The imperatives of empowerment and participation

Concept Note for the Expert Group Meeting on the Priority Theme of the Commission for Social Development 2013-2014

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This is a framework for the analysis of the priority theme for the Commission for Social Development in 2013 and 2014, promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration, and full employment and decent work for all. It draws on a long experience of the United Nations in addressing how to achieve full popular participation in development through policies, programs and approaches to empower but focuses on the specific challenges for the 21st Century, such as coping with the effects and hazards of climate change and other development issues.

Empowerment and participation are old subjects in social development. Initially, the term empowerment was used less than participation, which, as will be shown, is how empowerment is measured. In the 1960’s there was a concern with participation in the context of how to construct democratic cultures and achieve social mobilization.1 These studies did not address the connection between empowerment and other issues. Since the 1990’s, the term empowerment has increasingly been used.

At its 66th session, on the basis of a proposal by the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, the General Assembly adopted resolution 66/224 on ‘People’s empowerment and development’ which, among other things, expressed concern about “the crippling effects of poverty, inequality and disparity all over the globe, and recognizing that people should be the focus of all plans, programmes and policies, at all levels” recognizing that the empowerment of people is essential to achieving development. The proposal sought to integrate “the interlinked and mutually reinforcing elements of people’s empowerment and development, expressed as eradicating poverty and hunger, reducing inequality, mitigating deprivation, creating jobs for all, including excluded people, accelerating human development, and fighting terrorism in all its forms and manifestations in accordance with international law…”

In July, the General Assembly adopted the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20, entitled The Future We Want. The document refers to empowerment 17 times, 14 of which is in terms of empowerment of women. However, it refers to participation 36 times, mostly of specific groups and segments of society (the poor and vulnerable, women, men and women, scientists, civil society organizations) as critical factors in achieving the

desired future.

Empowerment is clearly again seen as a critical instrument to deal with global problems. The expert group meeting is expected to help refine and clarify how this instrument can best be integrated into policy frameworks. The first stage is to determine what empowerment is and what are the main issues related to it.

What is empowerment?

The term empowerment is relatively recent in United Nations vernacular and in order to use it effectively there has to be some agreement on a definition. How do you know that someone (or a group) has been “empowered”?

The term began to be used in the 1980’s. In a widely cited article, Cohen and Uphoff (1980) note that empowerment is a dimension of participation, stating that it is “how much capacity people have to obtain the results which they intend to obtain from their involvement in decision-making and implementation.” Its use increased in part, as some commentators said, because it was too abstract. Cornwell and Brock, for example, argue that

The last 10 years have witnessed the most remarkable apparent confluence of positions in the international development arena. Barely any development actor could take serious issue with the way the objectives of development are currently framed. This new consensus is captured in a seductive mix of buzzwords.

Another article, by Ibrahim and Alkire analyzed the definitions in 32 articles dealing with empowerment and concluded that “The concept of empowerment is related to terms such as agency, autonomy, self-direction, self-determination, liberation, participation, mobilization, and self-confidence. It is also a debated term, which has been ascribed a wide variety of definitions and meanings in various socio-economic contexts.” While each of the articles cited has a slightly different text in referring to empowerment, the main elements include what Ibrahim and Alkire call “agency” defined as “the ability to act on behalf of what you value and have reason to value” and “the institutional environment, which offers the opportunity to exert agency fruitfully.” A problem with this definition is that ‘acting on behalf’ does not necessarily include being efficacious, and the concept of empowerment has something to do with efficacy and puts ‘efficacious’ empowerment in the environment rather than in the individual. The World Bank, in its 2002 said: “Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to

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3 Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock, Beyond Buzzwords “Poverty Reduction”, “Participation” and “Empowerment” in Development Policy, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Overarching Concerns Programme Paper, Number 10, November 2005
participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives." Like similar definitions, it speaks to capacity rather than action. Put another way, empowerment refers to what individuals and groups do to pursue their individual and collective interest and the institutional context that will make that possible.

The discussions also note that there is an ambiguity in the concept: is it a process or is it an outcome? If it is a process, it involves the exercise of power (usually defined as the ability to get someone – or something – else to do something that they would not otherwise do). If it is an outcome, it means that power has been successfully exercised. The problem here, as with all of the definitions, is how to measure it. Capacity, for example, can only be measured by use.

With this in mind, in practice, empowerment has been defined in terms of participation, of all individuals and groups in a society. Participation is observable and measurable and, for that reason, antedated empowerment as a concept. Taking that into account, for the purposes of this analysis we can say that empowerment is a state in which people participate effectively in their societies. But what is meant by effective participation? One approach is to treat empowerment as a qualitative dimension of participation – direct or indirect? Organized or unorganized? Empowered or not? In that sense, one could have participation with or without empowerment – one could evaluate participation in terms of the extent to which, or the probability with which, it resulted in what participants sought to achieve, for themselves or for others.

The issue of how to define popular participation has been on the UN’s agenda for some time. It reflected two phenomena: a concern with community-based development in which participation was a key factor, and an academic concern with the types of values that would lead to participation and democracy. As an attitude this was a matter of what used to be called political efficacy, the belief on the part of citizens that they could influence government decisions. This concept, which was part of what was called the civic culture by Almond and Verba, went out of fashion among political scientists sometime in the late 20th century, but is embedded in a literature of mobilization such as Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed which focused on consciousness-raising as a means of increasing participation.

In 1975, reflecting on these developments, the United Nations Secretariat issued a sales publication (ST/ESA/31) entitled Popular Participation in Decision Making for Development. In its introduction, the report stated:

8 Popular Participation in Decision-making for Development (United Nations publication. Sales no. E.75.IV.10)
The study attempts to define the concept of popular participation through examination of its application in present-day development efforts, linking theory to practice by deriving theory from observed experience. Because of this focus, it is primarily directed towards those persons interested and involved in development plans and programmes - whether as policy makers, planners, programme administrators, or as technicians, students, civic leaders or persons in othersocietal roles - who wish to have a practical idea of what popular participation entails and of its relevance to development planning and programming.

In the definition, the study suggested that: “... there are three basic ways to view popular participation in development: mass sharing of the benefits of development; mass contribution to the development effort, and decision making in development.” [sounds like Cohen and Uphoff, with P in evaluation subsumed in the latter facet] This is consistent with current usage dealing with empowerment. It distinguished between popular participation as an end-state, a passive process, and an active process in terms of two key elements of social development: improvements in material welfare, and improvements in social relations. These concepts are still part of social development, but now they are referring to eradication of poverty and social integration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Popular participation as:</th>
<th>Improvement of material welfare</th>
<th>Improvement of social relations</th>
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<tr>
<td>End-state or goal</td>
<td>Sharing of material outputs of development</td>
<td>Receiving benefits of improved social relations (e.g., equal opportunity, end of discrimination)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Contribution to production (e.g., working, investing, saving)</td>
<td>Contributing to improved social relations (e.g., being a &quot;good citizen&quot; or &quot;good neighbour&quot;)</td>
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<td>Passive process</td>
<td>Participating in decisions to allocate factors of production</td>
<td>Participating in decisions on determination of societal values and roles, and on distribution of benefits</td>
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<td>Active process</td>
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For the expert group, the focus should be on participation and empowerment as an active process, where the focus is on participation in decision-making. Implementation participation is important in this because this creates justification for and pressure for participation in decision-making;
The UN publication also suggested that decision-making involved a logical process, as seen in Figure II. To influence the process, interventions would have to be made at each stage and would be conditioned by the information available, the types of cognitive categories to the process the information and the institutional context. At least one study suggested that to be able to act effectively, individuals would have to use a complete chain of stages.9

The expert group should consider what would be needed to ensure participation, including issues of information, education and institutional context.

A more complex model, shown in Figure III, was produced by Cohen and Uphoff which shows how feedback can occur.

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Empowerment and participation in an international context

To the extent that empowerment is defined by participation, it is not an end in itself, but rather a means to achieving other objectives. It is particularly important in addressing poverty eradication, social integration, and full employment and decent work for all. There have been a large number of international agreements about it, as well as different specific contexts in which it is expressed.

International agreements on empowerment and participation

The Preamble to the United Nations Charter states that the purpose of the organization is “to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom” and “to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples…”

Participation as a human right is declared in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in its articles 19-21 that have carried over into the International Covenants and other facultative conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

In 1969, the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on Social Policy and Development. This included popular participation as an integral element of development. The Declaration of Social Progress and Development (General Assembly resolution 2542 (XXIV) of 11 December 1969) states as its first principle...
(art. 1): “All peoples and all human beings ... shall have the right to live in dignity and freedom and to enjoy the fruits of social progress and should, on their part, contribute to it.” It further states, as a principle (art. 5):

"Social progress and development require the full utilization of human resources, including in particular:

" (a) The encouragement of creative initiative under conditions of enlightened public opinion;

"(b) The dissemination of national and international information for the purpose of making individuals aware of changes occurring in society as a whole;

“(c) The active participation of all elements of society, individually or through associations, in defining and in achieving the common goals of development with full respect for the fundamental freedoms embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

"(d) The assurance to disadvantaged or marginal sectors of the population of equal opportunities for social and economic advancement in order to achieve an effectively integrated society."

Finally, the Declaration states (art. 15) that, as a basic means and method for achieving social progress and development, attention must be given to:

" (a) The adoption of measures to ensure the effective participation, as appropriate, of all the elements of society in the preparation and execution of national plans and programmes of economic and social development;

“(b) The adoption of measures for an increasing rate of popular participation in the economic, social, cultural and political life of countries through national governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, cooperatives, rural associations, workers’ and employers’ organizations and women’s and youth organizations, by such methods as national and regional plans for social and economic progress and community development, with a view to achieving a fully integrated national society, accelerating the process of social mobility and consolidating the democratic system."

In 1974, the Economic and Social Council, taking into account a Secretary-General’s report recommended that governments should “adopt popular participation as a basic policy measure in national development strategy” and “encourage the widest possible active participation of all individuals and national non-government organizations, such as trade unions, youth and women’s organizations, in the development process in setting goals, formulating policies and implementing plans.”

This focus on participation as a means of achieving other objectives has carried through the World Summit on Social Development and its five-year, ten-year and fifteen[-]year reviews, although the specific focus on popular participation as a means has had a decreasing attention.

A basic principle enunciated in the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action in 1995 is that “we will give the highest priority in national, regional and international policies and actions to the promotion of social progress, justice and the betterment of the human condition, based on full participation by all.” (para. 25). It goes on to specify as a means of action to

(o) Recognize that empowering people, particularly women, to strengthen their own capacities is a main objective of development and its principal resource. Empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and well-being of our societies;

This carries over to the three main themes of the Summit that are now consistently dealt with by the Commission: poverty, social integration, and employment.

Participation is built into most of the main plans of action that have been adopted and are reviewed by the Commission. Thus, the 2010 Summit Outcome contained in General Assembly resolution 65/1 states:

73. We commit ourselves to accelerating progress in promoting global public health for all, including by:

(a) Realizing the values and principles of primary health care, including equity, solidarity, social justice, universal access to services, multisectoral action, transparency, accountability, community participation and empowerment, as the basis for strengthening health systems, and recall, in this regard, the Declaration of Alma-Ata;

In short, participation leading to empowerment (and empowerment leading to participation) is a common theme in all international work on social development.

As a human right

Participation as a human right is declared in article of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.\(^{11}\) This has been incorporated into all of the international conventions to implement the Declaration.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{11}\)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.

\(^{12}\)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.
Participation is the means by which groups improve their situation, societies are able to ensure that rights are enjoyed, and how individuals can change how they think about their situation and change their behaviour. As such, it is a key element of social change and social stability. Empowerment of women has been a major focus of United Nations concern. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women is clear on the right of women to participate.\textsuperscript{13}

Participation by women in power and decision-making was one of the priorities set in the Beijing Platform for Action, which specified two strategic objectives to be achieved:

Strategic objective G.1. Take measures to ensure women’s equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making.

Strategic objective G.2. Increase women’s capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership

In short, enjoyment of all human rights is conditional on the ability to participate in decision-making.

\textit{In poverty eradication}

The role of empowerment in poverty eradication has been an issue for decades. It is reflected in Commitment 2 of the Copenhagen Programme of Action with regard to eradication of poverty which includes the agreement that governments should;

(c) Ensure that people living in poverty have access to productive resources, including credit, land, education and training, technology, knowledge and information, as well as to public services, and participate in decision-making

\underline{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.

\underline{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.

\underline{Article 7}

States 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.
on a policy and regulatory environment that would enable them to benefit from expanding employment and economic opportunities;

**Cooperatives**

General Assembly resolution 66/123 on cooperatives and social development urges governments to give due consideration to the role and contribution of cooperatives in the implementation and follow-up to UN conferences including the World Summit for Social Development by

- Encouraging and facilitating the establishment and development of cooperatives, including taking measures aimed at enabling people living in poverty or belonging to vulnerable groups, including women, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons and indigenous peoples, to fully participate, on a voluntary basis, in cooperatives and to address their social service needs;

**In social integration**

Commitment 4 of the Programme of Action with regard to social integration states that:

> We commit ourselves to promoting social integration by fostering societies that are stable, safe and just and that are based on the promotion and protection of all human rights, as well as on non-discrimination, tolerance, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, solidarity, security, and participation of all people, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons.

Similarly, Article 12 of the Madrid Political Declaration on Aging states:

> The expectations of older persons and the economic needs of society demand that older persons be able to participate in the economic, political, social and cultural life of their societies. Older persons should have the opportunity to work for as long as they wish and are able to, in satisfying and productive work, continuing to have access to education and training programmes. The empowerment of older persons and the promotion of their full participation are essential elements for active ageing. For older persons, appropriate sustainable social support should be provided.

Finally, as another example, in General Assembly resolution 65/312. Outcome document of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding

> We, Heads of State and Government, Ministers and representatives of Member States, gathered at a high-level meeting at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 25 and 26 July 2011 on the theme “Youth: dialogue and mutual understanding”
12. Reaffirm our determination to give priority attention to the promotion of youth and their interests and to address the challenges that hinder youth development, in particular through poverty eradication, the promotion of sustained economic growth, sustainable development and full and productive employment and decent work for all, and call for increased participation of youth and youth-led organizations in the formulation of, as appropriate, local, national, regional and international development strategies and policies;

In full employment and decent work for all

The relationship between participation and employment is clearly set out in Commitment 3 on employment similarly emphasizes participation:

We commit ourselves to promoting the goal of full employment as a basic priority of our economic and social policies, and to enabling all men and women to attain secure and sustainable livelihoods through freely chosen productive employment and work.

To this end, at the national level, we will:

(a) Put the creation of employment, the reduction of unemployment and the promotion of appropriately and adequately remunerated employment at the centre of strategies and policies of Governments, with full respect for workers’ rights and with the participation of employers, workers and their respective organizations, giving special attention to the problems of structural, long-term unemployment and underemployment of youth, women, people with disabilities, and all other disadvantaged groups and individuals;

Cooperatives and unions

Empowerment leading to full employment through economic institutions based on full member participation, embodied in cooperatives, is a key method for addressing the theme, as well as poverty eradication and social integration. 2012 is International Year of Cooperatives and that institution has historically been one way that people can affect their own economic destiny. One of the objectives of the Year is “Promote the formation and growth of co-operatives among individuals and institutions to address common economic needs and for socio-economic empowerment.” The celebration of the year will provide information and suggestions about how to achieve this empowerment. It can respond to the recognition of Rio+20 in whose outcome document: “70. We acknowledge the role of cooperatives and microenterprises in contributing to social inclusion and poverty reduction in particular in developing countries.”

Trade unions are another method that individuals can affect conditions of employment. The outcome document of Rio+20 has underscored the importance of unions by noting:
51. We stress the importance of the participation of workers and trade unions in the promotion of sustainable development. As the representatives of working people, trade unions are important partners in facilitating the achievement of sustainable development, in particular the social dimension. Information, education and training on sustainability at all levels, including in the workplace, are key to strengthening the capacity of workers and trade unions to support sustainable development.

In some countries trade unions are under attack, where in others their strength can help empower workers. The role of unions in empowering workers is something studied by the ILO, who should be engaged in this aspect of the theme.

Taken as a whole, empowerment seen through the lens of participation is and has been for the entire history of the United Nations considered a critical factor in solving global problems.

**What has changed? New issue areas for participation**

While empowerment and participation have been long-standing concerns for social development, they have not been a recent major focus except in their group-specific context, especially empowerment of women. Developments and issues at national and international levels have made the issue ripe for further analysis, discussion and policy decision-making. Some are inherent in the problem itself, and in other cases, the developments can enable empowerment and participation. While the list is not exhaustive it includes key 21st Century developments that have changed global priorities. The list includes

1. Sustainable development including especially dealing with climate change
2. Growing inequality in the distribution of economic benefits
3. The role of local government in the context of decentralization
4. The effect of the new information society
5. The need for world citizenship and the imperative to hold institutions accountable.

These themes will be explored during the first year’s discussion of empowerment to determine the nature of the problems that would need to be addressed by recommendations during the second year’s discussion in 2014. The expert group meeting in September 2012 in preparation for the theme should narrow the issues to those that are most need of analysis by the Commission.

**Sustainable development**

Scientists are increasingly concluding that if climate change is to be addressed in time, there will need to be significant behavioral changes in a short time. Whether this is in terms of consumption patterns, support to political decisions, people need to participate actively in the process leading to achieving sustainable development. One method of encouraging people to make the necessary changes is to engage them in the decisions about the policies and programmes that will be necessary.
As noted earlier, the final outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, “The Future We Want,” refers to empowerment 17 times, 14 of which is in terms of empowerment of women. However, it refers to participation 36 times, mostly of specific groups and segments of society (the poor and vulnerable, women, men and women, scientists, civil society organizations) as critical factors in achieving the desired future. In the section on engaging stakeholders, the document states clearly:

43. We underscore that broad public participation and access to information and judicial and administrative proceedings are essential to the promotion of sustainable development. Sustainable development requires the meaningful involvement and active participation of regional, national and subnational legislatures and judiciaries, and all major groups: women, children and youth, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, the scientific and technological community, and farmers, as well as other stakeholders, including local communities, volunteer groups and foundations, migrants and families as well as older persons and persons with disabilities. In this regard, we agree to work more closely with the major groups and other stakeholders and encourage their active participation, as appropriate, in processes that contribute to decision-making, planning and implementation of policies and programmes for sustainable development at all levels.

One of the input documents to the Conference, the Report of the United Nations Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Global Sustainability, entitled “Resilient People, Resilient Planet,” makes reference both to the need for participation to achieve green growth:

Greengrowth could also facilitate greater involvement of all relevant stakeholders as its successful implementation requires such participation and cooperation. (p. 25)

In a key section of the report entitled “Empowering people to make sustainable choices,” the report states:

The more influence we have in society, the greater our potential impact on the planet and the greater our responsibility to behave sustainably — never more so than today, when globalization and the constraints of our natural resources mean that individual choices can have global consequences.

It notes clearly the importance of political participation as a means of ensuring social integration and support for sustainable development:

Enhancing social inclusion requires the promotion of decent employment for women, youth and the poor. Studies have established that countries are more prosperous, and their economies more competitive, where the gender gap is narrowest, youth and the poor have access to educational and health care and
economic and political participation are fully ensured. It also notes the key role of participation in institutional governance:

And, in an examination of institutional governance, the report states:

...sustainable development depends on an effective framework of institutions and decision-making processes at the local, national, regional and global levels. ...

Good governance is at the heart of sustainable development and starts with the basics: democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and equality for women and men, as well as access to information, justice and political participation. (para. 207)

Participation is one means by which people can realize its importance and band together to address it at the local and group level. How to engage this participation is a major concern for policy makers.

A long-standing slogan of the environmental movement has been “think globally, act locally.” The problem, of course, is that to think globally, local organizations and individuals need to understand the global issues. For some aspects of sustainable development, this is not complicated. For other aspects, including especially climate change, the complexity of the science involved makes mobilization difficult, although the information revolution that is noted below can help address that issue. More important is the use of community organizations to bring people together. However, here, the kind of education advocated by Paulo Freire may be a key factor.

Existing research on the subject has been uneven. One study, done for a nongovernmental organization, noted in connection with developing locally-based approaches to climate-change adaptation, that if properly achieved, participation in planning sets an example of a type of governance that is inclusive and thus actively strengthens and supports democratic values. The degree of participation by communities that have an interest in planning or are affected by its results could thus serve as a reliable indicator of the vitality of civil society. 14 It continues:

Stakeholder and resident ‘support’ for climate adaptation plans, achieved through participation, is crucial to sustainable development. Good plans are kept alive by communities. These plans are successfully implemented, managed and maintained over a longer period of time and thus are related to the needs of future generations.

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Another study, based on empirical research among cassava growers in a state in Nigeria showed that the farmers were trying to adapt, but had both perceptual and institutional problems that needed to be solved if they are to adapt successfully.15

The issue of sustainable development and climate change raises significant issues for empowerment. These should be considered in the discussion:

- To what extent is the success of national policies for adaptation and mitigation contingent on effective participation of local groups in decision-making?
- How can mobilization techniques be used to develop support for sustainable development initiatives.

### Inequality

There is increasing evidence that inequality in distribution of income is growing in both developing and developed countries.16 There is evidence that this will have negative consequences for many countries and will certainly make reducing poverty more difficult.

Taking this into account, the theme for the Report on the World Social Situation for 2013 will be inequality. Empowerment is clearly related to inequality in society, politics and the economy. An unresolved question is: Does inequality lead to disempowerment or does disempowerment lead to inequality.

There has been a new approach in the analysis Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty 17 which suggests that lack of growth and development, including poverty eradication, social integration and full employment is related to inequality in participation and decision-making.

The connection between equality and participation has been raised in the Africa Progress Report 2012 of the Africa Progress Panel entitled “Jobs, Justice and Equity: Seizing opportunities in times of global change”

They conclude that

> In this report, we have identified a number of concerns that, in our view, merit urgent consideration. Across the world, we have seen the rise of social movements and the spread of public attitudes contesting what are viewed as unacceptable levels of inequality. We are of the strong view that inequalities across much of Africa are ethnically indefensible, economically inefficient and

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16 See, for example, Joseph Stiglitz, The Price of Inequality: How Today’s Divided Society Endangers Our Future, W.W. Norton, 2012
politically destabilising. That is why we call upon Africa’s leaders to put equity and the development of more inclusive societies at the heart of their planning for the future.

...

In our view, both the current and future MDG frameworks should attach far more weight to equity targets. The MDG promise was made for everyone. Yet in many countries, people who are poor, female and rural face acute disadvantages. And because of inequitable patterns of public spending they have the last call on public spending. We are convinced that it is time to integrate equity targets into the MDG framework. These targets could take the form of specific goals aimed at reducing gaps in, say, child mortality, maternal health, and education based on wealth, gender, rural-urban divisions and wider markers for disadvantage. Reducing inequalities in basic life-chances is a moral imperative. But it would also spur prospects for economic growth and accelerate progress towards the MDG targets themselves.

Some questions to discuss include:

- How can increased participation in decision-making by previously marginalized groups increase equality?
- To what extent does the institutional structure of governance help address inequality or perpetuate it?

**Local government and decentralization**

Participation in development at the local level has been a priority for decades. Reflected in community development programs that were popular in the 1950’s and 1960’s. The role of local governments has been increasing in many countries as efforts are made to bring government closer to the people. The assumption made is that it is easier for people to participate in local government than higher levels. The Rio+20 outcome document stressed this, in the context of urban development, when it states:

135. We commit to promote an integrated approach to planning and buildingsustainable cities and urban settlements, including through supporting local authorities, increasing public awareness and enhancing participation of urbanresidents, including the poor, in decision-making.

One of the themes of the Division for Public Administration and Management of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs is “Citizen engagement in managing national development programme processes including decisions-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.” They should be involved in designing the issues of concern.
In a paper written for the Committee of Experts on Public Administration, Jan Ziekow, a member of the Committee, noted by way of introduction:\textsuperscript{18}

Representative democracy at the local level can, in the context of this paper, only be viewed in light of the theme of local governance for results, and not in an abstract way. One is reminded of the fact that “public governance” stands for “the steering process by which the sense of direction of society and the social capacity to carry out public intentions are built and defined”.

There are experiments in ensuring this structurally in countries like Bolivia, where a decentralization policy, based first on a popular participation law and then an autonomy law, has been in force for over a decade. Its results are encouraging.

In considering this aspect of empowerment, some questions could be addressed:

- To what extent is decentralization possible to address development issues and how does local participation affect this?
- What types of training and orientation are needed to make participation effective?

\textbf{Information society participation}

The early 21\textsuperscript{st} century has seen a dramatic expansion in the tools that can shape participation, in terms of mass media and, especially, access to information over the Internet. The ability of individuals and groups to access and share information has been reflected in such diverse issues as what has been termed the Arab Spring.

The construction of an information society has been seen as a key factor in addressing global problems. The World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS), in Tunis in 2006, among other things, said:

\begin{quote}
31. We recognize that Internet governance, carried out according to the Geneva principles, is an essential element for a people-centred, inclusive, development-oriented and non-discriminatory Information Society. Furthermore, we commit ourselves to the stability and security of the Internet as a global facility and to ensuring the requisite legitimacy of its governance, based on the full participation of all stakeholders, from both developed and developing countries, within their respective roles and responsibilities.
\end{quote}

One of the main instruments for determining how to do this that was set up by WSIS is the Internet Governance Forum, a unique multi-stakeholder institution that is seeking to find ways to ensure that the Internet will work successfully. The IGF has just been renewed for an additional five years.

\textsuperscript{18}Intergovernmental governance and regimes, E/C.16/2012/2
One of the main issues discussed at the forum has been freedom of expression, including issues related to use of the Internet. However, there has been little discussion of the role of the Internet in promoting social progress. A growing literature is demonstrating that people are using the Internet as a means for empowerment. For example, one study of Internet use and political participation in the United States concluded:  

The impact of the Internet on the political sphere has been the topic of much debate. Although one school of thought contends that the Internet has the potential to revitalize democracy, others believe that the Internet will not change patterns of political interest, efficacy, participation, and knowledge. The empirical implications of this study lean toward the former interpretation but only to a limited extent. This research found significant bivariate associations between Internet access and online exposure to campaign information and internal efficacy, external efficacy, political knowledge, and participation. The associations were not large, but they were positive and significant. After controlling for a host of other variables, furthermore, the findings of the positive and significant impact of the Internet on political knowledge, participation, and efficacy persisted.

The importance of information was reiterated in the outcome documents of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, which stated:

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 communication 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.

In preparing for the discussion the author has conducted an initial review of the existing literature, including that emerging from such events as the citizen movements in a number of countries in which the Internet has been said to be a major factor, will be used. The analysis suggests several factors in ICT that enable and encourage participation in decision-making by groups of people, especially the poor and vulnerable as well as use of information to take charge of their own economic and social development.

The evidence from a large number of studies is mixed. Some suggest that there is no connection between use of the Internet and participation, or even that the effect is

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negative on physical participation. Others suggest that communication of information over the Internet has helped organize participation. There is little empirical literature yet on the role of the Internet in political change. However, a study of Arabic blogging done before the various uprisings, suggested that in some societies where there is significant political control of media, the Internet has provided the basis for an alternative space for views to be expressed and exchanged.20 Similarly, a study of social media in the context of protest in Guatemala also saw an effect.21

While the use of the Internet in the context of political participation is more media-genic, its use for economic development by poor persons may be more significant. Organizations concerned with fair trade, such as the World Fair Trade Organization and its affiliates, have used the Internet for marketing and for facilitating communication among members.

Perhaps as important as the Internet (and, in terms of new technologies, a potential bridge to it) is the growth of the use of mobile telephones in developing countries. A special issue of New Media and Society explored this.22 While they found that the effects of the expansion of telephony were mixed, they also concluded that

The adoption and use of the mobile phone in the global south has been enthusiastic. The statistics of adoption give us a sense of the device's popularity. Several of the articles, however, reveal the reasons behind this wide-scale acceptance in spite of the fact that the device costs money and that it does not necessarily overturn existing power dynamics. Those who have more powerful positions in society still have control of many resources, i.e. money, jobs, status, notions of appropriate roles, etc. However, the ability of the relatively powerless people to communicate in spite of their position means that the dynamics of the situation have been changed. ...

...Once adopted the device has a hand in shaping everyday routines. The material here does not depict revolutionary changes in daily life, but rather it describes existing activities that have been adjusted and re-shaped by access to mobile communication. ...

The connection, positive, negative or neutral, between the new ICTs and empowerment need to be explored further. Some of the questions that need to be reviewed might include:

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20 Bruce Etling, John Kelly, Robert Faris and John Palfrey, Mapping the Arabic blogosphere: politics and dissent online,” New Media Society, 2010 (12): 1225
21 Summer Harlow, “Social media and social movements: Facebook and an online Guatemalan justice movement that moved offline,” New Media and Society, 2012 14: 225
• What organizational context is needed to ensure that ICTs are used effectively to increase participation in the economy and in political decision-making;
• To what extent are international norms and policies needed to ensure access to ICTs and their content by all groups in society?

This discussion will contribute to the discussion at the 2013 session of the Economic and Social Council, which will be “Science, technology and innovation, and the potential of culture, for promoting sustainable development and achieving the Millennium Development Goals” which will include the role of ICT in the process.

**World citizenship**

In the 21st century, the importance of governance at the international level has increased, as international organizations have increasingly taken on responsibilities for addressing global problems. There is no doubt that international organizations are increasingly becoming a vehicle for both advocacy and management of international responses. How to empower people and groups to be able to participate in decision-making at the intergovernmental level is a clear challenge, as already noted in the discussion of the Rio+20 Conference. In fact, over time many groups were able to influence intergovernmental decision-making and there are clearly documented cases. Empowerment of women is a clear success story, where women were more able to influence international norms than the laws and policies of their own countries. They then used the fact that their governments had agreed to the international norms to pressure those governments to change national laws and policies. The United Nations was a key actor in that.\(^{23}\)

Similarly, involvement of civil society and other groups in the Rio+20 process (and its predecessors) was important in shaping intergovernmental decision-making about issues that clearly transcend the borders of the nation-state. The revolution in communication occasioned by the Internet has made the international level much more accessible to groups of stakeholders.

There have been several analyses that have suggested the value of defining a concept of world citizenship as a concept based on participation in decision-making.\(^{24}\) While the potential of the concept is interesting, translating it into programmes, policies and actions needs further analysis. This would be an additional task of the expert group.

**Accountability for results**

One way to address inequality and promote participation is to ensure that international programs to address poverty, lack of social integration and productive employment are held accountable to their beneficiaries. This is particularly

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\(^{23}\)This has been documented in John Mathiason, *The Long March to Beijing, Vol. 1, The Vienna Years*, New York: AIMS, 2002.

important for international programs. A large number of governments now use performance management or result-based management in delivering programmes. United Nations norms for evaluations call for full consultation with stakeholders when evaluations are performed. This theme was included in the outcome document of Rio+20. In one case, referring to fisheries projects, the document stated:

172. We recognize the need for transparency and accountability in fisheries management by regional fisheries management organizations. We recognize the efforts already made by those regional fisheries management organizations that have undertaken independent performance reviews, and call on all regional fisheries management organizations to regularly undertake such reviews and make the results publicly available. We encourage implementation of the recommendations of such reviews and recommend that the comprehensiveness of those reviews bestrengthened over time, as necessary.

Even more to the point, the document, referring to Official Development Assistance (ODA) stated (para. 258):

To build on progress achieved in ensuring that ODA is used effectively, we stress the importance of democratic governance, improved transparency and accountability, and managing for results. We strongly encourage all donors to establish, as soon as possible, rolling indicative timetables that illustrate how they aim to reach their goals, in accordance with their respective budget allocation process. We stress the importance of mobilizing greater domestic support in developed countries towards the fulfillment of their commitments, including through raising public awareness, providing data on the development impact of aid provided and demonstrating tangible results.

The World Bank, in its sourcebook on empowerment specifically noted its role in ensuring that Bank projects were accountable. They suggested that a number of tools be used to ensure accountability in a participative environment.

A range of tools exist to ensure greater accounting to citizens for public actions and outcomes. Access to information by citizens builds pressure for improved governance and accountability, whether in setting priorities for national expenditure, providing access to quality schools, ensuring that roads once financed actually get built, or seeing to it that medicines are actually delivered and available in clinics. Access to laws and impartial justice is also critical to protect the rights of poor people and pro-poor coalitions and to enable them to demand accountability, whether from their governments or from private sector institutions.

Accountability for public resources at all levels can also be ensured through transparent fiscal management and by offering users choice in services. At the community level, for example, this includes giving poor groups choice and the funds to purchase technical assistance from any provider rather than requiring them to accept technical assistance provided by government. Fiscal discipline can be imposed by setting limits and reducing subsidies over time. Contractor accountability is ensured when poor people decide whether the service was delivered as contracted and whether the contractor should be paid. When poor people can hold providers accountable, control and power shifts to them.

How to achieve this requires analysis of experience over the past few years, from organizations that have built RBM into their programmes and projects.

**Approaches to the Theme: a programme of work**

The first phase of preparing the theme is to determine the main problems with empowerment and the contours for dealing with them. This should take place at the 51st session of the Commission on Social Development in February 2013.

There are two steps to prepare for the discussion. The expert group meeting to take place from 10-12 September 2012 is the first step. The experts will reflect the different issues suggested in this paper, taking into account geographical distribution and gender. While a limited number of experts would be financed by the United Nations, Member states and civil society organization could be invited to provide experts at their own expense.

For the expert group, this paper analyzing existing literature on all of the issues, including especially the broader concept of empowerment and participation is to serve as a starting point. In addition, the Division for Social Policy and Development will prepare a paper on the issues seen from its perspective. Each expert would be encouraged to prepare an individual paper on her or his issue of greatest interest.

The expert group would seek to achieve consensus about the main issues that should be discussed by the Commission. This would be included in the Report of the Secretary-General which would additionally include background information and main substantive data, as well as recommendations by the Secretary-General.

Depending on the quality of the papers, the total could be put together into a publication that could be made available over the Internet and as background information for the Commission.

Based on the results of the Commission discussion, the next round of analytical preparations can begin, based on the issues that the Commission has identified as needing policy recommendations.