

Empowerment: Of Whom? By What Means? Towards What Ends?
An evening discussion at the margins of the 51st Session of the Commission for Social Development
7 February 2013 | New York

In conjunction with the priority theme of this year's Commission, a diverse group of representatives from Member States, UN and civil society organizations gathered for an exploratory consultation on the concept of empowerment. Facilitated by Ms. Winifred Doherty, participants were invited to consider 3 overarching questions: Of whom? By what means? Towards what ends? A working paper was offered to stimulate thinking about these issues.



Participants included:

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| • Gemma Adaba | • Rachel Harris | • Carmel Rawhani |
| • Barbara Adams | • Sopheap Hou | • Fatima Rodrigo |
| • Julia Berger | • Edwin M. John | • Marta Roig |
| • Thomas Brennan | • Aena Konde | • René Ruidíaz |
| • Ming Hwee Chong | • Rosa G. Lizarde | • Hiro Sakurai |
| • Amanda Coleman | • Judith Therese Martinez | • Mark Scheffer |
| • Winifred Doherty | • Carl Murrell | • Borg Tsien Tham |
| • Ugoji Adanma Eze | • Áine O'Connor | • Fatma Gul Unal |
| • Bernhard Frey | • Nisha Patel | |
| • Meg Gardinier | • Werner Puschra | |

In 4 small groups, participants were asked to read through and reflect on the concepts presented in the working paper.

This was followed by a plenary discussion, which is summarized as follows:

- Why was this theme chosen, and to what extent is the promotion of empowerment an expression of legitimate and authentic concern, as opposed to a “cover” for more self-serving ends?
 - The theme is based on the assumption that there is insufficiency somewhere. Whose responsibility is it to empower? Internal – individual? External – government? Community?
- In regards to the us/them dichotomy, things are very finite and we have to be sensible about resources that have to be shared. On other hand, people have own capacity, and maybe we don't need to bring power from elsewhere; people can develop their own latent power.
- People should be empowering themselves – using own capacities, building their own skills and capacities – but a wider institutional framework should be supporting them in their efforts.
- What incentives do “haves” have to share their power with the “have nots”?

- Our actions can start small in local settings, by identifying what social injustices are, and by devising actions to address them.
- There can be a lack of motivation on the part of the “haves” – their attitudes are what need to change.
- There are different definitions of power. One statement talked about four bases of power – power within, power of example, the “we” power (working with others inspired by the same vision), power given (us/them: giving tools and resources).
- Defining the ends to which empowerment will be turned – “effective agents of human well-being” - can change how we conceive of empowerment and the nature of power itself.
- The opposite of well-being is ill-being. What are the causes of ill-being? There are two: selfishness and helplessness/powerlessness. Both must be addressed together. We can be selfless but cannot help others if we are powerless. To focus on either one alone doesn’t solve problems.
- We should not be giving people power, we should be creating environments in which people can develop their own power. A good legislative system will then deal with misdeeds committed with that power.
- Central to values-based empowerment is the human rights framework. How can one talk about empowerment without human rights? It provides the framework in which to develop power.
- The role of the state is to provide a level playing field in terms of basic social needs and services. That is the first task, and then one can talk about empowerment.
- One problem with the idea of levelling the playing field is that power is given to corporations/transnationals. How do we identify who is involved in levelling the playing field, and to what end? Why are we giving more power to them?
- Everybody wants his or her own well-being. But they also want others’ well-being as well. They are simply put in a situation where they can only think about themselves.
- One way to increase power is to have something of substance to say; though, one needs a forum at which to speak. A key principle is that the bigger a forum becomes, the more it becomes a game of who has the biggest voice. Small sized forums are needed where people live; this will allow people to start having their say.
- One overlooked question: who are we as individuals, regardless of what we have or have not? How do we insert values into the conversation? How do we listen to each other? How do we understand where others are coming from?
- Empowerment is multidimensional. Some people may have lots of money, but may lack culture. Some may have little sense of purpose in life. We need to talk about duties as well as rights; we need to take responsibility for the power we have.
- The capacity of reading one’s social reality isn’t something that necessarily correlates with material wealth. People can have a significant degree of resources, but if they don’t have a sense of themselves as agents of human well-being, we wouldn’t say they are particularly empowered.

Participants shared encouraging comments regarding the evening, these included:

- *“Liked diversity of people and views...loved the format...If people can come together and talk about ideas like these – that’s empowerment itself.”*
- *“Sometimes working at the UN, we accept certain terms and don’t reflect on them. It’s nice to have a chance to talk with others about what they really mean.”*
- *“Thanks to organizers for their care and creativity. Good initiative, good process. I could find a good spirit in searching and listening. I wish this happens more often, that this initiative is kept up.”*
- *“Demonstrated the equality of all participants, nobody was sitting in a position of authority. Everyone had time to share and speak.”*
- *“[I]t was a real learning process...This was a community experience, everyone sharing their experience.”*
- *“Going to take with me one sentence – What needs to change in me that I can listen to people and see their perspective and it’s value, rather than imposing on them what I think it’s like.”*