

DURABLE EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT: Rights-based approaches to development characteristically call for including stakeholders in shared responsibility for development decision-making. In some cases this will help poor people, but in other cases it can be harmful. From an ethical perspective, asking or expecting poor people to take on participatory responsibilities is warranted just to the degree that it is empowering for them. A prima facie justification of this principle can be given insofar as it may prevent exploitation, irresponsibility, and paternalism. The primary aim of the article is to clarify what ‘empowerment’ should mean, insofar as it is a valuable goal. I begin with the core ethical idea of empowerment that is to be found in recent work on measuring empowerment, led by Deepa Narayan, namely: empowerment occurs when people are better able to shape their own lives. Since this is a metaphorical idea, I attempt to articulate its literal meaning. What I find is that people are empowered to the extent that: (a) they exercise enhanced decision-making and influence over strategic life-choices and barriers to agency and well-being freedom, and (b) their capacity for such decision-making and influence has also been enhanced, and (c) given (i) the capabilities they have and assets they control, individually or collectively, and (ii) the opportunity structure in which they act, it is probable that they can make these gains prevail, in the face of opposition.

DURABLE EMPOWERMENT

Stakeholder responsibility in development may now be more widely appreciated than ever before, but, as is typical in matters of development ethics, this appreciation has not emerged quickly, uniformly, or without struggle. The development-as-growth strategies of the 1960s typically favoured top-down decision-making structures controlled by international institutions in conjunction with national governments; expert planners regarded themselves as accountable primarily to national governments but were clearly aware of requirements by international funders that had to be satisfied. Wider popular participation was “normally restricted to some hastily organized meetings in which outside experts ‘brief’ local people about the objectives and activities of the projects” (Brohman 1996, p. 202). By excluding project-affected persons from project decision-making, these strategies oddly both excluded them from responsibility and at the same time imposed responsibilities upon them. Exclusion from responsibility came, of course, through exclusion from decision-making. On the other hand, there were not uncommonly collateral harms and risks created by development, and these imposed a collateral responsibility on people to protect themselves, their families, and their communities. Also imposed on communities were *de facto* responsibilities to sustain projects (or not) after completion, especially if the project was not initiated by the community, or, in the extreme, unwanted.

What became evident (unevenly) in these contexts was that some greater sharing of responsibility might be useful. For stakeholders, it could be better to be included in decision-making responsibility earlier, as a means of managing the potential risks imposed by a project, rather than having to manage them in the aftermath. Arguably a more inclusive approach might be useful to developers as well, especially if projects in which stakeholders were excluded from responsibility were less likely to succeed. In short, a variety of reasons were available to various parties for recognizing the instrumental value of more widely shared responsibility for development decisions.

On the other hand, there were still questions about whether taking on the responsibilities of participation in decision-making had any intrinsic value for the stakeholders, or whether, on balance, it was merely a self-protectively motivated duty that was occasioned by the outsiders who had decided for their own reasons to bring a development project into the community. In short, was a role in decision-making a responsibility that stakeholders had reason to value for its own sake? And, if not, was this not yet another imposed responsibility, imposed largely for the benefit of the developer? (It could benefit the developer either by helping the project to succeed or, in case the project was an unwanted concession by an unwilling government, it could benefit the developer by laying blame for failure on the stakeholders.)

This was complicated by the fact that ‘participation’ was used loosely to cover a wide spectrum of types of engagement (Gaventa 1998). It could be called ‘participation’ if local people were consulted even if their views had no influence on decision-makers. Others would use ‘participation’ to mean that local people worked for a project, a criterion so elastic as to include the Egyptian slaves as participants in the construction of the pyramids. At the other end of the spectrum, other instances of participation would involve stakeholders forming sustainable organizations that not only shared in management of an initial project, but kept these resources under their control, while seeking and acquiring further resources to develop subsequent projects. In cases where local organizations and movements have sought this stronger, more autonomous

sort of participation as an explicit political goal, they have not infrequently met with resistance if not repression from states or local elites (Brohman 1996, pp. 273-74). Moreover, in cases where participation was regarded merely as a means to development, it was the weaker forms that were likely to be employed, whereas stronger forms of participation were more likely to be employed when it was advocated for its own sake (Moser 1987, p. 14).

One very early response to these issues came from Denis Goulet, who in 1971 proposed that all people “are entitled to become agents, not mere beneficiaries, of their own development” (Goulet 1971, p. 148). Goulet’s conception of agency here overlaps with the idea of having control or influence over one’s well-being and development, even if (as is likely) one is not the *sole agent* of it, and it shares this core meaning with the idea of empowerment, which has been used more frequently in this context in recent years. The value, then, is not participation *per se*, but agency or empowerment; what is valuable is not the number of meetings that people may attend, but whether, by doing so, they achieve greater agency, influence, or control over their development. Twenty years after Goulet, *Human Development Report 1993* proclaimed, “Any proposal to increase people’s participation must therefore pass the empowerment test – does it increase or decrease people’s power to control their lives?” (UNDP 1993, p. 21)

That principle is my starting point in this article, namely: asking or expecting poor people to take on “participatory” responsibilities is warranted just to the degree that doing so gives them greater influence through active decision-making over the course of their lives (including family and community members). In short, it is to be valued just to the degree that it is empowering.

My primary focus will be on what ‘empowerment’ should mean. In support of the principle, I will offer only the following, a brief *prima facie* argument. Suppose a developer induces poor stakeholders to take on unpaid participatory responsibilities that are time-consuming without being empowering. Consider two questions. First, who will benefit from this participation: stakeholders, developers, third parties, or no one? If it benefits the poor stakeholders not at all, then they are diverting time from more pressing responsibilities they have towards those who depend on them to scrape out a living and struggle against their impoverishing circumstances. If it benefits poor stakeholders somewhat but benefits developers or third parties far more, then the stakeholders are being exploited (albeit voluntarily). The second question is: will this participation engage the stakeholders’ capacity for active decision-making? To the degree that it does not, they are being induced into a subordinate role. If what they do in this role benefits others more than it benefits them, then their subordination (though voluntarily accepted) once again exploits them, whereas if it is beneficial to them, it is still paternalistic. Now suppose we call a process more or less ‘empowering’ depending on how well it engages people’s active decision-making to enable them to shape their lives (or those they care for) for the better. All things considered, then, for poor people to take on participatory roles that are not empowering is either exploitative, irresponsible, or paternalistic. These are good *prima facie* reasons for thinking that there is something wrong inducing them to take on such roles.

From its inception, rights-based development thinking has clearly and explicitly endorsed free participation, yet its support for empowerment has been uneven, and it has never probed the meaning of ‘empowerment’ to any great depth. The Declaration on the Right to Development stipulated that the development to which people are entitled is to take place “on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation” (UN GA 1986, Art. 3). If this is interpreted to mean that development decisions affecting people’s well-being must be open to more of their active

decision-making, then empowerment is tacitly entailed. But this is not made explicit in the document. The Copenhagen Summit of 1995 was far less reticent: its Declaration and Programme of action call on nine occasions for empowerment of women, once “for members of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups” (UN 1995, par. 47) and on four occasions for empowerment more broadly, *e.g.* “empowerment of people, who are to be assisted so that they fully participate in setting goals, designing programmes, implementing activities and evaluating performance” (UN 1995 par. 82). Empowerment continued to be advocated in a follow-up resolution five years hence (UN GA 2000b), but it seemed to fall from favour by 2005, omitted entirely from the Declaration on the tenth anniversary of the World Social Summit (UN CSD 2005).

In 1998 the Commission on Human Rights initiated a process leading to the appointment of Dr. Arjun Sengupta as Independent Expert on the Realization of the Right to Development. The Independent Expert made extensive and consistent reference to empowerment and its role in realizing the right to development in four of his six Reports (UN GA 2000, UN CHR 2000, UN CHR 2001, UN CHR 2002). The subsequent High-level Task Force on the Implementation of the Right to Development has in its first Report (UN CHR 2005, p. 9) acknowledged “the importance of empowering people as active agents in the development process”; it recognized “growing call by people for more empowerment,” and it drew attention to work done at the World Bank towards developing indicators for measuring empowerment.

None of these documents has offered any guidance as to the meaning of ‘empowerment’, and the one document that is far more prolific than any of the others in its use of ‘empowerment’ seems to shed more darkness than light on its meaning. In *Human Development Report 2000, Human Rights and Human Development* (UNDP 2000), one encounters ‘empowering’ everywhere, but with various meanings ranging from ‘invigorating’ to ‘enabling’. In the chapter titled “Rights Empowering People in the Fight Against Poverty,” ‘empowerment’ is used as a synonym either for ‘enable’ or for ‘enable and motivate’. Some usages are simply mystifying, such as: “Since the process of human development often involves great struggle, the empowerment involved in the language of claims can be of great practical importance” (22). The Gender Empowerment Measure that is featured in the quantitative section of the Report *reduces* empowerment to political or economic participation – which has the effect of making the idea of empowerment useless as a criterion for judging the extent to which such participation is worthwhile. Anyone hoping to glean the meaning of ‘empowerment’ from these central documents of rights-based development is bound to be disappointed.

Somewhat greater progress in conceptual clarification has been made more recently in an extensive collaborative research project led by Deepa Narayan for the World Bank.¹ Owing to its focus on measuring and implementing empowerment, this project has brought to light a wide array of conditions that can block or facilitate empowerment, including stakeholder assets and capabilities, the institutional climate of inclusion or exclusion, and existing social and political structures.

¹ In the rest of this article the abbreviation *SB* will be used to refer to *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook* (Narayan 2002), and *ME* will refer to *Measuring Empowerment; A Cross-disciplinary Approach* (Narayan 2005).

The conception of durable empowerment that I present here follows draws significantly on this work by Narayan and her colleagues. On the other hand, it also emerges from an engagement with that work that in some ways is highly critical. My main concern is head off some damaging confusions that could set in if further work on measuring empowerment is allowed to become detached from its normative ethical moorings.

As a development ethicist, I am primarily interested in empowerment as a value. My approach to the project is therefore to ask how the empowerment that we have reason to value relates to the empowerment that the contributors to these volumes seek to measure. Does ‘empowerment’ mean one thing in both cases, or does it have meanings that are different but related? In the latter case, how can we avoid confusing what is valuable with what is measurable? Talking about empowerment as a value generally implies some end or goal that we have reason to value, apart from its further consequences. Talking about measuring empowerment generally involves measuring the available means for achieving that goal or end; confusing the valuable for the measurable is therefore confusing ends with means. In this context a specific question arises about the linkage between empowerment and power. This is based on the widespread intuition that wanting power for its own sake is wrong. Consequently, having more power could be morally valuable only as a means. If power is valuable only as a means, but empowerment is valuable as an end, and not merely a means, then it is difficult to understand how ‘empowerment’ could mean having more power. My main concern in this paper will be with this outcome, that arguably empowerment does not mean having more power.

I will begin by reviewing what Deepa Narayan has written about the concept of empowerment and then clarifying its normative meaning, that is, the meaning of ‘empowerment’ as a valuable goal. This takes up the first three sections, and in the fourth I turn to power.

1. The end vs. the means

The *Measuring Empowerment* book of 2005 was a sequel to another World Bank publication, *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook*, which was also edited by Deepa Narayan. In the first book we can find a somewhat more detailed analysis of the meaning ‘empowerment’ as something valuable, and I will try to show (in section 2) why I find the kernel of this analysis very promising. However, both books proceed too hastily to define ‘empowerment’ more concretely, and I want to show first how this can lead us to misrecognize empowerment.

The *Sourcebook* begins by noting that “Empowerment is of intrinsic value; it also has instrumental value” (*SB* 14). What is intrinsically valuable is this: “In its broadest sense, empowerment is the expansion of freedom of choice and action. It means increasing one’s authority and control over the resources and decisions that affect one’s life” (*SB*, p. 14). *Measuring Empowerment* echoes and refines this somewhat by representing “empowerment broadly as increasing poor people’s freedom of choice and action to shape their own lives” (*ME*, p. 4).

The *Sourcebook* then mentions two broad categories of conditions that are typically disempowering: “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.” These are disempowering *causal* factors. Their lack of assets *causes* poor

people to have limited choices. Their lack of influence in or access to institutions *causes* them to have limited control over their lives. By stressing that these are *causal factors*, I mean to highlight that they are not part of what we *mean* by “having limited choices” or “having limited control over one’s life”. Because lack of assets and institutional access relate to empowerment and disempowerment as causal factors, it would be a mistake to smuggle them into the meaning of ‘empowerment’ or ‘disempowerment’. But unfortunately that is the next step taken in the *Sourcebook*, which proceeds to *define* ‘empowerment’ in the following way:

Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. (*SB*, p. 14; *ME*, p. 5).

Why is this a mistake? There are three reasons. One is that it misrepresents the link between causes and effects, another is that it eliminates the critical distance between means of empowerment and what these means are *for*. A third is that it ignores the directly damaging effects that limited assets (especially psychological ones) can have upon people’s control over their lives.

(a) *Defining effects by their causes.* To consider the first point, consider a parallel case. Exposure to sunlight is at present the only known cause of melanoma (skin cancer), but we do not define skin cancer in terms of sunlight exposure. Why not? If we did, then it would be inconsistent to claim a case of skin cancer caused by anything else. If, rather than letting the link between the two be regarded as a factual claim, open to being supported or disputed by evidence, we defined ‘skin cancer’ in terms of sunlight exposure, we would not only be making this evidence irrelevant, but we would be blocking the path of inquiry into other possible causes – because we defining ‘skin cancer’ so as to imply it could not possibly have any other cause. The parallel with empowerment is this. In *Measuring Empowerment* it is claimed that the causal factors of empowerment and disempowerment fall within four categories: individual assets and capabilities; collective assets and capabilities; institutional climate; and social and political structures. This claim is a factual claim; whether it captures all the causal factors and whether it describes them well are questions to be decided on the basis of evidence, whereas defining ‘empowerment’ in these terms would mean that no other classification or causal factors are possible. Since Narayan and her colleagues could not have meant this, their definition is flawed.²

(b) *Losing critical perspective.* The second problem is that the definition inadvertently loses sight of what empowerment is *for*. It counts people as empowered as long as they have greater assets and capabilities to influence institutions that affect their lives. But this could

² For sharing her knowledge of ways in which medical conditions are defined, I am grateful to Susan Beardall, Senior Policy Analyst, Health Canada. To add some complexity: there can be occasions in any science when there is reason to define a phenomenon in terms of its cause. Examples are alcohol-induced psychosis, and development-induced displacement (in which development projects or processes cause the uprooting of individuals, families, or communities). However, these are cases of specification: alcohol-induced psychosis is one specific form of a generic condition that can be defined in terms of symptoms, and development-induced displacement is distinguished from conflict-induced displacement, and both, as forms of “push” displacement, are distinguished from “pull” displacements. These cases are unlike the case of empowerment, where the interest lies in defining the genus rather than in distinguishing its various species.

happen without people thereby becoming better able to shape their lives, and this is the defining purpose of empowerment. Consider these scenarios:

UPWARD RETREAT OF POWER. Initially Tyrannyville and Power Polis were separate communities ruled repressively by elite families, to the great and unfair disadvantage of everyone else in each community. Then the elites merged the two communities to form Tyrannopoli, with two levels of government: free municipal governments for each of the two regions, with resources and jurisdiction for these local governments remaining under the tyrannical control of the elites, who seized control of the senior government. Comparatively speaking, the majority of people achieve greater influence in the municipal institutions that affect their lives, and yet this makes them no more able to shape their lives.

POLITICAL GRIDLOCK. Subsequently, the elites of Tyrannopoli are expelled by the majorities that they had formerly oppressed. However, conflicts of interest between the two local communities creates political gridlock within the senior government, so that again their increased control over institutions gives them no greater ability to shape their lives.

In both cases, people acquire some typical *means* of empowerment, but they are not actually empowered as a result. So classifying these as cases of empowerment would be misleading.

(c) *Non-institutional aspects of empowerment.* It would be difficult to deny, based on available evidence, that access to and influence upon institutions is an essential means of empowerment, often a necessary condition. However, non-institutional causes also contribute to disempowerment, such as the prevalence of anti-egalitarian attitudes and cultural beliefs. Compare the *ME* definition of ‘empowerment’ with the following segment of the definition put forward in the *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity and Culture*:

At a personal level, empowerment refers to the process whereby people are enabled to gain the resources that enable them to live in optimal conditions, in ways that they would choose. While these resources are partly psychological, they are also educational, economic and political. People can have self-confidence, self-esteem and the knowledge necessary to influence their environment but be disempowered by the community or political system in which they live (Bolaffi et al. 2003, p. 85)

In this passage, psychological disempowerment is being distinguished from disempowerment by exclusion from networks and institutions. In a later chapter of *ME*, Diener and Biswas-Diener distinguish between “actual ability to control one’s environment (external empowerment) and the feeling that one can do so (internal empowerment)” (*ME*, p. 126). While the authors stress that reversing psychological disempowerment may leave community and political disempowerment intact, the converse is true as well. Social, economic, and political exclusion and oppression can also incapacitate people psychologically. As Biswas and Biswas-Diener conclude, “Resignation or passivity sometimes prevail, despite the fact that the new opportunities for effective action are real. What is lacking in these cases is psychological empowerment” (*ME*, p. 138). So expanding these psychological “assets” can be empowering not just because it can give people greater influence on institutions, but also because self-confidence, self-esteem and knowledge are in their own right enhancers of people’s ability to “live ... in ways they would choose” (*ME*, p. 85). The institutional conception put forward in *ME* includes these psychological gains as empowering not insofar as they directly enable people to shape their lives, but only insofar as they do so indirectly by enabling them to influence institutions. This is

arbitrary and one-sided. Consider why Paolo Freire's famous pedagogy of the oppressed should count as a method of empowerment. Is it just because Brazil in Freire's time required literacy as a qualification for voting? Of course, even apart from these restrictive laws, illiteracy is an impediment to engaging in and influencing political life. But there are many other ways in which illiteracy directly impedes people's efforts to shape their lives, *e.g.* by undermining basic capabilities for health, safety, and employment, as well as severely limiting access to knowledge and culture.

These difficulties may have been overcome by the successor to ME, the *Empowerment in Practice* volume of Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland (2006) which focuses much more clearly on the achievement of empowerment, as distinct from presence of means for achieving it. Their innovation consisted in proposing that "three direct measures are important for measuring or tracking empowerment:

1. Whether an opportunity to make a choice exists (*existence of choice*).
2. Whether a person or group actually uses the opportunity to choose (*use of choice*).
3. Whether the choice brings about the desired result (*achievement of choice*)." (p. 17)

What Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland want to count as empowerment are the existence, use, and achievement of choices, rather than the causal factors that underlie them; the causal factors (assets and opportunity structure) are to be studied as promoters or inhibitors of empowerment. The focus on effective choice also avoids losing sight of what empowerment is *for*, although I will argue in the next section that it is unfortunate that they failed to distinguish between the two evaluative spaces that Sen has called 'well-being achievement' and 'agency achievement'. Finally, they have shed Narayan's narrow institutional focus.

2. *Shaping one's own life*

Despite these misgivings about *Measuring Empowerment*, I find its core ethical conception of empowerment to be very illuminating. The core idea is that 'empowerment' means that people become better able to *shape their own lives* (SB, p. 2; ME, p. 4). Intuitively, this seems to capture quite well what people rightly despise about being powerless (in the broadest sense), namely that the shape of their lives is beyond their control, and that shaping their lives for the better is not something they can do much about. But the expression 'shaping their own lives' is metaphorical. What should it mean literally? In this and the next section I will explore some possible literal meanings in terms of the capability approach. There are three questions I wish to address: (a) Is the meaning of 'empowerment' reducible to expansion of capabilities or to agency achievement? (b) Is the meaning of 'empowerment' prioritarian in that it refers principally to reversing disempowerment and thus focuses on the worst-off? (c) Assuming that 'empowerment' refers to expansion of people's abilities to shape their lives, does it mean (i) exercising those greater abilities, (ii) having them, or (iii) having the means to exercise them?

(a) *Reducibility*. According to Narayan's formulation, empowerment is to be viewed "broadly as increasing poor people's freedom of choice and action to shape their own lives." Implicitly we mean shaping their lives for the better. How, then, are we to understand this? Can we work out its literal meaning in terms of the four central ideas of Amartya Sen's capability

approach: well-being freedom, well-being achievement, agency freedom, and agency achievement. 'Well-being achievement' refers to the set of functionings – i.e., being this, doing that, and so on – that people have reason to value, and which they do manage to achieve. On the other hand, the cluster of things we do manage to become and to do is distinct from others, that we feasibly might have achieved, given our desires, abilities, and circumstances. Taken together, these clusters (or budgets) of beings and doings that we might have achieved comprise a person's well-being freedom. More broadly still, we can conceive of freedom as the ability to achieve goals that we just do value, regardless of whether they are good for us. These may include altruistic goals that we value for others' sakes, not our own. Again we may distinguish between those that we do manage to achieve and the broader set of clusters that we could feasibly achieve, and this gives us the distinction between agency achievement and agency freedom (Sen 1992, pp. 56-72; Sen 1993, pp. 35-36). With this in mind, let us return to the question of what literal meaning belongs to the expression, 'people's freedom of choice and action to shape their own lives'. What would it mean, to expand *this* freedom? Does it mean expanding people's well-being freedom or agency freedom? If so, then the literal meaning of 'empowerment' reduces to the expansion of well-being freedom or agency freedom. Hence 'empowerment' would mean neither more nor less than Sen's expression 'development as freedom'.

In part we can respond to this prospect of reductionism by considering problems that would arise from reducing the meaning of 'empowerment' either to well-being freedom or to agency freedom exclusively. Relying exclusively on well-being freedom is problematic because some particular capabilities can be expanded to some degree even within relations of dependency, as for instance children's capabilities to remain healthy are maintained and expanded initially in ways that are highly dependent on parents and depend less on active decision-making than on passive compliance. Martha Nussbaum addresses this by listing practical reasoning (hence active decision-making) directly as a valuable capability (Nussbaum 2000), so that the full expansion of well-being freedom requires transcending passivity and dependency. Nevertheless, if 'empowerment' were defined exclusively in terms of well-being freedom, we should have to count passive and dependent expansion of capabilities as *some* empowerment, because *some* capability expansion had taken place, even if it did so more by compliance than by a person's own active decision-making. As Naila Kabeer has argued, comparative absence of gender disadvantage in terms of basic needs does not always correspond with absence of other gender disadvantages, including agency. Gender differentials in life expectancy and children's nutrition may be less prevalent in sub-Saharan African than in South Asia; nevertheless the African women may still have heavier workloads than the men, who may at the same time dominate private and public decision-making (Kabeer 1999, p. 5). Hence the meaning of 'empowerment' cannot be reduced to expansion of well-being freedom exclusively.

On the other hand, Sabina Alkire seemed to reduce the meaning of 'empowerment' to agency in stipulating that "the term empowerment ... carries the definition of agency achievement alone" (Alkire 2002, p. 131, n.29). She must mean *expansion* of agency achievement, for otherwise repeating the same valued achievements year after year would count as empowerment. Similarly in *EP*, Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland define empowerment entirely in terms of achieving chosen goals when they say, "Empowerment is defined as a group's or individual's capacity to make effective choices, that is, to make choices and then to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" (2006, p. 10). (It is possible that Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland were simply unaware of the distinction between agency freedom and well-being freedom, as they later claim that their conception of empowerment is similar to Sen's

(2006, pp. 15-16). Both definitions are highly problematic, since by defining 'empowerment' in terms of achieving valued goals, we make ourselves vulnerable to the problem of adaptive preferences. If instead of achieving only half of our goals we give up on those we did not previously achieve, (or "settle" for achievements that our circumstances will permit) our achievement rate may reach 100%, but this change is not one of empowerment, it is one of acquiescence or adaptation.

So the meaning of 'empowerment' is not reducible just to well-being freedom, nor just to agency. Yet, for all this, we have not shown why the meaning of 'empowerment' should not be reducible to some *combination* of expanded well-being freedom and expanded agency freedom. My point is not to recommend this sort of reductionism but to make explicit the challenge that it poses. If one wants to show that the meaning of one expression is not reducible to some others, then one must show what else this expression means. So, if the meaning of 'empowerment' is not reducible to development as freedom, then what else does it mean?

Shaping one's *own* life implies making one's *own* decisions. So one aspect of empowerment must be the expanded application of practical reasoning for active engagement in decision-making rather than passive acquiescence in the decisions of others. One interpretation of 'shaping' has focused on *strategic* decision-making, that is, making those major decisions that will affect the shape of one's life. In this category Kabeer includes such decisions as "choice of livelihood, where to live, who to marry, whether to marry, whether to have children, how many children to have, who has rights over children, freedom of movement and choice of friends that are critical for people to live the lives they want" (Kabeer 1999, p. 3). Although some researchers are skeptical of any "disjuncture between women's abilities to make small versus large choices" (Malhotra & Schuler 2005, p. 79), the strategic choice idea does capture an important part of the intuitive notion of shaping one's life.

On the other hand, shaping one's life is not limited to this, either. There is one aspect of practical reasoning that tends to be obscured by a particular stereotype of practical reasoning. According to the stereotype, practical reasoning involves adopting goals, making them harmonious with each other, and then working out the best, most efficient means for reaching them. But most people, and in particular poor people, may approach this the other way around, beginning with where they are (rather than with where they want to be) and focusing on the barriers that are holding them back. These barriers may include individuals' lack of assets and abilities, *e.g.* lack of skills, of opportunities for employment, of land or credit; lack of collective assets and capabilities may also function as barriers, such as absence of networks or organizations to protect and advance shared interests. Others may be social or political barriers such as unresponsive, hostile, or repressive governance. Practical reasoning in this context involves identifying (i) barriers that do affect one's life, as well as (ii) opportunities for reducing these barriers. Then one needs to assess (iii) which barriers have the greatest effects (short term and long term) upon one's life, as well as (iv) which will be more difficult to reduce or remove. Finally, opportunities to reduce these barriers need to be assessed in terms of (v) their likelihood of success.

What we have in view here is a specific kind of agency focused on the goal of reducing barriers to agency freedom and well-being freedom for oneself and (in various degrees) other members one's family and community. Surely this, too, must count as *shaping one's life*.

So far, then, we have found that ‘empowerment’ must mean an expansion of *active* agency especially for strategic life-choices and for reducing barriers to agency and well-being freedom. Now by ‘active agency’ I mean two things. ‘Active agency’ implies engagement of practical reasoning, contrasting with passive acceptance of decision-making by others. But increasing the scope of agency means increasing the range of valued objectives that a person can manage to accomplish. So, by ‘expansion of active agency’ we must mean not only that a person engages in more decision-making, but that their decision-making is also more *influential*. In sum, ‘empowerment’ must mean a combined enhancement of decision-making and influence over strategic life-choices and barriers to agency and well-being freedom. This, then, is the literal meaning of ‘expanding people’s freedom of choice and action in shaping their own lives’.

(b) *The priority of empowering the poor.* What advocates of empowerment generally have in mind first and foremost is empowerment of the poor. Priority-to-the-poor can be advocated either as a tactic or as a normative value. It could be advocated as a tactic by utilitarians whose primary value is not equality but welfare maximization. It could also be advocated by Kantians as a means to reducing people’s vulnerability to being treated not as ends in themselves but as a mere means. However, there is one view that makes priority-to-the-poor its primary value, not merely a means to some other value, and this view has been named “prioritarianism” (Parfit 1997). This raises two issues: first, whether empowerment has prioritarian justifications, and what these might be, and secondly whether this has any consequences for how empowerment should be conceived.

Prioritarianism arises from the observation that what egalitarians value is not equality *per se*. For if we valued equality for its own sake, then it would not matter how we brought it about, and so we would consider it just fine to make everyone poor. The point here is not to ridicule egalitarianism but to understand its objectives more clearly. The leveling-down problem, as it is called, shows that what concerns egalitarians is not to achieve equality *per se*, but rather to improve the condition of the worst-off. One way to express this concern as a general principle is to say: “Benefiting people matters more the worse off those people are” (Parfit 1997, 213). Although ‘benefit’ was initially construed in terms of resources or subjective welfare, it is also compatible with the conception of advantage that is provided by the capability approach (Sen 1993; Sen 1991, p. 92).

Consider how this might apply to empowerment. I have argued that what empowerment is to enhance is (a) active decision-making and (b) influence (c) over strategic life-choices and (d) over barriers to agency and well-being freedom. There are two ways to approach this in a prioritarian way. If we consider this sort of decision-making and influence as itself a benefit, then we approach it in a prioritarian way if we say that gaining more such decision-making is better for people who have least of it. Assuming that the poor are generally deprived of such decision-making, it follows that it is generally speaking better to enhance it for the poor. But this does not exclude enhancing it for other groups that are disempowered or subjected to dependency, such as women or indigenous/aboriginal people. Secondly, we can approach empowerment with a view to the outcomes that are possible if it succeeds in enabling people to overcome barriers to their own agency and well-being freedom. Here prioritarianism would say it is better to empower those whose barriers keep their agency freedom and well-being freedom at more restricted levels and who are worse off in this sense. But these two lines of thinking are most likely to give priority to the same groups; divergence in the consequences of the two lines of thinking will be exceptional. Almost all advocates of empowerment share this conception of

it, that priority goes to empowering the poor and other groups whose agency and well-being freedom have been restricted.

On the other hand, I would argue that this priority should not be built into the meaning of ‘empowerment’. One reason is that we need to retain ‘empowerment’ as a descriptive term. For instance, some policies may be more empowering for the rich than the poor. But if ‘empowerment’ means empowerment *only* for the poor, then ‘empowering the rich’ would be inconsistent, an oxymoron. Another reason for keeping priority-for-the-poor separate from the meaning of ‘empowerment’ is to recognize that expanding everyone’s agency and well-being freedom should be valued, even if we do give priority to those of us who are worse off. Ultimately, and quite apart from the distributional questions, if public policy is dedicated to the public good, then (at least from the capability perspective that I have adopted) it must aim to enhance everyone’s freedom for being healthy, for engaging with thought, knowledge, and art, for having good human relationships and emotional lives, and so on. In other words, it must aim not only to reduce barriers facing the worst-off members of the public, but it must also take aim at barriers facing any member of the public.

3. *Freedom or achievement?*

One conceptual choice remains to be made. So far, I have argued that ‘empowerment’ has to do with gains in active decision-making and influence over strategic life-choices and barriers to agency and well-being freedom. Now: should ‘empowerment’ mean *actually gaining* in such decision-making and influence, or should it mean *becoming capable* of making them? Generally the capability approach holds that social policy should aim to increase people’s capabilities, but achievements are up to individuals. This is commonly defended on grounds that if having less of something is truly the result of free choice, then this is not an inequality we must aim to reduce or eliminate. Otherwise we could not find any moral difference between fasting and famine, between a life of poverty undertaken for religious reasons and a life of poverty that was never chosen and from which there is no escape. Should this also apply to empowerment? If so, what we should value is that people become capable of this type of decision-making and influence, and whether they actually gain it is for them to decide.

In this case, however, there are reasons why empowerment as capability and empowerment as achievement must be valued in conjunction with each other and in relation to each other.

(a) *Empowerment must be actual, not merely potential.* What makes anything advantageous to any of us, according to the capability approach, is that it renders us better able to function in ways that we have reason to value. So too for empowerment. Food and medical care are of advantage to us because, with them, we can eat well and stay healthy, whereas without them we cannot. How is empowerment of advantage to anyone? Partly it may be so because engaging actively in practical reasoning is something we have reason to value, for its own sake (Nussbaum 2000, p. 79). But primarily the value of enhanced decision-making is attached to the substantive capabilities that this may unlock. Making more decisions about health care can be regarded as a benefit in its own right, but it may also represent a cost, insofar as health worries are not only unpleasant but divert attention from other needs and opportunities. So the primary advantage that comes to people by getting more choices and more influence over conditions affecting their health consists in rendering them better able to keep healthy. In other words,

when empowerment does benefit people, it does so insofar as these people, with their empowerment, are actually able to function better (well-being freedom) or achieve a wider range of valued goals (agency). For this to happen, empowerment needs not just to be made possible for them, it needs to be actually exercised.

(b) *Exercise of empowerment often lags behind means and opportunities.* Along the same lines, providing people with the means of empowerment may not be enough. It is interesting that the authors in *Measuring Empowerment* who focus on the empowerment of women are quite clear about this, while others are not. It is often more feasible to measure access to means of empowerment than to detect when these means are being used in empowering ways. Consequently measures of access or resources for empowerment can be misleading if they are construed as measures of empowerment itself. The problem that proxy measures of empowerment may misrepresent the degree to which women are empowered in fact is examined at length by Anju Malhotra & Sidney Ruth Schuler. Karen Mason concludes that because links between empowering factors and empowerment outcomes “often are weak, resorting to easier-to-measure proxies such as education or employment, does not provide a satisfactory answer. ... particular dimensions may help to empower women in some respect but not in others” (*ME*, p. 98). Steven Brown addresses this gap outside the gender context as well, arguing that empowerment cannot be measured simply by measuring change in “empowering *opportunities* – for example, providing basic services, improving local and national governance, developing pro-poor markets, and establishing access to justice.” On the contrary, “objective opportunities, while necessary, are insufficient for empowerment. It is also necessary that they become a functional part of the person’s perspective” (*ME*, p. 197).

However, other contributors to *Measuring Empowerment* seem to ignore these gaps. Lokshin and Ravallion seem to reduce the meaning of ‘empowerment’ to increasing one’s power which they seem to conceive as the ability to influence others. Hence they ignore the gap between possessing more power and exercising it for strategic life-choices and for expanding one’s agency and well-being freedom. Moser’s discussion of empowerment in a peace process focuses quite narrowly on indicators of strengthened alliance, which her study-subjects (in Colombia) *considered* indicative of empowerment; whether or why strengthened alliance might (or might not) actually be empowering is not discussed. Khwaja acknowledges the distinction between empowerment’s ends and its various means, but then he explicitly defines ‘empowerment’ as a means, namely inclusion in decision-making – and ignores those types of inclusion that merely co-opt people without empowering them. Diamond, to his credit, begins from the premise that economic assets alone may not empower people, especially in the absence of democracy, and he also seeks to identify factors that render some democracies less empowering than others. However, his view of these disempowering factors is blinkered, narrowly limited to two: lack of liberal democracy, and corruption within liberal democracies. And so he ignores the sadly vast array of political alignments that can disempower the poor, for instance through organizing the ganging-up of better-off social strata against the poor, especially along ethnic or racial lines (as continues in Europe and North America), or by dividing and conquering the poor by means of political parties that command allegiance along lines of religion (as in Northern Ireland, parts of South Asia, or the Middle East).

These, then, are two reasons for conceiving of empowerment not merely as enhanced potential, but as greater exercise of active decision-making and influence in strategic life-choices or in reducing barriers to agency or well-being freedom. First, what gives any change value is

either that it promotes goals we value or that it is conducive to functioning in ways we have reason to value. It is not potential empowerment but only the actual exercise of empowerment that can do either of these things. Second, the exercise of empowerment often lags behind the presence of means and opportunities. If having the means and opportunities for empowerment were confused with empowerment itself, then measures of empowerment would register more empowerment than has actually occurred. These are also reasons for adopting a methodology like the one proposed by Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland (2006) that measures degrees of empowerment in terms of the existence, use, and effective achievement of choices.

However, I am not arguing that the meaning of ‘empowerment’ should be restricted to its exercise, for this can also result in overstating the extent to which empowerment has taken place. This arises from the problem of disempowering contexts of choice.

(c) *Disempowering contexts of choice.* Kabeer has argued convincingly that measures of empowerment (and, I would add, our conceptions of empowerment) must be “sensitive to the way context will shape processes of empowerment” (Kabeer 1999, p. 44). It should not be assumed, for instance, that microcredit is empowering for women only when it provides them exclusive individual decision-making rights, “equating joint decision making with disguised male dominance”. On the contrary, if women start from being excluded from this kind of decision-making and end up being actively included, then this should count as empowerment too, because, “in situations where women have been marginalized in household decision making, social transformation is less likely to take the form of the emergence of individualized decision making and more likely to take the form of greater equality in decision making” (44). Contextualism has another side, though: when women are attempting to make good choices, their conception of a good choice will be influenced by values and norms in their families and communities. If these norms tend to be disempowering, then the “good choices” as women perceive them may tend to be disempowering as well. Received ideas of status in particular can induce women to make choices that are disempowering:

The need to bear the approved number of children in order to secure social status and family approval takes its toll on women’s bodies and on their lives as they bear children beyond their capacity. Furthermore, status considerations in cultures of son-preference require women to give birth to a certain number of sons; to favour their sons over their daughters in ways that reinforce social discrimination against women; and to bring their daughters up to devalue themselves, thereby acting as agents in the transmission of gender discrimination over generations (Kabeer 1999, p. 40).

This generates a dilemma for the very idea of empowerment. If women, in exercising greater decision-making and influence over strategic life-choices, end up making choices that have disempowering consequences, is this empowerment or not? It seems that the idea of empowerment is diluted either by relativism (which would tolerate any and all inequalities, as long as they arise somehow from choice and local values) or paternalism (which would discount women’s own capacity to make good decisions). Have we any basis for ranking these cases as less empowering than they might be, short of dictating choices that the women ought to have made?

We have some basis for this sort of critical space, even within a conception of empowerment as exercise, but we will have an even stronger basis if we do not exclude empowerment as capacity. Let us not ignore that we are talking about patterns of gender

discrimination that are damaging to the well-being of women and girls. Standards of well-being do not need to be arbitrary; the foundation of the capability approach is the idea that achieving well-being is a matter of functioning in ways that people have reason to value. In carrying out son-preference, women are diminishing the capability of their daughters to function in those ways that the women themselves have reason to value as aspects of living well. It is not that son-preference conflicts with values externally imposed; rather, it involves mothers depriving themselves and their daughters of well-being as they themselves understand it. This would be one reason for saying that expanding this sort of decision-making would not be as empowering as it might be: for rather than overcoming barriers to agency and well-being freedom, it reproduces and reinforces them. Beyond this, however, there is a further reason: the context of choice is itself a barrier to empowerment. The context of choice is one that faces women with a dilemma, in which the goal of reducing barriers to the agency and well-being freedom of their daughters can be accomplished only at the cost of status and esteem in the eyes of the community. The context of choice itself is disempowering insofar as it snares women in this dilemma. Notice what is disempowering: the dilemma reduces women's capacity to apply practical reasoning to enhance the well-being of their daughters and themselves. More thoroughgoing empowerment would expand this capacity. Hence this expanded capacity as well as its expanded exercise should be included within the meaning of 'empowerment'.

4. Does 'empowerment' mean gaining more power?

My results so far can be drawn together as follows:

EMPOWERMENT (WITHOUT POWER): People are empowered to the extent that:

they exercise enhanced decision-making and influence over strategic life-choices and barriers to agency and well-being freedom, and

their capacity for such decision-making and influence has also been enhanced.

However, in its wider usage, to 'empower' has meant to authorize or license, to enable or permit, or, finally, to make someone powerful (OED online 1989). So there is ample precedent for recognizing the importance of power in the meaning of 'empowerment'. In *ME* Norman Uphoff advocates this when he says, "Empowerment is commonly understood as the condition of having power, and being able to exercise it and obtain the benefits therefrom" (*ME*, p. 219). In the last two clauses, however, Uphoff considerably exceeds his historical precedent, since 'becoming more powerful' does not mean the same as exercising that power, much less benefiting from it. That Uphoff felt it necessary to add these clauses suggests he would concede the point that 'empowerment' cannot *just* mean 'becoming more powerful'. One could become somewhat more powerful without thereby active decision-making and influence over strategic life-choices or over barriers to agency or well-being freedom. For instance, in some cultures the marriage of a woman's son makes the mother (as mother-in-law) a very powerful figure, especially over the daughters-in-law. Yet in spite of gaining this sometimes formidable power, the mother-in-law might not actually expand the scope of her decision-making, but merely subordinate more people to it. It is possible, too, that she gains no greater influence over her own strategic life-choices or barriers to her own agency or well-being freedom. In short, becoming more powerful might make her no better able to shape her own life.

All this is to say that neither becoming powerful nor becoming more powerful can be regarded as a sufficient condition defining ‘empowerment’. But could it nevertheless be a necessary condition? In that case, becoming better able to shape one’s own life would not be sufficient for empowerment, but some further condition of power would need to be met. In other words, if that power-condition were not met for some people who nevertheless did become better able to shape their own lives, we would still not consider them to have been “empowered”. Is there any reason for conceiving of empowerment in this way? Or should we break from the historical meaning and consider power to be a means or resource for empowerment, rather than one of its defining features?

How we answer these questions must depend on what is meant by ‘power’. In this connection, I find much of Uphoff’s analysis to be helpful. In particular it is helpful to avoid what is in my view the inflated and misleading conception of power that is popular among followers of Michel Foucault. In that conception, we are subject to power if we acquiesce in others’ way of thinking, or discourse, whether or not we are compelled to do so. I think, on the contrary, that it is important to distinguish between these two cases. Cases in which we can make the world better simply by changing how we think, for instance by rejecting values and norms that harm many for the benefit of a few, are very important cases to recognize because we can accomplish so much with so little cost. These are importantly different from cases in which deviation from a set of norms carries a sanction – be it legal, political, or economic – a harm that will be imposed on those who do deviate. Here we cannot change much merely by changing our minds or rejecting someone else’s discourse. Power resides in the latter case, not the former, but the distinction is not one that the Foucauldians recognize. By contrast, Uphoff follows Max Weber in conceiving of power as:

(a) the *probability* that (b) someone *in a social relationship* (c) will be able to achieve his or her *will* that is, whatever is desired, (d) despite *resistance*, and (e) regardless of the *bases* upon which this probability rests (*ME*, p. 221).

Consider how this contrasts with empowerment as I have been considering it so far. I have been focusing on empowerment as an end to be achieved, as distinct from the means of achieving it, with a view to avoiding false positive assessments when the means of empowerment are present and yet people are not actually empowered. One weakness that remains with my result so far is that, for all it says, empowerment could be ephemeral. Imagine the following scenario:

DULSE, OR EPHEMERAL EMPOWERMENT. An island community has for centuries harvested a local sun-dried seaweed that they have enjoyed as a salty, chewy, iodine-rich snack food. The harvesting activity provides families with a very modest supplement to their incomes – modest because demand has been limited to the small and economically depressed island population. Over time new markets develop. One includes people who leave the island for better prospects elsewhere and appreciate the seaweed snack for sentimental reasons. Another is a health-conscious market who nevertheless cannot give up snack foods. The government creates a state-owned company, which includes representatives of the seaweed harvesters on its Board of Directors, to package and market the product. The harvesters as a group find they are better included in decision-making as well as greater influence on the development of their small industry, and, as a result, they are able to raise themselves for the first time safely above the poverty line. However, this government is defeated in the next election, and the winning party

sells their company to a transnational snack food company, under which prices paid to the harvesters are reduced so as to increase profitability to the parent company.

There are numerous cases like this (but less fanciful), in which initiatives by which people are better able to shape their lives are undermined because those people lack either political influence or control over their productive resources. Is it right to call these cases of empowerment? The people affected were able to raise their decision-making and influence to shape their lives momentarily, but they could not defend these gains against opposition later on. Because their empowerment was not strong enough to prevail against opposition, it strikes us as being a paler shade of empowerment – more anemic than what people needed. In retrospect, it would have been more empowering for the previous government to have established the marketing-packaging company as a producer co-operative, since then, at least if the business succeeded, the harvesters could have protected themselves from a disempowering takeover.

The upshot is that advances in life-shaping decision-making and influence should be regarded as *still* more empowering to the degree that people can make these gains prevail against resistance, and less empowering to the degree that they cannot. So we must adjust what we mean by ‘empowerment’ as follows:

DURABLE EMPOWERMENT (WITH POWER): People are empowered to the extent that:

- they exercise enhanced decision-making and influence over strategic life-choices and barriers to agency and well-being freedom, and
- their capacity for such decision-making and influence have also been enhanced, and
- given (i) the capabilities they have and assets they control, individually or collectively, and (ii) the opportunity structure in which they act, it is probable that they can make these gains prevail, in the face of opposition.

The last clause represents power as the probability that people can prevail in the face of possible opposition, following Uphoff’s Weberian conception. However, we are not concerned here with their power to achieve “whatever is desired”; we are concerned more narrowly with their power to sustain and defend their gains in influential decision-making to shape their lives. There are many ways in which the bases of power may be categorized, and I have chosen here to follow Narayan’s framework rather than Uphoff’s. Assets and capabilities may be material (physical and financial property), human (education), social (social belonging, identity, capacity to organize, and other aspects of social capital), psychological (self-esteem, capacity to aspire), or political (capacity to represent themselves, to engage in political life). By ‘opportunity structure’ Narayan means two things. One is the institutional climate, the set of formal and informal rules that are upheld by states, markets, civil society, and international agencies, especially as they affect access to information, inclusion/participation in decision-making, accountability, and local organizational capacity. The other is social and political structure, especially in its capacity for openness, political competition, and conflict resolution (*ME*, 6-11).

5. Conclusions

The conception of sustainable empowerment for which I have argued promises to avert some of the confusions that can beset attempts to measure empowerment. The idea of durable development refers to the *occurrence* of empowerment, not merely to the presence of means to

empowerment, and this calls for measures of empowerment that do not yield false positive readings when means of empowerment are present and yet people do not manage to be empowered by them. At the same time, the importance of these means is implicitly acknowledged. While power is not valued for its own sake, the power to sustain gains in people's control over their lives is explicitly included in the idea of durable empowerment.

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