



Empowerment and equity

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Equity and empowerment underpin poverty reduction. They are also important in improving “enabling environments” for poverty reduction and pro-poor growth because they can increase access to opportunities and enhance democratic processes. Some equity challenges constitute discrimination and structural barriers to empowerment. Donors can support the marginalised, build the capacity of civil society and support decentralised government. Donors must build broad-based alliances, working with non-traditional partners and fostering networks. Explicit attention to equity and empowerment reduces the likelihood of unforeseen negative effects and places principles of fairness and social justice clearly at the heart of the work of development agencies.



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Key messages

- Equity and empowerment underpin poverty reduction, and are particularly important in tackling severe and intransigent chronic poverty and inequality.
- A two-track approach is most effective, engaging governments in pro-equity policy dialogue and challenging discrimination and structural barriers to empowerment on one side, and working to support empowerment of the marginalised from the ground up, build the capacity of civil society and support decentralised levels of government on the other.
- At policy level, a useful function which donors can perform is developing a better information base on the living conditions of different social groups and the barriers which they face in accessing services and opportunities and interacting with formal/informal decision-making institutions.
- Empowerment and equity derive from the political settlement within a society, which can only be changed by longer-term endogenous processes. Donors can support these processes, but it is important to recognise the limits to what both donors and civil society partners can achieve, particularly in the short-term time horizons of many donor programmes.

Introduction

This Good Practice Note discusses the benefits of a development agenda which focuses simultaneously on empowerment and equity, and suggests what such an agenda might look like. Achieving pro-poor growth depends upon enabling poor women and men to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from growth, meaning that poor and marginalised people must attain equitable access to jobs and markets, to the assets they need for productive activity, and to the services and/or transfers they need to enable them to seize economic and social opportunities. Currently poor people, and various other groups in society, face highly inequitable access to services, and to opportunities to increase their incomes and improve their lives. They pay severely for these inequities in their quality of life and life prospects. Greater equity in political opportunity is critical to enable the poor, women and oppressed groups to demand more inclusive, pro-poor and non-discriminatory policies.

Empowerment is key to the achievement of greater equity, and to enabling poor and marginalised people to break out of traps of poverty and inequality and play greater political, economic and cultural roles in society. At the same time, severe underlying inequities in access to income, services and growth opportunities must be tackled if people are to seize new opportunities, so the two must be dealt with hand in hand. Equity must be, alongside empowerment, at the forefront of donor activities.

This Good Practice Note approaches equity from the perspective of citizen-state relations, and does not cover equity within households or non-state institutions though these are important aspects. The second section briefly introduces the concepts of equity and empowerment and their interlinkages. The third part then deals in more depth with different aspects of equity which are critical for empowerment and pro-poor growth (namely, equity in economic opportunities, political voice and access to justice, access to public services, and non-discrimination/social inclusion). This Good Practice Note then sets out priorities and recommendations for donors wishing to develop strategies around equity and empowerment, identifying the different roles which donors can play in different contexts, and key areas for engagement. Examples of successful experiences are also given.

The section on policy coherence and global dimensions of equity briefly mentions the important role of other policies of donor countries in promoting global equity, notably trade and migration, though these are not dealt with in depth in this paper.

Equity and empowerment

Equity has its roots in the theory of moral equality, which states that all people should be treated as equals. At societal level, this translates into three core principles which should govern the distribution of goods and services and the way in which opportunities are awarded (Jones, 2009):

- equal life chances;
- equal concern for people's needs; and
- meritocracy.

In reality, an individual's life chances are largely determined by factors outside their control such as their place of birth, the wealth and education level of their parents, their gender and race. Goods and services are distributed preferentially to some groups over others, and political influence and social status tend to accrue to the wealthy, well-connected and well-educated in society. Equity is about levelling the playing field to achieve equality of opportunity, and relates to the social contract between a state and its citizens. While equity is often cast in economic and social terms, it also has important civil and political dimensions which relate to access to justice, political opportunity and redistribution of wealth.

It is important to distinguish the concepts of equity and equality. Equality refers to the distribution of goods or outcomes among individuals or groups, whereas equity is about fairness and the principles by which resources and opportunities are distributed in society (Jones, 2009). Complete equity in how people are treated is a desirable and, in principle, realisable goal. Complete equality in outcomes is not possible as there will always be differences in individuals' abilities, efforts, preferences and luck (World Bank, 2006), but a greater focus on equity and empowerment would go a long way to redress the vast inequality in life chances that characterises the world today.

Empowerment is defined as what "happens when people, individually or collectively, conceive of, define and pursue better lives for themselves. From a Pro-Poor Growth perspective, poor women and men need to change existing power relations and gain and exert influence over the political, economic and social processes that determine and, all too often, constrain their livelihood opportunities" (Policy Guidance Note, p. 19). Empowerment emerged as an important theme in development in the 1980s, in particular in relation to gender and women's empowerment. More recently the term has been used in relation to other marginalised groups. In the 1990s, "empowerment" became part of the language of mainstream development, although this has led to criticisms from some social movements that the term has been co-opted to refer to increasing participation of the poor or marginalised in existing structures, rather than the radical transformation of those structures (Luttrell and Quiroz, 2009).

Strategies to promote empowerment can be broadly divided into structure and agency approaches. Structural approaches focus on external forces which constrain people's actions and seek to change these, for example by tackling unfair privileges in society and reforming laws, policies or institutions that disadvantage certain groups. Agency approaches focus on

enabling the marginalised to drive change for themselves. This includes enhancing their ability to participate in decision making, supporting them to access skills, resources and markets, facilitating collective action, building confidence and raising awareness of rights.

Empowerment is something that comes from within, and cannot be achieved solely by the actions of outsiders. There are important roles for development agencies, however, in promoting societal change that supports empowerment and creates opportunities for the marginalised, through engagement with government on key public policy areas, support to civil society (and in particular networks that link civil society with the state), and the promotion of public debate with a conscious effort to reach marginalised groups (Eyben *et al.*, 2008). External actors can also play an important role in changing the mindsets of both the marginalised and the powerful, as a first step to empowerment (Luttrell and Quiroz, 2009).

Equity and empowerment are intimately linked. A focus on *equity* also means a focus on justice and power, because inequities both derive from, and serve to maintain, underlying power imbalances. Elites that benefit from inequitable laws and practices tend to use their greater power to defend the status quo, while poor and marginalised people are relatively powerless to demand fairer treatment or hold institutions to account. Approaches to tackling inequity must therefore involve efforts to promote empowerment of the poor and marginalised so that they are better equipped to make such demands. Promoting equity in access to social and political opportunity, justice systems and other accountability mechanisms is similarly at the heart of achieving empowerment. Equitable (free) discourse, access to justice and the rule of law create an enabling environment in which people can empower themselves and where civil society advocacy, independent media and other democratic processes have a chance to transform discriminatory structures and achieve social change.

Linking equity and empowerment for pro-poor growth

Economic empowerment underpins equity – and vice versa – as well as pro-poor growth

“When societies become more equitable the poor generally gain a double dividend”, according to the World Bank (2006), as *i*) they gain new opportunities to participate in growth and the development process, and *ii*) that process itself becomes faster and more resilient thanks to the positive effect of increased equality on a country’s pace of growth, quality of institutions and ability to manage conflicts.

Empowerment of more people to participate in markets and act entrepreneurially fosters pro-poor growth (Narayan, 2002). Conversely, the denial of economic opportunity not only causes direct harm by trapping people in poverty but also represents a waste of human potential which could contribute to growth. Economic empowerment of women in particular is critical. Where women are denied opportunities for skilled work because of social and cultural norms, women and girls suffer from wage inequality, lower job security and a high likelihood of intergenerational transmission of poverty, and the wasted opportunities for productive work by half the population place a drag on economic growth (OECD, 2006b).

Supporting economic empowerment means fostering an enabling environment that offers more equitable access to markets for jobs, land, goods and capital. Currently access is very inequitable across most of the world, and the poor face multiple barriers to

successfully participating in these markets. Those with assets are in a better position to determine the price at which they sell labour or goods or borrow credit, and are more able to take risks and seize new opportunities (UNDP, 2000). Access to decent, secure, well remunerated work in particular depends heavily on the level of formal education achieved and physical location (Good Practice Note 5. Decent work and empowerment for pro-poor growth). All of these problems are particularly severe for women, who in many places do not have equal rights to ownership and inheritance of property, are often in low paid jobs, and struggle to access financial services.

Inequitable access to infrastructure such as roads, electricity, irrigation and communication systems places a serious constraint on growth by limiting overall economic opportunity, and specifically reduces the pro-poor nature of growth. Providing infrastructure that matters for the poor reduces the costs and risks of doing business, increases the mobility of poor or remotely-located people enabling them to access centres of growth, and decreases inequality as marginalised areas become more connected to economic centres and service provision (OECD, 2006a). Not all infrastructure development brings benefits to poor people, however. Often vast shares of public investment budgets are spent on infrastructure investments that benefit only the rich, or help foreign companies to exploit the natural resources on which large numbers of poor people depend.

Key points: economic empowerment can lead to greater equity, and vice versa

Economic empowerment is a key prerequisite of an equity agenda supporting pro-poor growth. Allowing more people to participate in markets and act entrepreneurially fosters pro-poor growth, while the denial of economic opportunity traps people in poverty and limits growth.

- Poor people face multiple costs and risks in entering markets for jobs, land, goods and finance, making access very unequal. Providing economic security (*e.g.* through social protection, insurance or asset redistribution) enables the poor to enter markets at lower cost and brings faster, more pro-poor growth.

Economic activity of women is particularly critical for pro-poor growth. Where women are denied opportunities for skilled work and entrepreneurship, as well as causing suffering for women and girls the potential for half the population to contribute to growth is wasted.

Political voice and access to justice

A second dimension of equity and empowerment relates to political opportunity, representation and voice. Uneven economic and political playing fields tend to reinforce each other, as economic hardship reduces opportunity for political empowerment and the poor generally have a weak voice to change the status quo (World Bank, 2006). More broadly, unequal power in society leads to poorer quality institutions which perpetuate inequality in power, status and wealth, reflecting the interests of powerful elites. For this to change, marginalised people need support for empowerment to engage successfully in policy-making processes (OECD, 2006a). Broadening the policy debate in this way is likely to require “changes to the current political settlement between the diverse interests of different segments of society” (OECD, 2006a), so actors supporting empowerment must simultaneously engage the powerful and find ways to open up space for meaningful political involvement.

Equitable access to justice is part of the necessary enabling environment for pro-poor growth, and contributes to empowerment by increasing the freedom of marginalised people and protecting them from arbitrary treatment. In many countries, however, police and justice systems frequently “side with the rich, persecute poor people and make poor people more insecure, fearful and poorer” (UNDESA, 2005). Legal Empowerment of the Poor (LEP) is an approach which supports poor people in accessing legal institutions and services and has gained ground in recent years (Good Practice Note 6. Legal empowerment of the poor and its relation to pro-poor growth). LEP is a multi-level approach which includes bottom-up support to poor citizens and state reforms, and also involves a wide variety of non-state actors in efforts to promote the enhancement, awareness, enablement and enforcement of rights.

Both equity and empowerment are linked with the process of improving governance. Poor governance is usually bad for long-term growth as it is frequently linked with social and economic inequality. Conversely, high levels of equity are associated with trust and social cohesion, which tend to produce strong, resilient institutions and promote economic success. Empowerment can reduce corruption and promote accountability and transparency since it involves increasing people’s access to information, political processes, legal systems and complaints or dispute resolution mechanisms. Of course, improving governance also supports and sustains empowerment. In fact only when governance systems are functioning fairly and effectively is empowerment likely to be firmly established.

There are clear synergies between an agenda focused on political and legal freedoms, equity and empowerment, and a “rights-based approach” (RBA) to development. RBAs aim to “integrate the norms, standards and principles of the international human rights system into the plans, policies and processes of development” (UNHCHR, 2001). This means prioritising *equity*, as rights are universal, with particular attention to ensuring the rights of the marginalised and vulnerable and supporting *empowerment* of these groups to claim their rights. At the same time, equitable access to justice and accountability mechanisms, and the empowerment of all people to use them, is central to the realisation of rights (UNDP,

Box 7.1. Rights, freedom and links to Sen’s Capability Framework

The human rights agenda is underpinned by the idea that everyone should have equal rights and freedoms. Human rights have intrinsic values but also instrumental values in terms of driving development: the realisation of rights directly increases human development, which builds capacity (such as knowledge or good health) that in turn enables people to better claim other rights. Sen’s capabilities framework similarly seeks to understand human development by looking not just at outcomes (*e.g.* income or assets) but at people’s capability to make use of these assets to better their lives. The central idea is that people should have the freedom to act in ways which they deem important, and thus determine the course of their lives. These freedoms depend on capabilities such as good health, knowledge or education, ability to move around safely, and equal access to services. Poverty is then much more than a lack of income or assets but is defined as the deprivation of these freedoms, whether this derives from discrimination, oppression, or ignorance. Building human capabilities and freedoms is closely linked with empowerment. A focus on empowerment and equity – particularly equity in life chances and political/civil liberties and opportunities – will help to ensure that growth and poverty reduction do not only increase the incomes of the poor but address the multiple dimensions of poverty and deprivation.

Source: Clark, D.A. (2005), *The Capability Approach: Its Development, Critiques and Recent Advances*. GPRG-WPS-032, Global Poverty Research Group, University of Manchester, UK.

2000; Pieterse, 2010). The denial of rights, reflected in inequality in people's life chances, is an expression of unequal power and tackling this is a question of social justice as well as benefiting growth and poverty reduction. The 2000 Human Development Report makes a strong call for greater attention to rights in development.

Key points: Political voice and access to justice

- Countries are more likely to develop growth policies which are truly pro-poor if policy is developed out of a broad-based dialogue including groups relevant for economic activities of the poor, *e.g.* small farmers and the informal private sector. This may require engagement of the powerful to create space for dialogue, as well as support to help these groups to participate.
- Equitable access to justice and the rule of law are key parts of the necessary enabling environment for empowerment and pro-poor growth. Multi-pronged approaches such as Legal Empowerment of the Poor are likely to be most effective in promoting access to justice for all.
- There are synergies between an agenda focused on equity and empowerment and a rights-based approach to development. Equitable access to justice and accountability mechanisms is central to the realisation of rights for all, particularly the most marginalised.

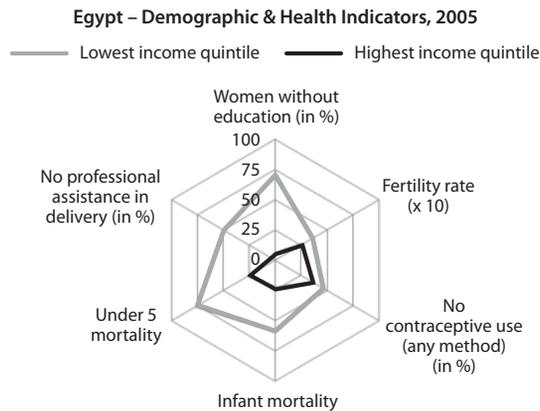
Equity in access to public services

Empowerment through the enhancement of political and economic opportunities for poor and marginalised people is critical, but people may be unable to take advantage of new opportunities if they face extreme poverty, physical insecurity or poor health, or lack basic education. Equitable access to public services for excluded groups is therefore critical for empowerment and poverty reduction. In much of the world, however, access to services is highly inequitable and the poor pay a higher price (whether in money, time or personal risk) to access services of lower quality than are available to the rich. Inequities in service provision may have proximate causes which do not seem to relate to power – such as resource constraints, geographic factors or ability to attract frontline staff to poor and remote areas – but they are underlain by political dynamics and power relations which need to be tackled in order to change the status quo. The human development outcomes of different income quintiles clearly demonstrate the impact of inequitable access to public services (Figure 7.1). Gender inequities are also significant; almost 70% of those living in extreme poverty in the world are women (DFID, 2005) and women face consistently lower access to public services.

Key points: Equity in public services

- More equitable access to public services for excluded groups must underpin empowerment and poverty reduction. Otherwise, many will be held back from seizing new economic or political opportunities by poor health, lack of education, physical insecurity or other factors, and face poor life chances as a result.
- However, in much of the world access to services is highly inequitable and the poor pay a higher price (in money, time or personal risk) to access services of lower quality than are available to the better-off. These inequities in service provision are ultimately underlain by power relationships which need to be tackled in order to change the *status quo*.

Figure 7.1. **Human development outcomes for the poorest and richest income quintile in Egypt, 2005**



Source: El-Zanaty, F. and A. Way (2006), *Egypt Demographic and Health Survey 2005*, Ministry of Health and Population, National Population Council, El-Zanaty and Associates and ORC Macro, Cairo.

Discrimination and social exclusion

Key points: Discrimination and social exclusion

- Groups which face discrimination in society generally have simultaneously low access to political, social and economic opportunities and benefits, a combination known as social exclusion. Social exclusion keeps people in an inequality trap, with high rates of intergenerational transmission of poverty.
- Social exclusion of particular groups, particularly where active discrimination takes place, is a leading cause of conflict, gang violence and insecurity. These in turn have direct effects on a country's economic and growth prospects. Group-based inequalities tend to be highly persistent and must be addressed through targeted interventions.

When a particular group faces discrimination in law or practice (either intentionally or due to a lack of awareness of their needs), its members are more likely to be poor and to be denied access to income, assets and services (DFID, 2005). Discrimination may be by gender, race, age, caste, class, disability, religion, sexual orientation, HIV status, migrant status or place of living. Because of the mutually reinforcing nature of different aspects of inequality, groups which face discrimination generally have simultaneously low access to political, social and economic opportunities and benefits, a combination adding up to social exclusion. When people face inequitable opportunities in multiple spheres of life, social mobility becomes very difficult and inequity traps are created in which poverty is passed on from generation to generation. Social exclusion is also a leading cause of conflict and insecurity. In sub-Saharan Africa the risk of ethnic war has been found to be ten times higher where one or more ethnic groups face active discrimination (DFID, 2005). Empowerment of excluded groups by tackling discrimination and addressing feelings of exclusion and alienation directly contributes to reducing the risk of violence, which people may otherwise adopt as a means to increase their power or income.

Priorities for donors

Empowerment and equity are best promoted through multiple strategies involving a mix of agency and structure approaches. Donors should work to enable bottom-up empowerment of poor, excluded and marginalised groups through targeted interventions, often with civil society partners, while at the same time advocating for, and helping governments to develop, more equitable laws, policies and institutions (formal and informal), and supporting the media, civil society and individual champions to do the same. Achieving change in policies, laws, and most importantly in the practices of formal and informal institutions is often difficult and slow, but donors must engage with states to this end and not rely on supporting civil society or marginalised groups alone (Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008).

Box 7.2 sets out the main activities which donors should adopt in order to promote equity and empowerment. These activities are complementary and should form part of an overall strategy including all four elements. The following sections discuss each area in turn and give examples of good practice.

Box 7.2. Key activities for donors

1. Work in dialogue with government at national, regional and local levels to promote more equitable and empowering laws, policies and institutions.
2. Fund projects (often working with civil society) to support empowerment of specific marginalised groups from the bottom up, and to pilot approaches to empowerment or equitable access to important resources (*e.g.* land, capital) or services (*e.g.* business information, judiciary systems). For maximum impact these activities should be linked with efforts to promote structural change, as part of a coherent strategy.
3. Support civil society and the media to advocate for greater social equity and empowerment of the marginalised.
4. Examine their own practices to ensure, at minimum, that they do not inadvertently undermine the goals of equity and empowerment.

Engage in pro-equity policy dialogue

Key public policy areas recommended for donor engagement are:

- public services and social protection for all
- economic opportunities for poor people
- redistribution of wealth
- analysis of distributional impacts of policies
- putting equity at the heart of poverty reduction programmes
- access to justice for all
- more accountable public institutions

Public services and social protection for all

Universalising access to public services is a crucial step. As well as extending coverage of services to underserved areas or groups, it is important to promote an adequate and consistent quality of services, and ensure that they are affordable to all. Wherever possible, essential services should be free at the point of delivery. This may involve strengthening the institutions and infrastructure they depend on, and ensuring law and order. Universal provision often needs to be accompanied by targeted action for disadvantaged groups, such as girls' education programmes and quotas for groups facing endemic discrimination. It is important to look at why people are excluded and take appropriate measures, *e.g.* teaching in local languages, removing the requirement for ID cards to access services, or making efforts to reduce stigma and prevent discrimination. Investing in human capacity through early childhood care and education (especially for women) in particular help to level the playing field and enable people to break out of poverty traps.

The extension of social protection coverage for all should be prioritised to maintain a basic level of welfare, preventing people falling into traps where poverty and inequality become chronic. There are also important synergies between social protection and equity-enhancing pro-poor growth; social protection enables poor people to take part in economic growth, take risks and invest in assets while protecting them in a downturn (Farrington *et al.*, 2007; OECD, 2009a, b). There are a wide variety of instruments for social protection which cannot be treated in depth here; for more discussion of these approaches, and how to make social protection most effective and equitable, see among others Barrientos (2007), Conway *et al.* (2000) and Holmes and Jones (2009).

Economic opportunities for poor people

Economic opportunities are at the heart of pro-poor growth and empowerment, and donors should work to support relevant policies. An important first step is to analyse patterns of growth and assess how different groups (*e.g.* poor people or women) are included or excluded, before developing appropriate measures to address inequities. Various tools exist to disaggregate the sources of growth, sectorally and spatially. In particular it is important to consider the constraints faced by microenterprises and the informal sector, as these are often critical for the poor but may not benefit from overall improvements to the business environment (Narayan, 2002).

There is no one set of policies which will lead to pro-poor growth in all settings; rather it requires the "progressive forging of a social contract in favour of pro-poor growth between the state, private sector and civil society" (Narayan, 2002), which will depend upon experimentation and lesson-learning. This is inevitably a long term, endogenous process and donors should recognise the limits to what they can do to bring about such a contract. However donors should continue to promote policies which favour more equitable growth, and where necessary targeted support to help certain groups access new opportunities, *e.g.* cash for work schemes or vouchers for business development services, as equal opportunities are often not enough to tackle entrenched social exclusion (Bowles *et al.*, 2007). Economically lagging regions also often require targeted interventions.

Redistribution of wealth

Redistribution directly improves equity by reducing inequality. Measures include progressive taxation (particularly lowering the tax on essential goods), redistributive public spending, and policies which safeguard the most vulnerable such as a minimum wage and

legal rights for tenants and workers. Land reform is also an important form of redistribution, and improving security of tenure is critical. The case of Brazil shows how effective redistributive public policy can be at reducing inequality: it has been estimated that an increase in the minimum wage, pension contributions and benefits for those unable to work, alongside direct cash transfers to the poorest families, reduced inequality by 0.2 Gini points per year from 1995 onwards (Veras Soares *et al.*, 2006).

Assess the distributional impacts of policies

It is important to consider the distributional impacts of all new policies or policy packages, to ensure that their impacts are progressive or at least neutral. Donors should call for such analysis, and offer technical support where needed. It is widely accepted that the distributional impacts of policies should be made public knowledge, to create a culture of accountability (UNDP Human Development Report, 2000; World Bank World Development Report, 2006). Making exclusion visible is the first step to tackling it (Narayan, 2002).

The World Bank's Poverty and Social Impact Analysis (PSIA) and the *ex ante* Poverty Impact Assessment developed by the OECD DAC are two tools that have been developed to assess the distributional impacts of policies, programmes and projects (Ludi, 2007; OECD, 2007). Such analyses can also be a good way to open a policy debate around equity and social exclusion and bring these issues into the open (DFID, 2005). There are also various participatory methods to assess the distributional impacts of policy, such as social budget initiatives and gender-sensitive budgets. Gender-sensitive budgeting analyses both expenditure and methods of raising money for their particular impacts on women and girls, and at the same time seeks to increase participation of women in budget debates (UNDP, n.d.). Gender-sensitive budget analysis and similar tools also enhance accountability, as they can be used to check whether budget allocations are in line with policy commitments and are having their intended impact.

Putting equity at the heart of poverty reduction programmes

Policies and programmes for poverty reduction – where donors often have a high level of influence – should include a specific goal on reducing inequality (UNDESA, 2005). Marginalised groups and those facing discrimination should be given particular consideration, as experience shows that poverty reduction policies often fail to reach excluded groups unless they are specifically designed to do so (DFID, 2005).

Access to justice for all

Donors should support universal access to justice, with particular attention to the needs of the poor and any groups facing exclusion and discrimination. This requires measures within the justice sector, *e.g.* promotion of legal aid and piloting innovations such as mobile courts or working with customary institutions, but also a broader effort to improve citizens' understanding of their rights and how to claim them, and work in other sectors (for example public services) to promote the enforcement of rights.

More accountable public institutions

Donors should promote greater transparency and accountability of public institutions. This may require changes in institutional culture and mindsets, which donors can champion in policy dialogue, though such changes are hard to impose. Donors should also support the

development of good institutional governance procedures in general, and promote specific measures which improve accountability and responsiveness to marginalised groups. This could mean making information about citizens' rights, institutional performance and complaints procedures available in more accessible ways, but also includes promoting access to justice for all.

Success in promoting pro-equity reforms will depend on donors playing a range of strategic, context-specific roles based on a good understanding of power relations and the political economy of change. Donors should play the following roles in their relationship with government:

- build capacity to address the needs of marginalised people;
- analyse power relations at national and decentralised levels;
- challenge unequal power in public institutions and support reformists;
- in decentralised contexts, foster inclusive local governance and support intermediary institutions;
- In fragile states, maintain dialogue and use aid in conflict-sensitive ways to build human capabilities;
- recognise the limits to donor influence, but continue to bring equity concerns to the table.

Build capacity to address the needs of marginalised people

Governments often lack good information on the barriers and challenges faced by marginalised groups in accessing services and opportunities. In many cases there is a dearth of core data on who is accessing services, which is needed to establish whether access is equitable and which people are excluded. Donors should help to fill these gaps by building capacity for collecting, analysing and using this information, and then support inclusive deliberation processes to determine how to address identified inequities and challenges. Donors should also play a role in analysing and sharing international experience in this area.

Analyse power relations at national and decentralised levels

Donor strategies for influencing public policy must be informed by a sound political economy analysis of the power relations which underlie inequitable policies and practices. Achieving change depends on understanding who holds the power to change policies and practices, and the incentives which they face. Analytical work can help to identify where power is located and how it is exercised at different levels, remembering that power may not always be visible. Informal institutions and practices should be included in the analysis, as they are often as important for decision-making and the exercise of power as formal ones.

Challenge unequal power in public institutions

Following power analysis, donors can play an important role in challenging unequal power relations embedded in the practices of government. Donors should encourage new ways to enhance the participation of excluded groups in policymaking and budgeting, as this in itself starts to rebalance the power equation, although it is important to go beyond superficial "participation", such as public meetings where participants have no real

influence (DFID, 2005). Attempts to tackle unequal power relations must extend to informal institutions and practices which perpetuate inequity and disempowerment. While promoting the use of more formal approaches to enhance transparency and accountability, donors also need to get better at understanding and engaging with the informal (Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008).

Donors should not rely on their own influence in dialogue forums, but support reformists in government. Empowerment needs champions among the powerful if any space is to be opened up for the marginalised, and donors must identify and support change-makers and influential reformists (within or outside government) as much as in civil society and marginalised groups themselves. DFID (2005) argues that “wider alliances” for change are needed, which go beyond marginalised or excluded groups to include middle classes and parts of the elite who support the equity agenda. There are societal benefits of greater equity (e.g. reduced crime and risk of conflict), and these arguments may help convince some elites to support a pro-equity agenda.

In decentralised contexts, foster inclusive local governance and support intermediary institutions

Donors are increasingly working with local governments in decentralised contexts. Decentralisation has the potential to enhance both empowerment and equity, by bringing decisions closer to the people. This can increase participation in local politics, strengthen accountability and also improve the political representation of minority groups (Good Practice Note 3. Empowerment through local citizenship, and Dom, 2010). However, there is no guarantee that decentralisation will improve governance and accountability or that local government will automatically be more democratic or inclusive of minorities. Checks and balances remain very important. “Effective decentralisation requires an effective state” (DFID, 2010), and decentralisation is not a solution to governance problems at national level. In fact the capacity of local government institutions may be lower than at national level, so even if there is a will to engage the marginalised support may be needed.

Donors must be aware of these risks and take steps to mitigate them, by ensuring they have a good understanding of local power relations and institutions. Donors should work to increase their understanding of local governance and support intermediary institutions (which may often be informal) which play a role in mediating between poor communities and local government. See Box 7.5 for an example of this from Nepal.

In fragile states, maintain dialogue and use aid in conflict-sensitive ways to build human capabilities

Almost a third of the world’s poor live in fragile states with weak rule of law and poor governance (OECD, 2006a). Aid can be a critical catalyst for change in these contexts and donors should stay involved and seek ways to strengthen policy dialogue and build the capacity of oversight institutions, while directing resources towards services and infrastructure to build human capabilities (OECD, 2006a and McLean *et al.*, 2010). If governments are not interested in equity or empowerment, donors should at least bring these issues into policy dialogue. An explicit focus on equity is particularly important in conflict-affected areas, to avoid the risk that aid inadvertently exacerbates tensions between groups or communities. Donors should adopt conflict-sensitive approaches based on good context analysis.

Recognise the limits to donor influence

It must be remembered that donor-government relations vary considerably between countries, and that this sets the parameters of both what donors are permitted to do and the degree of leverage which they have (Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008). Where donors have a dominant role in policy dialogue, as may occur in highly aid-dependent countries, opportunities for influence are high but there is a risk that the government-donor relationship undermines or bypasses domestic accountability and policymaking processes. Donors need to be careful when they hold this much power.

Link bottom-up empowerment activities with policy engagement

Donors can play an important role in developing and supporting initiatives to **facilitate the empowerment** of marginalised groups, promote equity or tackle social exclusion from the ground up, for example:

- raising awareness about rights and how to claim them (for example how to become legally registered, how to access services and resources, how to engage with the legal system);
- building confidence and support for minorities to participate in local politics;
- providing support for inclusive community organisations/forums to discuss equity issues.

Such measures should always be linked with influencing efforts at higher levels. Multi-level strategies will maximise impact and help ensure that structures provide the kind of opportunities which people are supposedly becoming empowered to exploit. Job training may require job creation in rural areas to lead to economic empowerment, for example, while increasing girls' education will have much greater impact if women are later permitted to own assets, work, and contribute to household decision making. This may require changes at different levels in laws, policies and mindsets. There are links here with the experience of proponents of a RBA to development, which has established that promoting rights involves both a struggle to empower rights-holders to claim their rights and efforts to push and enable duty-bearers, particularly the state, to fulfil their obligations (Boesen and Martin 2007; DFID, 2006b; Foresti and Ludi, 2007).

Bottom-up agency-based approaches in isolation seldom lead to real change in power relations or to more equitable and accountable governance. A joint evaluation of a large sample of donor programmes for citizens' voice and accountability (Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008) found that many projects focusing on voice succeeded in improving the livelihoods of particular groups at local level and increasing their representation in local forums, but that there were relatively few cases where this led to transformation of local institutions. Donors should therefore not expect "bottom-up" empowerment efforts alone to bear fruit in terms of policy change in the short term. Supporting marginalised groups is often easier than engaging governments in dialogue about governance reform, but the two must go hand in hand.

To give examples from the field of gender equality, a donor strategy might include several of the following elements: ensuring that gender perspectives are an integral part of the legislation; allocating specific amounts of funding to women's development plans; raising awareness of gender issues at all levels of government; increasing women's participation and due representation in decision-making bodies beyond the local level; strengthening networks; and addressing structural and cultural barriers to allow women to genuinely participate in

governance. USAID's Gender Equality Framework (GEF) is an example of an approach which focuses explicitly on women's empowerment and gender equity, and goes beyond equitable service provision to look at outcomes and the opportunities available for women in society (Box 7.3).

Box 7.3. The Gender Equality Framework

The GEF explicitly links equity and empowerment in relation to gender equality in education. It is based on the idea that "*achieving gender equality necessitates a transformation of the power dynamics between boys and girls*". This reflects recognition that improving girls' education will do little to improve opportunities for women if women remain marginalised and powerless in society.

Many of the measures proposed relate to empowerment, for example that schools themselves should "challenge harmful gender norms". The GEF also provides a "continuum of approaches" – an operational tool to identify interventions that will have most impact on transforming gender relations and achieving gender equality. It categorises strategies as:

- aggravating: creates, exacerbates or ignores gender inequalities in pursuit of project objectives;
- accommodating: maintains existing gender dynamics and roles while pursuing project objectives;
- transforming: seeks to actively change gender inequalities; create positive, healthy relationships between males and females; and promote gender equality while achieving project objectives.

Donors must not be naïve in expecting that poor or marginalised people, once they gain greater voice, will necessarily use their influence in favour of pro-equity policies. The example of a project to increase women's political participation in Burkina Faso (Box 7.4) shows how engaging men and building consensus across genders and political parties contributed to success in increasing women's political representation and confidence. However, not all of these women were interested in using their position to tackle social equality issues, as the project had intended.

Box 7.4. Strengthening women's participation in political processes in Burkina Faso

From 2005-08, The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) supported the programme Strengthening women's participation in political and decentralisation processes in Burkina Faso'. This programme worked from the individual level upwards, combining grassroots awareness-raising and capacity building with efforts to change practice at national level. The programme trained women leaders from political parties, community organisations and the public administration, building their capacity to participate in political life. Training and dialogue forums were also established to discuss issues around women's political equality, for example the fact that women had no right to speak at local councils. Finally a national NGO consultation group on women's political participation was established which undertakes advocacy to sensitise political parties.

Box 7.4. Strengthening women's participation in political processes in Burkina Faso (continued)

The final evaluation of the programme concluded that it had been successful in building the confidence of women in political life, and that training at community level enabled many women to become involved in women's empowerment activities. The programme's ability to build a broad alliance in favour of change at national level at the same time as building the capacity of women was a key success factor, in particular:

- the involvement of men such as customary chiefs in the dialogue process;
- working across political parties in a neutral way.

In addition, the programme benefited from being relevant to Burkina Faso's political vision at the time.

However, increased participation of women did not lead to the reduction in corruption and greater focus on gender inequality in political debates that donors had expected. Some women acted corruptly, and many were motivated by personal ambition as much as social goals.

This highlights an important lesson, that broadening participation in decision-making does not automatically lead to a more equitable political settlement or better development outcomes. Marginalised "groups" are heterogeneous sets of people with their own interests, and will rarely offer a united pro-equity voice.

Source: Clark, D.A. (2005), *The Capability Approach: Its Development, Critiques and Recent Advances*. GPRG-WPS-032, Global Poverty Research Group, University of Manchester, UK.

Box 7.5. Linking empowerment and equitable access to resources: experiences from Nepal

The Danida-funded Dalit/Janjati Empowerment Campaign, funded by the Danish International Development Agency (Danida) supported marginalised *dalits* (lower caste people) and *janjatis* (indigenous people) to exercise their citizen rights and thus secure better livelihoods. The project worked through "social families" – inclusive community groups which are open to all – at village level, to provide training on rights, establish micro-finance groups, support applications for citizenship certificates and other empowerment activities. Members of social families reported that their lives had changed as a result of the programme. Awareness of rights led to more concrete demands being made of local government (for example citizenship registration and a roof for a community building). By gaining legal citizenship, *dalits* and *janjatis* were able to access land for the first time, improving their income and livelihood security. *Dalits* reported a reduction in discrimination in their communities, increased school enrolment and better access of to worship areas. Success factors identified by an evaluation were:

- The social family concept, which crosses group divides to promote integration;
- The fact that voice was linked with access to resources, sharpening the focus of an empowerment project and demanding accountability from local government;
- A strong CSO partner able to connect with local governments and advocate on the behalf of communities, with their trust.

Box 7.5. Linking empowerment and equitable access to resources: experiences from Nepal (continued)

The second project, Poverty Alleviation in Selected Rural Areas of Nepal (funded by BMZ), focused first on economic improvements in poor rural areas, such as road-building, microfinance, and the introduction of new agricultural products. The establishment of participatory learning groups then enabled discussion of rights and social issues. The project had considerable success in increasing income and food security, mainly by improving market access, and social exclusion of *dalits* was reduced by including them in project activities, that supported improvement of their economic and social position.

These two projects reflect slightly different approaches to linking equity in economic opportunity and empowerment, but the success of both lay in the fact that these two issues were tackled hand in hand, allowing them to reinforce one another

Source: Danish International Development Agency (Danida) (2008), *Nepal country case study. Citizens' voice and accountability evaluation*, http://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/binaries/evaluation_cva_nepal_en_tcm312-64806.pdf.

Multi-pronged approaches to promoting equity and empowerment need to be carefully planned and sequenced based on an analysis of the constraints faced by marginalised groups. Interventions to improve the welfare of the marginalised may be needed before they can seize economic or political opportunities (though improving welfare alone is unlikely to be very empowering). At the same time, marginalisation and discrimination are often expressed through denial of access to services and critical economic resources, such as land. In such cases empowerment activities must go hand in hand with efforts to improve the economic condition and wellbeing of the marginalised. Box 7.5 gives examples of two projects in Nepal which combined local economic development and equitable access to resources with efforts to empower marginalised *dalits* (low castes) and *janjatis* (indigenous people). One took empowerment as a starting point, while one focused first on economic improvements. These projects illustrate the importance of linking these concepts for greater and more sustainable impact, and again highlight the importance of building alliances across groups in favour of tackling discrimination, rather than working only with those who are discriminated against.

Support civil society and the media

In addition to working with governments, donors should support civil society and independent media as a central part of a programme focused on equity and empowerment. When civil society and the media are strong and professional, they can advocate effectively for change, mobilise people around equity goals and hold politicians to public account. Civil society organisations often play an important role in delivering services where the state does not, for example in conflict-affected areas or slums, in supporting excluded groups to exercise their rights and obtain redress if denied, and in helping to change attitudes, promote debate and challenge discrimination (DFID, 2005). CSOs can also help to forge greater links between government and marginalised communities or groups and improve local governance (*ibid*). Donors should support these important functions, and help foster networks and organisations that link civil society and government in constructive dialogue and partnership (Eyben *et al.*, 2008).

Donors may also wish to directly support membership-based organisations for poor people, such as small farmer organisations or women’s groups, and their networks. These groups will be able to engage more effectively with local government and markets if they are well organised and have access to some resources, and hence have a higher chance of having their needs met. When they are able to link together and federate through networks, they gain bargaining power and have a chance to influence government at regional or national levels (Narayan, 2002, 2002).

Where governments are resistant to an equity agenda or do not wish to engage with donors, civil society may be the main or only actors donors can work with. In such situations donors should support civil society to undertake effective advocacy for change, including conducting power/political economy analysis, enhancing the voice and capabilities of the most marginalised, and developing strategies for influence. Vene Klasek and Miller (2007), for example, provides tools and guidance on advocacy “for people and organisations grappling with issues of power, politics and exclusion”. However, it is important to remember that in some contexts organisations may be shut down or staff imprisoned for engaging in advocacy activities. Donors must be sensitive to these risks and decide how best to use their influence and support in such situations. It remains important to support and build up civil society and the media even when their activities are highly constrained, so that these organisations survive difficult periods and are able to take advantage of opportunities for influence or policy engagement when they eventually arise.

Donors must also remember the risk that civil society organisations can be captured by interest groups which are not necessarily representative of marginalised groups or communities, or which may be primarily interested in their own empowerment. Civil society partners should be chosen carefully, as in some countries organisations have sprung up seeking to take advantage of donor funds, while others have diversified from service delivery into advocacy without necessarily having the skills or policy experience to be effective. Donors should ensure that partners are experienced (although capacity building can be provided in new areas) and have good links with the grassroots, particularly marginalised and isolated groups. There is evidence that working with non-traditional civil society groups such as religious groups, social movements and trade unions groups can be effective, although this is not widespread practice among donors. In Indonesia, for example, working with Islamic mass-based organisations has opened new doors for donors as these organisations have good links with the grassroots, greater traction with local government than NGOs, and a high level of legitimacy and popularity in the population (Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008). Such groups should be considered on a case-by-case basis as there is a risk that they represent specific interest groups other than marginalised groups, but donors should be open to working with a broad array of civil society partners.

Examine and improve donors’ own practices

Finally, donors should examine their own practices and programmes from an equity perspective, and pay attention to their own place in the power dynamics of countries where they work. This means donors must:

- ensure that no activities undermine equity and empowerment;
- build internal analytical capacity;
- promote participation of the marginalised in development programmes, but with care;
- work through formal governance and decision making forums.

Ensure that no activities undermine equity and empowerment

Not all donor programmes may actively promote equity and empowerment, but they should never undermine it. Donors should pay particular attention to gender and support empowerment of women and other marginalised groups throughout their programmes, and ensure that none of their work inadvertently reinforces power imbalances and exclusion. Contractors and partners should be expected to follow best practice in terms of inclusion. Mainstreaming important concepts such as gender equality into programmes is a way to avoid inadvertent negative impacts, but it is important to retain targeted programmes as well. Tackling social exclusion in particular requires targeted interventions for marginalised groups, as a general commitment to include them in development programmes is not usually enough to undo the multiple barriers and power imbalances which they face (Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008).

Build internal analytical capacity

Donors need to get better at understanding and monitoring the impact of their programmes on different groups. Baselines are an important component of this, but are often lacking (DFID, 2006a). In order to design effective strategies for empowerment, donors may first need to strengthen their own internal capacity for power and political economy analysis. However, evaluations have found that converting the insights from these analyses into effective practice and programming is often the biggest gap, rather than the ability to conduct the research (CIDA, 2008; Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008).

Promote participation of marginalised people in development programmes, but with care

Participation can contribute to empowerment by building the capacity of marginalised people and increasing their voice in decision making. However, participation must be based on a good understanding of local power dynamics, as there is a risk that superficial participatory processes may entrench and even offer legitimacy to existing power imbalances. It is also important to be realistic about how transformative participation processes are likely to be; at the very least they must avoid simply placing further demands on the time and resources of already disadvantaged people and groups.

Work through formal governance and decision-making forums

Donors should support processes for policy making that include poor people and which are formal, transparent and accountable, and then should make sure that they work through these processes themselves in order to strengthen them and set an example. When donors make decisions and implement programs through parallel, non-formal or behind-the-scenes procedures, they undermine domestic democratic channels and the long-term goal of empowerment.

Priorities for donors working on equity and empowerment are summarised in Box 7.6, based on the discussion above.

Box 7.6. Priorities for donors working on equity and empowerment

Engage the state in pro-equity policy dialogue to promote:

- public services and social protection for all;
- economic opportunities for poor people;
- redistribution of wealth;
- analysis of distributional impacts of policies;
- putting equity at the heart of poverty reduction programmes;
- access to justice for all;
- more accountable public institutions.

Maximise impact by:

- building capacity to address the needs of marginalised people;
- analysing power relations at national and decentralised levels;
- challenging unequal power in public institutions and support reformists;
- in decentralised contexts, fostering inclusive local governance and supporting intermediary institutions;
- linking bottom-up empowerment activities with policy engagement;
- supporting a strong, independent civil society and media, and fostering links between civil society and government;
- in fragile states, maintaining dialogue and using aid in conflict-sensitive ways to build human capabilities;
- recognising the limits to donor influence, but continuing to bring equity concerns to the table.

Examine and improve donors' own practices, in particular:

- ensuring that no activities undermine equity and empowerment;
- promoting participation of marginalised people in development programmes, but with care;
- building internal analytical capacity;
- working through formal governance and decision-making forums.

Policy coherence and global dimensions of equity

Finally, aid is not the only instrument which donor countries should use to promote greater global equity. Although not the focus of this note, poverty reduction in low-income countries depends not just on domestic policies but on global governance, access to global markets, opportunities for international migration and patterns of investment by wealthier nations (OECD, 2006a; World Bank, 2006; UNDESA, 2005). More open immigration policies in rich countries, opening up of international markets to products from developing countries and more

investment in research that could improve the lives of poor people (medical research is currently highly skewed towards the diseases of rich countries, for example) would make a considerable contribution to tackling the huge global inequalities which exist. This would require both greater attention to international equity by governments of wealthy countries, and simultaneous empowerment of low-income nations in international forums, such as trade negotiations where rich countries have large numbers of permanent lawyers and negotiators working in their interest, and the poorest have few or none. More detailed discussion of the need for greater policy coherence among OECD countries is available in Dayton-Johnson and Katseli (2006).

Conclusions

Equity and empowerment underpin poverty reduction, and are particularly important in tackling severe and intransigent chronic poverty and inequality. They are also important in their own right, and accord with internationally recognised principles of human rights and social justice. By focusing on these twin concepts, development agencies can make a meaningful contribution to human development. Equity and empowerment are also good starting points when it comes to the need to improve “enabling environments” for poverty reduction and pro-poor growth – often a vaguely defined concept – as they relate to improving access to opportunities in society and enhancing democratic processes.

In practice, this means engaging governments in pro-equity policy dialogue and challenging discrimination and structural barriers to empowerment on one side, and working to support empowerment of the marginalised from the ground up, build the capacity of civil society and support decentralised levels of government on the other. Different approaches will be more effective in different contexts, and multi-pronged strategies are necessary. There are few easy answers, but donors have an advantage here in that they are likely to be in a strong position to engage the powerful as well as the powerless. One of the main lessons emerging from donor experience to date is that building broad alliances for change is critical. This means not just working with marginalised people but identifying, cultivating and supporting champions within powerful groups, and seeking to break down barriers between social groups. Working with non-traditional partners which cut across social and economic groupings may be one way to do this, and fostering networks and intermediary institutions is also important. It is also important to consider sequencing of interventions. Improving the welfare of disadvantaged groups, for example, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for empowerment. Experiences suggest that linking empowerment activities with concrete economic or livelihood outcomes creates an effective combination for lasting impact.

Bottom-up approaches are vital but need to be combined with efforts to change discriminatory or inequitable structures for wider impact. At policy level, a useful function which donors can perform is developing a better information base on the living conditions of different social groups and the barriers which they face in accessing services and opportunities and interacting with formal/informal decision-making institutions. Governments often lack this kind of disaggregated information, and it is needed to design effective strategies to enable excluded groups to overcome the barriers they face. Donors should also support disaggregated analysis of policy and public spending impacts on different groups (as well as donor programme impacts) to assist governments to design more equitable policies, and/or to provide evidence for advocacy activities by donors and civil society and support citizens’ demands for accountability. Providing support to civil society and the media also has great potential, as these actors can drive social change, but also carries risks (of danger to partners, as well as capture or the lack of professionalism or capacity of civil society and media in many countries) that donors need to be aware of and make efforts to mitigate.

In decentralised contexts, it is particularly important that donors work at regional or local level to support dialogue processes between local government and communities, particularly inclusion of the marginalised. This means paying much greater attention to informal institutions which mediate between citizens and local authorities, including so-called “traditional institutions”. However, donors must be aware of the risk of capture of democratic processes by interest groups; such institutions may not have an inclusive agenda. Where donors are supporting decentralisation processes, this must include support for democratisation at the same time.

It is important to recognise the limits to what both donors and civil society partners can achieve, particularly in the short-term time horizons of many donor programmes. Empowerment and equity relate to the political settlement of a society, and this can only be changed by longer-term endogenous processes, not by the actions of outsiders. Donors can contribute a lot to support, facilitate and encourage the process, but must recognise that the impacts of their actions are likely to be slow and uneven. Consistent, systematic long-term support is therefore essential. It is also critical to undertake good analysis and assess options for influence, and to avoid over-optimistic assumptions. For example, while empowerment of the marginalised and increased societal equity should ultimately be mutually reinforcing, it should not be assumed that marginalised groups, once they gain greater voice, will necessarily speak out for more progressive policies or social justice. Empowerment of excluded groups to participate in decision-making does not necessarily translate into pro-equity structural change.

Finally, a focus on equity and empowerment means that donors should examine all their interventions through this lens. Some activities may not contribute explicitly to these goals, but they should at least avoid creating or exacerbating inequities and power imbalances. Explicit attention to equity and empowerment would reduce the likelihood of unforeseen negative effects, and place principles of fairness and social justice clearly at the heart of development agencies’ work.

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