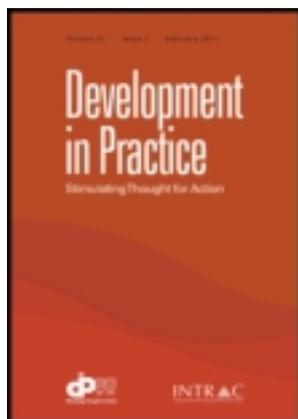


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# Defining empowerment: perspectives from international development organisations

*Monique Hennink, Ndunge Kiiti, Mara Pillinger, and Ravi Jayakaran*

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*Empowerment has become a mainstream concept in international development but lacks clear definition, which can undermine development initiatives aimed at strengthening empowerment as a route to poverty reduction. In the present article, written narratives from 49 international development organisations identify how empowerment is defined and operationalised in community initiatives. Results show a conceptual framework of empowerment comprising six mechanisms that foster empowerment (knowledge; agency; opportunity; capacity-building; resources; and sustainability), five domains of empowerment (health; economic; political; resource; and spiritual), and three levels (individual; community; and organisational). A key finding is the interdependence between components, indicating important programmatic implications for development initiatives.*

## **Définir l'autonomisation : points de vue d'organisations internationales de développement**

*L'autonomisation est devenue un concept courant dans le développement international, mais elle n'a pas été définie clairement, ce qui peut miner les initiatives de développement qui cherchent à renforcer l'autonomisation afin de réduire la pauvreté. Dans cet article, des récits écrits de 49 organisations internationales de développement identifient la manière dont l'autonomisation est définie et mise en œuvre dans des initiatives communautaires. Les résultats mettent en évidence un cadre conceptuel d'autonomisation comportant six mécanismes qui favorisent l'autonomisation (connaissances, intervention, opportunité, renforcement des capacités, ressources et durabilité), cinq domaines d'autonomisation (santé, économique, politique, ressources, et spirituel) et trois niveaux (individuel, communautaire et organisationnel). Une conclusion clé est l'interdépendance entre les éléments, ce qui suppose des implications programmatiques importantes pour les initiatives de développement.*

## **Definindo empoderamento: perspectivas das organizações de desenvolvimento internacional**

*O empoderamento tem se tornado um conceito dominante no desenvolvimento internacional, mas não possui uma definição clara, o que pode prejudicar as iniciativas de desenvolvimento destinadas a fortalecer o empoderamento como forma de se reduzir a pobreza. Neste artigo, narrativas escritas de 49 organizações de desenvolvimento internacional identificam como o empoderamento é definido e operacionalizado em iniciativas da comunidade. Os resultados*

*mostram uma estrutura conceitual de empoderamento compreendendo seis mecanismos que promovem o empoderamento (conhecimento; agência; oportunidade; capacitação; recursos e sustentabilidade), cinco áreas de empoderamento (saúde; economia; política; recursos e espiritual) e três níveis (individual; comunidade e organizacional). Uma constatação-chave é a interdependência entre componentes, indicando implicações programáticas importantes para iniciativas de desenvolvimento.*

***Definiciones de empoderamiento: perspectivas de organizaciones internacionales de desarrollo***

*Empoderamiento se ha convertido en un término de uso generalizado en el desarrollo internacional pero carece de precisión, a tal grado que puede restar eficacia a las acciones para el desarrollo que buscan fortalecer el empoderamiento como una vía para reducir la pobreza. Este ensayo revisa 49 descripciones de organizaciones de desarrollo internacionales sobre cómo se define y se aplica el empoderamiento a nivel comunitario. Los resultados arrojan un marco conceptual del empoderamiento que comprende seis mecanismos que fortalecen el empoderamiento (conocimiento, apropiación, oportunidad, creación de capacidades, recursos y sostenibilidad), cinco ámbitos del empoderamiento (salud, economía, política, recursos, espiritualidad), y tres niveles (individual, comunitario, organizacional). Un resultado importante muestra que estos componentes son interdependientes, lo cual tiene importantes implicaciones programáticas para las acciones de desarrollo.*

KEY WORDS: Aid; Labour and livelihood; Social sector

## Introduction

Empowerment has become a mainstream concept in international development (Kabeer 2001; Sen 1999), yet the term *empowerment* still lacks clear definition in this field. This is clearly evidenced by the wide variation in terminology, conceptualisation and meaning used to frame and understand empowerment in the development literature (Hui *et al.* 2004; Khalid 2008). This lack of clarity can undermine the value of efforts aimed at strengthening empowerment as a route towards improving community development and poverty reduction. The present article focuses on understanding how international development organisations define and implement empowerment initiatives. Understanding both the conceptual definition of empowerment and its practical application in development initiatives provides us with a clearer perspective from which to define empowerment, its components and complex meaning, and strengthen community initiatives that foster empowerment as a mechanism towards development.

From a development perspective, research shows that empowerment can be a genuine public health strategy, and if conceptualised and used effectively it leads to improved community health outcomes and poverty reduction (Wallerstein 2006). A report commissioned by WHO (Wallerstein 2006) focused on seeking evidence on the benefits of empowerment for improving health and development. The report stressed the importance of first clearly defining and conceptualising empowerment – it states: ‘As “empowerment” increasingly enters mainstream discourse, those using the term need to clarify definitions, dimensions and outcomes of the range of interventions called empowering’ (Wallerstein 2006: 4). The report also examined how empowerment can be a viable approach for improving public health strategies, stating that: ‘empowerment influences people’s ability to act through collective participation by strengthening their organisational capacities, challenging power inequities and achieving

outcomes on many reciprocal levels in different domains: psychological empowerment, household relations, enhanced social capital and cohesion, transformed institutions, greater access to resources, open governance and increasingly equitable community conditions' (Wallerstein 2006: 19). The potential contribution of empowerment to development and poverty reduction has also been supported by global institutions such as the World Bank (2000) and development practitioners. For example, Narayan (2002: 14) describes empowerment as *'the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives'*. Although there has been much progress in acknowledging the potential contribution of empowerment strategies for strengthening community development and poverty reduction, there remains a lack of clarity on defining empowerment and what being empowered really means.

Much previous research suggests an approach to poverty reduction that builds on the resources, assets, capabilities, and opportunities of individuals and communities themselves – a term commonly referred to as *agency*, which is seen as a critical component of empowerment (Sen 1999). Many authors state that a clear understanding of empowerment must examine the relationship between the potential to build agency and the prevailing power structures which can support or hinder agency and hence empowerment (Luttrell and Quiroz 2007; Ibrahim and Alkire 2007; Sammon and Santos 2009; Alsop and Norton 2004; Freire 1984). Alsop and Norton (2004) discuss how power can impact poverty reduction and that the imbalance of economic, social, and political power sustains the disparities that keep individuals and communities in poverty (Page and Czuba 1999), which can lead to disempowerment (Sen 1999). Sadan (1997) states that *'since the sources of powerlessness are rooted in empowerment processes that disempower entire populations, the empowerment process aims to influence the oppressed human agency and the social structure within the limitations and possibilities in which this exists and reacts'* (Sadan 1997: 144; emphasis added). It is the shift in the power structure or *'a process of transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of relative control over one's life, destiny and environment'* (Sadan 1997: 144) which brings about empowerment. Although the concept of agency is seen as a critical component of empowerment for poverty reduction, how agency is embraced within the broader understanding of empowerment remains unclear.

Much existing literature that contributes to defining empowerment is based on secondary data or proposes a theoretical framework of empowerment without a substantive evidence base. While these contributions remain very important, there is little empirical research to understand how those at the centre of development practice define and implement programmes that promote empowerment as a route towards development and poverty reduction. To this end, international development organisations often implement initiatives aimed at strengthening empowerment. The perspectives of development practitioners at the forefront of empowerment initiatives are critical for the present article, not only in defining empowerment but also in identifying how community initiatives can effectively strengthen empowerment strategies towards sustainable development practice. Therefore, the present article aims to identify how international development organisations conceptualise empowerment and implement empowerment initiative. We collected primary data from international development organisations to develop an empirical understanding of the multidimensional nature of empowerment. Specifically, the study addresses three research questions: (1) How do international development organisations define empowerment? (2) What are the components of empowerment identified and how do they interact? (3) What types of empowerment initiative are implemented by international development organisations? The study provides a unique perspective on defining and operationalising empowerment and highlights further questions that continue to shape the global conversation around the conceptualisation and operationalisation of empowerment.

## Methods

A qualitative approach was necessary to understand the complex multidimensional nature of empowerment, allowing participants to describe, in their own words, their perspectives on empowerment. Data were collected as written narratives from participant organisations in response to open-ended questions via an online platform. This approach was used to allow a broad range of development organisations from different global regions to share their perspectives. Participant organisations were dispersed internationally, in developed and developing countries, so personal interviews were not feasible.

Open-ended questions were structured around three areas: (1) background of the organisation and the type of activities conducted or sponsored (e.g., health; education; food security; micro-credit; emergency relief; etc.); (2) how the organisation defines empowerment, projects or activities they feel support empowerment and any observed outcomes of empowerment; (3) whether organisations have measured empowerment and any indicators used. The measurement of empowerment yielded few results, as most organisations had not developed indicators to measure it. Therefore, the present article focuses specifically on how organisations define empowerment and their activities to support empowerment.

Participants in the present study comprised organisations whose overall mandate is community development with a focus on poverty reduction. Participant organisations worked in a broad range of areas including: health; education; nutrition; agriculture; policy; and governance. Organisations varied in size, global reach, regional and programmatic focus, thus enabling us to identify a diverse range of perspectives on empowerment, which was sufficient to gain depth and variety on the research issues (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Organisations were recruited through five umbrella organisations whose members comprised of agencies working in the aforementioned areas. The umbrella organisations endorsed the study and encouraged member organisations to participate voluntarily in the study. Forty-nine organisations participated, responding to open-ended questions with detailed narratives. These written narratives were provided by the director of each organisation or individuals who manage the community initiatives and/or policy development. Internet access is widespread and is the typical mode of communication between these organisations; therefore, the online format of data collection is unlikely to have excluded any organisations from participating in the study within the six-month timeframe of data collection.

The data for the present article comprise 49 transcripts of the written narratives. Data were analysed using MAXQDA2007, a computer package to assist in coding, searching, comparing, and managing textual data. The process of data analysis followed the 'grounded theory' approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), whereby inductive and deductive themes were developed and used to code the entire data set. Data analysis involved searching data, description and comparison of themes, categorising core components of empowerment identified, examining the relationships between these components and developing an empirically grounded model of empowerment. The grounded theory approach is particularly well-suited for the present study, which sought to identify the core components of empowerment as described by development organisations, and then develop a conceptual framework that embraces these components to explain how development organisations perceive the process and mechanisms of empowerment.

## Results

### *How do international development organisations define empowerment?*

Participant organisations highlighted that empowerment is complex and multifaceted, and is both a process itself and an outcome of a process of change. Despite the size, type, and programmatic

**Table 1:** Mechanisms of empowerment

Mechanism	Definition
Knowledge	Access to education, training and information from formal or other sources
Agency (a) Self-identity (b) Decision-making (c) Effecting change	Capacity to act independently and make choices – comprised of three components: (a) self-confidence and self-efficacy to set and achieve goals (b) ability to make informed decisions that are recognised and respected (c) belief in own ability to take action to effect change based on own goals
Opportunity structure	Existence of an enabling environment of social, political, institutional and community support to foster individual and community development
Capacity-building	Harness community capacity to provide or advocate for services or self governance, and to seek accountability from government service provision agencies
Resources	Access to physical and financial resources, or skills for seeking resources, to develop communities
Sustainability	Ability of communities to develop and support initiatives towards long-term sustainability

focus of organisations, few differences in the descriptions of empowerment were found based on these characteristics, which suggests some conformity in how organisations broadly defined empowerment.

The descriptions of empowerment highlighted a range of mechanisms by which organisations believed empowerment occurs. The six mechanisms identified in the data are summarised in Table 1. A different combination of mechanisms operates depending on who is being empowered – an individual; a community; or an organisation. These three distinct levels of empowerment and the mechanisms operating within each are described in the following sections.

*Individual empowerment:* Individual empowerment was described as a process of transformation that enables individuals to make independent decisions and take action on these decisions to make changes in their lives. A core mechanism identified for individual empowerment was *agency*. In these data, individual agency comprised three core components – an individual’s self-identity; their decision-making capacity; and their ability to effect change (see Table 1).

Individual empowerment is not achieved with agency alone; knowledge and the presence of an enabling environment for change were also identified as mechanisms. Participants stated that knowledge contributed to informed decision-making, self-confidence, and self-efficacy, which enables individuals to recognise problems, understand potential solutions and identify sources for assistance. The existence of an enabling environment of institutional structures and social norms was shown to facilitate or hinder individual empowerment. The relationship between agency and an enabling environment was seen as the core to individual empowerment.

*Community empowerment:* Community empowerment was described as the process of enabling communities to mobilise towards change. Five mechanisms were seen to foster community empowerment: agency; capacity building; resource provision; opportunity structure; and sustainability. Community agency was described as the ability of a community to set its own

priorities, make decisions, and take action. However, it was seen as broader than individual agency as it also involves a community advocating for, or providing, resources or services for itself. Participant organisations described an empowered community as one that is able to *'identify [its] own problems... then devise a plan of action to... implement solutions'*.

Community empowerment also involved capacity building, whereby communities build networks or community groups, then mobilise these groups to take action on certain issues. For example, participants described community mobilisation to construct safe water sources or to provide healthcare to underserved groups. Resource provision is another mechanism of community empowerment identified, which involved direct provision of supplies or services to a community to facilitate capacity-building initiatives. However, some participant organisations felt that direct resource provision may negate community development and sustainability by building reliance on external resources, rather than facilitating a community's own capacity to identify and develop their current resources.

It was acknowledged that community empowerment requires an enabling environment that recognises community groups, is responsive to community advocacy, and is accountable to the community itself. The enabling environment was determined by the level of community agency, capacity building, and resource provision, highlighting the close interlinkages between these mechanisms. Sustainability was also highlighted as a component of community empowerment that enables a community to be self-sufficient. Sustainability was seen both as a mechanism for community empowerment and an outcome of it.

*Organisational empowerment:* Empowerment of organisations was described in two contexts: where empowerment of a local partner organisation is a focus of collaboration, or where it is a by-product of collaborative activities. Examples of organisational empowerment included assisting local partner organisations to improve their operational effectiveness or to expand their programmes.

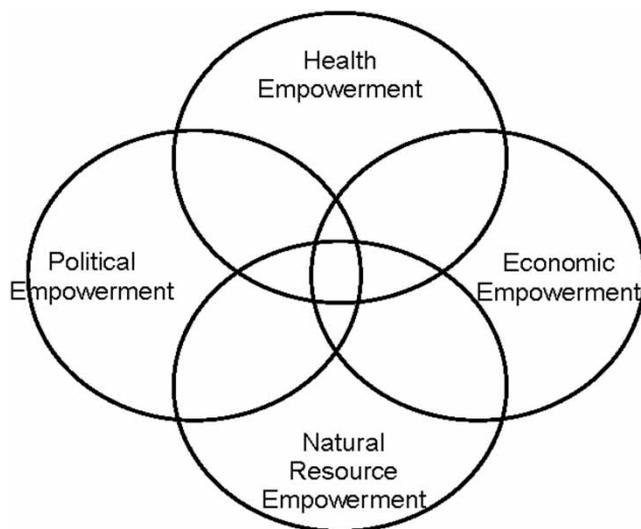
The five mechanisms that foster community empowerment were also described for organisational empowerment. Organisational agency was described as the ability of an organisation to set goals and priorities, make operational decisions and take action to implement programmes or activities. Capacity building, resources and sustainability were seen as critical components of achieving organisational agency and were often inter-linked. One participant organisation described these links as such:

*...capacity building requires an evolving relationship with local partners... [we] act as a mentor for local organisations... Ultimately, [our] role is to be a resource for these developed, high functioning organisations, [through] the transfer of knowledge and skills to local partners... capacity building is at the core... of capability. We engage in capacity building activities to support sustainability.*

An enabling environment was seen as an important mechanism for organisational empowerment. This was described as the existence of effective partnerships between local and national or international organisations to develop activities or deliver services and create financial sustainability. As in community empowerment, there were mixed opinions on whether resource provision promotes capacity or creates dependence on external support, potentially reducing sustainability.

### *What types of empowerment initiatives are implemented by international development organisations?*

Participant organisations described a wide range of activities they felt contributed towards empowerment. These were categorised into five domains of empowerment: health; economic;



**Figure 1:** Domains of empowerment

political; natural resource; and spiritual. Each of these domains is distinct, yet they also overlap, as shown diagrammatically in Figure 1. In the following sub-sections we describe each domain, how the mechanisms of empowerment (in Table 1) operate in each domain, and how they operate by the level of empowerment being achieved.

*Health domain:* Empowerment in the health domain referred to activities that enable people, both individually and collectively, to have control over their health in terms of knowledge, decision-making and access to health services. The activities that promoted health empowerment included: HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention; maternal and child health; sexual and reproductive health; nutrition and physical fitness; water and sanitation; and reducing gender-based violence. Many programmes were targeted towards specific sectors of the community, such as women, youth, rural poor communities, refugees, or ethnic minority groups. The health domain was viewed as a key component of empowerment and the area in which the most activity was being conducted.

Participant organisations stressed that knowledge and capacity building were fundamental mechanisms for health empowerment among individuals because they influence the ability to make informed decisions and to access healthcare. Knowledge also increases an individual's self-efficacy to act on health decisions made. Activities that foster health knowledge included health education programmes (e.g., safer sex; sanitation; nutrition; immunisation), and behaviour-change campaigns (e.g. community theatre). Capacity building for health, at the community level, was also described as providing health training and technical assistance to improve, expand, and sustain the delivery of healthcare services. Capacity building activities were also seen to increase a community's ability to negotiate improved health services, promote good health practices and contribute to community sustainability, for example: *'[We helped to] organise a community so they can engage effectively with local health facilities – such as by influencing hours/services offered by the facility, educating [them] regarding what quality of care and services to demand from the health system, and advising community members in how to serve as community-based health care workers...'*

Participant organisations described how health education activities foster the development of individual agency to improve self-efficacy for health improvement. For example, one programme:

*... aims to help mothers and families be in control of and improve their own health... by improving women's self-efficacy and self-worth. Women lacked self-worth, thinking that their breast milk was not good enough or bad for the baby. We were then able to address the issue and plan programme priorities around these beliefs/inaccuracies, instilling in the mothers the confidence to take control of their feeding practices and envision healthy futures for their babies. We improved the mothers' capacity to believe in themselves and thus act on these new beliefs.*

Participant organisations highlighted activities that created an enabling environment for improved health, such as increasing the availability of healthcare and challenging social norms that influence health. They do so, for example, by sensitising the community to gender norms that negatively affect maternal health or targeting young people, who often have fewer resources or capacity to access healthcare independently. The provision of health resources is another mechanism to facilitate health empowerment, by providing health supplies (e.g., medications; equipment; vaccines; vitamins; latrine building) to community health teams, local clinics, and district health services. One organisation converts old buses into mobile medical clinics and donates them to local partner organisations.

*Economic domain:* Empowerment in the economic domain refers to assisting individuals, communities and local partner organisations to achieve economic security and sustainability. Three types of activities were highlighted to promote economic empowerment with different sectors of the community: facilitating individuals or households to participate in income generation; assisting communities to form cooperatives to increase profits on produce sold; and supporting local partner organisations to improve fiscal management and diversify funding to improve economic security and sustainability.

Participant organisations conducted economic empowerment activities for individuals and households. Many programmes were targeted at women and young people. These provided knowledge and skill development to conduct income-generating activities, fostering greater financial security. Such programmes also cultivate agency by increasing an individual's self-esteem, self-efficacy, and decision-making capacity, to make independent decisions about income generation and expenditure. Making economic contributions to one's family and community also contributes to an individual's self-worth; for example, helping youth to learn a trade '*enhance[s] their commitments to themselves and their communities*'. Other examples of economic empowerment activities include:

*... a microfinance [programme]... that leads to the empowerment of women participating in a savings group. The training women in the group receive increases their knowledge and empowers them to make decisions about their spending, savings, and household income.*

*Women who are given access to job-training and literacy workshops have more confidence to work outside of their homes and hold jobs. They are also more likely to stand up for themselves and voice their opinions... Economic empowerment is an important way of contributing to women's overall empowerment and their ability to live their lives to the fullest.*

Programmes like these also provide an enabling environment for empowerment, particularly for women. For example, access to financial resources changes the opportunity for women to participate in economic activities and generate independent income. Furthermore, women's

economic participation can challenge social norms to allow women to make economic decisions and contributions, thereby contributing to their economic empowerment.

Participant organisations also described activities that promote economic empowerment of local partner organisations. Most activities focused on capacity building, such as providing training in business strategies (e.g. strategic plan, mission statement), financial management, fiscal tools (e.g. banking, budgeting) and sourcing new funding and income-generating opportunities. Few participant organisations provided direct funding to local partner organisations. Economic empowerment activities also included assisting local organisations and community groups (e.g. farmers) to form business cooperatives to transport goods to markets or negotiate more favourable terms for the sale of produce. This provides an enabling environment for change and development.

*Political domain:* Empowerment in the political domain refers to the ability of individuals, communities and organisations to have legal rights, hold government accountable for protecting these rights, and have the freedom to advocate for political and legal change. Participant organisations described both macro- and micro-level activities that promote political empowerment. At the macro-level, activities advocate for policy and legal change, such as legal reform in gender equity, child protection, and rights for displaced persons. At the micro-level, activities advocate for change in policy relating to service delivery of local government, and holding local government accountable for service provision. One participant organisation stated: *'Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable the institutions that affect their lives'*. Furthermore, activities also included supporting community self-governance and peacebuilding programmes. Participant organisations highlighted that a range of *a priori* conditions were needed for political empowerment to be achieved, such as legal rights, gender and caste equity, and religious freedom. The most commonly mentioned was gender equity, which encompassed sexual and reproductive rights, and protection from domestic violence.

Participant organisations stated that the underlying mechanism for political empowerment was change in the prevailing opportunity structures within a society or community, which can have a positive or negative influence on people's lives. One participant organisation stated that *'...creating an enabling environment through the development of legal entitlements, political stability, etc may be as (or more) important than increasing access to assets, income and capital'*. Participant organisations described three types of activities that contributed to building enabling environments for political empowerment: changing government policy; changing service delivery entitlements; and promoting self-governance within communities.

Additional mechanisms for political empowerment were resource provision and capacity-building, which support communities and local partner organisations in advocating for policy change and service provision. One participant described this process as follows:

*... [we] provided an opportunity for community members to interact and establish a mechanism for communication of community needs with district health officials, NGO representatives, clinicians, and political leaders. Community members raised questions about the causes of maternal death, the availability of ambulances, and the scarcity of doctors in rural areas. Elected officials were asked about their support to address these issues and were asked to commit to supporting and undertaking the necessary steps to meet these safe motherhood needs. As a result, representatives of political parties have committed to allocate new resources for maternal health under a new five-year plan, and civil society groups have been equipped with simple checklists to monitor the implementation of new policies.*

The final mechanism of political empowerment described was the development of community agency by supporting self-governance, peacebuilding, and promoting community representation on regulatory bodies or local government advisory boards. One participant organisation described the formation of community councils, which address social issues like alcoholism by introducing and enforcing alcohol-free zones in the community. Another participant organisation *'looks at issues of empowerment by focusing on capacity building, institutional strengthening of local organisations as well as village structures or associations, which is at many levels'*.

Peacebuilding programmes are aligned with community development as they aim to promote conflict resolution within and between communities. For example, one participant organisation explained that peacebuilding programmes *'form partnerships. . . and build capacity to carry out conflict mediation, conciliation, and numerous kinds of peace related training'*. Another organisation described a peacebuilding programme that *'equips refugees with the information and skills necessary to rebuild their communities and to reintegrate into society at large'*.

*Natural resource domain:* Empowerment in the natural resource domain refers to the ability of individuals and communities to access, use, and conserve natural resources towards sustainability. Three types of programmes were highlighted by participant organisations: food security; safe water; and the conservation and rehabilitation of natural environments. The majority of programmes focused on improving food security through increased food production, improved agricultural practices, and promoting small-scale household gardens. Other types of programmes focused on promoting equitable and sustainable management of natural forest and water resources for communities.

A range of mechanisms were described as facilitating natural resource empowerment. The most commonly mentioned mechanism was the provision of agricultural resources (such as seeds, fertiliser, and equipment for agricultural production), constructing agricultural infrastructure (such as wells and dams to expand water supply), and re-vegetating the environment for rehabilitation and long-term agricultural sustainability. A second mechanism for facilitating natural resource empowerment is individual and community agency. For example, programmes that encourage women to grow household gardens foster women's identity and self-efficacy to decide what to grow, how to sell it and to take ownership of a project.

A third mechanism described was capacity building (in both knowledge and skills) and technical assistance in using new agricultural practices and technology. One programme *'focuses on increasing the quantity of food produced through good agronomic practices, appropriate technologies, skill development and the use of improved breeds'*. Capacity-building activities are often coupled with resource provision. For example, one participant organisation described a programme that:

*. . . develops village model farms that provide technical assistance. . . that enable households to cultivate micronutrient rich fruits and vegetables year round. These programmes are combined with nutrition education and behaviour change communications to ensure that participating farms understand the necessity to consume products and feed them to their young children. The products also increase household income and food security.*

Another aspect of capacity building is advocating for access to peaceably sharing natural resources. This leads to new opportunities for communities to demand accountability from government and other organisations that facilitate access to and preservation of natural resources.

*Spiritual domain:* Empowerment in the spiritual domain refers to the development and strengthening of faith and the transformation of values within an individual or community. Discussion

of spiritual empowerment was limited almost exclusively to agencies that identified as faith-based organisations (FBOs). When non-FBOs did address it, they referred to religion and spirituality as an element of the local cultural context that needs to be considered in development work.

In contrast, many FBOs described faith as an underlying motivation for development work and a primary purpose of it, describing it as *'doing God's work'* and enabling people to realise their *'God-given potential'*. For these organisations, a desired outcome of spiritual empowerment was for an individual or community to embrace Christianity (all organisations had Christian roots), join or establish a church, conduct active worship, strengthen religious fellowship, and begin to disciple others. This direct focus on spiritual empowerment may go further to foster a transformation of values within individuals to change one's worldview towards a new set of faith-based values. This new worldview may, in turn, inspire individuals to become involved in community service and leadership activities based in the Christian ethos. Some organisations included spiritual empowerment as part of their broader organisational mandate of community development, such as improving the health and economic conditions of a community. Others suggested that spirituality is a necessary criterion for empowerment.

The second type of FBOs did not consider direct spiritual empowerment as their primary goal. Instead, they conducted activities that contributed towards other types of empowerment, particularly health empowerment. For example, they facilitated the development of church-based networks to improve access to medical care for the community, care for widows and orphans in the community, and sponsored programmes to promote personal empowerment. The emphasis of personal and community empowerment may lead to empowerment in other domains, rather than direct spiritual empowerment per se.

*Interaction between domains:* The aforementioned domains of empowerment are distinct, yet there are also interlinked and interdependent in contributing towards empowerment (as depicted by the interlinking circles in Figure 1). Participant organisations described that empowerment in one domain can augment, facilitate or be dependent upon empowerment in another domain. For example, economic empowerment often enables health empowerment by providing the funds needed to access healthcare or by fostering advocacy for health. One economic development programme led to *'women having their own income and taking a stronger stand with regard to family planning'*. Economic empowerment programmes (e.g., microcredit) have also become effective vehicles for disseminating health education messages, particularly regarding domestic violence and HIV/AIDS prevention.

The inter-linkages between domains may operate directly (e.g., economic empowerment facilitates health empowerment) or indirectly (e.g., economic empowerment influences health empowerment through political empowerment). For example, health and economic empowerment are inter-dependent with political empowerment, as access to health services (health empowerment) and developing income-generating activities (economic empowerment) require not only finance but also policies and service delivery protocols for equitable access to services and decision-making (political empowerment), particularly for women. Similarly, natural resource empowerment intersects with political, economic, and health empowerment. For example, legal rights for land ownership, especially for women, provide a foundation for utilising natural resources for income-generating activities (e.g., farming, household gardens) that improving food security and economic sustainability. This in turn fosters economic empowerment that can facilitate access to healthcare (health empowerment). A further aspect of such interdependence is the ability of an individual, community, or organisation to be empowered in one domain and not in another, similarly disempowerment in one domain can stifle empowerment in other domains.

Full empowerment is, therefore, not confined to any single domain but permeates through many aspects of life and thus lies at the intersection of all domains (e.g., the centre of Figure 1). As one participant organisation described it: '*empowerment [is] a state where people can make choices and take actions on their own behalf with self-confidence, from a position of economic, political and social strength*' (emphasis added). Developing a society where citizens can access and manage land and resources; support themselves economically; access health, education, and other services; participate in the political process; demand accountability from their government; and enjoy the security of legal protection, depicts a picture of empowerment in all domains.

Spiritual empowerment, however, was not viewed by participant organisations as interdependent with other domains of empowerment. Spiritual empowerment was sometimes described as a trigger for individual empowerment, or the transformation of values from spiritual empowerment as a mechanism for community empowerment. However, individual or community empowerment may also happen independently of spiritual empowerment. Therefore, the spiritual domain of empowerment is not included in Figure 1 as its relationship to other domains is not clear from these data and is an area requiring further research.

## Discussion

As a development approach, empowerment continues to gain recognition as a viable strategy for improving public health and community development. However, the term *empowerment* still lacks clear definition, which can undermine efforts aimed at fostering development. The present article highlights the complex and multidimensional nature of empowerment, comprising six mechanisms through which development organisations believe empowerment occurs, five domains of empowerment, and three levels of empowerment. The strength of the present article lies not only in identifying and understanding each component of empowerment but interact. There exists important interdependence between the domains of empowerment identified, whereby empowerment may be achieved in one domain and not in others, or a lack of empowerment (or disempowerment) in one domain can stifle empowerment in other domains. Understanding this inter-dependence is critical for development initiatives aimed at fostering empowerment. Although other authors (Luttrell and Quiroz 2007) distinguish various dimensions of empowerment – e.g., economic; social; political; and cultural dimensions – little is made of any interactions between these dimensions.

Distinguishing the components of empowerment and understanding the interlinkages between them not only highlights the complexity of empowerment, but also identifies important opportunities for strengthening empowerment initiatives to effect sustainable change. The linkages between the various domains of empowerment suggest that efforts to support empowerment within a single domain may be limited, although they remain important. The challenge is to develop empowerment initiatives across domains or through effective multi-sector partnerships, whereby a range of organisations work together on empowerment initiatives that effect change in several domains. For example: agriculture, health, and microcredit organisations working together to train women on cultivating nutritious produce in home gardens that can improve family health and be sold for profit in small business enterprises, thereby fostering health, economic, and natural resource empowerment. From a programmatic standpoint, such partnerships could encourage community stewardship, limit duplication, build capacity, broaden impact and the ability to scale-up programmes, and increase local resource mobilisation.

From a policy perspective, strong partnerships could strengthen advocacy and influence, ultimately impacting change. Organisational partnerships can be an effective mechanism for developing empowerment initiatives and for fostering organisational empowerment. However, the nature of these partnerships needs to be given careful consideration, particularly where one

partner is a donor of funds, resources, or expertise. Partnerships with such external donor agencies can be considered disempowering, as described in the present study: '*interference from outside groups now actually probably does more harm to the poor and the country than good because of the programmes that the local community has there*'. The role of external partner agencies is also contested by others (Luttrell and Quiroz 2007), who ask: '*How do you challenge internal oppression while avoiding external manipulation of agenda and process?*'.

Development organisations can also benefit from understanding how the mechanisms of empowerment operate within each of the domains identified in the present article, as a guide to strengthening empowerment initiatives towards poverty reduction and development. For example, providing knowledge or skill training are common interventions aimed at fostering empowerment. However, providing knowledge alone is often insufficient to ensure empowerment occurs, without consideration for the opportunity structures that can facilitate or hinder individuals to use that knowledge for change. Therefore, considering both the mechanisms and domains of empowerment, and particularly how these components interact, can lead to the development of effective empowerment programmes.

The conceptualisation of empowerment, shown in the present article, may also inform approaches to measuring empowerment. Much debate surrounds how to measure empowerment; current indicators are indirect proxy measures and the lack of multi-dimensionality has been criticised (Ibrahim and Alkire 2007; Sammon and Santos 2009). For example, Wallerstein (2006: 10) states that: '*empowerment outcomes, therefore, must be assessed at many levels simultaneously and over time for an accurate picture*'. The results of the present article provide an empirical base from which to support the call for multi-dimensional indicators for measuring empowerment, which embrace the multiple domains in which empowerment occurs and the range of mechanisms that facilitate the empowerment process. Approaches to measuring empowerment may, therefore, benefit from a broader understanding of the components and process of empowerment shown in the present article.

## Conclusion

The present article provides an important contribution to defining empowerment with empirical data from organisations at the frontline of community development. It highlights the complex nature of empowerment, which development organisations believe consists of a range of mechanisms, domains, and levels of empowerment. However, an important outcome of the present article lies in recognising the complex interdependence between the various components of empowerment, which suggests that efforts to foster empowerment in a single domain may be limited. This has important implications for development organisations to work in multi-sector partnerships to strengthen effective and sustainable empowerment initiatives. In addition, the present article highlights the notion that full empowerment comprises empowerment within each domain, and that empowerment in a single domain is insufficient for sustained development. Understanding each component of empowerment and the interlinkages between them can have important programmatic and policy implications for development organisations that foster empowerment initiatives towards sustainable community development and poverty reduction.

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