EVALUATING EMPOWERMENT¹

Catalina Smulovitz (Universidad Di Tella, Argentina)
Michael Walton (World Bank)

Latin America and Caribbean Region (World Bank)

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DRAFT

Abstract

The paper examines how to go about evaluating the effect of empowerment on development outcomes. Empowerment is understood in terms of the capacity of poor or subordinate groups to influence development processes, and consequentially achieve greater well being. The paper argues that evaluation requires two distinct elements, The first is an explicit causal framework for empowerment itself. This is treated as the joint product of influences on (a) the agency capacities of poor or subordinate groups, and (b) the formal and informal institutional context that determines the opportunities for the exercise of agency. These are affected by economic, legal and socio-cultural influences, as well as the power and behavior of other groups. The second element is a causal framework for how empowerment influences development. Here it is key to take account the multiple forces at work—or, in other words, to seek to identify the specific effects of empowerment. This is a classic problem in evaluation. Because of the complexity of the interactions, actual or quasi-experiments with treatment and control groups are particularly attractive. Where this is not feasible (that is often) it will be important to apply the mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques available in ways that seek, however imperfectly, to assess the effect of an empowerment-related change relative to the counterfactual of no such change.

¹ This paper was prepared by Catalina Smulovitz (Universidad Di Tella, Argentina) and Michael Walton (World Bank) with significant inputs from Patti Petesch (World Bank). Valuable comments were received on earlier versions from Ruth Alsop, Peter Evans, Patrick Heller, Phil Keefer, Yasuhiko Matsuda, Ernesto May, Deepa Narayan, Guillermo Perry, Ray Rist, Judith Tendler, Warren van Wicklin and Michael Woolcock.
1. Introduction—What is Empowerment and Why Does it Matter?

This paper is concerned with how to evaluate the role and importance of empowerment in poverty reduction and development. Empowerment has received a rising profile as a source of more effective, and more inclusive, development. This is particularly so in the sense of increasing the capacity of poor people and subordinate groups to influence development processes. One marker for this was the incorporation of empowerment as one of the primary forces for poverty reduction by the World Bank in its millennium World Development Report (World Bank 2001) and in subsequent strategy statements—and this from an agency more commonly associated in the public mind with market liberalization and technocratic solutions. A subsequent World Bank publication states that “A growing body of evidence points to the linkages between empowerment and
development effectiveness both at the society-wide level and at the grassroots level” (World Bank 2002).

There has been considerable study of the role of empowerment-related factors in poverty reduction and overall development. Yet there are few, if any, rigorous evaluations that allows the contribution of empowerment to be measured, and compared with other influences on developmental outcomes, whether at the local or society-wide level. There is also a paucity of empirical analysis on causal influences on empowerment itself. Yet this type of information is crucial to assessing the potential and priority for public action that is intended to foster empowerment relative to other pressing concerns of policymakers and other development agents. There is an increasing range of cases of projects or policies that involve empowerment-related elements. These involve a variety of mechanisms, including interventions that promote participation, increase transparency, build capacity amongst poor groups and strengthen accountability mechanisms. They can be at the local or national level. It is of some importance to start carefully evaluating the effects of these measures to inform future priorities and design choices.

This paper seeks to develop a framework for analyzing how empowerment influences the development process, and for analyzing the causal forces on empowerment. It is intended to guide applications to case studies to be undertaken by the World Bank and others that will pilot, test and undoubtedly modify the approach.

In this introduction we sketch the overall approach proposed in the paper, in order to provide readers with the context in which to read the more detailed exposition. It has three elements: first, an account of what empowerment is and how it fits within a causal account of the development process; second, an account of the causes of empowerment; and third, a discussion of the implications of the approach for undertaking an evaluation, including the informational requirements.

By empowerment we mean increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make purposeful and effective choices in the interest of pursuing a better life for themselves. This can apply to any group, but we are particularly concerned with the empowerment of poorer, excluded or subordinate groups, and the analysis is developed from that
There are, unsurprisingly, multiple definitions of empowerment in the literature that emphasize different aspects of the concept. Yet, in spite of the diversity of approaches, a recent survey found a “greater consensus … on its conceptualisation than expected.” It found that the terms most often included in its definition are: options, choice, control and power. Naila Kabeer, for example, asserts that empowerment is “the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.” This definition highlights both the actor’s ability to make choices and the process of change in the achievement of these abilities. She emphasizes the need to examine a poor group’s resources, agency and achievements, in interpreting the process of empowerment. In the World Bank’s sourcebook on empowerment, Deepa Narayan, states that “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.” Like Kabeer’s, this definition highlights that empowerment refers to the actors’ abilities to make purposeful choices and that it involves a process of change. It also emphasizes that empowerment is about the transformation of those choices into actions and that this is a function of the institutions with which poor groups interact.

In this paper we build on this past work, in particular developing an approach that sees empowerment as a compounded concept, that involves both the capacities of individuals and groups to make purposeful choices (that is to be agents), and the ability to transform these capacities for agency into favorable outcomes via interactions within the social and institutional context in which actors live. We can say that there has been empowerment when poor groups exercise agency with a reasonable prospect of this having an influence on development processes and outcomes (or achievements in Kabeer’s terminology). Whether the priority for empowerment lies in strengthening the capacities of subordinate groups or making the institutional context more responsive will depend on the initial conditions.

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2 We often use the terms “poor”, “excluded”, “subordinate” to refer to groups that we are concerned with. Each of these concepts has distinct meanings. Questions of empowerment relate in particular to cases of exclusion or subordination—but these will be of both constitutive and instrumental relevance to poverty.

3 Malhotra et al 2002 p.4

4 See Kabeer (1999) p. 437

5 World Bank 2002b p. xviii. For other recent work on the nature of empowerment within the World Bank see Bennett (2002) and World Bank (2002c.)

6 The ability to make purposeful choices is usually referred in the literature as the agency component of actors. More on this below. See Giddens 1984, Sen 1985, Emirbayer and Mishce 1998.
Empowerment can have value for intrinsic and instrumental reasons. Having more power over one’s life is valued for its own sake in almost all societies, and it is important to recognize this intrinsic value of increased choice or empowerment. But empowerment is also potentially of importance for its impact on other aspects of development—for its influence on the processes that lead to less income poverty, lower mortality, greater skills, and less insecurity. Such capacities to influence development occur within a world of multiple other causes. The development process is complex, and—as a large quantity of development study has sought to document—a whole range of factors are germane to the realization of such development outcomes. These may include public spending on roads, schools, health centers, and safety nets, private investment in machines and skills, pricing polices, financial flows and so on.

Empowerment fits within this. We illustrate this in Figure 1, in what we call the simple hypothesis on empowerment. While we will soon be adding some complexity to this, this already helps us focus on three points: first, empowerment is hypothesized to matter to the achievement of core development outcomes (such as those captured in the Millennium Development Goals for example); second, there is particular interest in the outcomes for the poor—and thus in inequalities within a society; and third, in seeking to understand the role of empowerment, it will be necessary to assess this in relation to other influences—here referred to as “economic factors”. Thus in evaluating empowerment, we will be greatly interested in outcomes for the poor, but will need an independent account of the empowerment process that will allow assessment of the causal relationships with development outcomes within the context of the multiple influences on development processes. Evaluation of the role of empowerment involves questions of how to attribute changes to empowerment-related changes, whether these involve increased capacities of disempowered groups, or changes in the context that allow existing groups to be more effective. This is an example of a common, indeed classical, question in evaluating the causes of development processes.

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7 For discussion of intrinsic and instrumental effects of the related concept of agency-freedom and capabilities see discussions in Sen (1985, 1992).
As already noted, the other main focus of the framework concerns the causal influences on empowerment itself. Here we build on the view of empowerment as a compounded concept: a product of the interaction between the agency capacities of poor groups, and the context in which these can potentially be exercised. The agency capacities of individual groups are the products of a range of influences, including their economic resources, human capital, and individual capabilities, but also capacities that flow to a significant extent from their socio-cultural histories. The extent to which agency can be effectively exercised depends on the context, that determines the structure of opportunities faced by individuals and groups. This opportunity structure is a product of formal rules, informal socio-cultural structures, the power and strategies of other groups, and the extent to which a state, and the rule of law, effectively operates (including in protecting the weak from the predations of the powerful).  

A final comment in this introductory section. Empowerment is of intrinsic positive value for those who become more empowered. This can often bring benefits in terms of greater aggregate production, efficiency or well-being in a society. But it is by no means necessarily the case that instrumental influences are beneficial to all. For

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8 This can be seen as an extended version of syntheses of resource mobilization, political opportunity and cultural approaches within the social movement literature; see Tarrow (1998) for a general discussion..
empowerment of poorer groups will often lead to the relative disempowerment of previously dominant groups. And, not least for this reason, empowerment need not be harmonious, and may lead to heightened conflict or other outcomes that at least some groups would judge in a negative light. This is a matter for both causal and normative analysis.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section expands on the role of empowerment within the development process—in relation to other factors, and in relation to various arenas for development action. This is the causal framework for development change within which empowerment operates. The third section then turns to the causal framework for empowerment itself, expanding on the distinction between the capacities of poor groups and the institutional context in which such capacities may be exercised. The fourth section discusses the documentation and evaluation of empowerment, building on the preceding discussion. Documentation refers to the need for descriptive and interpretative accounts of the process of empowerment, while evaluation refers to the exercise of assessing the contribution of empowerment to development outcomes, in relation to the range of forces on such outcomes. This in particular has to take account of, or struggle with, the question of attribution—how much an observed change (reduced mortality, increased school attendance) is due to empowerment relative to other factors, such as rising incomes or a decision to increase spending made in a far-off capital city?

While we don’t yet have cases that answer this last question, we do seek to link the analysis to some actual cases to provide qualitative illustrations. These include: the introduction of participation into schooling in El Salvador (in “EDUCO”); reforms designed to increase participation and accountability at the municipal level in Bolivia (including in the context of the National Dialogue); the development of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil; and the (unplanned) impact on the behavior of unemployed groups of Argentina’s Trabajar, workfare, program. These cases are referred to at various parts of the text. They were selected to illustrate a variety of types of conditions in which empowerment was either intended, or appeared to matter, but by no means exhaust the potential arenas. The World Bank’s empowerment sourcebook emphasizes three other arenas—in national decision-making, in markets and within the justice systems.
2. How Empowerment Fits Within Development Processes

In this section we outline the broader development context in which empowerment occurs, that provides the overall framework within the objective of evaluating empowerment needs to be considered. Here we are primarily concerned with the instrumental role of empowerment—the potential for empowerment to have an influence on development outcomes, especially for poorer groups. As illustrated in Figure 1, the simple hypothesis is that empowering poorer groups can lead to changes in the dynamic of development in ways that may increase outcomes such as health, education and incomes. The influence and behavior of poorer groups does not occur within a vacuum, but rather within a system in which there are many other influences at work. We first expand on why empowerment can make a difference to development outcomes, then look at the question of the multiple influences on such outcomes and third at the types of transactions in which empowerment may matter.

**Why empowerment can make a difference**

An implicit model of how societies work in much mainstream development work—at least until the last decade or so—has been one of governments as the enlightened guardians of the interests of their citizens, making technocratic decisions on policy, that were then implemented either by well-functioning bureaucracies or through the indirect influences on the behavior of private firms working in market conditions. The governmental side of this might be termed the Weberian ideal, in which efficient bureaucracies are responsible for the design and implementation of policies, held accountable by formal democratic processes.\(^9\) (A variant on this, with similar implicit premises, lies in some of the interpretations of the successful East Asian “development state”. See, for example, World Bank (1993)) The market side involves private sector firms responding efficiently to the demands of the population, with competitive conditions assuring that goods and services provided are efficiently produced and aligned with the preferences of people.

It is abundantly clear that these ideals lie far from reality, especially in developing countries (if not in developed ones too). Governments do not typically behave as if they have a social welfare function weighted toward poorer groups. The policies of states are

\(^9\) See Pritchett and Woolcock (2002) for a discussion of these issues; also Giddens (1995) chapter 1
typically disproportionately influenced, and sometimes captured, by the powerful and wealthy. Clientelistic relations help sustain unequal political relationships. Social divisions along class, ethnic and racial lines are often associated with the continuance of inequalities through a variety of mechanisms. Both public and private sector actors are engaged in a variety of corrupt practices, that also typically benefit the rich and powerful. State actors, from "street level" workers (teachers and police) to judges, are not neutral actors, but part of the social and political system, sometimes working hard for the interests of the excluded, but often providing poor services, seeking bribes, or even abusing their "clients". The Voices of the Poor archive provides a wealth of material on how the poor feel abandoned by institutions of the state. Nor is this just a feature of the state: private companies can "capture" state policies and foster corruption, especially when they wield market power or private influence.

Civil society organizations also display great variety, from representative organizations of poor groups, to single-interest advocacy groups and exclusivist sectarian groupings.

These factors, that stray from a simple ideal of democratic process, efficient bureaucracy and competitive markets, are precisely why we are interested in the role of empowerment of the poor (and of others groups, especially the middle classes). One way of thinking of this, introduced by Albert Hirschman (1970), is the idea that "voice", matters to the performance of both public and private firms—the expression of the views and complaints of citizens, the clients, customers, workers or other stakeholders of organizations. The expression of voice can affect the behavior of local or national government, of schools or health clinics, of police services, of private firms (outside ideal competitive markets), and of civic groups. There may be a variety of ways in which organizations can be influenced by their stakeholders: from the actual participation of groups in decision-making, as in parental engagement in school boards, through to the results of opinion surveys or other sources of information about the views of clients that actors in organizations respond to. Participatory engagement may often be a feature of empowerment, but is by no means the only means by which poorer groups may be able to exert greater influence. There are a range of areas in which indirect influences on actors in power are important. An example would be citizen score-cards that make

10 See Tilly (1999) for a discussion of the mechanisms by which categorical inequalities are sustained in societies.
public the views of different groups (including the poor) that consequentially may lead to decision-making being more aligned with the preferences of the poor.  

_Empowerment as one amongst many influences_

In Figure 2, we return to the question of the context in which empowerment may influence outcomes. We illustrate a slightly more complex set of relationships, with three extensions from the simple hypothesis of Figure 1:

- Empowerment of poorer groups can potentially influence either policy choices (how much spending, on roads or schools, what design features for policies or programs?) or the implementation of agreed activities (do teachers turn up to teach, are roads maintained, are funds illegally siphoned off, do police abuse poor groups? and so on). Both clearly matter for development effectiveness.
- A whole range of other factors—economic, political, institutional—also have an influence both on the decision-making and on the extent to which poorer groups are empowered.
- There are potentially significant feedback loops, that may be positive, for example when economic and other outcomes for the poor feeding back into their capacity to make choices and influence government and other actors, or negative, when changes lead to resistance from other groups or heightened conflict.

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12 See Sen (1992 p.57) for the distinction between “realized agency success” in which outcomes are achieved in line with an actor’s goals, whether or not this is due to their direct effort, and “instrumental agency success” in which the actor was direct a participant in the process. Confining “empowerment” to the second sense, involving direct participation, would greatly limit the scope of the concept.
This flow chart, although still simplified, already has significant implications for evaluation of empowerment, and especially the types of information required. This will have to include independent sources of information on:

(a) the enactment of empowerment itself, or what we term the “exercise of agency” in the next section;
(b) the causal influences on empowerment
(c) intermediate and final development outcomes
(d) other influences on these outcomes (initial and external economic conditions, policy actions and so on).

It is crucial to have these different categories of information in order to be able to form an assessment of the role of empowerment within the broader process of development change. In undertaking comparisons between cases or over time, analyses will need to take account of differences in initial conditions, and feedback loops. These considerations all form part of the fundamental question of working out how much changes in outcomes can be attributed to empowerment rather than other factors. We return in Section 4 to the types of techniques that can be applied to undertake such an analysis either under conditions of high quality information or under those (more common) cases, where information is incomplete.
Transactions in which empowerment may play a role

So far the story has been quite abstract. Let’s add a bit more context, in terms of the arenas in which empowerment operates. We again start with a stylized representation of the relationship between poor and other groups and the provision of services that affect their lives. This is shown in Figure 3, that provides a simple schematic of the “playing field” in which poor and non-poor groups are engaging. (This leaves out, as does the rest of this paper, the role of international influences. Issues of empowerment also apply in the context of international interactions; specifying that is for future work). Within this playing field we are concerned with the capacity of poor, excluded, or subordinate groups—a subset of groups in the bottom box of Figure 3—to influence both policy decision-making by the state, and the implementation of those policies in terms of quantity and quality of delivery of services. As the figure indicates, there are a number of ways in which the views of citizens can be expressed—including formal voting, more direct expression of demands or “voice”, and through directly paying for goods and services.

Figure 3. The playing field
While Figure 3 is a simplification, it helps illustrate the different arenas, or parts of the playing field, in which empowerment may take place and the agency of poorer groups be exercised. Empowerment, in the instrumental sense of affecting development processes (such as policy decisions or service delivery), only makes sense in the context of an interaction, or a transaction, between a poor individual, or group, and others. Typically the development action of interest is that of a public, private or civil society organization, though the behavior of other groups will also be critical to the dynamics of what happens. As suggested in Figure 3, there are a variety of forms of interaction, including voting, paying, sharing information and so on. And there are also a whole set of private behaviors that will contribute to development processes and outcomes. Empowerment is only about a subset of these behaviors and interactions, involving the expression of preferences via “voice” or non-price mechanisms in order to influence the behavior of organizations or change socio-cultural norms and practices.

In the next section we give more structure to the influences upon potential interactions between poor groups and institutions. Here we emphasize a complementary issue. These transactions can occur at different levels of society, and via different kinds of service. The potential character of any interaction will be very different if it is about how a community makes use of a new village fund, as opposed to how the interests of poorer groups are represented in the national budget. So let’s provide an (incomplete) list of some of the categories of interaction, service or transaction. These are organized into four categories, local interactions involving the state, national interactions involving the state, interactions with the private sector and with civil society organizations. In each area some examples are given.
Table 1. Illustrations of types of transactions in which empowerment may be relevant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type or transaction</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local level interactions involving the state</strong>&lt;br&gt;Decision-making in front-line services</td>
<td>Community participation in schools in EDUCO, El Salvador, local decision-making in workfare program in Trabajar, Argentina, women’s police stations in Brazil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal and city-level decision-making</td>
<td>Popular Participation in Bolivia, participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre (and elsewhere) in Brazil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social funds (when they involve participation)</td>
<td>Throughout LAC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>National level interactions involving the state</strong>&lt;br&gt;Independent assessment of national budgets</td>
<td>Institute of Democracy in South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report cards on public services (can be national or local)</td>
<td>Pioneered in Bangalore, India, in design phase in Peru.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National judiciaries</td>
<td>Judicial reforms that seek increase access and accountability to poorer groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in the formulation and implementation of national poverty reduction strategies</td>
<td>Poverty reduction strategies in Bolivia, Guyana, Honduras and Nicaragua; national dialogue in Peru.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactions involving the private sector</strong>&lt;br&gt;Privatized services, when linked to greater information or community involvement</td>
<td>Water supply in El Alto, Bolivia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support to small-scale market development</td>
<td>BancoSol in Bolivia, Crediamigo in Northeast Brazil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of workers rights</td>
<td>Union and civil society against abuse or exploitation of workers (e.g. child work, dangerous conditions etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactions involving civil society providers of services</strong>&lt;br&gt;NGO micro credit providers</td>
<td>Grameen Bank, Bangladesh, many organizations throughout LAC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-government social services</td>
<td>Church-based schools</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The main examples we use in this paper are within the public sector and involve local interactions. This is to give some focus to the discussion—though we believe both the general framework and discussion can be effectively applied to national and private sector interactions (see comment below) and to civil society providers. In local public
sector service delivery interactions with the recipients or users of the services are likely to play a large role in the quality of service delivery. Pritchett and Woolcock (2002) further place emphasis on categories of interaction that are transaction-intensive and involve some discretionary behavior, since these are likely to be cases in which citizen-state interactions are of particular interest.

Within local public sector interactions we mainly focus on two sub-categories of public action. First there are cases of interaction involving a specific sectoral service provided by the public sector. This can involve education, health, roads, irrigation, police etc. Two cases that illustrate this are EDUCO in El Salvador and Trabajar in Argentina. EDUCO was a new approach to schooling introduced in El Salvador after the civil war. Its most well-known feature was a change in the rules of decision-making, involving a shift in authority (notably to manage school infrastructure improvements and operating budgets, and to hire and fire teachers) to community associations of parents. The objectives were to reopen rural schools quickly, including those heavily damaged in the war, and to raise the quality of education. This clearly looks like a case of using an empowerment-related mechanism with the purpose of getting a specific development outcome—raising the skills of poor children. There were also complementary actions involving public spending, curricula and so on, that would have to be evaluated in assessing the influence of empowerment. Argentina’s Trabajar, by contrast, was a workfare program targeted at the poor unemployed, which did not have a specific empowerment objective. It relied on a mixture of geographic targeting and, especially, a low wage, as a mechanism for assuring the bulk of the benefits went to the poor. It was implemented by local offices. This case was selected because local political dynamics did affect its implementation, and, in particular, an unplanned effect of the program was provision of incentives for a previously unorganized group—the poor unemployed—to organize to demand services. This later developed into the piquetero movement that has played a significant role in Argentina’s crisis.\(^\text{13}\)

The other category we mainly use for illustrative purposes involves decentralization to local governments, associated with greater participation, with the objective of increased local responsiveness, reduced clientelistic political cultures and increased pro-poor

\(^{13}\) For selected references on EDUCO see Umanzor et al (1997) On Trabajar see in particular references by Siempro, Ravallion (various)
spending. This is again of major interest throughout the world and has been of rising importance in Latin America and the Caribbean. The two examples selected have strong contrasts. Popular Participation in Bolivia was introduced in 1994 as a change in the rules by a central government, in the context of high levels of social exclusion of indigenous groups and clientelistic local traditions. This was also backed by increased resources to local levels, with the development objective of changing spending allocations and increasing outcomes at local levels. The Bolivian case is also an illustration of national-level participation in policy-making. As a central input to the formation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy, the government undertook a National Dialogue in 2000, involving municipal discussions throughout the country, followed by national level discussions with various associational groups. The main policy change that emerged was a further deepening of decentralization and participation at the municipal level, complemented by measures to increase social accountability.\textsuperscript{14}

By contrast, participatory budgeting in the city of Porto Alegre was introduced as a change in practice following the democratic election of the Workers Party (\textit{Partido dos Trabalhadores} or PT) in the 1989 election. It emerged very much as an interaction between the program of a political party, the administration and civil society—and has been interpreted as a transformation in political and administrative practices from traditionally clientelistic system, to the genuine participation of a variety of previously excluded groups in the decision-making over the investment budget. This was combined with explicitly redistributive formulae in resource distribution. It has been continuously implemented since, albeit with modifications. Comparable processes have been introduced into some 70 other municipalities in Brazil.\textsuperscript{15}

National level interactions, just referred to in the Bolivian case, raise additional issues because of the complexity and scope of decision-making and because of the more direct links with formal democratic processes, for example in policy debate and budget reviews in national parliaments. In a development context, this has become highly topical in recent years for two reasons. First, there has been a proliferation of civil society actors operating on the national stage throughout the world, supplementing the more traditional

\textsuperscript{14} Selected references relevant to Bolivia’s decentralization include Gray-Molina (2002), Calderón and Szmuckler (2002), and Faguet (2001)

actors of political parties, unions, and business associations. Second, national level participation is now a key element of the process of preparation of poverty reduction strategies in the context of the new approach to supporting debt reduction and concessional assistance in low income countries by the international financial institutions.\textsuperscript{16} Some middle income countries in Latin America, including Guatemala, Paraguay and Peru, have also chosen to follow a participatory, consensual approach to the design of poverty reduction strategies that have similarities to the processes in low income initiative. In all of these cases questions of the extent to which poorer groups are able to voice their concerns and influence processes of design and implementation arise, as do the links to formal democratic processes.

With respect to the private sector, at first sight it might be thought that questions of the efficiency and responsiveness of provision of goods and services should be taken care of by competitive market processes. The market is indeed of fundamental importance in resource allocation, and in assuring efficiency in production and marketing. However, at least since Adam Smith it has been recognized that the market ideal of atomistic producers and consumers is far from the truth, and that questions of market power, and the institutional context within which producers operate, has a powerful influence on many aspects of private sector performance—including the responsiveness of private sector organizations to poor or excluded groups. It is noteworthy that Hirschman’s development of the concept of Voice (Hirschman 1970) was largely within the context of the influence of consumers on private sector organizations. Furthermore, questions of the empowerment, or agency of poor groups, also apply in their role as producers (whether vis-à-vis financial markets, or bureaucrats responsible for providing permits) and workers in private firms.

In all these cases of single sector service delivery, local government, national state action and private sector interactions, it is relevant to ask the question of how, and how far, poorer (and other) groups have the capacity to influence the behavior of organizations or more powerful groups, including the potential to change exclusionary socio-cultural norms. And in each case it makes sense to ask how empowerment can lead to better (or worse) outcomes, within the context of multiple other influences on

\textsuperscript{16} See \url{http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/strategies/index.htm} for information on the history and experiences of the poverty reduction strategy approach.
both behaviors and development results. We now turn to unpacking further the causal framework for empowerment itself in order to provide some more structure to analyzing these interactions.

3. A Causal Framework for Empowerment

Empowerment of poor, excluded or subordinate groups is a product of the interaction between the agency capacities of these groups and the social, political and institutional context that defines the opportunity structure in which this agency is potentially exercised. The overall framework we suggest is illustrated in Figure 4. Agency capacities of poorer groups are influenced by: economic and human capital resources; socio-cultural influences on their “capacity to aspire”, envision alternatives and act upon them; and organizational capacities. The opportunity structure they face is influenced by the permeability or openness of social arrangements in a society (including access to information), by the strength of potential opposing groups (especially powerful elites) and by the effectiveness of the state in execution of policies or rules that it has supported. Increased empowerment of subordinate groups can be a product of a variety of influences. It can be a product of actions by the groups themselves, or can flow from changes in rules specifically designed to increase their opportunities for action in their interests. But it is also intimately linked to the behavior of other groups that benefit from the existing structure of power, and by the institutional strength of the state. Indeed one of the disempowering consequences of a weak state is its inability to protect the weak from the actions of the strong. Finally, there are multiple interactions and, in particular, mutual influences between agency capacities and the opportunity structure.

The remainder of this section expands on each of these causal influences. While we at times go into details on the specific areas, the most important theme lies in the overall structure.

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17 In line with the general approach we use the phrase “increased empowerment” to mean either increased capacities of poor or subordinate groups, or changes in the context that allow greater exercise of these capacities. Some authors (e.g. Bennett 2002) confine “empowerment” to the first use. This is a semantic, not a substantive difference.
The capacities of agents: choice and action.

Let’s first explore the question of agency capacities. Individuals or social actors behave as agents when they can pursue purposeful courses of action that further their goals. The goals may relate to their individual well-being, but also can relate to the range of other objectives that an individual, or group, may hold to be desirable. The capacity to act as an agent implies that the actor is able to envision alternative paths of action, is able to decide among such alternatives, and can take action both as an individual and with others. Note that the capacity to act as an agent is not the same as the achievement of the results desired. There will be a causal influence from agency capacities to results, but this influence will be mediated by a whole range of other factors, including the institutional context and other influences that have nothing to do with empowerment—as emphasized throughout this paper.

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18 There is a large and diverse literature on agency, especially in political science and political philosophy. The specific points here can be illustrated in reference to Sen (1985b, 1992), who distinguishes between freedom to pursue a goal and its actual achievement, and also between well-being achievement, that refers only to an individual’s well-being, and agency achievement, that “refers to a person’s success in the pursuit of the totality of her considered goals and objectives” (Sen 1992 p.57, see also Sen 1985).” Some authors confine “agency” to the capacity of an individual, while others, use the term to refer include the context in which such capacity is exercised, that influences the probability of agency being effective. To reduce ambiguity we use the terms “agency capacity” and “exercise of agency”. See also previous footnote.
The ability to envision and decide upon alternatives and to act upon such decisions depends upon a range of influences. As shown in Figure 4, we organize these into three areas: economic and human capital, the “capacity to aspire”, and the capacity to organize. While some of these can be measured in terms of “objective” individual attributes, it is often important to interpret the capacities in terms of the socio-cultural history and context in which individuals and groups reside.

*Economic and human capital.* Access to economic and educational resources weakens both the social, economic and political dependence of the poor on others, and increases their capacity to make choices. Satisfaction of basic material needs helps provide the wherewithal for actors to allocate effort and resources to processes of choice, organization and engagement. Educational attainment provides technical and social skills and informational opportunities that strengthen decision-making capacities. Intrinsic talents also clearly play a role, though it will typically be difficult to disentangle these from what is formed in processes of education and broader socialization. A good example of the role of education in enhancing agency comes from issues of gender relations. Amartya Sen has long emphasized the role of women’s education in increasing their agency, and in particular their influence in decision-making within the household. Extensive empirical work has documented the positive effects of greater women’s education on investment in children, especially girls.\(^{19}\)

*The “capacity to aspire” and the cultural context.* In addition to economic and human assets, the agency of an individual or group is a product of their capacity to envision alternatives and to aspire to different futures.\(^{20}\) These are central dimensions of the symbolic assets of actors and vary with the social status actors enjoy. These capacities have, to a significant extent, a cultural basis. Histories and forward-looking aspirations of groups, a central element recently characterized by Appadurai as the “capacity to aspire”\(^{21}\) are the product of their interactions within and between groups and constitute their collective identity.\(^{22}\) In putting it this way, we understand cultural attributes to be

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\(^{19}\) See Sen (1999) chapter 8 for a review.

\(^{20}\) This can also be characterized as their symbolic and cognitive resources.

\(^{21}\) See Appadurai (2002), and for related case study material Appadurai (2001)

\(^{22}\) There is not the space here to fully develop the argument on the centrality of cultural influences on agency capacities, in addition to Appadurai see Rao and Walton (2002) for a discussion of the links between agency and culture. Some strands of the social movement literature also emphasize the role of culture in determining the behavior of social movements, see Tarrow (1998) for a discussion.
dynamic, future-oriented and contested and we recognize that individual actors will typically have complex and multiple identities. This complexity shows the need to embed an analysis of agency within social histories and structures.

There is also a more specific way in which cultural considerations need to be considered in understanding agency. Actual choices depend on the way in which alternatives are weighed and interpreted in specific cultural settings. Naila Kabeer cites examples that show how interpretations of an action can only be understood within its cultural context. Quoting from Gita Sen, she cites reproductive choice as an example. In societies that link woman’s status to her fertility, “bearing the approved number of children will grant a woman the rights and privileges accorded to a fertile woman, but do not necessarily give her greater autonomy in decision-making”. In this context, how should we evaluate the decision to bear many children? Is it evidence of a woman’s inability to exercise choice in critical areas of her life, or a sign of the strategic use of choice to achieve rights and privileges in other social arenas where she participates? The interpretation will need to consider the cultural meaning of each choice. Although this may complicate comparisons in evaluations, it cannot be avoided, since the exercise of choice can only be evaluated in relation to the alternatives those who make options confront.

The capacity to organize. Organizational capacities are often required, even in friendly overall environments, for the translation of choice into action. There are some areas of the exercise of autonomous choice that are purely individual in character. But the capacity to organize can be important to further interests in a wide range of areas, that both include areas where collective interests are at stake, such as the quality of public services or the rule of law, and areas where sectoral or individual interests matter, and not least where distributional questions are in play. In these cases, to exercise agency actors need to collectively organize or have access to formal or informal networks. Thus an evaluation of actors’ agency capacities also needs to consider whether they are organized, the type and strength of organization they have and whether the networks they have access to are integrated or reach other social structures. In other words, evaluation of agency capacities must include an assessment of the resource mobilization and linkage capacities of the organizations and actors involved. The role

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23 Kabeer (1999), p.458
24 See Uphoff (1997)
of organizational activities is widely documented, especially in work on civil society organizations. The *piquetero* movement in Argentina illustrates: starting from mobilizing to make demands for access to Trabajar activities, it became a national level organizational effort designed to influence decision-making by the Argentinean state.

The social capital literature is clearly relevant here: there has been considerable work on the role of networks and linkages between individuals and groups. One of the themes within that has been the distinct roles of the “strong” links that bind families, kinship or local, homogenous groups, and the “weak” links that connect groups with other groups unlike their own, or with the vertical structures of the state and formal organizations. It is often the latter that make the difference to economic advancement. For both strong and weak links, it is important to see observed structures of social capital as a product of social interactions, cultural histories and organizational efforts, and not as something that just resides in different individual and groups.25

Finally, an aspect of organizational capacity that is of importance is the ability to effectively manage conflict. Interests within poor groups may be varied and internal conflicts are a common symptom of weakly developed organizational structures. And the process of engagement with organizations and dominant groups will typically involve the need to negotiate, bargain and resolve conflicting differences. The long history of trade unions provides an example of the evolution of sophisticated institutional forms for developing conflict management capacities.

*Interactions.* These influences on agency capacity interact with each other, and exhibit significant complementarities. While conditions will vary, we would suggest aspirational capacities are typically necessary conditions for active agency—without the capacity to envision alternatives or consider different futures it is difficult to envisage autonomous action. However, organizational capacities also matter to converting this potential into action. Economic and human capital mediates the influence but is not a necessary condition—poor, unskilled groups can be active agents where the aspirational and organizational basis exists.

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The exercise of agency: the context and opportunity structure

We now turn to the second set of factors affecting empowerment, the contextual conditions that are crucial to the exercise of agency. Agency capacities, in the sense described above, are not enough for empowerment. We need to also include, as a constitutive element of empowerment, the contextual conditions and opportunities that determine the actors’ ability to participate, negotiate, influence and hold institutions accountable.

What are the relevant parts of the context? Formal and informal institutional structures in Latin America and the Caribbean (and elsewhere), have historically evolved in ways that typically reduce the prospects for influence of poor and subordinate groups. A variety of mechanisms and structures are relevant, including clientelistic political cultures, patterns of social exclusion, capture of the state by powerful private interests and top-down corporatist structures. These can affect the potential for influence in the full array of organizations and arenas illustrated in Figure 3 and Table 1—from national governments to schools and private firms. In order to provide a way of organizing analysis of specific cases, we draw on what the social movement literature has characterized as the political opportunity structure\(^\text{26}\) that hinders or facilitates the probability that actors will transform their choices into decisions and outcomes. The political and social environment in which individual and social actors operate imposes differential costs to their strategic behavior and to their chances of success.\(^\text{27}\) Given a particular environment, certain strategies become more attractive and results more likely. But what are the conditions that affect the success of autonomous groups as well as the potential for empowering disempowered groups?

While empirical studies have identified a wide range of variables that need to be considered, we draw on recent analytical developments in organizing the central contextual influences into three categories:

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\(^{26}\) Tarrow defines the political opportunity structure as the “consistent—but not necessarily formal, permanent or national—signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements” (Tarrow, p. 54) Although, in Tarrow’s writing the characteristics of the political opportunity structure are intended to explain the emergence of a particular social movement, other authors have also related its features to the success or failures of their actions. See Tarrow (1998), Kitschelt (1996).

\(^{27}\) North (1990), Knight (1992)
a) The “permeability” or openness of the context to the claims of individual or organized actors, including their access to information. Is the social and political environment open or closed?

b) The power of potential oppositional groups. Are the social and political elites stable and/or united against the interests of the poor?

c) The capacity of the state to implement decisions and ensure the rule of law. Does the state have the organizational capacities to convert decisions into outcomes?

What is involved in each of these dimensions? The permeability of the context, whether the context is open or closed to poor and subordinate groups, relates to the institutional and informal obstacles individual and social actors confront in seeking to transform their claims into action. The degree of openness can be treated as the product of an array of formal and informal rules, that define how actors compete to win and achieve their goals (competition rules), who is entitled to participate in the competition (inclusion rules) and how and who controls the results of those competitions (accountability rules). Cutting across these are rules affecting access to information and conflict-management institutions. This institutional context can facilitate or hinder the scope for individual and social actors to organize, reach networks and resources and affect decisions.

The second dimension concerns the strength and strategy of opposing groups. An important element of this concerns whether social or political elites are united and well-organized or fragmented. Where they are fragmented, opportunities are likely to increase—other things equal--because elite members look for new sources of support, and are more receptive to the claims of potential partners. Old adversaries can become influential allies and advocates of the causes of weak actors. Opposition need not only come from elites: many groups may benefit from existing structures, including members of the “middle” classes—or some poorer groups, for example on ethnic lines. Of particular interest is whether the variety of “middle class” groupings and organizations—that may include professional associations, formal sector workers, teacher’s unions and so on—allay with poorer groups of with elites.

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28 The relevance of the stability and unity of the social and political elite alliance for the achievement of outcomes has been widely documented in the democratization literature as well as in social movement studies. A similar argument has been advanced by the rational choice literature.
Finally, the third dimension is the *state’s implementation capacity*. Do authorities have the organizational capacities to implement adopted policies and uphold the rule of law? These capacities are related to the presence of specific bureaucratic abilities, but also to the centralized or fragmented nature of the state bureaucracy, to the amount of economic resources the state is able to control and to the degree of independence it enjoys vis-à-vis other state bodies such as the judiciary or the parliament.

The opportunity structure that is embedded in the institutional context is a product of the *interaction* among these three variables. None of them by itself ensures that vocal groups or actors will be able to achieve intended results. For example, under conditions of open rules, and low elite strength, a strong state is an important ally for empowerment. With a closed system and high elite unity, a strong state can be a force for repression and disempowerment. We return to these interactions at the end of this subsection, after (briefly) expanding on each of the three dimensions.

(a) **The permeability of the context to the claims of the individual and social actors.**

The *permeability*, or openness, of the institutional context is a continuum defined by the rules (both legal and social) that determine the opportunities that poor individual and social actors have to advance their claims and influence outcomes. These rules can be formal, in the sense of being explicitly defined and written and “enforced by an actor or set of actors formally recognized as possessing such power”\(^{29}\). But they can also be informal, in the form of social norms, habits, routines—all the elements of social and political cultures. In informal contexts, rules can be imprecise and no actor is legally entitled to enforce them.\(^{30}\) Norms are enforced by traditional authority structures or self-enforced by internalized norms. Often such cultural norms reflect and reinforce differences of power and wealth, simultaneously reducing the agency capacities of subordinate groups, as noted earlier, and increasing the discriminatory or exclusionary beliefs and behaviors of dominant groups.\(^{31}\) In Appadurai’s terms (Appadurai 2002), poor groups may face adverse “terms of recognition” within a society, as a consequence of cultural histories of behaviors, interactions and practices of dominant groups. Such

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31. See Bourdieu’s work for classic developments of this theme (see Bourdieu 1992 and Swartz 2000); or Tilly (1999) for a related approach. See also Rao and Walton (2002) for a discussion of the links between culture, inequality and agency.
informal norms may be inconsistent with and undermine the influence of formal rules. Recent work on Bolivia discusses the dissonance between generally sound formal rules in the public sector and the potent history of informal norms, for example in clientelistic granting of jobs to political supporters when in power. In assessing a structure of rules it is always important to see how they “really” work and how informal and formal structures interact.

(A special case is when approval for shared norms or traditional authorities declines. In this case the actual or potential use of force becomes more important. The powerful typically have much greater access to instruments of force. Although disempowered actors may be able to organize to exercise force—as in the long tradition of local protest activity—both the likelihood and sustainability of their success will tend to be, in the long run, lower than when there are open rules backed by effective state authority).

With this context, let’s look at the three categories of rules, affecting competition, inclusion and accountability.

The impact of competition rules on the permeability of an environment can be illustrated with an example from an election in a liberal democracy. There are a great variety of rules in democracies on how votes should be aggregated. These counting rules determine the permeability of the environment to groups demands because they affect their chances of winning. For example, if competition is based on majoritarian electoral rules, there is a low likelihood that weak minority actors will win, since this implies collectively organizing and alliances with other actors. Since both courses of actions impose important difficulties for disempowered actors, the presence of majoritarian rules is often associated with a relatively closed environment. By contrast, proportional electoral rules are usually associated with greater permeability of an environment (though it may have other drawbacks—such as less decisive government, or allowing more voice to extremist groups). Although the need to collectively organize does not

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32 See World Bank (2000b)
33 A majoritarian rule is one that establishes winner takes all.
34 The first requires investing in collective organization in order to win an absolute majority, a difficult goal to achieve for an actor that does not command strong mobilizational resources nor the time and money needed to sustain throughout time successful organizations. The second course of action involves disempowered groups entering into alliances with other actors, that forces negotiations that can result in the resignation of some goals.
disappear, the required organizational capacities are less demanding, reducing, in turn, the resources weak actors need to mobilize in order to be successful. While the example is from national democratic procedures, comparable considerations may apply at municipal, village or school levels.

*Inclusion* rules determine who can effectively participate and what issues can be discussed. They can establish income, educational, gender, racial or religious requirements or they can be universal. Environments will be obviously be more open if participation is universal rather than restricted. But this is an area where informal factors can play a role. Even if inclusion is formally universal, the actual scope can be curtailed where cumbersome processes makes participation costly, or the voice of poor and subordinate groups get little *de facto* recognition. Inclusion rules also define the number and nature of the policy decisions where actors are entitled to participate. If the number of issues actors can decide upon is restricted, the environment becomes less permeable in so far as the spaces where participants have a chance to exercise agency decreases.

Finally, *accountability* rules define how the decisions of authorities are controlled, and by whom. If accountability mechanisms are ineffective, the permeability of the context diminishes, since the ability of social actors to assure agreed decisions are implemented decreases. Funds agreed for a school can be diverted to upgrading the mayor’s office, or lining the pockets of the influential. Accountability mechanisms should allow actors to ensure that representatives are answerable for their behavior, to inform about and justify their decisions, and, where necessary, to implement sanctions. In the case of Popular Participation in Bolivia, the formally independent “vigilance committees” had all these rights, including to remove a mayor from office in the case of malfeasance.

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35 It should be noted however, that proportional rules could also negatively affect the chances of success of disempowered actors. Since proportional rules increase the fragmentation of actors, they can also hinder their chances of achieving results, because they can result in weakening the strength of disempowered groups presence. Proportional rules, not only increase the openness of an environment, they can also result in an increase in the fragmentation of social actors hindering in turn their ability to achieve outcomes.

36 It has to be emphasized that in contrast to competition and inclusion rules, that can define how to win and who participates in a political struggle, and where actors can intervene directly on decisions, accountability rules only apply to situations in which decisions have been delegated to a third party. That is, the exercise of accountability necessarily implies the existence of a representative relationship.

37 Schedler (1999)
Access to *information* is a cross-cutting issue that is of fundamental importance to the effective openness of a system. It affects all categories of rules, but is of particular importance to accountability, in terms of access to information on public decisions, budget entitlements, private company behavior, rights to participate, processes and outcomes. This is an institutional issue that can have formal or informal dimensions. If access to public information is restricted, or if the media property is highly concentrated, the likelihood of influencing decisions decreases. Increasing “rights to information” are being enacted into laws, but this needs to be complemented by practices, such as radio campaigns on development opportunities, decisions and outcomes. Internet based approaches can facilitate this—and are being increasingly used—but are only relevant to poor groups if they have direct or indirect access to internet services.

Finally an additional cross-cutting issue concerns the extent to which there are institutional mechanisms for equitable and effective conflict resolution—this is the counterpart to the role of agency capacities to manage conflict noted in the preceding subsection. As in all these areas, such mechanisms may be formal—as in the (potential) role of the judiciary in resolving private conflicts—or informal—as in the range of practices from listening and negotiation to repression and violent engagement.

*(b) The strength and strategy of powerful groups.*

The second factor we consider is the strength of the social and political elites or other potentially opposing groups. One approach to this focuses on how unified the elite is. Divisions in the elite can facilitate the exercise of agency and the achievement of outcomes because they weaken the elites ability to oppose, repress and/or neutralize challengers’ claims and because they encourage disgruntled elite fractions to look for new sources of support outside their traditional allies, and so be potentially more receptive to the claims of weak actors.³⁸ When elite fragmentation is high, elite attempts to forcefully repress or to totally disregard challengers’ claims run the risk of being used by those portions of the elite that need “to seize the role of ‘tribunes of the people’ “.³⁹ Thus, from the challengers’ point of view, it expands the number of their potential allies and it lower the costs of engaging in collective actions to exercise agency. Conversely, a

united elite does not need to buy the support of potential partners and is able to repress or neutralize challengers.

Also important are the range of other groups that may oppose or support increased empowerment of poor or subordinate groups. In many Latin American societies, formal sector workers (notably in the public sector) and the “middle classes” play an important role between elites and poorer groups—even though these groups wield much less influence than in the mature democracies of industrialized societies. Often they are beneficiaries of existing patterns of service provision, social security or jobs, and so may oppose changes that risk reducing their relative advantages. One of the major issues for the success in empowerment of poorer groups is whether these middle groups ally with the elites or the poor.

The interests and interactions of groups in positions of power and influence will be complex. Elite strength will not have a simple relationship with disempowerment of the poor. To take a classic example, Bismarck, Germany’s Iron Chancellor, founded that country’s welfare state with important redistributive and inclusive consequences. This was, of course, in part in response to the threat of the growing power of the Social Democrats—that is of rising agency capacities of subordinate groups. In the recent past in Brazil, a significant range of effective, inclusive measures were introduced in the Northeast state of Ceará in the late 1980s and 1990s across a range of sectors, including health, famine-relief, extension and micro-enterprise support. These typically involved effective mobilization of front-line workers and greater engagement with poorer groups. Yet a major, and crucial, driver was the actions of the State government—often working against local clientelistic practices and established interests in government services—that was in the hands of a modernizing group in the elite.40 However, the overall message is to pay attention to the strength, interests and strategies of the range of non-poor actors—in elites and other groups—in interpreting the potential for and dynamics of empowerment-related changes.

**(c) State Implementation Capacity**

The state’s implementation capacity, that is the power of authorities to implement the policies that have been adopted, is the third dimension affecting the likelihood of

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40 See Tendler (1997)
achieving outcomes. Even if claims have been heard and opposing forces are not strong enough to stop new policy decisions, intended outcomes will not follow unless the state and bureaucratic capacities effectively implement the adopted policies. These capacities depend on the characteristics of the bureaucratic resources, the capacity of the state to maintain the rule of law, the range of institutional offices and agencies that intervene in a decision and on the centralized or decentralized character of state decisions. Effective bureaucratic capabilities exist when there are adequate technical abilities, decisions are depoliticised and controlled, and when agencies in charge of policy implementation have the administrative resources to deliver the expected services. State implementation capacities is also related to the number and strength of veto players, both formal (such as mandatory parliamentary procedures or independent judicial reviews) and informal (such as the capacity of vested interests to impede the implementation of changes.)

State implementation capacities also relate to the extent of decentralization. Decentralization can increase local responsiveness and flexibility, but also implies the incorporation of new actors into decision-making and implementation, and may weaken the national state’s ability to ensure the implementation of decisions. This is especially the case where local elite influences are strong, and technical capacities weak.

One additional element that defines these capacities is the actual reach of the state authority. Is the state bureaucracy able to penetrate and rule all geographical and arenas of social life? Or is its reach unequal and heterogeneous? Recent empirical literature has explored the consequences of the heterogeneous presence, characteristic of weak states, for the achievement of outcomes for weak actors. On the one hand, heterogeneous reach might negatively affect the prospects of weak actors, because of local strongmen or elites have more effective power. Houtzager and Pattenden, for example, have shown that when the state is unable to hold a homogeneous and extensive control of its territory and population, the chances weak actors have to achieve outcomes decrease not only because they cannot ensure enforcement of decisions, but also because the costs of organizing in a national scale increase, diminishing in turn, their agency abilities. On the other hand, under some conditions unequal state reach

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41 O’Donnell (1999c).
42 Houtzager and Pattenden (1999).
can become an opportunity for effective engagement in some regions by subordinate
groups, because of the weakness of national authorities are unable to neutralize weak
actors activities.

In general, the impact of state capacities on the effective influence of poorer groups
depends on interactions with the other two dimensions considered. We turn to this issue
now.

**Interactions between openness, opposing forces and state effectiveness on the
structure of opportunities**

How do these different variables interact? And what is the impact of their interaction on
empowerment and on the achievement of outcomes? Table 2 presents a simplified
mapping of the three dimensions to illustrate a range of possible combinations of
permeability, elite strength and state effectiveness. While the underlying variables will
generally be continuous, we use binary—strong/weak—classifications within each
category for illustrative purposes. On the basis of these three dimensions, the table
distinguishes eight possible settings for the degree of empowerment with respect to
context, with higher numbers indicator a more propitious context for effective
empowerment. These would of course interact with the agency capacities of
subordinate groups. There is a powerful two-way influence between the structure of
political opportunities and agency capacities and a full treatment would involve an
integrated analysis. For now we are concerned to illustrate interactions with elements of
the context, and so the table is limited to this in order to keep the exposition tractable.
Table 2: How the institutional context affects the opportunity structure of weak actors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State Implementation Capacity</th>
<th>Permeability to poorer actors' claims</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Low (Empowerment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High (Formal empowerment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Low (Uncertain inclusion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High (Uncertain selective exclusion)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The greatest likelihood of success in the achievement of outcomes is when actors operate in an open context; where political or social elites are weak or divided; and when the state implementation capacity is strong. We identify this as empowerment (8), a combination of conditions where the environment is most conducive to the empowerment of weak actors. In an international context this might be typified by Scandinavian societies and states. In terms of the examples we are using, the Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre is probably closest. Here the rules of participation were changed with a concerted effort to bring subordinate groups into the decision-making process. There were no legal changes, but there were *de facto* change in rules of inclusion, supported by strong accountability rules. The state is reasonably effective—and has probably become more so in the decade or so since PB was introduced. The original power shift was in the context of an effective political strategy of the Workers Party. Subsequent power has been maintained in part through achieving support from the middle class, as well as the poor, and has undermined the power of traditional clientelistic practices.
Let’s go to the opposite case. Effective empowerment is highly unlikely in case (1) when the context is closed, there is a strong political and social elite, and there is effective state implementation capacity. In this case, identified in the table as *no empowerment*, the closeness of the context, that prevents claims from being heard, is reinforced by the unity of the power elite, allowing the claims of weak actors to be ignored. In addition, strong state capacity provides the united elite with bureaucratic resources to implement its own policies and to effectively veto contenders’ claims. In a Latin American context, this mix was classically the case in the centers of colonial rule. More recently, the Pinochet regime in Chile is probably a good example. This case also illustrates a further point. While there was a major reduction in influence of subordinate groups in this regime—associated with a severe curtailment of human rights—along some dimensions there was social progress for the poor. For example, Chile’s historically good performance in reducing infant mortality was sustained under Pinochet’s regime, in part through effective targeting of policies to poor groups. This was an improvement in well-being due to effective public action, but it was not a consequence of empowerment of these groups. This is not to defend the disempowerment of most groups during this period, but to underline the general message on the complexity of processes causing development outcomes.

All the other mixes in the table are of an intermediate character, that would be expected to results in incomplete forms of empowerment in terms of institutional context. What happens will be much more dependent on the specifics of individual cases, including, crucially, the agency capacities of weak and subordinate groups. However, we continue with a suggestive categorization for purposes of illustration.

From the perspective of empowering weak actors a second best situation is probably that identified as *uncertain inclusion* (7) where the context is open, opposing forces are weak (for example because elite fragmentation is high) and state implementation capacity is low. Openness and fragmented elites creates opportunities for poor actors, but weak state capacity reduces the probability that their claims will be translated into outcomes. The influence of local political conditions may make a large difference here. The case of EDUCO appears to be a good example of successful empowerment in

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43 See Drèze and Sen (1989) for an analysis of this case. They suggest the international opprobrium on the regime may have provided incentives for action in some social areas.
these conditions. After the civil war there was increased openness to action to reach
closer groups, and one of the traditional areas of resistance to schooling reform—public
sector unions—was weak. While overall state capacity was not strong, decisive action
by the Ministry of Education was central to the design and introduction of the reforms.
Where the new form of school governance was introduced, there was effective local
management and a major expansion of enrollments, especially amongst the poor. (See
also Box 1 below). Trabajarse was also introduced in the context of fragmented elites and
relatively weak state capacity. The new measure led to greater potential for influence at
local level—even if the increased organization and activism of unemployed groups (that
enhanced their agency capacities) was not anticipated.

It is difficult to decide whether achievement of outcomes is more likely in the situation
labeled *formal empowerment* (6) or in the one labeled *uncertain exclusion* (5). In the
case of *formal empowerment* (6) there is a genuine potential tension between an open
context and strong state capacities on the one hand, but entrenched opposition. Claims
can be voiced and heard, but whether they are converted into outcomes depends on
how effective the elite is in preventing implementation. Many arenas of public action in
Brazil may be illustrative of this case. Since the transition to democracy, Brazil has had
a lively and open democratic process at national and local level. It also has a
reasonably effective implementation capacity. Yet in many areas entrenched opposition
can effectively bar redistributive change, whether this in local patron-client relationships,
or national “middle class” interest that make reform of an inequitable and unaffordable
social security system very difficult. That change can occur is illustrated by many
specific instances, including the Porto Alegre example, and specific aspects of reform (of
which the most well-known is the health workers initiative) that were pioneered in the
very poor and highly unequal state of Ceará in the late 1980s and 1990s.\(^{44}\)

**Uncertain exclusion** (5) results from the combination of openness of context, a strong
political elite and weak state capacities. In this case the permeability of the context to
challengers’ claims is counteracted by the unity of the political and social elite. But how
do weak state capacities interact with these two dimensions? On the one hand, the
combination of low fragmentation and weak state capacities is likely to increase the
importance of informal powers and reduce the chances of success of weak actors. On

\(^{44}\) See Tendler (1997)
the other, loopholes in the bureaucratic structure may open opportunities for the advancement of challenger groups claims, especially in public action outside the state. However, since the political elite is united, the likelihood of achieving outcomes are probably lower than in the scenario of uncertain inclusion (7).

The experience across municipalities in Bolivia is of interest here, since they appear to span the “uncertain inclusion” and “uncertain exclusion” cases. The overall context is of relatively weak state capabilities, and embedded of patronage politics. (World Bank 2000). Popular Participation was then a national reform that shifted resources and control to municipalities and legalized local level civil society groups, of which campesino’s syndicates were the most important in many parts of the country. While the changes brought benefits on average (Faguet, 2001) the dynamics of changes depended on the variable local institutional context. In some parts of the country, notably the Cochabamba valley, the extent of elite domination was relatively low and there were high levels of organization of poorer groups (that is greater agency capacities of the poor.) The legal changes in context in the direction of greater openness appear to be bringing initial benefits in better public action. In the traditional sierra city of Sucre, in Potosí, by contrast, both a traditionally more closed political culture and elite strength was stronger, and the decentralizing reforms may primarily have increased the power of local elites.45

The three remaining empowerment scenarios take place in contexts characterized by a closed environment. As was the case of the scenario labeled no empowerment (1), chances of achieving outcomes are low because the opportunities for challengers to advance their claims are negatively affected by the nature of the context. The fact that all empowerment scenarios in this column are worse off than in the others, is based on the judgment that permeability is key to success, albeit still interacting with the other variables. What are the chances of achieving outcomes in these three empowerment scenarios? In the three cases chances are low, but success should be more probable in the cell identified as uncertain selective exclusion(4), where the closeness of the environment interacts with high fragmentation of the power elite and weak state capacities. In this case, if claims of challengers are able to get attention (an unlikely event given closeness), they may be converted into outcomes because fragmentation of

the political elite and weakness of the state create opportunities and loopholes that may be used by challengers to exert pressure. The scenario characterized by the closeness of the environment, the high fragmentation of the elites and the strong implementation capacities, offers even fewer opportunities for success than the scenario just described (selective exclusion, 3). In this case, the fact that the state is strongly organized eliminates the opportunities and loopholes for challengers. Finally, when closeness takes place together with low elite fragmentation and weak state capabilities (almost no empowerment opportunities, 2) the likelihood of achieving outcomes are almost nil and approach the situation characterized before as non empowerment. In this case it could be expected that a compact elite will be able to block challengers claims mainly through informal rules and norms. However, the potential for achieving outcomes are somewhat greater than in the non-empowerment scenario because the weakness of the state capabilities may produce unexpected loopholes.

4. Documenting and Evaluating Empowerment and its Effects

Let's now look at what the substantive framework implies for undertaking a practical, empirical evaluation of empowerment. The questions to be addressed are:

- What are the changes in empowerment of a poor or subordinate group, and what are the causal factors affecting this?
- How do these changes in empowerment affect development process and outcomes?

We distinguish between documenting a process of empowerment and associated development change, and evaluating the effects.

Documenting change

A useful first step is a documentation of where in the playing field of a society the changes are taking place (local schools, national government, private utility—see Figure 3) and who are the main actors involved in that specific level of the playing field (local or national governmental groups, unions, professional associations, underlying social groupings, elite players.). Then we can apply the results of the journey through the complex terrain of agency and political and institutional context discussed in the previous section. This suggested a set of structured causal hypotheses on the forces affecting the
extent of empowerment poorer groups. The types of information that would be needed to document the processes are of three kinds:

a) on the factors affecting the capacities to act as agents of different groups, that would include economic and human capital, access to information, culturally embedded symbolic resources, aspirations and organizational capabilities of different groups;

b) on the opportunity structure for exercising agency, that has been treated as a function of the permeability, or openness, of institutions to weak actors, the strength or fragmentation of potentially opposing elites, and the effectiveness of the state in implementation and upholding the rule of law.

c) on the actual exercise of agency—that could include a combination of behaviors, both of poorer groups, and of their interactions with representatives of the state or other groups, and, if available, attitudinal information, including perceived power

Some of these areas are amenable to cardinal measurement, others to documentation of changes, or ordering between states. Figure 5 lists some of the areas in which information will be relevant, as well as noting approaches to collecting information.

**Figure 5. Information relevant to evaluating empowerment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influences on agency capacities of poor groups</th>
<th>Information on the exercise of agency</th>
<th>Influences on the institutional context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic and human capital --standard measures</td>
<td>Actual participation in decision-making, implementation and evaluation</td>
<td>Formal and informal rules affecting the permeability of institutions --documentation on formal rules; observation on informal norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirational capacities; ethnographies</td>
<td>Attitudes on relative power</td>
<td>The nature, strength and strategies of elite and other oppositional, groups --documentation on behaviors and alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational capacities --social capital surveys --organizational activity and membership</td>
<td>Perceptions by poor, government and other groups on influence</td>
<td>Effectiveness of state action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnographies of behaviors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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As Figure 5 indicates, a variety of approaches to information collection or analysis are likely to be required for different aspects of the process—that cover a range of “quantitative” and “qualitative” processes. Lest this seem intimidating in its information requirements—it is important to underline that the approach we are advocating is intended as a general framework within which specific evaluations can be conducted. In particular, the key focus would normally be on the change that is to be evaluated, and the difference between cases. This will typically involve only one or two elements of Figure 5—often a change in rules designed to change the context, or information, a social movement or “capacity-building” action designed to enhance the capacities of the poor. The purpose of using a framework such as Figure 5 is to ensure that the effects of such a specific change on empowerment is interpreted correctly in a way that controls for the various other influences on empowerment.

One note on measures: having quantitative indices or measures can often facilitate evaluation, and many of the variables can indeed be captured numerically using both objective and subjective scales. There is experience on the use of subjective assessments of relative power from survey-based questions that provided a measure of perceived empowerment. However, it will often be inappropriate to put an index on an empowerment-related change, such as a change in rules, or access to capacity building for which a quantitative measure may not be meaningful. But this by no means precludes quantitative evaluation of the change, provided cases with and without the change can be specified—there is a whole branch of econometric techniques that are precisely about assessing categorical differences in cases.

**Evaluating the contribution of empowerment to development outcomes**

Let’s now assume we’ve got some measures or documentation of an empowerment-related change. The second part of the challenge is to sort out its influence on development outcomes within the context of multiple other influences—the issue that was illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. Here the central idea is to compare what happens with a counterfactual of what would have happened in the absence of the empowerment-related changes. Note that this core concept is by no means confined to the use of quantitative techniques. It is true that the thrust of quantitative evaluation methodologies is precisely to find ways of assessing this question. But the range of qualitative

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46 See Lokshin and Ravallion (2002).
approaches are also concerned with exactly the same issue. When a poor farmer in a focus group expresses views on the effectiveness of a new extension system, or an ethnographic study undertakes a deep interpretation of the forces at work behind the dynamics of relations with government services, the issue at stake for evaluation is still against an (explicit or implicit) counterfactual.

It is useful to start with an “ideal” evaluation problem to illustrate the issues. A change occurs in a development context, that is hypothesizing to empower poor groups either by design or inadvertent effect. This might, for example, be the introduction of EDUCO-style forms of school-level governance. As emphasized throughout this paper, there will be many influences on the subsequent evolution of development outcomes that need to be accounted for. The evaluation problem is to compare what actually happens with what would have happened absent the change under scrutiny—the counterfactual that is, of course, not observed.

The ideal way to replicate the counterfactual is through comparing cases with the change with other cases without the change, but with otherwise identical characteristics. The first group of cases would be the “treatment” and the second the “control” group. This can form the basis for comparing the differential performance in the two groups. In practice no two cases are the same, and it is crucial to take account of other differences between the treatment and control groups that may be sources of differential performance. This is for two reasons. First, failure to do so could lead to incorrect attribution of a development outcome, say school test scores of poor kids, to empowerment effects, if the latter were correlated with other influences on the outcomes, say the education of the parents, or their ethnic group. Participatory budgeting may work superbly in Porto Alegre, but not in a poor municipality with deeply engrained patron-client political cultures. Second, there may be interactions of policy interest between empowerment-related changes and other factors. The ideal solution is to have good information on the range of other variables that may influence outcomes, and then randomly select the treatment and control groups for the empowerment-related change. Then, on average, calculated differences in outcomes between the groups will

47 We aim to present this intuitively here and so avoid mathematical exposition. There is an extensive literature on evaluation methodology. See Baker (2000) for a handbook with applications and http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/impact/index.htm
be attributable to the empowerment related change. Having information on other characteristics of the groups allows checking for any systematic differences between them, either initially or over time. This can form the basis for understanding other influences, and interactions between empowerment-related change and other variables. For example, the introduction of participatory processes in schooling or budgeting may have different effects in richer or poorer circumstances, under conditions of more or less embedded patterns of social exclusion or traditions of political activism, and where poor adults have more or less education.

This ideal is an important benchmark: a specific empowerment change, treatment and control groups randomly selected, and good information on various other factors to assess other influences and their interactions with empowerment. In designing interventions such an approach is always desirable, to inform policymakers and other actors of the effects of changes, and allow subsequent debate over alternatives. Real life situations are typically messier. This is by no means special to the evaluation of empowerment: much of the econometric evaluation literature is precisely concerned with dealing with situations which do not correspond to a coherent experiment with good information structure is not present. However, the general problem will typically apply with some force in the case of evaluating empowerment, precisely because of the high degree of interactions between different variables. In designing evaluation strategies under less-than-ideal conditions, it is important to use the ideal as a benchmark that evaluation strategies are seeking to replicate, however imperfectly. Box 1 provides a summary of an econometric evaluation of EDUCO. While participation of schools in the EDUCO experiment was not random, but based on the voluntary participation of communities, this is nevertheless a highly suggestive case of success of how changes in empowerment-related processes can lead to better development outcomes.
In looking at cases with less than ideal information structures, it is useful to distinguish situations with a large and small number of cases. Where there is a large number of exemplars—many schools, health clinics or municipalities and rich information on individual or household characteristics—econometric techniques can, potentially, make progress in replicating the ideal case (as always, combined with qualitative techniques that will be important in interpreting the nature of changes). This obviously requires information on both empowerment-related changes and other influences. However, this is not the end of the story, since there will typically remain a problem of separately identifying the influence of empowerment-related changes. This can be for a variety of reasons, including the endogeneity of the changes to other influences (such as the wealth or education of the area in question), the lack of information on other causes of development outcomes (or omitted variables), or poor measurement. There are general econometric approaches to tackling these problems. These include, for example, use of

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**Box 1. Impact evaluation of EDUCO**

Enrollment in EDUCO preschools and primary schools jumped from 8,400 children in pilot schools 1991 to 237,000 children in 1999, far exceeding expectations. An impact evaluation of EDUCO’s performance was conducted by the Bank and the Government in 1997. The survey sampled and then compared more than 300 rural communities (with and without EDUCO schools (193 traditional schools, 69 mixed EDUCO and traditional schools, and 32 EDUCO schools). EDUCO schools are overseen by local associations of parents, which have the authority and resources to manage their school’s capital improvements and operating budgets and to hire and fire teachers. The evaluation found that the academic performance of EDUCO students is low but is not statistically different from students in traditional rural schools, despite the fact that EDUCO students come from poorer households and worse-off schools (due to gaps in infrastructure and basic services) than their counterparts in traditional rural schools. This finding is important because socioeconomic determinants are typically found to be more statistically significant in explaining student performance than school inputs and quality. EDUCO appears to be not only getting more very poor kids in schools but also compensating for the disadvantages of their environment.

The evaluators’ hypothesize that EDUCO’s performance may be linked to EDUCO classrooms having more resources such as libraries than traditional rural school classrooms and parents’ increased involvement, both through their local education association and their higher contact with teachers. Although quantitative data cannot corroborate this, this hypothesis is supported by findings from qualitative evidence: investigators members of local EDUCO associations feel that they have significantly more personal influence over school decisions than do members of parents’ associations in traditional schools. EDUCO parents also report that teachers are more responsive to their concerns and that they themselves are more involved in their children’s education. Similarly, EDUCO teachers report that they spend significantly more time meeting with parents to discuss issues such as discipline, academic performance and attendance than is reported by teachers in conventional schools.


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instruments to deal with problems of endogeneity—that involves finding of factors correlated with the empowerment-related change that are not associated with all the other influences (which may be quite difficult in practice). Another approach is to recreate the treatment and control structure through “matching” of participating cases with others that are like them in every other respect. If this is done successfully then the difference can be attributed to the change under investigation—in this case the empowerment-related change. However, it is important to emphasize that none of these techniques offer quick fixes. It will often be difficult to find exogenous influences associated with empowerment-related changes but not other factors. Matching techniques generally require large sample sizes, and cannot account for unobserved differences between treatments and controls. These econometric techniques have to be applied judiciously, combined with qualitative assessments, and interpreted with care.

Where the number of cases is small, traditional statistical evaluation techniques cannot be applied. The extreme is where there is only one case—for example when there is a new participatory process around a national budget. But both the overall framework of the previous sections and the benchmark concept of a treatment-and-control situation remain useful. These can be used to help carefully document the various influences and interpretations, especially over time, using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. This could involve a more interpretative matching of with and without cases (different provinces for example). Or, when there is only one case, it would involve careful interpretation of “before and after” evolution with tracking of range of variables and gathering of interpretative assessments from a number of sources.48

5. Next steps

This paper has sought to present a framework for evaluating empowerment. Summaries have already been provided, in the abstract and the introduction. The paper is intended as part of a process. The concept of empowerment is relatively new, different disciplinary perspectives are involved, and the contexts in which there will be interest in evaluation will vary considerably. Next steps will focus on applications to specific case

48 Some general equilibrium modeling techniques seek to deal with the counterfactual, but these largely provide information on the assumptions made—and we are in any case some way from incorporating empowerment related factors into such modeling frameworks.
studies. These will involve cases in different arenas of public action and with relatively rich and poor information structures (relatively to the “ideal” for an evaluation.) In specific cases, much more careful specification of the processes and the hypotheses to be explored can be undertaken. It is planned to explore in more depth some of the cases referred to here, that are mainly in the areas of public service provision, and also, over time, to explore applications to national, private sector and civil society public action. It is hoped that this will provide both meat and areas for modification for the approach suggested here. The issues of understanding the nature and determinants of empowerment of poor and subordinate groups, and how (and how much) it matters for the realization of development outcomes, is likely to remain a central one in the coming years in Latin America and the Caribbean and elsewhere.
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Michael Walton
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