

The Concept of Empowerment

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Introduction

The *empowerment* of the poor has been added to a long list of strategies for poverty reduction, including economic growth (supposed to 'trickle down' to the poor), the development of human capital (especially through health care and education), safety nets, improving access to markets, public action to facilitate the accumulation of assets, redistribution of wealth, and linking the interests of the poor to those of the rich through 'pro-poor coalitions'. In a contribution to the *International Herald Tribune* the Chief Economist at the World Bank argued that to overcome poverty 'we must not confine ourselves to following sound economic policies and focusing on measures which are directly oriented to the poor'. The poor have to be empowered by strengthening their participation in local decision-making and 'removing social barriers that result from distinctions of gender, race, ethnicity and social status'¹.

The World Bank's World Development Report for 2000/2001 on *Attacking Poverty* is an example of this recognition of the need for the poor to become politically more powerful if poverty is to be reduced. The United Nations also includes 'empowerment' as a facet of human development, along with co-operation, equity, sustainability and security (UNDP, 1997, p.8). The UK's aid agency, the Department for International Development, identifies the empowerment of the poor and disadvantaged people as a key aspect of governance that aims to be pro-poor. Aid should change political systems which discriminate against, and exclude, the poor. Empowerment is widely sought, not just by and for the poor, but also on behalf of other disadvantaged and marginalised groups, such as the elderly, the physically and mentally disabled, and women (though the disadvantage that such groups experience may be in part caused by poverty).

Empowerment, however, is a contested concept. It is used by different social scientists and professionals to denote different kinds of social and psychological change. It is sometimes used to refer to individuals, sometimes to groups (such as the aged), sometimes to classes (e.g. the poor) and sometimes to communities such as neighbourhoods. There is sometimes uncertainty about whether it is a dependent or independent variable. But mainly the problem is the diverse situations which have been labelled 'empowerment', to the extent that it runs the risk of meaning so much that it ends up being nothing more than a 'buzz' word. Such is the variation in usage and range of contexts to which the term 'empowerment' has been applied that it is tempting to reject it altogether as a concept for scientific enquiry and relegate it to the realm of political rhetoric.

However, rather than jettison something of potential use this paper prefers to restrict what it refers to. It tries to disentangle the many different meanings attached to the term 'empowerment'. The aim is to create a useful concept for understanding how those members of society, especially the poor, who universally have relatively little political power, might be 'empowered'. It is suggested that 'empowerment' should be restricted to strictly political contexts. Essentially this means focusing exclusively on the power relationship explicit in the dictionary definition - to authorize, license, give power to, make able - and restricting usage to politics. This necessitates distinguishing a range of situations in which it is inappropriate to think of change as 'empowerment'. The next section of this paper thus states what should *not* be thought of as 'empowerment'. Following that, two dimensions of empowerment are identified: the dimension of the individual, and the dimension of authority structures. It is argued that both types of change are necessary before empowerment can be said to have

¹ Nicholas Stern, 'Opportunity, empowerment and security - the key to attacking poverty', www.worldbank.org/knowledge/chiefecon

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occurred. So the first task is to exclude its use from contexts and relationships that do not warrant it, or are better described in other terms.

In the first place, 'empowerment' should not be confused with *access and entitlement*, as it is, for example, in the World Bank's *World Development Report* for 2000/2001. Strengthening the citizen's ability to claim rights and entitlements may well be desirable. But a claimant who has access to statutory benefits, such as social security or a pension, nevertheless remains dependent and powerless to influence what social and economic benefits are to be allocated, and how they are administered. Gaining access to a service to which the user or beneficiary has a right cannot be said to give users control over it, though their personal circumstances might well be improved by better access.

Empowerment has also been confused with *political objectives*, such as challenging and combating racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, oppression and injustice. This association is sometimes found in the literature of radical social work. For example, Ward and Mullender (1993) insist that 'empowerment' has no meaning unless it is 'connected with' or 'accompanied by a commitment to challenging and combating' oppression and injustice. This does not tell us what empowerment means for those who are empowered, only what their objectives should be. Nor does it guarantee that *confronting* racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination will change anything. Such confrontation has to be by empowered people. It is not the confrontation that empowers them, but changes to their social and political relationships with those with power.

Indeed, Ward and Mullender's discussion of anti-racist social work practice acknowledges that consciousness-raising, organising, and building upon experience, are essential preparations for combating racism, as does their advocacy of 'self-directed group work' which entails 'placing the reins in the hands of service users organised together in groups and (by) offering them help in achieving their own goals' (1993: 153). Indeed, most people are likely to be interested in the impact of empowerment, rather than empowerment itself, with the risk that it is left in a 'black box', and so unable to be viewed (Wils, 2001). For example, the empowerment of women will hopefully lead to equality with men, 'transforming unequal gender relations' (Enderley, 2001: 35). But this is not what empowerment *means*.

A similar confusion is found when empowerment is perceived as *decision-making process* and the ending of 'oppressive' and discriminatory practices in public services, even though such changes merely expose the client to more appropriately designed and equitably delivered services. The client is not necessarily made less dependent on the service, or given a greater role in its design. It is hard to see why someone should be empowered when professional public servants deliver services in the manner intended by the authorities, rather than in a biased, discriminatory or culturally oppressive manner. The lives of elderly people in local authority residential care, for example, will be made more comfortable by staff who observe the spirit as well as the letter of the law, and act with humanity and sympathy. But they will not be empowered.

Neither is empowerment synonymous with *participation*, since institutions and procedures for participation vary widely in the extent to which they empower the participants, if at all. Some forms of participation are tokenistic, while others simply pass the burden of providing services on those least able to bear it. For example, participation can mean no more than contributing labour or money to a project.

Sometimes empowerment is given a *private* dimension and equated with the ability to manage one's own personal affairs. Examples can be found both in reports on development projects and care of the disabled. For example, two World Bank experts define 'empowerment' in the case of rural infrastructure projects as 'the capability to manage assets...enter into contracts and raise financial resources' (Calvo and Pouliquen, 1999: 1). Writing about the role of NGOs in empowerment, Barkat Alam takes empowerment to mean that people have choice and control 'in every day aspects of their lives: their labour, reproduction, access to resources, etc.'

(Alam, 1998: 139). Similarly Naila Kabeer, writing about women's empowerment, associates empowerment with the resources and agency needed to be able to make choices and (citing Amartya Sen) live the lives they want (Kabeer, 1999: 438). Empowerment has also been seen as the social power of households to improve the condition of their members' lives. Social power is based on the physical space available to a household, surplus time, knowledge, skills, information, economic resources (incomes, credit, tools, land), networks, and social organisations such as clubs, churches, unions, and community associations (Friedman, 1992: 68-69).

In a very different context, residents of a home for the disabled were defined as 'officially empowered' when they became involved in all aspects of the management of their home: serving on committees, training and directing staff, managing finance, and organising social, educational, vocational and recreational activities. Here 'empowerment' was taken to mean being able to exercise choice in basic domestic management and freedom in developing lifestyles (Brown and Ringma, 1989). In community care 'empowerment' has been used to denote a process in which people are given resources (e.g. an income) with which to solve their own problems (Jack, 1995: 16).

In the case of care and support for people in need, such as the disabled, the elderly or those with learning difficulties, acquiring control over one's daily existence may be of supreme importance when in a dependency relationship with professional carers. 'Living life to the full' as a result of training, employment, physical access for the disabled, transport and so on, is undeniably important. User involvement means that choices in basic domestic management and lifestyle can be made by people who would otherwise be the passive recipients of care. Clients determine their own needs to the greatest extent possible. However, it cannot safely be inferred from such experience that those with the capabilities will necessarily be able to transfer them to the political arena. Empowerment as an economic concept and removed from policy decisions about public services has something in common with the consumerist model of people using their own resources to select what they want from what is offered by the market. Similarly, 'social power' may or may not be used to release people for political action.

The idea that 'empowerment' means making people stronger, not in the public realm but in their private and personal relationships, is found in some feminist perspectives on gender relations. Empowerment is seen as a solution to domestic violence, for example. It means making women more autonomous and safe in their relationships with male partners. Women who are the victims of domestic violence need emotional, psychological and economic support to give them the confidence to change relationships (Abrar, Lovenduski and Margetts, 2000). Women are also said to be empowered when released from household drudgery and thus provided with the time to take part in politics, among other things (Friedmann, 1992: 34).

However, this is a different kind of empowerment to that found lacking in the public arena, and needed by women and other victims of discrimination if public policies are to be enacted to produce outcomes which include strength in dealing with adversaries, whether they be violent partners, employers, landlords, government officials and others encountered in the normal routines of everyday life. So-called 'social empowerment' may release women to engage in other activities, some of which may empower politically, but it is not synonymous with political empowerment,

A *consumerist* approach to public service provision is yet another change in the relationship between state and citizen that has sought to lay claim to the positive image of 'empowerment'. But empowerment should not be confused with the fiction of making public services more responsive to users by pretending that they are 'consumers'. Citizen's charters, customer surveys, service guarantees, mission statements, performance plans, and customer care programmes may match the service more closely to the user's wants or needs. But the public is not thus empowered.

Public policy may be able to give the 'consumer' of public services more choice. One course of action is to increase the individual's personal resources so that dependence on the state is reduced, 'exit' becomes possible, and effective demand within the private market (if one exists) can be exercised. Another is to create a variety and range of competitive provision within public services so that providers become more responsive to user demand. These are both very limited options, especially for the poor in developing countries, and neither increases the service beneficiary's political influence. All the while public services have a role in meeting needs, dependent groups who are economically unable to satisfy their needs in the market, and for whom the privatisation of empowerment is a fantasy, will still be considered as needing empowerment in relationships with the state.

More generally, 'empowerment' is too often simply defined too broadly and amorphously. A recent telling example was produced by Deepa Narayan, the World Bank's Social Development Specialist who organised the survey of 60,000 poor people in more than 60 countries that informed part of the *World Development Report* for 2000/2001. She defines 'empowerment' as change in the interactions between poor people and the rest of society generally, not just the state, but also the private sector, civil society, and all the institutions that mediate access to resources and opportunities (Narayan, 2000: 18). A similarly excessive breadth of meaning is found when the UN defines empowerment as 'the expansion of people's capabilities and choices...based on freedom from hunger, want and deprivation; and the opportunity to participate in, or endorse, decisions that affect their lives' (UNDP, 1997: 8). So while it is true that empowerment involves not just participation but also power - 'choosing between alternatives `when others don't like it'; and that empowerment is 'essentially a political strategy and process' for those who have previously been excluded, the decision-making involved is extended too far when it includes just about everything - control

over resources (time, money, household budget, land, labour), access to credit and government programmes, making 'life choices' in marriage, divorce, education, occupation, and regional mobility (Wils, 2001: 7-8).

The concept of 'empowerment' thus needs to be analytically sharpened, especially if it is to refer to the possible consequences of participation or other social, economic and political changes, such as in education or income levels or civil rights. Empowerment is a form of human development that results from a shared experience of decision making and choice. It is best seen as a dependent variable resulting from two kinds of change for the citizen. One entails the development of *capacities* for exercising power. The other requires the *right* to exercise power. Empowerment thus combines power and authority.

Capacities

The individual dimension of empowerment derives from the development of individual and group skills. While empowerment strategies usually focus on group activities, the eventual beneficiaries are both groups and individuals (Wils, 2001: 9).

Empowerment is in part a preparation for action. People become empowered when they develop a capacity to share their ideas, experiences, problems and judgements about what action might be taken: 'taking a place on a consultative committee, using legislation, publishing a research report, or taking direct action' (Beresford and Croft, 1993: 134). Developing negotiating skills and an ability to co-operate are central to the process of empowerment. Internal individual and group skills include listening, assertiveness, exploiting expertise, dealing with difficult people, enabling newcomers to get involved, broadening the basis of involvement, accumulating knowledge, creating organisations, and ensuring organisations are accepted as representative of the group interests they have been created to promote. Empowerment means making good any 'deficits' - in literacy, organisational skills, or emotional stability. Consciousness-raising and demystification of political power might be added to this dimension of empowerment (Gomm, 1993: 134-35).

Writing about the role of rural organisations in empowering the rural poor, van de Sand makes the very important point that achievements in one type of group activity, such as the provision of credit to women through small savings and credit groups (as supported, for example, by the Tamil Nadu Women's Project in India), can lead to other activities not originally intended, in this case campaigning to stop the illegal killing of female children at birth. (2000: 27).

The development of organisational capacities will not in most cases have much effect on power relationships within local communities or society generally. It might be said to 'enable' rather than empower (Jack, 1995: 11). Empowerment needs in addition the right to make binding decisions about policies and services, either as a user (for example by being entitled to participate in the management of organisations such as health centres or schools) or as a citizen (for example, through participation in neighbourhood or village organisations or formal institutions of local democracy).

Authority

The second dimension of empowerment entails obtaining the *authority* to make decisions within official structures and to control provision so that needs as defined by the intended beneficiaries (often formerly excluded, disadvantaged or stigmatised groups) are met. Beresford and Croft define empowerment as 'making it possible for people to exercise power and have more control over their lives. That means having a greater voice 'in institutions, agencies and situations which affect them' (1993: 50). People are empowered by having the right to determine the nature of services or care (for the sick, elderly or disabled, for example). They have the right to engage in decision making about operational practices (the performance expected of staff, for example), expenditure (through delegated budgets, for example), and policy making (on plans for the development of a housing estate, for example) (Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, 1994). Empowerment means having a choice and sharing control: 'empowerment takes place within a framework of collective choice' (Stewart, 1995, p.299).

Empowerment thus needs to be based on authentic forms of participation, not just consultation or 'having a say' (valuable though this may be). Empowerment requires *accountability*, so that service providers answer to service users; *representation* on decision-making bodies so that responses to such accounts mean more than just 'having a say'; and *redress* of grievances 'to limit the use of control by agencies' (Spicker, 1994: 174-175).

This brief look at some conceptualisations of empowerment has drawn from a variety of sources – social work, social policy, the politics of underdevelopment, community care, and community development. Inevitably 'empowerment' will have its own special resonance in different fields of professional action and academic inquiry. There do, however, seem to be common themes in all attempts to define the process of political change labelled 'empowerment'. By identifying and isolating these, the concept can be saved from deteriorating into a catch-all reference to whatever happens to make people's lives better.

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