

**Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)  
Division for Social Policy and Development**

**Report of the Expert Group Meeting on “Promoting People’s Empowerment in  
Achieving Poverty Eradication, Social Integration and Decent Work for All”**

10-12 September 2012  
United Nations Headquarters, New York

**Executive Summary**

The Expert Group Meeting was convened to help prepare the priority theme for the 51<sup>st</sup> session of the Commission for Social Development in February 2013. At the Meeting, it was decided that the most appropriate definition of empowerment was as an iterative process with key components including an enabling environment that enshrines human rights, expands choices and enables ‘empowered participation’ in decision-making that affects the long term achievement of goals like poverty eradication, social integration and decent work for all as well as sustainable development. The enabling environment includes human rights, policies and institutions for their enjoyment, appropriate attitudes and values. Empowered participation takes place at local, national and international levels and can be individual but is usually mediated by institutions such as civil society organizations. There is strong evidence that empowered participation has been effective in making development programmes function well. The Meeting made recommendations to the Commission about next steps to take in order to elaborate new policy approaches that will link its work on empowerment to the on-going work on the social pillar of the Rio + 20 Summit and developing post-2015 goals and objectives.

**Background**

The Meeting was convened in the context of draft Resolution 1 in the Report of the Commission for Social Development (E/2012/26) in which the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) decided that the priority theme for the 2013-2014 review and policy cycle should be “Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all”. The outcomes of the meeting will provide important inputs to the work of the Commission, in particular contributing to the formulation of policies that have been shown to have a major impact on efforts to promote people’s empowerment.

Given that the mandate of the Commission for Social Development (CSocD) is the follow-up to the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development and the 24<sup>th</sup> Special Session of the General Assembly, and taking into account its choice for the priority theme of its 2013-14 cycle, the Expert Group Meeting on empowerment focused on: (1) A practical definition of empowerment relevant to achieving the three core objectives of social development (as the Commission mandates), (2) A review of what has been achieved so far in promoting the economic, social and political empowerment of people and social groups, and (3) An evidence-based set of policy recommendations to promote the empowerment of people. The Expert Group Meeting

(EGM) provided concrete suggestions in order to contribute to the Division's preparation for the forthcoming session of the CSocD.

The Expert Group Meeting was expected to undertake a comprehensive review of what has been achieved so far in promoting the social, economic, political and legal empowerment of people and social groups, highlight challenges and successes, examine best practices and lessons learned and make policy recommendations on concrete steps that can be taken at the national, regional and international levels to strengthen capacity to promote and accelerate progress toward the empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment for all.

The deliberations and recommendations of the meeting will contribute to preparation of the report of the Secretary-General to be submitted to the 51<sup>st</sup> session of the Commission for Social Development on the priority theme of "Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and productive and decent work for all".

### **Defining Empowerment**

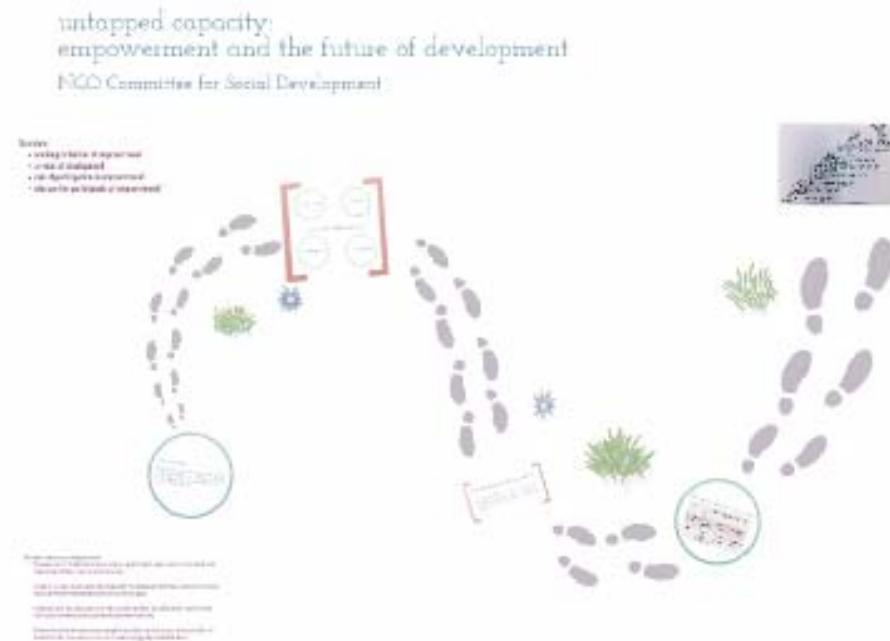
The Expert Group Meeting, as requested, spent significant time considering the definition of empowerment. It was conscious of the fact that in academic literature there were many different definitions of the term. It was also aware that the term had come into use in the United Nations in the context of empowerment of women and, later, empowerment of persons with disabilities and it is becoming a conceptual tool of youth policies and programmes. The decision by the Commission to consider promoting people's empowerment meant going beyond group-specific approaches. It rather aims to embrace a holistic venue so as to focus on people-centred development as a comprehensive objective of the development agenda of the United Nations. On this ground, the work of the Commission would give specific guidance for the social pillar of the Rio +20 Summit and ensure a focus on specific goals for people centred development within the Post-2015 Development Agenda of the United Nations.

In reviewing the concept in the light of research on it, the EGM decided that empowerment is a process with different components. An online survey that produced responses from members of civil society, governments and other United Nations organizations also emphasized these components. Conceptual approaches draw on agency: what actors can do, and structure, behaviours and values. Empowerment requires an enabling environment that supports policies and attitude change to permit all people of all abilities and across the lifecycle and to participate in decision-making about their lives. Meaningful participation is one of the most observable and prized aspect of empowerment. Then, through meaningful participation, people affect the achievement of objectives. Achievement of objectives reinforces empowerment by demonstrating its value. The process is therefore iterative.

Empowerment derives and builds upon the intrinsic resources of human beings and their inner potential for taking charge of their own destiny. Its essence relates to the need for people to reclaim ownership of the improvement of their life through

enriching it. As a tool for enhancing the human capital, empowerment is a process for self-development. As such, empowerment does not imply a set of measures that a group of people may prescribe to another group to adopt and implement. The process of empowerment will ideally combine policies and behaviours that seek to enhance choice and capacities of those who are experiencing powerlessness and discrimination. This makes any suggestion on policy recommendation, as it pertains to the concept of empowerment, a delicate undertaking.

The expert from the NGO Community presented a graphic of the process and the experts expanded on its elements.



## Enabling Environment

The enabling environment consists of different elements. There needs to be a formal institutional structure that both permits meaningful participation and encourages it. This includes attention to the human rights framework and a rights-based approach to ensure that rights can be enjoyed and institutions and policies developed that encourage empowerment. There also needs to be attention to the environment that enables and creates space and meaning for an individual to participate. This includes ready access to knowledge and information, for which the new information and communication technologies provide a significant contribution.

All people need to be sure that their efforts to participate will bring tangible results as participation is often costly in terms of time and resources. Positive participation will be positive and effective, and allow definition of problems, exploration of solutions and affirmation that actions will be effective. In political theory, this is what is called political efficacy, the belief that one can influence government decisions (and social attitudes?). How this is obtained, from education or from the work of institutions, can vary but it is clearly needed.

## Participation

The most measurable part of empowerment is participation. This has been a focus for some time. The United Nations in 1975 underscored the importance of popular participation for development.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, it noted that there were different kinds of participation depending on the issue.

<b>Figure I. Meanings of popular participation in terms of development</b>		
<i>Aspects of development</i>		
<i>Popular participation as:</i>	<i>Improvement of material welfare</i>	<i>Improvement of social relations</i>
End-state or goal	Sharing of material outputs of development	Receiving benefits of improved social relations (e.g., equal opportunity, end of discrimination)
Passive process	Contribution to production (e.g., working, investing, saving)	Contributing to improved social relations (e.g., being a "good citizen" or "good neighbour")
Active process	Participating in decisions to allocate factors of production	Participating in decisions on determination of societal values and roles, and on distribution of benefits

The group agreed that there was a learning interaction between participation and enabling factors. Participation can affect the enabling environment, just as the enabling environment promotes participation. Participation can be at different levels, local, national and even international.

## Citizenship

An emerging way to look at participation was in terms of citizenship. The group recalled that Aristotle had said "He who has the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state is said by us to be a citizen of that state. And speaking generally, a state is a body of citizens sufficing for the purposes of life."<sup>2</sup> Citizenship means having rights, having responsibilities, but mostly being able to participate. An empowered person is a good citizen and citizenship is a requirement for participation.

## Empowerment outcomes

An empowered population, whether individuals, groups or the society as a whole, has a greater likelihood of solving major problems like poverty, social integration and employment, as well as sustainable development. As one expert

<sup>1</sup> *Popular Participation in Decision-making for Development* (United Nations publication. Sales no. E.75.IV.10)

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, (1943) *Politics*, Book III, Chapter One. (In *On Man In the Universe* Translation of Benjamin Jowett), New York: D. Van Nostrand.

noted, a starting point for thinking about power and empowerment, especially of the poor, should be to be clear about the *outcomes* of power relationships: whether someone was able to achieve all or at least part of what was desired, or was unable to get what was desired, or indeed got what was actually *undesired*. It is also important to factor in the *costs* of achieving objectives, which is not done in much of the literature on power. Power should be assessed considering not only *success*, but also with regard to the *costs* of success, absolute or relative.

### **Indicators**

Given a definition, the Group agreed that more work needed to be done to measure the extent of empowerment by developing cost-effective indicators. The indicators have to be observable and some elements of empowerment, like participation, can be measured depending on the location of participation (e.g. voting, percentage of women in decision-making) and may require qualitative indicators. Other elements in the enabling environment can be measured as can the connection between participation and outcomes. However, there are still no universally agreed indicators on empowerment at the level of the United Nations and these need to be developed if the concept is to fulfil its potential and a cross-cutting variable in achieving development objectives.

### **Definition of Empowerment**

Based on the discussion, empowerment means effective participation by members of society, as individuals and groups, in decisions about their lives, that is conditioned by a supportive enabling environment, and leads to the solution of economic and social problems confronting them.

### **Ensuring an enabling environment**

The first step in promoting empowerment is to ensure an enabling environment. This involves having rights, the policies and practical arrangements to enjoy them, a favourable institutional environment and attitudes and behaviours that make participation effective.

### **Human rights approach**

The Expert Group considered that the human rights framework and the human rights-based approach was an essential element in establishing the enabling environment for empowerment. There is no doubt that individuals and groups have the right to participate, set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights articles 19-20 and 25 that state:

#### **Article 19**

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

#### **Article 20**

- (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
- (2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

### **Article 21**

- (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
- (2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.

### <sup>1</sup> **Article 25**

Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in article 2 and without unreasonable restrictions:

- (a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives;
- (b) To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors;
- (c) To have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his country.

However, having those rights does not mean that there is clarity on those responsible to ensure the promotion and realization of those rights so that individuals can enjoy them. International conventions and their protocols have set out what needs to be done in detail. For example the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) specifies the human rights basis for women's empowerment, by stating

### **Article 7**

Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- (a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- (b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;
- (c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

A human rights based approach includes ensuring that the opportunity exists to exercise these rights. This entails the adoption of public policies and programmes that encourage people – as individuals or in groups – to exercise their rights for their own and the common good, and also to monitor adherence to them.

### **Institutions and policies**

The Expert Group emphasized that appropriate policies and institutions needed to be in place. There were many examples. In the Latin America and Caribbean region, for instance, improved participatory processes in the formulation and implementation of social policies and programmes have been important in reducing the levels of corruption that normally prevail, thus improving their reach and

effectiveness. Similarly, for persons with disabilities and those who are ageing, elimination of barriers and supporting contributions and recognising value was important.

Institutional responses to expanding choices and capacities are essential. Some basics are clear – good health care, access to safe water and nutritious food and regular income are prerequisites for all people at all stages of life. Which institutions were more effective in promoting empowerment was still an open question. For example, while microcredit had its merits in helping to promote women's economic empowerment, there are criticisms on its failures at promoting genuine empowerment given limitations on gender dynamics in the home and community and lack of flexibility with regard to age and disability. Similarly, there are currently criticisms in the failure to address similar fault lines in the promotion of entrepreneurship for economic empowerment.

Good, responsive and transparent government institutions are critical for empowerment. There are trends that work in favour of empowerment, including aid transparency, government decentralization, use of ICT including social media to improve transparency and information flow to citizens to allow them to have a monitoring and watch role on government. This has been referred to as horizontal accountability.

Policies that encourage organized participation are also important and organizations of citizens including cooperatives have a long and distinguished history, but lessons can be learned for improved citizen structures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century context.

The Expert Group noted the importance of balancing the view of empowerment as both a means toward and a consequence of well-informed, well-implemented and accountable social and economic policies.

### **Vision-efficacy**

The Expert Group noted that a sense of personal empowerment, or political efficacy, was essential and that the literature suggested a number of ways in which this could be obtained. The education system can help create concepts of critical thinking and information processing if this is included in the curriculum. This was called, in some countries, civic education. Similarly, theorists and practitioners of adult education, like Paulo Freire, have pointed out that this type of thinking can be inculcated through participative education.

The act of participation itself can produce a sense of political efficacy as many studies have shown, although some studies have indicated that this is related to how participation is organized. Studies referred to in the expert group meeting suggested that an ability to carry out a full analysis of problems was critical to believing that one could influence government decisions.

### **Information and ICT**

The increase in information availability through information and communication technology (ICT), especially the Internet and new applications using

it like social media, has made participation much easier, if sometimes problematic. The group noted many cases where the availability of information has made participation effective, but it also noted negative cases.

The use of ICT by groups rather than by individuals was found as an important factor of participation. A study of youth and ICT in the “Arab spring” presented at the Expert Group found that the social media tools would not have had the same impact in the absence of social movements that were ready to be deployed in an open confrontation strategy with the regimes. Another study, of use of ICT to transfer new knowledge to farmers, also underscored the need to have local organizations as mediators.

For ICT to be effective, users need training in the intricacies of the Internet. They also need access to the technologies, including, as has been noted by the General Assembly, to broadband.

### **Participation by Individuals and Groups**

The group agreed that participation had to be seen in terms of individuals, but also of groups; group characteristics helped define the issues related to empowerment. In fact, empowerment has traditionally been seen in terms of specific groups. While the focus of the expert group meeting was on empowerment generally, the experience of specific groups was illustrative of both problems and potential.

### **Women**

Empowerment of women was the first focus of the concept at the United Nations. It was defined in terms of gender relations, namely the relationship between women and men. The process of empowerment, starting with rights but including programmes and policies, is to ensure that there is equality between women and men in key areas of life. A focus of this has been on economic empowerment through women challenging the gender patterns of production and access to wealth considering that the markets are mostly controlled by men. Land ownership and rights was an area where considerable work had been done to provide women with equal access to key means of production. Empowerment of women also involves equality in participation in decision-making. However, if empowerment of women is not part of a broader empowerment of both men and women, it is likely to be inadequate.

### **Persons with Disabilities**

For persons with disabilities, a key factor in the enabling environment is the removal of cultural and physical barriers so that the persons can have equal access to all opportunities available to other persons, including education, information and employment. Most barriers confronting persons with disabilities relate to lack of access to material and immaterial opportunities, stereotypes built in social and cultural traditions and denial of basic rights. There was considerable evidence, particularly at the regional level, that if barriers are removed, persons with disabilities, particularly through their organizations, can affect policies and further empower members of the group. This was evident at all levels, including the international level where



participation of persons with disabilities had been a major factor in the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

## **Youth**

Young people were considered a critical group, facing particular risk factors for exclusion and marginalization as well as high unemployment. To empower youth there needs to be policies that enable youth to participate in decision-making to address their problems.

## **Older persons**

The proportion of older persons in society was increasing globally and ensuring that older peoples contributions to family and community are valued and recognised, and their rights respected and promoted are considered to be of fundamental important by older persons themselves. Being able to meet their basic needs of income, health and access to decision makers and to tackle discrimination was a growing issue. Overall more data as well as affirmative action on ageing is needed. While there was evidence that older persons were more likely than younger to participate by voting in most countries, it was not clear to what extent that older people are able to use their vote to ensure the kinds of policies necessary to address problems of aging, which require a fully enabling social and economic environment. For older people the core issues were described as strengthening capabilities; expanding choices; and ensuring human rights.

## **Families**

Families are a key social institution that provides identity and economic security. In terms of empowerment, the examples of how family members cope are means of socialization of younger persons. The role of families, particularly multi-generational ones, in showing how empowerment can be attained, needs to be explored further.

## **Role of Civil Society**

The role of organised civil society organizations to demand accountability and to ensure the promotion of human rights is central to meaningful empowerment. While individuals can act on their own, this is usually not sufficient to achieve objectives. Mediated participation through community action may be the main vehicle for empowerment. Civil society organizations have been particularly effective at the local level to effect far reaching change or at international level where they have encouraged adoption of international norms and standards and then used these to advocate for changes in policies, laws and institutions at the national level. The role of organizations in the two cases that were presented was critical to success.

## **Participation by Level**

While most participation is expected to be at the local level, where people live and work, it is also possible at the national and international levels.

At the local level there has been considerable experience in obtaining empowered participation. What is termed community development occurs at that level. The Expert Group noted that empowered participation may be easier to obtain in rural areas than in poorer urban areas. One factor in success is engaging local leaders in the process who have to listen and to act on the wishes of a mobilised community. The institutional structure for engaging people at the community level, through incentives and programmes, is important. One element that is growing in importance is decentralization of government programmes and administration to the local level. The experience seems mixed and is worthy of further analysis.

At the national level, an increasing number of countries are engaging civil society organizations in the discussion of policies and in achieving accountability.

At the international level, engaging civil society in the formulation of policies has become increasingly important and new institutions like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the Internet Governance Forum are multi-stakeholder bodies that engage different groups. In some respects, the environmentalist concept of “think globally, act locally” appears to be becoming more effective.

### **Results of Participation**

Participation has reciprocal effects on the main issues with which the United Nations is seized. On the one hand, addressing the problems can affect the enabling environment for participation. On the other hand, participation can make the solution of the problems more likely. This was examined in the expert group in terms of four problem areas identified by the Commission.

### **Poverty**

The problem of poverty has been a concern of the United Nations since its founding. It is caused by a lack of economic opportunities that are affected by diverse factors, some natural, some man-made. Eleven years earlier there was an expert group meeting on poverty that explored some of the causes and consequences. The expert group noted that while poverty disempowers, increasing participation can make anti-poverty policies work better.

One element of removing disempowerment is through measures of social protection that provide a floor that enables innovation and change. Social protection is now part of the development agenda.

Social protection can be seen as helping people survive but a better approach is as helping people thrive so that it becomes a source of empowerment rather than dependence on the state.

### **Social Integration**

The Expert Group examined the Shared Society project from the Club de Madrid based on four principles that bring about a shared society: (a) equality of opportunity; (b) absence of discrimination; (c) opportunities for participation; and (d)

respect for the dignity of everyone. Participation in decision-making was an essential component and enabled different groups to be integrated on an equal basis.

### **Employment and Decent Work**

Employment with decent work is a means to improve living standards. Empowerment and inclusiveness are means to achieve employment and decent work and at the same time is a manifestation of empowerment itself. The MDG framework recognizes that employment should bring remuneration and security as well as sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

The ILO argues that there must be effective policies if employment and decent work goals are to be achieved. This includes not only counter cyclical measures but also measures to improve productive capacities through investment, support to small and medium enterprises and green economy, coherence, coordination in government to obtain social objectives and also integration of policies, trade finance and technology as well as employment policies, nationally defined social protection floor and worker rights to create the framework for inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Participation of workers in the design and implementation of these policies can help ensure their success.

### **Sustainable development**

One result of the Rio+20 Conference and its outcome document “The Future We Want” was to give priority to sustainable development as a key concept and basis for formulating post-2015 goals. Empowerment is a critical cross-cutting issue for achieving sustainable development. Confronting challenges like climate change will require significant changes in human behaviour in terms of both production and consumption patterns and this can only be achieved if people participate effectively in the formulation and implementation of plans, policies and programmes. This requires a shift in traditions, conceptions and assumptions relating multi-facets of the life of individuals and groups.

The expert group noted that a key paragraph in “The Future We Want” was:

44. We acknowledge the role of civil society and the importance of enabling all members of civil society to be actively engaged in sustainable development. We recognize that improved participation of civil society depends upon, inter alia, strengthening access to information and building civil society capacity and an enabling environment. We recognize that information and communications technology is facilitating the flow of information between governments and the public. In this regard, it is essential to work towards improved access to information and communications technology, especially broadband networks and services, and bridge the digital divide, recognizing the contribution of international cooperation in this regard.

## **Recommendations for the Commission**

Based on its examination, the Expert Group recommends that the Commission:

1. Agree on the definition of empowerment as a process with key components, each of which can be examined in detail.
2. Begin a process of defining universally-applicable empowerment indicators that can be used for monitoring progress of development priorities including through an expert group meeting.
3. Consider that empowerment is a cross-cutting theme, and that its measurement should be built into all policies, including poverty eradication, social integration and employment and decent work.
4. Consider the implications of empowerment for the consultation about and design of post-2015 goals and objectives that have within them the core of sustainable development to ensure that people can better contribute to decision-making using existing means (such as non-governmental organisations) and new mechanisms (social media, communication technology outreach);
5. Begin an examination of the relationship between access to information and communication technology and empowerment, including the role of mediation, investment and infrastructure.
6. Review the lessons learned from efforts of specific groups like youth, persons with disabilities, indigenous people and older persons to ensure their empowerment in determining new empowerment concepts, paradigms and policies.
7. Consider the role of empowerment at the international level, including in policy formulation and in ensuring accountability of international programmes as well as the role of civil society organizations and ICT.
8. Encourage a synthesis of existing research on empowerment with a view to identifying areas that require further investigation and applicability to social and economic development policies and programmes.