

Empowerment: Of whom? By what means? Towards what ends?

51st Session of the Commission for Social Development Small Group Discussion

What is the vision of human development which guides our understanding of empowerment--one based on competition or on relationships of mutual aid? Who should be empowered—individuals, communities, institutions? What are the ends towards which empowerment is pursued—the enlargement of choices and freedoms, the building of capacity, the construction of more just and peaceful communities, the transformation of human relationships, or towards some other end?

The term empowerment means many things to many people, although consensus can be found around the idea of empowerment as expanding the basis of human well-being. The metaphor of the body politic, likening all of humanity to a single social organism, provides a useful framework for exploring empowerment as means of achieving well-being and prosperity for humanity as a whole. Implicit in such a conception are characteristics such as reciprocity, the need to differentiate and harmonize roles, the existence of a collective purpose, and the interdependence of individuals, communities and institutions. Viewed in this way, empowerment both depends on and contributes to a system in which diverse actors are provided the resources needed for each to make their rightful contribution to the whole.

Empowerment of whom?

Experience suggests that three actors are critical to the process of social transformation: the individual, the institutions of society, and the community. Empowerment can be said to involve assisting individuals to manifest constructive capacities in creative and disciplined ways, institutions to exercise authority in a manner that leads to the progress and upliftment of all, and communities to provide an environment in which culture is enriched and individual wills and capacities combine in collective action.

By what means?

Discourse about empowerment is often rooted in notions of the “empowered” members of society helping the “disadvantaged” or “marginalized.” The impulse to rectify social inequalities is noble, but us/them dichotomies perpetuate and reinforce existing divisions. Careful thought needs to be given to ways in which empowerment can be approached as a universal enterprise and not something the “haves” bestow on the “have nots.”

The ability to identify the root causes of injustice will be crucial to the empowerment of populations to become agents of social transformation. Unless a population is able to discern the presence of social injustice and its causes, it will be unable to rectify them. If empowerment is to lead to social transformation, it must enhance the ability to recognize the forces shaping one’s social reality, to identify the possibilities and challenges presented by that reality, and to devise initiatives for the betterment of society.

Building the capacity of the world’s peoples, communities and social institutions to create a more just society will require a vast increase in access to knowledge. Local capacity must be strengthened so that knowledge can be more readily generated, applied and diffused, thus expanding the local knowledge base and raising the community’s confidence in its ability to devise solutions.

Towards what ends?

Drawing on the above ideas, individual and collective empowerment can be conceived as the expansion of vision, capacity, and volition necessary for people to act as effective agents of human well-being and prosperity. Progress towards this end will involve reflection on the following questions: How do we understand empowerment of the individual, the community, and social institutions? How does the metaphor of the body politic reframe our understanding of the relationships of individuals, communities and institutions? How does this bear on conceptions of empowerment? How can social transformation be approached as a universal and shared enterprise and not something driven by the “haves” for the benefit of the “have nots”?