

2009 DRAFT SESSION REPORT

20th Annual General Assembly (AGA) and Conference | 14 – 16 May 2009
Rome Cavalieri | Rome, Italy



tel.: +32.2.512.8938 | fax: +32.2.512.3265 | e-mail: aga@efc.be | web: www.efc.be

Empowerment: But what is empowerment?

Moderator: Lyndall Stein, Sheila McKechnie Foundation, interim CEO Resource Alliance
Speakers: Angela O'Neill De Guilio, Concern Worldwide; Theo Sowa, Independent Social Development Advisor

Session proposed by: Concern Worldwide

The session debated the challenging question of what empowerment means and what it can do for communities, while outlining how funders might approach empowerment in fighting against poverty.

Ms Sowa, Independent Social Development Advisor, stressed the importance of the clarity of definition. Highlighting issues that funders should consider, she described empowerment as about facilitating but not controlling relationships and outcomes; about acknowledging, listening, valuing and working in true partnership with all stakeholders. Empowerment should filter through all of the work of a foundation to achieve its goals and therefore be present as an approach across the full range of funding activities.

As a development specialist, Ms O'Neill De Guilio of Concern Worldwide, also emphasised the need to have an integrated approach, that you must work at several levels, that staff must be trained to be able to facilitate the process, and that this work requires skilled staff. She recalled that it is a long-term process, but you need to have incremental steps along the way that you can measure. She underlined the importance of addressing women's empowerment, of tackling inequality and bringing on board people such as opinion leaders, and religious leaders.

Panellists shared their respective experience outlining key issues and recommendations.

Empowerment is multidimensional and requires a holistic approach

Panellists emphasised that empowerment is multidimensional: economic, socio-cultural, political etc. Funders and implementing bodies need to consider the role of different forms as well as the different levels of empowerment (individual, community, country) in promoting long-term change to fight against poverty.

The causes, ongoing problems and obstacles that prevent people escaping poverty must be addressed. Key obstacles include inequality and powerlessness. Funding bodies can facilitate and help people take control of their own lives; but they can also undermine empowerment. As a funder it is therefore important how you define empowerment and how it affects all your work, and does not just consist of a side-project.

Development actors need to understand and tackle what is preventing people accessing services and taking up opportunities; and enable change at the individual level but also at a structural level and essentially change relations to more equal relationships. Addressing the obstacles requires transformative change and an integrated holistic approach working at different levels and in partnership with *agents of change*. This was illustrated by several programme examples presented during the session.

An evaluation of a successful Concern Worldwide micro-finance programme in Bangladesh outlined positive outputs in terms of improving the economic situation of entire families and communities, as well as the confidence and esteem, in particular of women. Ultimately their position and status had increased but the overall impact of the programme on gender relations was minimal. The programme was successful on a number of levels but did not manage to change, at least in the first instance, the more structural power relations causing the continuation of significant inequality in this area. In Bulgaria, economic empowerment for women had sometimes resulted in increased domestic violence.

In Zimbabwe, an empowerment project for girls and boys to protect them from HIV required both personal and structural changes. The initiative focused on community conversations with

women's, girl's, boy's and men's groups which enable them to gain a level of confidence on how they can protect themselves and share similar situations and experiences. What was key to the success of the programme was the ability to work with men and boys, religious leaders and any other leaders in the community. The biggest protection factor for girls regarding HIV is education but knowledge in itself is not enough, other factors need to be in place: societal structures, as well as the confidence of girls to take decisions. But one also needs to acknowledge that change takes time and in this case may take up to the next generation of schooled girls.

Another example featured an Ethiopian programme addressing gender inequality and gender – based violence. Laws and policies exist in Ethiopia prohibiting violent practices, and the country signed up to international conventions, but there was a lack of awareness among communities of their rights, a lack of capacity of enforcement agencies, the absence of institutional structures to deal with it, and traditions. Here, the programme approach -working in partnership with a local organisation- was to work at several levels on several issues including among other things the creation of self-help groups to break the silence about the issue, involving men, counselling, and looking at other coordinating mechanisms and structures in the community that could be involved etc.

You don't start from scratch: assess what you don't know and understand who does

As a foreign funder in a region you should not assume to start from zero. Referring to work in Africa, Theo Sowa reminded funders and development agents that they do not start from scratch – there are already achievements and there is work underway. There are aspects of empowerment that we can see for instance regarding women's issues and their participation in the decision –making process and political life at the highest level. Funders should acknowledge what already exists, and not try to reinvent the wheel or undermine work.

It is critical to acknowledge progress that has been made, listen and value and act upon other people's knowledge. As a new funder in an area you may wonder how to fund “the real communities?” Here you should beware of who is providing you with “expert” information, and who your advisers are.

Support participation and embrace accountability

The third major issue relates to what is required in terms of our approach as funders or development agents, i.e. having an empowerment approach. This means adopting approaches which are citizen-based and rights focused. One aim of empowerment is to encourage two-way interactions, where there is real representation and the promotion of voice and agency of the various groups involved in promotion social change and development. This includes encouraging participation where communities are analysing their own situations, are developing the solutions and evaluating progress and drawbacks and inputting modifications in the process.

It is also about multiple accountability: accountability between development actors and communities where they work; between citizens and governments, between development actors and donors, etc...

At the same time funders must be aware of the pitfalls along the way, in particular influential players who can subvert or control the process. They need to know how to put systems in place to minimise and mitigate power imbalances. There can also be tensions between the local communities and international development workers. As a funder you need to provide space and voice to the communities you support.

Be a flexible funder

For funders working on empowerment issues it is also about *how* you fund. It means having a flexibility of funding, and an understanding about the longer-term nature of funding. It requires clarity about the type of funding that you do, and working with people to understand how you measure your work and what you measure. Finally, flexible funding can be about supporting very specific projects in an empowering way, but also about funding *movements* which can do more for sustainability than fundraising or financial strengthening programmes.

Summing-up the discussion, Lyndall Stein highlighted some “golden” precepts for funders to recall: be responsive, flexible, look at the process, have a holistic and contextual approach, be aware but dare to take risk in funding movements (women's, rights, social movements etc.) and look at participative ways to evaluate programmes. This is the best approach to ensuring the sustainability of the initiatives when you pull out.