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Igniting Leadership

High-Level Panel Discussion
On 'promoting the empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social Integration and full employment and decent work for all'
United Nations Commission for Social Development

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Remarks by Dr. John Gaventa[1]
Coady International Institute
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Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this panel discussion on the important theme of 'promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all'. I commend the Commission and the Secretary-General for the report which we are discussing today.

 'Empowerment', as defined by the report of the Secretary General, is 'the process towards the effective participation of all members of society in decisions about their lives' and 'is a key objective of people-centered social development processes.'

This core idea has a long and important history. I now work as Director of the Coady International Institute at StFX in Canada. The Coady Institute has a 55-year history as a center dedicated to strengthening the empowerment of local leaders and communities around the world, as its founder Moses Coady said, 'to get the good and abundant life *to become the masters of their own destiny[2]*.

The way to achieve this vision, Dr. Coady believed, was through participation. As he wrote, *'it is not going to be done by guns, marching armies or bombs but by a program in which the people themselves will participate. It is democracy not only in the political sense but it is participation by the people in the economic, social and educational forces which condition their lives.'[3]*

Over the decades this core idea – which is shared by other leaders in many countries - has gained momentum in international development. The United Nations and its various agencies have been important champions in this history, ranging from the important UNRISD report in the 1970s, to the World Summit for Social Development in 1995, to this 52nd session of this Commission. Last year,

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[2] Coady, M.M. (1939), *Masters of Their Own Destiny*. New York: Harper and Row.
[3] Coady, M. M. (1957). *My story*. [n.l.]: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, p. 11.

as well, the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights affirmed the idea that 'Participation is a human right in itself, a precondition or catalyst for the realization and enjoyment of other human rights'*4*.

While the idea of empowered citizen participation as an engine of development and rights has been a strong one, what do we know about the conditions under which this actually occurs?

Before joining the Coady International institute, I had the opportunity to serve as director of 10-year research program, known as the Development Research Center on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability, based at the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex. Bringing together a network of 50-60 researchers in over 20 countries, we produced over 150 first hand case studies on how citizens engage, participate and mobilize to improve their lives and to gain their human rights. (For full information see www.drc-citizenship.org.)

Analyzing over 800 outcomes of participation from 100 of these cases, we gained important insights of the positive contributions of empowered citizen participation in four broad areas, each of which is essential for development.[5]

First, **engagement is important because it helps form better citizens: citizens who are aware of their rights to participate in the first place, and are more confident of their ability to do so.**

While this finding may sound self evident, it is a critical piece, which is often overlooked. People do not wake up in the morning and say, "aha, today I am an empowered, active citizen". Rather, our work suggests that it is through citizen engagement itself that people develop greater civic and political knowledge, and a greater sense of awareness of rights and of their own empowerment, which serve as a prerequisite to further action and participation.

> *For instance, in Bangladesh, a woman said: "in the past, we the poor did not realize many things. My father was a sharecropper, I also became a sharecropper. We thought that we would have to pass our days doing the*

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[4] Magdalena Sepulveda Carmona (2011), "Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights", UN Human Rights Council, p. 1.
[5] For further information see John Gaventa and Gregory Barrett (2012), "Mapping the outcomes of citizen engagement", **World Development** 40 (12): 2399-2410. A longer version is also available as IDS Working Paper 347, 2010. http://www.ids.ac.uk/idspublication/so-what-difference-does-it-make-mapping-the-outcomes-of-citizen-engagement1.

same things that our forefathers did, that those with assets would stay rich and those without would stay poor. We came to know that we are not born poor … that the government holds wealth on behalf of the people, that our fundamental rights as citizens of Bangladesh are written into the constitution."

Having a sense of citizenship is one thing; translating that into effective and sustaining change is another. This leads us to our second outcome: **Citizen engagement builds more effective and empowered participation practices.** Through participation, people can learn the civic skills, form the relationships and networks, and build the organizations needed to make their voices heard.

Both of these first two outcomes of citizen engagement – more aware and more effective and empowered citizens – are necessary building blocks for participation to deliver change more broadly. In the absence of such foundations, without strong citizen leaders and organizations, spaces and opportunities for participation will not take root and will rarely lead to lasting change.

Third, when these building blocks are in place, our study points to dozens of examples of how empowered **citizen engagement contributes to positive development results, for example in improved health, water, sanitation, or education.** There are also many examples of how popular participation contributes to strengthening governance by improving cultures and frameworks for accountability, or better implementation of national and international commitments to human rights, or new public policies for social justice.

Finally, the studies confirm that **participation is important at this higher level not just for policy change or service delivery: it can also contribute to more pluralistic societies, bringing new voices and issues into the public arena, providing a sense of recognition, social identity and dignity which are important for social integration.**

What more specifically then does this study tell us about the particular concerns of this commission? While the links are many, I believe that it can contribute to or affirm five important recommendations.

First, the study very strongly affirms the recommendations of the Secretary General on the important role of people's empowerment as both an engine of change, as well as end itself. From a database of 100 case studies around the

world, we could find plenty of evidence for the contribution of citizen engagement to positive change.

On the other hand, participation does not always work. It is not a panacea. Although 75 percent of the participation effects cited in the IDS study were positive, the other 25 percent were more negative. These include a sense of disempowerment arising from meaningless, tokenistic, or manipulated participation; the use of new skills and alliances for corrupt or questionable ends; and elite capture of the participatory process. A failed participatory process can set back its potentially empowering effects for years to come.

Significantly, many of the negative examples, of where participation had gone wrong, did not grow from the failures of people to participate effectively. A large percentage had to do with the failure of governments or agencies to respond. Greater citizen engagement might simply be met by bureaucratic "brick walls," or failure to implement policy decisions, or in many cases, reprisals and backlash - including violence - against those who challenged the status quo.

This finding leads to the **second** point. The study strongly supports the recommendation in the Secretary General's report on the important role that governments can play to help to create, value and protect the space for citizens who seek to express their voice, and to promote an enabling role for effective and empowered participation of all members of society.

A further finding of our study is that people's participation is not limited to avenues or spaces created for them by government. In most places, they also act for themselves in myriad other ways–through their own local community development associations, neighborhood or self-help groups, through social movements and campaigns to get their voices heard, or through informal as well as formal mechanisms for monitoring and holding officials to account. In fact, our study suggests that these grassroots associations as well as broader social movements were more likely to lead to positive change, than participation, by itself, in government-created or invited spaces for change.

From this a **third** lesson is clear. Governments wishing to support the empowerment might be well advised to figure out in any given context how citizens do participate in their own ways and spaces, and then build links with and support for these, rather than simply creating new "participatory" mechanisms and inviting citizens in.

Fourth, our study points to the importance of processes which helped to create capacities and skills for empowerment – again an area in which governments can do a great deal. As the findings suggests, aware and empowered citizens who can participate effectively and help to deliver developmental and governance gains do not emerge automatically. Strengthening awareness, organizations, and networks that enable more inclusive and empowered forms of participation takes time and involves more than education as usual. It also requires active support for building civic leadership and the civic associations through which empowerment is fostered. To affirm the importance of this critical building block for change, the empowerment of people itself should be an important goal of the post 2015 agenda, and the resources and indicators towards the goal should be tracked accordingly – otherwise it may risk being assumed or ignored. Strengthening women's leadership and empowerment is particularly important, as it is through women's empowerment that families and communities themselves are also often changed.

Finally, any approach that promotes the agency and capacity of people to shape their own futures must also help them build the economic and livelihood assets to do so. We cannot assume that building economic assets will contribute to empowerment automatically, just as we cannot assume the reverse. For instance, simply focusing on women's economic empowerment, will not necessarily lead to social and political empowerment as well. At the Coady Institute, we believe that empowerment must be linked across all aspects of people's lives – consciously linking the economic, political and social.

We also encourage a process that starts with mobilizing the assets and capabilities of communities, that focuses on their strengths and involves them as agents in the process of their own development. Such a process of self-empowerment, starting with what assets are available and building on these for communities to become 'makers and shapers of their own futures', ultimately will be more empowering than one that focuses only on what communities do not have, on their needs and deficits, and treats them as 'users and choosers' in programs in which they have no say.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts and I look forward to the discussion.