making process, including identifying problems, devising potential solutions, choosing preferred alternatives, determining the means of implementation, partaking of the benefits of the decision, determining the criteria of evaluation, and contributing to the evaluation process. Opening some parts of the decision-making process but withholding others, is simply another, albeit more nuanced, form of disempowerment and exclusion.

Structural elements of participation must be considered as well. In many areas, local governance structures are so expansive and constituencies so large that many — particularly minorities or members of disadvantaged groups — feel that their voice is lost in the mix. Large forums are inherently susceptible to influence by those with the resources or power to project their voice the loudest, and there is a perception — often justified — that those without such resources are unable to impact policy decisions in meaningful ways. Key to effective participation, therefore, will be small, territorially-based participatory forums, federated at various levels to facilitate the transmission of all stakeholders' ideas and concerns. Closely related is the organizing principle of subsidiarity, the idea that any issue is best handled by the smallest, lowest, or least centralized authority capable of addressing the issue effectively.

Finally, while participating in the systems of decision-making is a necessary prerequisite, it cannot be equated with full empowerment, for taking part in flawed systems runs the risk of merely perpetuating existing patterns of injustice. In its highest expression, empowerment implies the capacity to assess the strengths and weaknesses of existing social structures, and the freedom to choose between participating in those structures, working to reform them, and/or endeavoring to build new structures.

Questions to be considered: Can one participate without being empowered? How must participation go beyond merely having a seat at the table? Can one be empowered without participation? What should be the role of indirect or representative forms of participation? What social structures are required for true participation?

Who are the Participants of Empowerment?

Who are the primary actors in the empowerment process? Well-meaning organizations differ widely on the question of individual versus collective empowerment, including the relative merits of each, the proper weighting between the two, and the ties of relationship binding the

two. A closely related question is whether empowerment is more effectively directed at enhancing personal agency or reforming social structures.

Local conditions will determine the exact form that empowerment must take in any given context. Nevertheless, experience has shown that three participants are crucial to the process of real and transformative empowerment. These are the individual (addressing personal capacities, resources, paradigms, self-conceptions), the institutions of society (formalized structures, systems of power, regulations, laws) and the community (collective relationships, patterns of interaction, capacities for communal action).

To be effective and sustainable, empowerment must address each of these actors, particularly and explicitly in project planning and proposals. Combining this context with the vision of social development described above, empowerment could be said to entail: (i) the enabling of the individual to manifest innate powers in a creative yet disciplined way; (ii) the shaping of institutions to exercise authority so that these powers are channeled towards the upliftment of the members of society; and (iii) the development of the community so that it acts as an enabling environment conducive to the release of individual potential and the enrichment of culture.[8]

Another question of critical importance is the optimal role of outside assistance. In many cases assistance from outside an area will be needed for a time. The way this assistance is offered plays a major role in determining whether people are truly empowered, whether dependencies are created, or whether individuals, institutions or communities are in fact subtly disempowered.

To avoid unintended negative consequences, there must be a clear expectation from the outset that human resources indigenous to the area itself will sustain activities as quickly as possible. At the level of policy, transferring operational authority and decision-making to the most local level of execution must be a prominent and explicit goal. And underlying all efforts must be the conviction that empowerment demands widespread participation, and that development is not an activity which one group carries out on behalf of another.

The gap between the lack of resources some marginalized populations face, and the imperatives of self-development and self-determination can be bridged in part by the concept of accompaniment. Though still being refined through practical work and implementation in the field, accompaniment implies a bilateral relationship of mutual support, assistance and encouragement. Sometimes the dynamic centers on the more experienced partner assisting the less; sometimes it implies a number of individuals all acting, reflecting and learning together. In some quarters it has even been applied to the junior partner accompanying the senior in an activity that he or she would have been unable to do alone, but can undertake with the support of a less-experienced collaborator. Regardless of the particular form it takes, accompaniment depends on a relationship of equality and genuine respect, a sense of mutual attachment and commitment, and a framework of shared action, development and service. Accompaniment is an interpersonal attitude as much as a tactical approach.

Questions to be considered: What skills and attitudes are required to promote solidarity and unity of purpose, thought, and action among all members of a community? How can differing

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[8] Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, "Science, Religion and Development: Some Initial Considerations," 2008

population groups be harmoniously integrated into a common outlook? In what ways do individuals, institutions and the community as a whole interact to generate constructive social action? How can social interactions be imbued with an acute sense of justice?

The Question of Power

Etymologically, the term "empowerment" denotes the investment of someone or something with power. Yet the question of power dynamics in social relationships has been largely ignored in the discourse on empowerment. So great has been the collective discomfort surrounding it that it has been referred to as the proverbial elephant in the room. But failing to define the power being instilled in others puts any rational program of empowerment at a conceptual and practical disadvantage.

Avoiding past difficulties is best accomplished not by avoiding the concept of power, but by finding alternatives to treating it as a zero-sum commodity[9]. In this sense, power is best viewed not as a resource that can be possessed, acquired, or lost, but rather as an integral part of all social relationships and institutions, shaping the boundaries of what is possible for people to do or envision themselves doing.[10]

Adopting a collaborative and mutualistic paradigm will be greatly facilitated by exploring alternative conceptions of the idea of power itself. One promising avenue to win-win relationships can be found within VeneKlasen and Miller's classifications of *power to, power with,* and *power within*[11]. Such frameworks offer promising approaches to a communal, society-for-all approach to power and empowerment. Even the traditionally negative *power over* category can be re-conceptualized positively, such as powerful people empowering others.

Another issue of vital importance is the question of who is empowered and who is not? Clearly the twists and turns of history have today left some populations with fewer resources, options and skills, and steps must be taken to address those inequalities. But the framework most suited for a society based on human dignity and mutual respect seems to be one in which every individual and group is presumed to have room for advancement. In this view, development is not "capped" and existing circumstances can be regarded as milestones in an ongoing and ever-advancing process of human development. Within such a conception the traditionally marginalized are not without power and the traditionally privileged are not all-powerful. All have capacities yet to be developed and all have responsibilities to advance the collective welfare.

Any conversation on the role of power must also touch on the institutions of governance, as they are the mechanism by which power is formalized and legitimized within society. Just, responsible, and effective systems of governance are key to any process of empowerment, for such systems create the kind of environment in which individuals and communities are best able

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[9] Robert Chambers, "Transforming Power: From Zero-sum to Win-Win," *IDS Bulletin,* Vol. 37, No.6, 2006

[10] Rosalind Eyben, Naila Kabeer, and Andrea Cornwall, "Conceptualising Empowerment and the Implications for Pro Poor Growth," Institute of Development Studies, 2008

[11] Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, 2007

to develop. Crucially, empowerment must also be understood as both a goal and an outcome of improving governance. As institutions of governance fulfill one of the most important aspects of their mandate – empowering the constituents they represent and serve – they will be enabled to execute their duties with increasing efficacy.

Key to effective governance at all levels is a robust standard of accountability by which elected officials, public servants, and service providers can be held answerable for their policies, actions and use of funds. Barring such mechanisms, individual and collective initiative will always be vulnerable to corruption and abuse. Supporting thorough accountability is the concept of transparency, by which the parameters of policy formulation, fiscal management, and other decision-making mechanisms are publicly available and open to review and assessment. And though it should go without saying, governance must always be based on the rule of law, including compliance with international laws, conventions and treaty obligations.

But important as accountability and transparency are, their ultimate objective is always trust. Accountability and transparency are what the public demand when they do not trust their elected officials. Similarly, efforts to improve accountability almost always aim to reestablish that sense of trust. Participation in and support of the institutions of society ultimately stem from trust that those institutions will deliver just outcomes such as a social protection floor, equitable distributions of wealth and resources, and a healthy and sustainable relationship with the natural environment. Conversely, a lack of trust often stems from a failure to uphold, or an outright denial of, fundamental human rights. The ethical quality of trustworthiness, therefore, must never be far from efforts to refine and reform structures of power.

Questions to be considered: How will power relationships need to be transformed/re-conceptualized to provide for true empowerment? What is "true" empowerment? In what ways can conceptions of *power with* and *power to* transform efforts to achieve empowerment? What steps can be taken to improve the structure and selection of leadership and authority? What training and education is needed to further just and effective governance? How can power disparities be addressed constructively and in a non-adversarial manner?

Information, Education, Knowledge, Learning, and Technology

Information, education, knowledge, learning, and technology represent a cluster of related concepts that are widely acknowledged to be critical aspects of individual and collective empowerment.

Access to information is key to empowerment because without relevant, timely and accurate information, effective action is impossible. Tellingly, censorship or restriction of information is often one of the premiere tools of oppression and repression. Laws guaranteeing rights to information, freedom of the press and the operation of local presses in local languages will therefore be necessary.

Access to education is similarly fundamental to long-term empowerment. Participation in both formal and non-formal education is critical to eradicating poverty, furthering social integration, providing decent work and achieving virtually all other development goals. Expanding education

at all levels is vital, but particular attention should be paid to basic education and the eradication of illiteracy. Laws guaranteeing the right of all citizens to receive a basic education are necessary in this regard, but also needed are programs providing special assistance to traditionally marginalized populations such as women and racial, ethnic or religious minorities.

With the foundation of access to information and education in place, attention can be turned to efforts that focus on the generation, application, and diffusion of new knowledge at the local level. Rather than settling for the wholesale transfer of information, facts, or "solutions" from outside places and contexts, such an approach seeks to establish an iterative process of problem solving — applying basic principles to local challenges, analyzing the results, gleaning insights from those results, and applying the knowledge gained to subsequent efforts. The end result is a systematic and coherent process of learning that can gradually be expanded to encompass a wider and wider range of community endeavors.

Finally, the question of technology must also be addressed. The dissemination of productive technologies, particularly in the realm of agriculture, is an area of critical need. Yet the introduction of technologies that are inappropriate for a given area or community has been one of the great failures and detriments of the development field. Thus it is imperative that new technologies not be blindly imitated or thoughtlessly incorporated. "Donors" and "receivers" alike must remember that technologies always imply values and that the social impact of any new technology — the affect it will have on the relationships between and within communities — should be carefully and thoughtfully considered. Technology is not inevitable, nor its effects inescapable. Empowered communities can choose what innovations they will adopt and how they will do so in ways that produce the greatest social good.

Questions to be considered: What skills and attitudes are required to make appropriate and informed technological choices? How do these relate to those needed to generate and apply technical knowledge? In what ways might education need to be adapted and expanded? What is required to establish educational processes conducive to personal growth and life-long learning?

Going Forward

Though certain principles are well understood about empowerment, and consensus is coalescing around others, a great deal of learning remains to be done. How are the ideals of empowerment translated into practical, on-the-ground realities in varying situations? How can empowerment be measured? What kinds of interventions have the most impact on empowering people? Through what mechanisms does empowerment translate into improved outcomes? Questions such as these need to be at the heart of the Commission's deliberations and discussions about the post-2015 UN development agenda in general.