Empowerment:

What does it mean to you?

United Nations Social Development Network

Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Social Policy and Development
DESA

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) of the United Nations Secretariat is a vital interface between global policies in the economic, social and environmental spheres and national action. The Department works in three main interlinked areas: (i) it compiles, generates and analyses a wide range of economic, social and environmental data and information on which Member States of the United Nations draw to review common problems and take stock of policy options; (ii) it facilitates the negotiations of Member States in many intergovernmental bodies on joint courses of action to address ongoing or emerging global challenges; and (iii) it advises interested Governments on the ways and means of translating policy principles developed at United Nations conferences and summits into programmatic frameworks at the country level. Through technical assistance, it helps build national capacities.

DSPD

The Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD) is part of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) of the United Nations Secretariat. The Division seeks to strengthen international cooperation for social development, particularly in the areas of poverty eradication, productive employment and decent work and the social inclusion of older persons, youth, family, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, persons in situations of conflict and other groups or persons marginalized from society and development.

Note

The views expressed in the present report are those of the authors and do not imply the expression of any opinion on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations, particularly concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The term “country” as used in the text of this report also refers, as appropriate, to territories or areas. Mention of the names of firms and commercial products does not imply the endorsement of the United Nations.

This International Conference on People’s Empowerment and Development comes at a particularly opportune time. The recently concluded United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, adopted an action-oriented outcome document on “The Future We Want.” Empowerment is critical for attaining that future.

Empowerment is not new to the United Nations. Our long-standing efforts to protect human rights, promote job creation and obtain improved access to water, sanitation, energy, education and health care all have empowerment at their core — the goal of ensuring that people have the opportunities they need to live better lives in dignity and security. But we are also exploring new frontiers of empowerment. With the establishment of UN-Women, the effort to empower the world’s women and achieve gender equality received an important boost. We are also focusing greater attention on empowering the next generation through our work on youth. These are two critical planks of my action agenda for the next five years.

By looking at empowerment and development together, you are focusing attention on issues that matter most in the lives of families and their communities — opportunities for decent work, the chance to enjoy basic services and participate fully in the political life of their countries.

This international conference is an important opportunity to explore these and other issues. Your deliberations can also contribute to those of the Commission for Social Development, which next year will address the issue of promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all. Empowerment is a key means to achieving sustainable development and other vital goals. But it also has a value and of itself.

Thank you for your commitment to this effort. I wish you a productive conference.

Remarks of UN Secretary-General Mr. Ban Ki-moon at the International Conference on “People’s Empowerment and Development”, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on 5 August 2012.

These aspirations are embodied in many national laws and international agreements. Measures to ensure compliance with these laws and agreements should be an integral part of development strategies.

We must also harness the power of new communications tools and technologies. Access to information is a key means for enabling the citizenry to hold Governments and others accountable.

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Excellences
Distinguished Experts
Colleagues,

I am delighted to join you at this expert group meeting.

Normally, Under-Secretaries-General do not speak at expert group meetings. They are for experts to attend. Many would argue that USGs are no longer considered experts. Despite this, I took the decision to come and share with you a few personal thoughts, because I think empowerment is an extremely important matter. It has significant policy implications. Empowerment is critical to poverty eradication and to development. Indeed, I would even say that any long-term solution to poverty must start with empowerment.

The poor and vulnerable may need short-term assistance in times of crisis. But we should not underestimate the power of initiative and ownership. More often than not, poor people do not need charity. They need policies and tools that empower them to lead productive lives.

In this regard, I want to compliment the organizers for selecting empowerment as the focus of this meeting. The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro in June this year, also known as Rio+20, adopted an action-oriented outcome document on "The Future We Want".

Many of the actions set forth in this historic outcome will advance people’s empowerment and development ... through:

• poverty reduction;
• job creation;
• improved access to water, sanitation and energy;
• public services such as education and better health care; and
• social integration overall.

This expert group meeting is a timely opportunity for a thorough examination of how people can contribute to these efforts.

The UN System is now mobilized to work together toward a future we want – toward a global agenda beyond 2015, with sustainable development at its core. In order to attain that future, we need to ensure that people have the opportunities they need to live better lives.

As a start, it is important to focus on actions that can institutionalize measures for empowerment, through improved access to resources, public services, including education and training, and through income generating opportunities, especially for women and youth.

Message from Mr. Wu
Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs
Remarks at the "Expert Group Meeting on Promoting Empowerment of People in Achieving Poverty Eradication, Social Integration and Full Employment and Decent Work for All" New York, 10-12 September 2012.
Indeed, people’s aspirations are embodied in many national laws and international agreements. Measures to ensure compliance with these laws and agreements should be an integral part of development strategies.

At the same time, we must also harness the power of new communications tools and technologies. Access to information is a key means to holding Governments and others accountable. It also helps level the playing field for the young generation. Other tools are vital in helping to engage people more directly. Micro-credit programmes are among these, which help to facilitate greater empowerment opportunities for youth and women.

Countries around the world continue to celebrate the 2012 International Year of Cooperatives, and, indeed, the benefits that cooperatives deliver to the communities they serve. The Year has raised public awareness of the power of cooperatives to advance economic and social development. And it has been particularly successful in helping to promote cooperatives as empowering, member-driven and community-oriented enterprises.

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Your deliberations on these and other issues can contribute to those of the Commission for Social Development, which next year will address the issue of promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all.

I am sure that your conclusions will help the Commission advance our understanding of the role of empowerment even further. Going forward, let us be very clear: Empowerment is a key means to achieving sustainable development and other vital goals. But it also has a value in and of itself. We must not lose sight of the need to empower all individuals and groups on our shared planet.

In the coming years, the United Nations will elaborate on a United Nations development agenda beyond 2015. Sustainable development agenda will be at the core of the 2015 agenda. As you know, sustainable development has three inter-linked dimensions – economic, social and environmental. The social dimension has been considered weak in relation to the other two. Moreover, unlike economic growth, the social dimension is more difficult to quantify. But it is no less important. I hope this expert group meeting will take this into account when you discuss empowerment.

I wish you success in your deliberations and I look forward to the summary of this meeting. I promise you that I will read it from cover to cover.

Thank you.
Acknowledgment

The “Definitions of Empowerment” contained in this publication represent a collaborative effort, made possible by the answers received from people around the world on the theme of Empowerment. Their invaluable contributions were essential for the preparation of this publication.

In order to collect people’s ideas and experiences, the Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD) of UNDESA launched an on-line survey on “Promoting Empowerment of People”.

We were glad to receive tens and tens of responses from young individuals; persons with disabilities, older persons, and people working for various institutions and organizations committed to social development issues. Their keen interest on Empowerment reminded us about the growing importance of this topic in our society.

We welcomed and carefully screened all the answers from the on-line community, but due to the large volume of contributions, we were unable to include all of them. They were all precious, since they provided a unique overview of what Empowerment means for people with different origins, cultures and languages.

The Division for Social Policy and Development is grateful for the many contributions received, which enabled readers of the Empowerment survey, to share and learn from their experiences and beliefs.

Thank you to all of you for making this possible!

Introduction

Empowerment is not a new term to the United Nations. It is the process of enabling people to increase control over their lives, to gain control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives, to increase their resources and qualities and to build capacities to gain access, partners, networks, a voice, in order to gain control.

Empowerment is now increasingly used and connected to social development groups such as poor people, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and marginalized people.

The Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA) has organized an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on “Promoting Empowerment of People in Achieving Poverty Eradication, Social Integration and Full Employment and Decent Work for All” from 10 to 12 September 2012 in New York at the United Nations Headquarters. The meeting was convened to help prepare the priority theme for the 51st session of the Commission for Social Development in February 2013.

The meeting has decided that the most appropriate definition of Empowerment was as an iterative process with key components including an enabling environment that encourages popular participation in decision-making that affects the achievement of goals like poverty eradication, social integration and decent work for all as well as sustainable development.

DSPD has launched an online survey from 8 August to 5 September 2012 on “Promoting Empowerment of People”. It has received tens and tens of responses.

The survey featured different definitions of Empowerment related to the enhancement of the capabilities of social groups including youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, and Indigenous Peoples to fully participate in all aspects of society and promoting enabling social, economic, cultural and political conditions that can help them take control of their own development and future.

This publication contains definitions of Empowerment selected from our survey, which is available online at the following link:

"Empowerment is a process and an outcome. The process is the way people obtain the knowledge and skills that will allow them to take action, to create change, and then change themselves and for society."

Maryam Tarantala
United Nations Committee chair, Zonta International

"Empowerment means that individuals, a people have a choice to make decisions for themselves and for society."

Donald Horowitz
Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs

"Empowerment means that people, individuals have a vehicle to take actions for their own capacities in various areas (life) choices. It's about the “discovery/reality of ones capacities of what one can do” and the idea that absolutely everyone has something meaningful to contribute. The discovery of ones capacity and relevance for others can trigger a decision for oneself or for others."

Mary Tarantala
United Nations Committee chair, Zonta International

"Empowerment is helping people in such a way as to enable them to accomplish goals that will improve life for all."

Eva Boro
Urukele Sisters

"Empowerment is of course giving to others the possibility and existing spaces to play a meaningful role in their own environments. People feel empowered, because they comprehend that they can make a difference, which in turn makes them want to make efforts. A feeling of disempowerment often causes passivity. Moreover empowerment is of course related to the objective possibility and existing spaces to play a meaningful role in their own environment and a heard."

Sima Casares
50th Project Manager for the MDG/post 2015 project
United Nations Volunteers

"Power to achieve political, social and economic equality...

Salvatore Romagna
Secretary General, International Cultural Youth Exchange - ICYE

"The respect of human dignity and all human rights is of course meaningful participation in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the policies and programs that affect our lives."

Cristina Diez Saguillo
Director of International Relations Training International Movement Atd Fourth World

"Empowerment is to give a person the confidence and education and where with all to be able that they can be."

Sandra Lincoln
Secretary of the Holy Child Jesus, Asia Pacific Province Leadership Team Member

"A balance between liberty and equality (case to case actually cancel out the other when out of balance) and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes."

Moirag Henderson
Deputy Chef UNDP

"Empowerment can be understood in two different dimensions: 1. To develop the competences and capacities of individuals to educate and to qualify individuals, special target groups such as children, women, elderly persons and / or families to improve their skills and knowledge so they are able to generate income and improve the quality of the everyday of their lives and to contribute to the development of the society. 2. The means to develop / to enable the preconditions for individuals: basic requirements such as education, gender equality, human rights, or available food, access to land and micro credit or adequate education systems are necessary to enable individuals, special target groups such as children, elderly persons and / or families to improve their wellbeing."

Anne van Landeberg-Bierman
Executive Director, International Federation for Home Economics
"For me, being empowered means knowing and trusting that you are in full control of your own destiny. Empowerment implies freedom to choose without fear." - Claudia Laboo

"Empowerment means to enrich people with basic skills of traditional knowledge, education, providing skilled based training to earn income and understanding basic knowledge about health, hygiene and education to the individual and family. It means that an individual is given the strength to fight against any inequalities and getting self-esteem and confidence. Empowerment help to bring equality, it enhances skills, efficiency, knowledge and confidence to overcome any obstacles and to move ahead for development." - Najma Begum

"Empowerment is gaining more economic independence and political strength. It means a person a future and that of your family and community. Gaining hope." - Thomas Thorfinsson

"Empowerment is the empowerment to choose and action. It means increasing one’s authority and control over resources and decisions that affect one’s life. As people exercise real choices, they gain increased control over their lives. Poor people’s choices, are extremely limited, both by their lack of assets and by their powerlessness to negotiate better terms for themselves with a range of institutions, both formal and informal. Since powerlessness is embedded in the nature of institutions and informal arrangements, the context of poverty reduction is an institutional definition of empowerment. The term empowerment has different meanings in different social, cultural and political contexts, and does not translate easily into all languages. An exploration of local terms associated with empowerment and being able to use the skills, knowledge and rights that you need to empower been. Being empowered is the ability to control one’s own life, over all, to make a positive difference." - Zahra Hedaiety

"Empowerment means to help others in the community to adopt simple but powerful skills that help one to change the quality of their lives, it also makes them take their responsibility and have an active role in the society in a sustainable way. All this will lead to building a better future and make a positive difference." - Sian Arulanantham

"Empowerment means enabling someone to become all and everything he or she was meant to be. It means helping an individual develop self-worth, self-confidence, self-reliance and independence in such a way as to live meaningfully and peacefully." - Maris Korb

"Empowerment means knowing an individual of the community having power and being able to use the power in a creative way that enables a qualitative life for oneself, community and the world, not always excluding the Planet Earth." - Fatima Rodrigo

"Empowerment is utilizing the skills, knowledge and confidence. You have to make choices to seize the opportunities that help you to realize your potential. No one is empowered alone, else, it is helpful to do it for yourself, but others can help, collaborate or support you in accordance with your skills, knowledge and confidence to be empowered. Being empowered is the ability to control one’s own life, over all, to make a positive difference."

"When I hear the word: Empowerment it means that I have been given the tools, education, and support to accomplish my goals. When I am empowered, I can accomplish these things on my own without any outside support, thus gaining the ability to feel good about my accomplishments." - Henry Driskit
People have on-going forums that affect their lives are made. This will not come about until people are the ultimate stakeholders in the process. If only people are trusted, they will ensure that their problems are solved. The power should include governance and political power. Power in terms of the ongoing process, how they are governed and how decisions and laws that affect them are made. This will not come about until people have on-going forums where they could influence decisions and policies. Unfortunately no such forums are available for people. The present forums for participation - parliamentary constituencies, legislative assemblies (assemblies), neighborhood parliaments or so. We could call them neighborhood communities, neighborhood sabhas (assemblies), neighborhood parliaments or so. We could call them neighborhood communities, neighborhood sabhas (assemblies), neighborhood parliaments or so.

The need is for small-sized forums at every level of the federation, from the panchayat, block, district, state and the nation. Taking special-sized face-to-face communities. By small-sized face-to-face forums, I mean forums where people could sit together in one circle and talk without a microphone. In such a forum, everybody, even the last and the least, will have a face, a name, an identity, attention and scope to participate. Everybody’s tears will be noticed and responded to. It is crucial that people can talk without fear. Small-sized forums (i.e. neighborhood forum), especially, remains accessible to, and within the grip of, the people at the base. If they lose control on the forum of participation, and control, they have lost control on the entire process. They will end up as mere helpless and passive observers. Being small-sized the forums at every level can have an additional advantage in the above-mentioned multi-tier federated structure. When any legislature or government, on one level of the federation to the level immediately above-mentioned multi-tier federated structure. When any legislature or government, on one level of the federation to the level immediately above that level immediately above has to make a decision, they can immediately recall the person and send someone else, any day without the mind- boggling election expenses associated with elections in big constituencies. Thus the whole process become more direct, and immediate. If they understand their rights and duties and start thinking the way that they should, and within the grip of, the people at the base.

"Building capacity in others to find their voice and take ownership for themselves and their future by providing them with the skills and education that they need to do this." Paulette LeMoine Executive Director Good Shepherd Services

"Empowerment means helping people to participate fully in making decisions that affect their lives, culture, economy, and governance of the communities, state, and world in which they live." Rudy Cypser Newsletter Chair, US Representative Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Disabilties

"Empowerment is the process of allowing others the opportunity to have input and decide on the changes they want. A leader should not tell others what needs to be done, but a leader should seek out and respect the processes as positive and useful. Empowering others means a leader gives up some sense of power but a leader enjoys more power gaining respect and appreciation from others." Sharon Natter US Committee Chair and Board Member Associated Country Women of the World

"When I hear the term ‘empowerment’ it means that an individual has some measure of control, which is necessary, according to my state in life in a constitutionally formed, democratic society, to live socially and productively in a society without fear of being encouraged by the society to work for and encourage the remaining good of all its citizens." Gloria Coleman Educator Society of the Holy Child Jesus

"Empowerment can be defined in many ways, but for me it means motivation; increase of knowledge and education; recognition and application of the basic rights; and also it means the concept of freedom and individuality..." Errants Newsletter Editor, UN Representative

"Empowerment is the key to create change. Education is the psycho-social term which stands for emancipation and liberation of people in different aspects of life. Empowerment means bringing the weaker sections of the society for instance minorities and women on an equal plane with others, so that they can exercise their civil and political rights in the majority of the population. Empowerment is especially related to democracy concept like India for enforcing Fundamental Rights of equality. Weaker and vulnerable sections of the society can be empowered through political empowerment and subsequently their empowerment through enforcement of constitutional laws and rules. One recent example is the Right to Education in Section 21 A of our Indian Constitution..." Dr. K. Chatta Head of Department Department of Psychology, University of Delhi

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"Empowerment means to me the people who are finding a way to reach their potentials. When they understand their rights and duties and start doing the thing that they, could achieve them, it’s understanding and acting." Jodi Kupulainen Educator

"Empowerment is defined in many ways, but for me it means motivation; increase of knowledge and education; recognition and application of the basic rights; and also it means the concept of freedom and individuality..." Errants Newsletter Editor, UN Representative
"Empowerment means giving people the tools and knowledge they need to be able to act on their own to make truly informed decisions about what is going on in their lives. People who do not know what their rights are tend to be intimidated into giving up things that they are entitled to keep (e.g. possession of an apartment until an court orders them to leave). If someone does not know after knowing what their rights are, because that is the right choice for her to make based on all the circumstances of her living situation, it will at least be a situation, it will at least be a situation that she is able to act on her own to make truly informed decisions about what is going on in her lives. People who do not know about what is going on in their lives. People who may be feel valued and included, to be able to participate in any aspect of his life, to have the full responsibility for his actions and possessions, and to be able to participate in decisions affecting their lives.

"Empowerment means several things: The World Bank's definition: Empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals, groups and communities to control their lives, to improve their conditions. For instance, providing equal access to public education for all learners is necessary to build a competent workforce. A second example is training all to become effective self-advocates, which enables people to get the information and training needed to be effective self-advocates. The third example is training all to become effective self-advocates, which enables people to get the information and training needed to be effective self-advocates.

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“Empowerment is giving people who are marginalized and even disenfranchised not only a voice, but the means to determine their own development. Enabling others to live up to their potential. This term may be applied to efforts by individuals to join with others to strive for greater social justice for a group or individuals. It may be applied to individuals or organizations that work with the “powerless” in their own areas or nations to enable them to attain their potential legally and socially. It involves being with the people and assisting their efforts by guidance and expertise. It does not mean controlling the process.”

Philemona Grimley, Mary T. Currie and Mary Frances Nevins
Sisters Society of the Holy Child Jesus

“Empowerment is the taking of those steps that will help the poor, the needy, the immigrant, to achieve their goals. To be free to pursue those goals. “To empower” someone to take those steps to help the “other” be free. I also think that the term may be misleading. The people we are trying to “empower” already have that power to achieve and be free. The real question seems to be this. How do we help others to realize that they are already empowered?”

Marianne McGowan
Education Coordinator
Cabrini Immigrant Services

“Instilling in a person the awareness that they have the ability to make a difference, to be an example to others, to contribute their talents to a cause that can benefit others. An important component of empowerment is education.”

Kathleen Ries
Board President
Unanima International

“Ability to stand and fight for what is yours. Ability to make our decisions. Ability to say Yes or No. Ability to demand for services from Government. Ability to contribute meaningfully to your community. To be in control of issues or challenges that affects you. Not depending on others; having self power and self strength; living a life of dignity.”

Nyek Igemo Lydia
Parenting Uganda