Empowerment

“The Process of empowerment, by enabling people to articulate and assert by words and deeds their urges and thinking, is a core dimension of social development.” Discuss this statement, and explain the key challenges that may arise from adopting “empowerment” as a development objective.

Aristotle noted that “wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else” (quoted in Sen 1999, p14). This can serve as a simple justification for non-material goals for development. While lack of income is often considered the ‘bottom line’ measure of poverty, “it [poverty] also consists of lack of access to services and opportunities for human development, lack of a voice in political life and decision making, and in social subordination and exclusion” (DFID 2000, p13). Empowerment is often suggested as part of the solution to these problems, as well as being an end in itself.

Perhaps the greatest challenge presented by empowerment is attempting to understand what exactly it means in the context of development. Scholars note that “the concept of empowerment is notoriously contentious” (Mayoux 2001, p247), that there is “no clear definition of the concept across disciplinary lines” (Page and Czuba 1999) and that there is a distinct “lack of clarity” (Sen 1997, p1). Bartlett is far more poetic: “empowerment is like the taste of mango, or the scent of jasmine, or the sound of the waves on the shore; almost everybody can recognise those things for what they are, but almost nobody can describe them” (Bartlett 2004, p12). While this may well be true, it certainly has not stopped people attempting to understand and define it.

This essay aims to review briefly a number of these understandings of ‘empowerment’ and the motivations behind its popularity as a development objective. It will then discuss the development of the concept and attempt to focus on its original meaning, considering a number of challenges that arise from its adoption as a development objective. Finally it will suggest ways in which the word could be ‘reclaimed’ for its original meaning. It will conclude with a brief summary of the argument presented in the essay.
Of the over twenty definitions of empowerment considered while researching this essay, the most all-embracing states that “Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important” (Page and Czuba 1999). The simplest suggests that it “really boils down to ‘taking seriously’” (Tom Peters quoted in Holcombe 1996, p81). There is a general consensus that it is manifested in more than one dimension; it is both a process and an outcome, applicable personally and collectively. For both individuals and groups it can involve positive changes in resource base and control of resources (“material empowerment”), self-recognition (“cognitive empowerment”), the way others see them (“perceptual empowerment”) and relationship (“relational empowerment”) (Mahmud 2003, p585). It involves self-awareness (Melkote and Steeves 2001, p249), access to information (Sen 1997, p19), power (Page and Czuba 1999), politics (Moore 2001, p325), social upheaval (Sen 1997, p6) and equity (Holcombe 1995, p18). It is contextual (Narayan 2002, p1) and specific; individuals can be empowered in one situation but not another (Bartlett 2004, p12). It is not something “which can be done to someone else” (Sen 1997, p3), although it can be supported, enabled and facilitated. In addition to all this, as seen above, it is “like the taste of mango” (Bartlett 2004, p12).

Up to this point we have briefly reviewed various understandings of the concept of ‘empowerment’. While recognising that there is no universally accepted consensus, we have seen that the various elements described in the above paragraph are often ‘involved’ in empowerment. We will now consider motivations for utilizing this concept; it should be no surprise that these also vary.

For some, empowerment “cannot be separated from values” (Holcombe 1995, p 15); it is the ‘right’ way to practice development due to its respect for “quality of life and human dignity” (Narayan 2002, p6). Here, empowerment is seen as a result in itself, while at the same time acting as the “driving force of people-centred development” (Bartlett 2004, p3). Another motivation for making empowerment a key objective of social development is the understanding that it is a tool with which to achieve other development objectives. It is seen
to not only have intrinsic value, but also “instrumental value”; it “enhances development effectiveness” (Narayan 2002, p10 and p1). The core belief is that “the poor...must help themselves; but this, trapped as they are, they often cannot do” (Chambers 1983, p3). Empowerment acts to liberate them to act on their own behalf. Examples include poor women being financially empowered by microfinance to provide for their families through new livelihoods and slum dwellers being legally empowered to improve their homes through being granted tenure. At a slightly different level, others are motivated to utilise empowerment in terms of collective action and politics to cause social change. This will be discussed at a later stage.

The above paragraph considered motivations for using empowerment in practice. For some this misses the point; perhaps we should be questioning the reasoning behind the very inclusion of the word ‘empowerment’ in development rhetoric. Could it be “nothing more than the most recently popular buzz word to be thrown in to make sure old programs get new funding” (Page and Czuba 1999)? It appears likely that, to some extent at least, a culture of ‘peer pressure’ and follow-my-leader must exist among development organisations. If the majority of organisations are including the word empowerment, questions would be asked of the few that are not. Similarly, since major funding bodies such as the World Bank make empowerment a priority (Narayan 2002, p1), it follows that NGOs and states will ensure its inclusion in project proposals and funding applications: “Empowerment is a convenient concept to use in dry international reports on poverty in poor countries if the aim is to strike a positive chord with those ‘progressive’ groups on whom the very existence of international aid agencies and programmes increasingly depend” (Moore 2001, p322). The positive nature of the word can certainly “give today’s development policies a sense of purposefulness and optimism” (Cornwall and Brock 2005, from Summary). Could this be used to mask far more negative outcomes for the poor or appease more radical elements? Simmons appears to imply that this is attempted: “No amount of talk about ‘consultation’, ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ can alter the fact that the principal effect of Third World Development, as is generally practised, is to impose an economic and political system beneficial to a relatively small elite” (Simmons 1992, p244). The use of the word ‘empowerment’ with its “warm and nice” (Cornwall and Brock 2005, p4) connotations could even play some part in giving its users the appearance of a moral ‘high ground’;
“Poverty reduction, participation and empowerment are feel good terms...conferring on their users that goodness and rightness that development agencies need to assert in order to assume the legitimacy to intervene in the lives of others” (ibid.). The motivations for adopting ‘empowerment’ as a development objective are certainly varied and, in practice, often work in combination.

The range of understandings of empowerment and motivations for its utilization both as a word and a practice by development organisations reflect the fact that it has changed over time. As part of this process it has incorporated meanings from a variety of sources, including “feminist scholarship, the Christian Right, New Age self-help manuals and business management” (Cornwall and Brock 2005, p5), so it is no surprise that there is no one clear-cut definition. Empowerment’s roots were in movements for radical social transformation and in the “language of critique of the dominant development paradigms of the 1960s and 1970s” (Sen 1997, p1), particularly in feminism and liberation theology. Core aspects included awareness raising (or ‘consciencization’ through libertarian education, Freire 1972) and collective action to build “countervailing power to enable otherwise excluded social groups to mobilize collectively to define and claim their rights” (Cornwall and Brock 2005, p6) through power struggle and eventual transformation of the status quo.

The fact that such a word is a feature of today’s development rhetoric does not mean that these radical concepts have been fully accepted. Instead, it appears as if “words that once spoke of politics and power have come to be refigured in the service of today’s one-size-fits-all development recipes, spun into an apoliticized form that everyone can agree with” (Cornwall and Brock 2005, from Summary). This ‘refiguring’ has necessarily involved a certain amount of diluting, for reasons discussed in later paragraphs. This has had the effect of sometimes “neutralizing its original emphasis on building personal and collective power in the struggle for a more just and equitable world” (ibid., p5). So where has the original meaning of empowerment gone? To an extent it is still there, buried amongst the layers of additional meanings which have built up; in the words of Cornwall and Brock: “International organisations may appear to have appropriated concepts once used by radical alternative movements, but they have not necessarily swallowed them whole” (2005, p16). For example, the following quote is taken from a World Bank document regarding
Empowerment: “Empowering poor women and men requires the removal of formal and informal institutional barriers that prevent them from taking action to improve their wellbeing – individually or collectively – and limit their choices” (Narayan 2002, p. vi). This sounds extremely similar to the original and radical meaning of empowerment discussed above. Similarly, the quote given in the title, while offering a relatively general view of empowerment, can be understood in this light; “to articulate and assert by words and deeds their urges and thinking” could certainly be understood as a political call to arms. In practice, however, other meanings are ‘mainstreamed’, while this one appears mainly on paper. This is unfortunate, as it is still required for development; there is no doubt that people continue to suffer due to unfair power relationships. Empowerment offers an approach for people to oppose and transform these relationships. We will now consider some of the key challenges that impede the adoption of the original ‘empowerment’ as a development objective.

The words ‘power struggle’ were employed earlier for good reason; “genuine empowerment may not be a neutral process, and those embarking on it must be prepared for social upheavals” (Sen 1997, p6). Development interventions that aim for this type of empowerment will, if effective, challenge the status quo. DFID acknowledges that “people always find it difficult to adjust to change…and those who benefit from inequalities and inequities are seldom willing to surrender their advantage without a struggle” (DFID 2000, p21). Similarly, former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright, who now leads the Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor, notes: “We expect to meet resistance from those content with the status quo” (Albright 2006, p101). The extent of any resistance will depend on who is gaining power and where from. In some (zero-sum) situations this must entail a transfer, in which others lose power, privileges or ‘elite’ positions, potentially causing conflict.

Empowerment, in this sense, is also concerned with national politics. This can be a major difficulty for development agencies that tend to strongly value their independence. Moore notes that empowerment “may imply more political confrontation than international organisations are able to cope with” and that “it is rarely acceptable that such ‘external’ organisations should give direct financial and other support to explicitly political
organisations” (Moore 2001, p325 and p321). It must also be recognised that challenging the status quo does not only take place within a country’s borders. If development agencies encourage challenging unfair power structures at a local level, is there a danger that this could escalate to an international level, threatening their donor countries and corporations? To what extent are they willing to shake the tree?

Freire’s ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ draws attention to two other difficulties for development agencies seeking to empower. It is difficult for external agents to do so as “they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people’s ability to think and to know” (Freire 1972, p36). Development workers, and organisations, carry with them baggage that may subconsciously limit their very belief in empowerment. Similarly, they may be unable to truly understand the initial situation, leading to unsuitable interventions: “Many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own person views of reality, never once taking into account the men-in-a-situation towards whom their programme was ostensibly directed” (Freire 1972, p66).

Another challenge is that empowerment may be threatened by development interventions. In fact, some development interventions can be seen as disempowering, through encouraging dependency or increasing relative poverty. They must be carefully targeted, as if they fail to reach the very poor there is a danger that they may serve to increase inequality, lifting some segments of the population while others fall further behind. The following quote refers to microfinance, but could apply to any development intervention: “Inequality can increase whenever better-off people are able to improve their incomes faster than others. Even if the absolute level of material well-being of the worst-off people does not change, relative poverty may increase, and with it a sense of powerlessness among very poor people” (Johnson and Rogaly 1999, p10). This demonstrates that the empowerment of some may serve to disempower others. Social welfare projects carried out by NGOs on behalf of the state can also cause problems because they can be seen to “act as an anaesthetic, distracting the oppressed from the true causes of their problems and from the concrete solutions to these problems” (Freire 1972, p121). As a consequence the poor may be less likely to mobilise for social action (Moore 2001, p327). On the other hand, some see these projects as necessary
for the provision of basic needs, regardless of their potential disempowering effects (Albright 2006, p101). A possible compromise is suggested by Bartlett: empowered people can accept handouts if they have requested them; the difference is that they are claimed or taken rather than accepted or given (Bartlett 2004, p5).

The previous paragraphs go some way towards explaining why ‘empowerment’, in its original and radical sense, presents a challenge when adopted as a development objective. We have also seen how the concept of empowerment has been diluted through ‘mainstreaming’ and combination with other development aims. How can this concept be reclaimed? What can development organisations do to further this original concept of empowerment?

One option would be to invent a new word “or to pilfer [one] from other vocabularies – much as development tends to do with regularity” (Cornwall and Brook 2005, p17) and give it the meaning originally ascribed to empowerment. However, there is nothing to prevent this word suffering the same fate of its predecessor; gradual dilution of meaning to make it acceptable to all. Cornwall and Brook suggest an interesting alternative. They note that the meaning of the word ‘empowerment’ is often defined by its context; by the words with which it is found in combination (Cornwall and Brook 2005, p4). For example, empowerment, participation and good governance imply one meaning, while empowerment, gender inequality and livelihood suggest a different one. Therefore combinations could be used to specify the ‘empowerment’ required: “in configuration with words like social justice, redistribution and solidarity” (Cornwall and Brook 2005, p18). To this we could add an ongoing critical, or at least questioning, attitude towards the word ‘empowerment’ whenever it appears. As we have seen, it cannot be accepted at simple face value. Through asking for clarification or challenging empowerment based claims, the actual meaning of the word can be established in specific situations or contexts. The word ‘disempowering’ has significant power because of the popularity and prominence of ‘empowerment’. If used wisely in criticism of development interventions that hinder awareness raising, collective action, power struggle or social transformation it may also be able to play a part in reclaiming ‘empowerment’.
Finally, development organisations must remember that empowerment is never something which can be handed out or provided; “ultimately people empower themselves” (Sen 1997, p6). This is particularly true with regard to the radical sense of empowerment we have focussed on in this essay, as it often involves politics and challenges to the status quo. A more suitable role might be as catalysts; “to help empower the poor by helping to create a supportive or enabling political environment for the poor to organize, rather than by supporting poor peoples’ organizations directly” (Moore 2001, p325).

This essay has suggested that the greatest challenge presented by empowerment is attempting to understand what exactly it means in the context of development. It has therefore briefly reviewed a number of understandings of ‘empowerment’ and the motivations behind its popularity as a development objective. It then focussed on the original, radical understanding of the word and argued the case for its reclamation. It considered a number of challenges that arise from its adoption as a development objective and discussed ways in which the word could be ‘reclaimed’ for its original meaning. To do this it suggests: combining empowerment with words such as social justice, redistribution and solidarity; challenging appearances of ‘empowerment’ in development rhetoric to clarify their actual meaning; using the word ‘disempowering’ when appropriate to criticise questionable development interventions; and, recognising the limits of interventions – they cannot empower, at best they can support empowerment.
References


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