Notes on Evaluating Empowerment

Michael Walton
Latin America and Caribbean Region
World Bank

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Abstract: This note is a condensed and revised version of “Evaluating Empowerment” (Smulovitz and Walton 2002), which examines how to go about evaluating the effect of empowerment on development outcomes. Empowerment is understood as increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make purposeful and effective choices in the interest of pursuing a better life for themselves. The paper argues that evaluation of interventions to enlarge poor people’s empowerment 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 of poor or subordinate groups, and (b) the formal and informal institutional context that determines the opportunities for the exercise of agency. The second element is a causal framework for how empowerment influences development. Here it is key to take account of 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 The longer version of this paper was prepared by Catalina Smulovitz (Universidad Di Tella, Argentina) and Michael Walton (World Bank) with significant inputs from Patti Petesch (World Bank). Patti Petesch took the lead in the shorter version. Please refer to the longer version for more detailed discussion of the theoretical and empirical studies upon which this work builds. Valuable comments were received on earlier versions from Ruth Alsop, Kathy Bain, Lynn Bennett, Peter Evans, Peter Hakim, Patrick Heller, Phil Keefer, Yasuhiko Matsuda, Ernesto May, Deepa Narayan, Guillermo Perry, Lant Pritchett, Ray Rist, Judith Tendler, Warren van Wicklin and Michael Woolcock.
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Introduction

Empowerment is increasingly valued as a source of more effective, and more inclusive, development. Together with expanding poor people’s opportunity and security, it is one of the three primary forces for poverty reduction advanced by the World Bank in its millennium *World Development Report* (World Bank 2000a) and in subsequent strategy statements.

Since the early 1990s, a growing number of World Bank operations have featured empowerment-related components. These activities have worked, for instance, to strengthen the poverty focus or relevance of projects and policies for local people, to combat corruption and improve the functioning of public services, or to foster more open and inclusive governing structures. The specific empowerment interventions encompass a diverse set of actions to promote participation, increase transparency, build capacity amongst poor groups, and strengthen accountability mechanisms in development processes. (World Bank 2002b) The measures may imply relatively inexpensive policy changes affecting access to information or rules of participation, or can entail substantial medium term investments in, for example, expanding capacities for collective action in very poor communities.

This paper is concerned with how to evaluate the role and importance of empowerment in poverty reduction and development. The litmus test for empowerment is whether poor and subordinate groups have effectively advanced their particular interests through their own choice and action. Such processes are a product of complex forces, and a two-part conceptual framework is presented below for analysing these multiple forces and their development effects. The first part of the framework presents a causal model of empowerment in terms of interactions between the *agency* of poor citizens and the *opportunity structure* of a society. The discussion of the two areas is organized around a small set of causal influences that are particularly important to enlarging the empowerment of poorer or excluded actors. The framework recognizes that processes of social change and empowerment are not always the result of careful calculation from above or below, but rather can be by-products of unrelated shifts from economic, demographic, social or technological changes. And the second part of the conceptual framework directs attention to how to assess the contribution of empowerment to development outcomes in the context of the multiple influences at work. This leads to a discussion of methodological issues in undertaking an evaluation within this framework.

This note is a condensed and revised version of the November 2002 study on “Evaluating Empowerment,” which contains more thorough discussion of the theoretical and empirical literature upon which the conceptual framework is based.

What Is Empowerment and Why Does It Matter?

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 social group, but the conceptual framework developed here is particularly concerned with the empowerment of poorer, excluded or subordinate groups. It can be seen as the flipside of a diagnosis that social and political inequality matters to the dynamics of development for the poor. Of particular relevance are inequalities that are produced by the *relations* between different groups. Poorer and subordinate groups
experience inequalities not only with respect to economic resources (including “human capital) but also with respect to social, cultural and political factors. Such relational and categorical (or group-based) inequalities are sources of disempowerment of the poor, reducing their capacity to influence the world to further their interests.

Empowerment can have value both 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 direct and indirect impacts on other aspects of development—for instance, its influence on the processes that lead to less income poverty, lower mortality, greater skills, and less insecurity.²

The terms most often included in technical definitions of empowerment 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.” (Kabeer 1999, 437) This definition highlights both the actor’s ability to make choices and the process of change in the achievement of these abilities. In interpreting the process of empowerment, she emphasizes the need to examine a poor group’s resources, agency and achievements. According to the World Bank’s Sourcebook on empowerment, “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.” (World Bank 2002b, xviii) Like Kabeer’s, this definition refers to the actors’ abilities to make purposeful choices, but it also emphasizes the key role of institutions in which individuals and groups interact.

This evaluation framework also sees empowerment as a product of the interaction between the capacities of people and groups to make purposeful choices (that is to be agents), and the ability to transform these capacities for agency into favorable outcomes within the social and institutional context in which actors live. We can conclude that there has been empowerment when poor individuals and groups exercise agency with a reasonable prospect of this having an influence on development processes and outcomes.

While empowerment is about bringing benefits to the poor, and can often bring benefits in terms of greater overall well-being in a society, it is by no means necessarily the case that these effects are beneficial to all. Empowerment of poorer groups will often lead to the relative disempowerment of previously dominant groups. And, empowerment processes 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 casual and normative analysis.

**Multiple Domains, Actors and Transactions**

Empowerment takes place in the context of relationships between actors in a variety of domains of development action and social interaction. Figure 1 presents a stylized account of the major relationships. This distinguishes three groups of actors: citizens,

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² For discussion of intrinsic and instrumental effects of the related concept of agency-freedom and capabilities see discussions in Sen (1985, 1992).
rich and poor, powerful and weak, of high and low social statues; politicians and policymakers; and “providers” that may range from government agencies offering schooling or policing services to private firms offering jobs and goods. A wide range of civil society groups fills in the picture in a variety of ways, often providing services but also helping citizens exercise voice over policy choices and service delivery. This triangle portrays the key types of relationship that are relevant. There are two relationships that involve the exercise of empowerment (or reflect the disempowerment of the poor):

- The influence of citizens over politicians or policymakers on policy choice (the indirect route)
- The influence of citizens on frontline delivery of services through client power (the direct route)

There are also two other relationships that influence the context within which empowerment occurs:

- The relationship between policymakers and providers, via compacts, regulations or the policy environment
- The relationship between provider organizations and their frontline workers, whose behavior can be crucial to interactions with citizens.

Finally external influences and actors can affect the dynamics of these internal interactions in a number of ways.

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3 This stylized presentation draws on ongoing work by the team working on the World Development Report on service provision, as well as on earlier versions of this paper.
These interactions occur in a wide range of arenas of development action. Table 1 illustrates with four broad categories and selected examples of interaction, service or transaction that appear salient for understanding the role of empowerment in World Bank operations. As the table illustrates, poor people and their organizations may seek to exercise influence in a wide array of public, private or civic spheres; at the household, community, sub-national, national or international levels; via “direct” and “indirect” routes; and in innumerable ways—by organizing a local association to run a school, developing a proposal for a community improvement project, analysing their municipal or national government’s budget, answering a survey about the quality of services they receive, monitoring and reporting on abuses of child labor or workplace safety regulations, running for an elected office and so on. Given its clients, Bank evaluations will typically be concerned with cases that focus on state-society relations, but the study of empowerment is also most certainly about changes in power relations among specific groups of citizens or between citizens and market actors.
Table 1. Illustrations 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></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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 Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>National level interactions involving the state</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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 increased 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></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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 action against abuse or exploitation of workers (e.g. child work, dangerous conditions etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactions involving civil society organizations</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring of emergency social assistance programs</td>
<td>Social Monitor consortium of NGOs in Argentina</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we move from the stylised presentation of Figure 1 to one of the concrete cases in Table 1, we need to take account of the large range of actors that will affect empowerment processes, and so need to be considered in the evaluation. While these fall within the overall structure of Figure 1, the actual dynamics will be a function of the
specific interests, behaviors, actions and reactions of the different players. Figure 2 offers a hypothetical “playing field” of selected key actors and institutions that would be important to studying the EDUCO school reforms piloted and then mainstreamed in El Salvador during the 1990s. The program catalyzed a rapid rebuilding and reopening of schools after the civil war by successfully tapping into parents’ desires, energies and inventiveness in very poor rural areas of the country. The EDUCO model called for parents to form voluntary associations that then received legal authority, funds and training to manage school budgets and to hire and fire teachers. Between 1991 and 1999, enrolment in EDUCO schools jumped from 8,400 children to 237,000.

The playing field is designed to draw attention to the need for analysis of the capacities of poor people and groups to effectively pursue the goal of getting better education for their children (that is exercise agency), and for an understanding of the broader structures in their society that exercise a powerful influence over whether these very poor parents might succeed in their efforts (the opportunity structure). Some of the actors are clearly concerned with policymaking part of the triangle in Figure 1 (president, legislative assembly, political parties), others affect provision (teachers, civic and private sector providers), whereas others (education minister, teachers unions, local officials, the media) may influence both policymaking and provision. The model developed below gives more structure to the influences upon the potential interactions within and across agency and opportunity structure.

Figure 2. The EDUCO Playing Field

A Causal Framework for Empowerment

Evaluation of empowerment poses two levels of complexity: both empowerment and development outcomes are products of multiple and interconnected forces, and the evaluator must sort out and build a credible case for the most critical of those influences.
This section posits a set of factors that available evidence suggests are triggers of changes in empowerment; and the next section explores approaches for disentangling the contribution of empowerment-related influences relative to the many other influences on poverty and development.

A simplified model for analyzing processes of empowerment is presented in figure 3. The underlying assumptions are that increased empowerment of subordinate groups can be a product of i) an increase in the capacity to take purposeful actions, or the exercise of agency, by poor individuals or groups themselves, and ii) a change in the social, political and institutional context that defines the broader opportunity structure and which affects the ability of these groups to pursue their interests more effectively. In addition, the arrows in the figure highlight the multiple interactions between agency and the opportunity structure. In sum, **empowerment of poor, excluded or subordinate groups is a product of the interaction between the agency of these groups and the opportunity structure in which this agency is potentially exercised.** The three influences on each side of the model are examined in turn below.

**Figure 3. A Causal Framework for Empowerment**

**The capacities of agents: choice and action**

Individuals 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, decide among such alternatives, and take action in order to advance their chosen path as an individual or collectively with others.

*(a) Economic and Human Capital*

*Economic and human capital* refers to possession of economic resources, skills and good health; it could also be extended to include the strength of safety nets in hard times. These assets help to weaken the social, economic and political dependence of poor people on others, and increase 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.
(b) The “Capacity to Aspire”

The capacity to aspire is used to capture the array of factors that influences the capacity of poor groups to envision alternatives and to aspire to different futures. As Appadurai has argued, this forward-looking capacity is a product of the socio-cultural histories of poor groups, formed within the context of unequal interactions with other groups in a society. The capacity to aspire is typically unequally distributed, leading to unequal capacity to express “voice” and to hold accountable politicians or public and private organizations delivering services. But the capacity can also be influenced or produced in the process of group-based interactions or mobilizations; analyzing this context will often be indispensable to understanding the empowerment dimensions behind the path chosen.

(c) Organizational Capacity

The capacity to organize is often present in cases where aspirations have been translated into action agendas. Membership in organizations can enlarge poor people’s access to ideas, information, and camaraderie; strengthen their capacities for planning, problem solving, conflict negotiation and decision making; and expand their ties to other networks and resources. It involves both technical and cultural features. Patterns of networks, or “social capital,” typically reflect the structure of overall economic, cultural and political inequalities within groups. Even when poor groups have extensive ties amongst themselves—that can serve important economic functions in risk management, local production—they are typically weakly connected to, or excluded from, the networks of more powerful actors. Access to actors and organizations from other (more advantaged) social groups can be valuable tools for poor people’s empowerment and development advances, when these reflect viable coalitions for change. Many empowerment strategies, in fact, focus on strengthening and connecting poor people’s groups and linking them to wider networks.

Interactions among influences on agency. Analysis of agency conditions and trends requires consideration of how the influences interact with each other, and how they affect and are affected by wider forces. There are significant complementarities, but all three need not be present for the exercise of agency. Economic and human capital mediates the potential for influence but is not a necessary condition—poor, unskilled actors can be active agents where the aspirational and organizational basis exists. Similarly, organizational capacities can greatly facilitate but are not necessary for converting potential agency into action. Aspirational capacities, however, are typically necessary conditions for active agency—without the capacity to envision alternatives or consider different futures it is difficult to envisage autonomous action.

“Objective” and contextual assessment. Some of the influences on agency can be measured in terms of “objective” individual attributes (e.g. level of schooling, articulation of a vision for change, number of organizations and their members). Nevertheless, it is almost always necessary to interpret the capacities in terms of the socio-cultural history and context in which individuals and groups reside. This is not only because capacities to aspire and organize are in part the product of cultural conditions. It is also because interpretation of an action has to take account of what it means in a particular context. As one important example, questions of agency will frequently have important gender dimensions.

4 This abbreviated account does not to justice to this concept—see in particular Appadurai (2002) for a discussion of the concept.
Actual choices depend on the particular manner 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 a 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.” (Kabeer 1999, 458) 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 specific 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 that are perceived to be available by those who must choose.

It is important to note that the capacity to act as an agent is not the same as the achievement of the results desired. (Sen 1985b, 1992) There is an indispensable causal influence from the exercise of agency to results, but this influence will be mediated by many other factors, including the broader opportunity structure and other influences that have nothing to do with empowerment.

The Opportunity Structure

This second part of the framework focuses on the context within which poor actors operate: the openness of institutions, the power and behavior of non-poor actors, and the state’s enforcement capacity. Together these forces provide the contextual conditions and opportunities that shape the ability of individuals and organizations to participate, negotiate, influence and hold institutions accountable. The analysis builds on what the social movement literature characterizes as the political opportunity structure.5

(a) The Openness of Formal and Informal Institutions to Constituents

Institutions are understood as the rules of the game for social interaction. 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.” (Levi 1989, 405) But they can also be informal, in the form of social norms, habits, routines—all elements of social and political cultures. In informal contexts, rules can be imprecise and no actor is legally entitled to enforce them. Norms are enforced by traditional authority structures or self-enforced by the internalized dispositions of groups. Often such culturally formed dispositions reflect and reinforce differences of power and wealth, simultaneously reducing the agency of subordinate groups, as noted earlier, and increasing the discriminatory or exclusionary beliefs and behaviors of dominant groups. Such informal

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5Tarrow 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, 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).
norms, dispositions and behaviors may be inconsistent with and undermine the influence of formal rules, and reduce the capacity of organizations in a society to effectively serve their constituents. Recent work on Bolivia, for instance, 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. (World Bank 2000b) Analysis of Peru’s social fund in the early 1990s found that it was well-targeted to the poor, but also well-targeted to constituencies whose vote was important to the party in power. (Schady, 2000) In assessing a structure of rules it is always important to see how they “really” work and how informal and formal structures interact.

Historically, formal and informal institutional structures in Latin America and the Caribbean (and elsewhere) have evolved in ways that typically reduce the prospects for influence of poor and subordinate groups. A variety of mechanisms and structures foster the lack of voice, including clientelistic political cultures, deeply entrenched patterns of unequal gender and social relations (notably with respect to indigenous and Afro-Latino groups), top-down corporatist forms of inclusion, and, in the extreme, the capture of the state by powerful private interests. These mechanisms have persisted, sometimes in different forms, with the broadening of the franchise in the post-independence era and the recent formal democratization of the bulk of the region. They limit the potential for influence in the full array of a society’s organizations—from individual households to local government offices, private firms, civic organizations and networks and national elected bodies.

There are three sets of rules that are of particular relevance to evaluating the openness, or “permeability” of formal and informal institutions to the influence of poor and subordinate groups. They include:

- competition rules determining how to win, or the allocation of goods in situations of rivalry;
- inclusion rules defining who engages in what; and
- accountability rules establishing lines of authority and responsibilities.

If competition for national legislatures, for instance, is based on majoritarian or winner-take-all electoral rules, there is a much lower likelihood that weak minority actors can advance their interests in this arena. Such rules imply a strong need for organizing and building alliances with other actors to have a presence at the national level -- capacities that often are weak among disempowered actors. For these reasons, majoritarian rules are often associated with a relatively closed environment. By contrast, proportional electoral rules are usually associated with greater permeability of an environment because the required organizational capacities are less demanding in these contexts. Proportional representation, however, may bring some other key drawbacks for disadvantaged groups—such as less decisive government, more fragmented opposition, or a greater voice for extremist positions. While the example is from national democratic procedures, comparable considerations may apply at the municipal or village level if local officials are representatives of a single or multiple political parties. In addition, informal rules often proscribe women and certain socio-economic, ethnic, religious, caste or other excluded groups from reaching out for positions of authority or other channels of influence. And a change in competition rules that requires certain classes of excluded groups to have some representation on governing bodies can be another means for fostering a more inclusive environment.
Inclusion rules determine who can participate and in what issue areas. The rules can be used to exclude or favor disadvantaged groups by establishing formal employment, income, gender, geographic, racial or religious requirements for specific entitlements. Many environments will become more accessible to poor and excluded groups if participation is made universal, such as the opening up of historically restricted franchise in Latin America. More targeted examples that have been adopted to reverse longstanding inequalities include workplace policies on affirmative action in hirings and promotions for specific groups, and the application of poverty-based geographic or income criteria for allocating scarce public investments. Inclusion rules also define the number and nature of the policy areas where actors are entitled to participate; and new advocacy work often begins with the need to gain legitimacy for broader engagement in that arena of decision making. This is also an area where informal factors can play a role. Despite a right to participate, the voice of poor and subordinate groups can get little de facto recognition. Also, cumbersome processes can make participation costly or easily manipulated (e.g. documentation requirements or bribes for access to public services).

Finally, accountability rules define who has authority and their responsibilities, and processes for oversight of these duties. Strong accountability mechanisms allow actors to ensure that their representatives, service providers or other leaders are answerable for their behavior, that constituents will be informed about decisions and their justifications, and, where necessary, sanctions can be administered for wrongdoings. (Schedler 1999) In the Voices of the Poor study, poor people repeatedly commented that they felt abandoned by the state and the market. They particularly describe problems with a lack of accountability of elected officials, but also report utter powerlessness in the face of employers who refuse to pay them for work, police who harass them, doctors who charge side payments, teachers who don't show up, and so on. This illustrates disempowerment via weak accountabilities on both the indirect route via policymaking and the direct route of influence over frontline providers in Figure 1. The most trusted institutions named by poor people are frequently their own local, often informal, organizations, family and friends. It is these actors that provide vital support for poor people's daily survival, but they often lack the clout or resources needed to hold more powerful actors accountable and help people make the climb out of poverty. (Narayan, Chambers et. al. 2000)

Public 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 poor people's access to information on public decisions, budget allocations, private company behavior, rights to participate and to entitlements, 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.

(b) The Power and Behavior of Non-poor Groups
The second factor to consider in the opportunity structure is the power and behavior of elites and other important social actors, and particularly of potentially opposing groups and their relative influence. One approach to this focuses on how unified the elite is. Divisions among the elite can facilitate the exercise of agency because they weaken the elites' ability to oppose, repress and/or neutralize challengers' claims. Divisions also can encourage disgruntled elite fractions to look for new sources of support outside of their
traditional allies, and so be potentially more receptive to the claims of weak actors. From
the challengers’ point of view, a divided elite expands the number of potential allies. In
some contexts, policy champions inside governments have exercised decisive
leadership in support of pro-poor change.

Elite strength will not have a simple relationship with disempowerment of the poor. In
the recent past in Brazil, numerous effective and inclusive measures were introduced in
the Northeast state of Ceará in the late 1980s and 1990s; and the reforms affected 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. (Tendler 1997)

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. Thus, it is necessary to assess 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 Enforcement Capacity
The state’s enforcement capacity, that is the power of authorities to implement the
policies that have been adopted, is the third dimension affecting the likelihood of
achieving outcomes. These capacities depend on numerous variables, however, and it
can be useful to unbundle them to distinguish between capacities that help states relate
to citizens and those associated with conducting its business of delivering services.

The first set of capacities is about states being able to hear and respond to the needs of
all of their citizens; but more specifically it is about capacities to operate in ways that are
transparent, participatory and accountable. This includes being able i) to administer
public resources effectively and control corruption; ii) to guarantee rule of law, mediate
conflicts and ensure stability and lack of violence; and iii) to advance and protect the civil
and political rights that enable citizens to associate freely, mobilize influential
partnerships, exercise voice and hold authorities accountable.

A state with little capacity to keep local elites from capturing resources is of little service
to poor people. Likewise, poor people are profoundly disempowered by a government
that cannot ensure public safety in the localities where they live, such as poor inner city
slums of Rio de Janeiro, or vast rural and urban areas of Colombia. Also troublesome,
few states proactively help poorer citizens understand and realize their basic rights to
organize and meet without restrictions, to say what they want without intimidation (rights
of association and assembly, and freedom of expression), and to access information
about their rights and entitlements. These rights are essential building blocks for
meaningful participation of all groups in society, but they are especially vital for those
who are poor and easily excluded from arenas of decision making of great importance to them.

The second set of capacities--more closely tied to service delivery--include technical and managerial abilities, depoliticised decision-making and internal accountability mechanisms, and adequate administrative and financial resources for delivering the expected services. These capacities can intersect with state capacities to be open, inclusive and accountable. An Ombudsman needs a functioning administrative apparatus to respond to people's complaints. Yet, for purposes of exploring influences on empowerment, it is useful to distinguish public sector reform investments which typically focus on improving bureaucratic functioning for better service delivery from those less typical investments that seek to affect how service providers interact with clients.

A state with strong capacity to implement policies is not necessarily one with empowering opportunity structures that are grounded in good governance and participatory development. Such contexts can include states that have been captured by a narrow elite group, which effectively use a capable government bureaucracy to serve their own interests. This might also be the case of states that have managed to usher in large poverty declines or social advances despite closed political systems, such as China’s, Indonesia’s or Cuba’s.

It is also important to stress that the state is not monolithic, and elected bodies, the civil service and the judiciary often work at loggerheads. Not only may their interests differ but also basic mandates and capacities to relate to citizens can be very uneven. For these reasons, central and local governments, the different branches and agencies, and their leadership and political loyalties, also need to be unpackaged for sound analysis of enforcement capacities. For example, decentralization may increase local responsiveness and flexibility, but also implies the incorporation of new actors into decision-making and implementation, which 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. The state’s enforcement capacity is often a product of the other two influences on agency, but there are also contexts where the “regulators” have their own agendas and are unresponsive to the broader institutional environment and to the politicians who ostensibly oversee them.

**Interactions Among Influences on Opportunity Structure**

As with analysis of agency, understanding the opportunity structure requires exploring how the three influences--openness of institutions, the interests and strength of non-poor actors and state enforcement capacity--interact with each other to support or hinder the agency of weak actors.

Table 2 presents a simplified mapping to illustrate selected combinations of the three influences, and how the various mixes might affect the overall opportunity structure. While the underlying variables will generally be a continuum, the table uses binary—strong/weak—classifications within each category for illustrative purposes. The greatest likelihood of success in the achievement of outcomes for poorer and disadvantaged groups is when these actors operate in an open institutional context, where opponents are weak or divided and/or there are influential pro-poor policy champions, and when
state enforcement capacity is strong. This is identified as an *empowering* context (8), or the combination of conditions where the opportunity structure would likely be most conducive to the empowerment of weak actors. This ideal might be best typified by Scandinavian societies and states.

**Table 2: Effect of Different Contexts on Opportunity Structure of Weak Actors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State Enforcement Capacity</th>
<th>Openness of Institutions to Poorer Actors’ Claims</th>
<th>Interests and Strength of Non-poor Actors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td><strong>Supportive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering 8</td>
<td>Selective exclusion 3</td>
<td><strong>Opposing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formally empowering 6</td>
<td>Uncertain exclusion 2</td>
<td><strong>Supportive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Uncertain inclusion 7</td>
<td><strong>Supportive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain selective exclusion 4</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Opposing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain exclusion 5</td>
<td>Disempowering 1</td>
<td><strong>Opposing</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: 1 = Disempowering context; 8 = Empowering context

By contrast, effective empowerment is highly unlikely when the context is closed, there is a strong and unified political and social elite with narrow interests, and there is weak enforcement capacity. In this case, identified in the table as a *disempowering* context (1), formal and informal institutions work in ways that prevent claims from being heard, and this is reinforced by a powerful and united elite. Weak state enforcement capacities provide a united elite with the freedom to disregard contenders’ claims and to abuse their authority with impunity. This might be the case in Central American countries before changes in technology and commerce at the turn of the 20th century began to erode unity (and close family ties) among large landholders and agriculture producers; urban financial and commercial interests; and the military strongmen who often ruled.

All of the other combinations in the table are of an intermediate character, and would be expected to result in incomplete forms of empowerment in terms of the opportunity structure. What happens will be much more dependent on the specifics of individual cases, including, crucially, the agency capacities of weak and subordinate groups. From the perspective of empowering weak actors a second best situation is probably that of *uncertain inclusion* (7) where the context is open, poorer groups have ties to influential modernizing elites but the state’s enforcement capacity is weak. Openness and supportive elites create opportunities for poor actors, but weak state enforcement...
capacity reduces the probability that their claims will be translated into outcomes. The influence of local political conditions may make a large difference here.

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 enforcement 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” interests that hinder reform of an inequitable and unaffordable social security system. In such contexts, informal rules rather than state laws determine outcomes. That change can sometimes occur, however, is illustrated by many specific instances, including the Porto Alegre participatory budgeting 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. (Tendler 1997)

**Uncertain exclusion (5)** results from the combination of open institutions, a strong political elite and weak state capacities for enforcement. 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 the other, loopholes in the bureaucratic structure may open opportunities for weaker groups, especially in spheres outside the state. However, a united political elite makes it more unlikely that disadvantaged groups can advance their interests 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 patronage politics. (World Bank 2000b) Popular Participation was then a national reform that shifted resources and control to municipalities and legalized local level civil society groups, of which campesinos’ 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 a stronger elite, and the decentralizing reforms may primarily have increased the power of local elites. (Gray-Molina 2002; Calderon and Szmuckler 2002; and Blackburn 2001)
Interactions between Agency and the Opportunity Structure

As emphasized throughout this paper, there is a powerful two-way influence between the structure of political opportunities and agency of poorer groups, and an important focus of any analysis would involve an assessment of how these linkages may have interacted to contribute to (or block) new levels of empowerment and improved development outcomes. The gaps identified may suggest promising areas for empowerment work. For instance, large community-driven development projects may not be sound investments in contexts with relatively closed opportunity structures, and it may be more strategic to work on a smaller scale until the environment is more supportive. In such cases, it may be useful to support laws that recognize and protect civic organizations, expand access to information on rights and entitlements, or strengthen capacity for open and decentralized mechanisms for monitoring public policies and services.

Empowerment as One amongst Many Influences

A wide range of factors is germane to the realization of development outcomes. In addition to promoting empowerment, development actions 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. The research design must address the fundamental question of how much changes in outcomes can be attributed to empowerment rather than to the multiple other influences on the development process being analysed. Figure 4 illustrates a simple hypothesis on this evaluation challenge.

Figure 4: The Simple Hypothesis – Empowerment Affects Outcomes

Figure 5 illustrates a slightly more complex set of relationships to better capture the dynamic processes that underpin development. The figure builds on three extensions from the simple hypothesis of figure 4:
As illustrated in figure 1, 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.

There are potentially significant feedback loops on both empowerment and other development factors that may be positive, for example when economic and other outcomes for the poor feed back into their capacity to make choices or hold authorities accountable. These feedback loops can also be negative, however, and trigger resistance from other groups, heightened conflict, or decreased economic opportunities.

Figure 4. Some Interactions between Empowerment, Policy and Conditions

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) Initial (or baseline) conditions on both the influences on empowerment and on wider development forces of importance to the outcomes under study;
(b) Intermediate processes and final development outcomes, with particular attention to capturing the impacts that resulted from a change in one or two of the causal influence(s) on empowerment (Part I); and
(c) Other important influences on the processes and outcomes under study (Part II).

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. As discussed in the next section, it will be particularly valuable to undertake
comparisons between cases with and without or before and after an empowerment-related change in order to build a credible case for the most important influences on those impacts and their feedback loops.

Some Methodological Issues in Evaluating Empowerment and its Effects

Empowerment-related factors are often a missing variable in both the design and interpretation of development processes. The thesis is that taking account of empowerment would increase the understanding of what does and does not work—over and above “traditional” influences—and so would allow public action to be designed with greater impact on results, from school attendance, to health status to incomes of the poor.

There is growing study of the role of empowerment in poverty reduction and overall development, but there have been few, if any, structured impact evaluations that systematically take account of both empowerment-related and other influences. Such evaluations would allow the contribution of empowerment to be measured and compared with other influences on developmental outcomes, whether at the household, local or society-wide level. This is essential to assess how much difference empowerment can make to development effectiveness, and so provide guidance on how much effort should be directed to foster greater empowerment. There is also a paucity of empirical analysis on the causal influences on empowerment itself, which is important to shaping the design of effective public action to empower poorer groups in diverse social and institutional contexts.

Sound approaches to evaluating empowerment can draw on general experience in evaluation of the impact of development change on outcomes. However, the nature of empowerment raises special challenges in the interpretation of processes and the drivers of changes. This makes the use of mixed methods—combining quantitative and qualitative techniques—an intrinsic feature of a sound evaluation. While we don’t go into technical issue of how to do this, we here outline the issues.\(^6\)

It is useful to disentangle the evaluation challenge into two types of question. The first can be phrased along the following lines: how much difference did a particular empowerment-related change make to development outcomes, after controlling for other influences? This is a standard question for evaluation. Answering it requires comparing what actually happened with a counterfactual of what would have happened in the absence of the empowerment-related change, along with taking into account information on other influences on the development outcomes. Failure to provide a counterfactual could lead to incorrect attribution of a development outcome. For example, better test scores may be correlated with an empowerment-related change, such as parent participation, when the real cause lay in other factors such as expanded school infrastructure, which occurred at the same time. The real challenge is specifying the counterfactual since this is never actually observed and included in a quantitative analysis. There are a variety of ways of doing this. The simplest involves “before-and-after” (in which the counterfactual is the situation before the change). For example, this would involve comparing outcomes in Porto Alegre after the introduction of participatory budgeting to before its introduction. This is useful, but is also a very weak test of

\(^6\) For accessible discussions see Ravallion (2001) for an introduction, and Baker (2000) for a survey of techniques and examples of applications.
whether the new budgeting processes were the causes of the development changes, because a lot of other things were going on.

For this reason, most evaluation techniques use various forms of treatment and control—in which the effects of a change can be compared across cases, taking account of any differences. This in particular needs to pay attention to two issues. First, there may be “selection bias”, when a case pursues an empowerment-related change for reasons that also affect the development outcomes; for example, Porto Alegre in the 1990s may have chosen participatory budgeting because of the history of social movements, and composition and leadership of the PT—but these factors also contributed to the better development outcomes. The influence of participatory budgeting per se would then be overstated, if this is not taken account of. Second, the effects of an empowerment-related change may depend on a range of other factors (there may be “heterogeneity in treatment effects”), such as the strength of the local administration, the extent of corruption, the educational structure, the depth of patron-client political cultures. To stay with the example, participatory budgeting may work superbly in Porto Alegre, but not in a poor municipality with deeply engrained patron-client political cultures, weak traditions of grassroots mobilization and lower educational attainment. In both of these cases, some of the confounding influences may be observable (such as education, average incomes) whilst others are less easily observable (such as political cultures).

There are a variety of ways of dealing with these issues. The most robust approach involves the use of randomized experiments—introducing, or offering, an empowerment-related change to one set of cases but not others, for example having community participation in education in one set of schools but not others, with the participating schools randomly selected. The advantage of random assignment is precisely to control for the selection problem—communities that would have chosen participatory processes might be those most organized, with already strong interactions with teachers etc. Such an approach can make use of the natural phasing in of additional or improved services to new areas. Then, in the simplest case, the difference between treatment and control cases tells us the contribution of the empowerment-related changes. Other information on the characteristics of the community, school, health center, municipality etc. can be used to explore the interactions between an empowerment-related change and other variables.

When randomized approaches are not possible (because changes are driven by local dynamics, or governments resist such an approach), but there are large numbers of cases, then alternative econometric approaches can be used to assess the contribution of empowerment-related changes. “Matching” of similar cases with and without the change, is one such approach. When there is a lot of data, this be can done statistically; otherwise a less robust, judgemental approach has to be done. This does not take care of the problem of selection biases (or other influences of unobservable factors). However, this can to some degree be dealt with by comparing changes over time for treatment and control cases, assuming the influence of unobserved factors does not change over time. Other econometric techniques seek to deal with the challenges by effectively recreating a treatment and control through finding factors (instruments) that are associated with the choice of treatment, but not with the development outcome. While there are varying degrees of reliability, these alternative approaches all provide quantitative techniques for calculating the contribution of an empowerment-related
change, controlling for other influences—and also assessing interactions between empowerment and measurable other factors.

This large-n approach is a highly desirable element of any evaluation. Note, however, that its use is primarily in telling us that a specific change (or set of changes) made a difference, and by how much, in a rigorous way. (They will generally be of a “reduced form” character.) But these approaches are typically weak at any in-depth diagnosis of the processes, mechanisms and responses that were developed in our discussion of the causal influences on empowerment. For this a range of small-n techniques will be necessary, preferably involving structured case studies nested within the large-n analysis. There is a range of such techniques, often referred to as “qualitative” (somewhat misleadingly, since some involve quantification). These approaches can include focus groups, a range of other participatory processes—as used in the Voices of the Poor work—interviews with key informants, ethnographic work and small-scale surveys of different groups. These will have to be tailored to the situation at hand in order to obtain a richer interpretation of the processes, especially when these involve changes in attitudes, dispositions or behaviors that constitute social or political cultures.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches are highly complementary. While they have been presented sequentially, in practice an interactive study process will be most effective. On the front end of evaluations, qualitative and participatory fieldwork can provide the vital background context on agency and opportunity structure and uncover potentially important unknown factors (such as powerful informal institutions or rules), and in this way guide the larger survey and sampling exercise in appropriate directions. Once surveys are completed, qualitative and participatory research can again be valuable tools to crosscheck confusing or partial findings, shed light on key processes and feedback loops, and more generally bring greater depth of understanding to important survey results.

Where there are only small numbers of observations, or only one, for example, when changes are of national reach, the approach to quantitative analysis outlined here will not be feasible. However, the spirit of the above approach would still apply, for example through thinking through the counterfactual, and gathering information on other influences (both for their direct impact on development outcomes and potential complementarities with the empowerment-related changes.) We referred above to using judgement rather than statistical technique to match cases with and without the empowerment-related change. However, the results of such approaches will necessarily be less robust (and probably less convincing to skeptics) than those that use the mixed methods recommended here.

Of final note, the most promising—if not always the easiest—means to ensure that the results from evaluations will be used to inform future policy actions is to engage directly in the research program those actors who are important for effective follow-up. Participatory evaluation designs entail an inclusive learning and action process where the relevant stakeholders can negotiate study goals and indicators, engage jointly in data collection and analysis, and collaborate in the dissemination and follow-up work on results. As empowerment of poor and excluded groups is a clear objective of this work, a central role needs to be given for these voices to influence and benefit from the study agenda and process; and there are now well established planning, management and research tools for enabling this to happen.
Next steps

This paper has sought to present a framework for evaluating empowerment. It 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.

Over the months ahead, the framework will be tested on various World Bank-financed operations around the world. In the Latin America and Caribbean region some possible cases include: the introduction of community participation into school management in El Salvador (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 unemployed groups of Argentina’s Trabajar, workfare, program; and the effect of land titling on the behaviors of slum dwellers and their interactions with formal organizations in a poor section of Buenos Aires.

It is hoped that this will provide both meat for understanding the role of empowerment, as well as areas for modification of the analytical approach suggested here. With important initiatives ahead such as the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All, as well as growing investments in such central areas as anti-corruption and governance programs, 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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