

Reflections on Empowerment

(researched and summarized by Francis Dombrowski, Capuchin)

Defining Empowerment

Introduction

The poor often feel voiceless and powerless. They feel unable to influence or negotiate better situations or policies for themselves with governments, systems and society.

Empowerment has different meanings in different contexts but there are basic elements present in successful attempts to empower poor people. Empowerment is a value that is helpful to the individual and the group and it can be economic, social or political.

In the broadest sense empowerment is the expansion of freedom of choice and action. It means increasing one's authority and control over the resources and decisions that affect one's life. If people have real choice, they gain control over their lives. Poor people's choices are often limited, both by their lack of assets and by their powerlessness to negotiate better terms for themselves with institutions and systems and by racism and exclusion.

1. The poor need assets and capabilities to empower themselves: The poor need a range of assets and capabilities to increase their wellbeing, security, self confidence so they can negotiate with those more powerful.

Assets are material like housing, transportation, money to enable people to increase their choices. Without these they are very vulnerable and have little capacity to negotiate fair deals.

Capabilities are within people and enable them to use their material assets to increase their well-being. Human capabilities include good health, education, production and life skills. Social capabilities include belonging, leadership, relations of trust, a sense of identity, values that give meaning to life, the capacity to organize, to set goals, etc. Political capability includes the capacity to represent oneself or others, access information, form associations or groups and participate in the political life of a city, county, state or country. Given a lack of voice and power and hindered by social barriers, poor people are often unable to take advantage of opportunities to exercise their rights, skills to better their lives.

2. The poor, people who have limited resources and are marginalized in society, need to organize and mobilize among themselves or with other committed groups to allow them to increase their access to resources and economic opportunities, obtain basic services and participate in local government. Also when poor people's organizations or groups link up with organizations of the state, civil society or the private sector, they are able to access additional resources and participate more fully in society. Poor people's organizations, groups, and networks, working with others, can mobilize resources to improve individual health, education and employment by expressing their preferences, exercise voice and hold governments and service providers accountable for providing quality services in education, health, business development and financial services and new markets.

3. Because poor people are generally excluded from participation in state and other institutions that make the decisions and administer the resources that affect their lives, institutions and organizations need to change their ways of relating, their laws, procedures values, ethics and incentives that guide the behavior of public officials and the private sector. Poor people long for institutions that listen and treat them with respect and dignity, even when these institutions cannot solve all their problems. When they are excluded, they conclude: "nobody hears the poor." Institutions and agencies must be sure they really do represent poor people's interests and are accountable to them.

4. Strategies to empower poor people will necessarily vary. Strategies to make local schools accountable to parents will differ from strategies to have poor people's concerns reflected in budgets. The challenge is to identify key elements of empowerment that represent successful efforts to empower poor people, increasing their freedom of choice and action in different contexts.

5. Four elements of empowerment: The four elements are access to information, inclusion and participation, accountability and local organizational capacity. While these four aspects will be explained separately, they are closely intertwined and act together to be effective. Thus although access to timely information about programs or policies is a necessary precondition for action poor people may not take action because there are no mechanism to have their voice heard or the costs of individual action may be too high. Also poor people do not participate in activities when they know their participation will make no different or decisions are made without holding providers accountable. Even where there are strong organizations, they may still be disconnected from government and the private sector and lack information.

a. Access to information: Information is power. Informed citizens are better equipped to take advantage of opportunities, access services, exercise their rights, negotiate effectively and hold state and other actors accountable. Without information that is timely and presented in ways that can be understood, it is impossible for poor people to take effective action. Information that is power must be gathered and spread by the written word, group discussions, poetry, storytelling, debates, theater with the use of media including radio, television, internet, facebook, and public hearings, etc. Critical areas are information about rules and rights to basic government services, about the performance of state and private agencies, about financial services, markets and prices, transportation, jobs, etc. People have to know what is available.

b. Inclusion and participation: Inclusion of the poor in groups that affect them and in the decision making is critical to make sure that resources go to the right people and motivates people to change. This means that organizations have to create space for people to debate issues and participate in decision making, setting priorities, budget formation and delivery of basic services. Also conflict resolution tools need to be in place to manage disagreements to arrive at compromise. Public meetings without any impact on policy or resource decisions turns the poor away. Participation can take different forms, depending on the issue. Participation may be direct by personal presence and conversation, by selecting representatives or spoke-persons for the group or association, political through elected representatives, communicating information to local and national decision makers.

c. Accountability: Accountability refers to the ability to call public officials, private employers or service providers to account requiring that they be answerable for the policies, actions and use of funds. Abuse of public office and funds hurt the poor the most because they lack power and access to officials to obtain the truth and justice. Organized communities and associations linked together will have their voices heard and their demands met. It is only when groups connect with each other and form networks or associations that they begin to influence government decision making and gain collective bargaining power with the powers that be.

People can make representatives accountable through elections. Information in the hands of citizens builds pressure for improved governance and accountability and to help set priorities for such things as health care, quality schools, etc. Access to laws and impartial justice is necessary to protect the rights of poor people. Joining coalitions that take up the cause of the poor enable them to demand accountability from governments or providers of services.

d. Local organizational capacity: Local organizational capacity means the ability of people to work together, organize themselves, become aware of their own gifts and talents, mobilize resources to solve problems of common interest. Poor people can turn to each other for support and strength to solve their everyday problems. E.g. a group of women who lend each other money, farmers' markets or neighborhood clubs. Also organized communities are more likely to have their voices heard and their demands met. But it is only when groups connect with each other across communities and form networks or associations on a larger scale that they begin to influence government and gain collective bargaining power with suppliers and financiers.

(Source: <http://goworldbank.org/D392LWSSNO>)

For more information see: *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook*