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*The present issue of the Global Cooperation Newsletter is devoted to highlighting some key issues considered at the 52<sup>nd</sup> session of the Commission for Social Development, which took place from 11 to 21 February at UN Headquarters in New York. The ICSW actively participated in the work of the Commission, making both oral and written statements. We also co-organized three side-events convened during the work of the Commission and participated in the Civil Society Forum on 10 February, which preceded the work of the Commission. More information about the work of the Commission for Social Development is available at:*

*<http://undesadspd.org/CommissionforSocialDevelopment/Sessions/2014.aspx>*

*The Editor*

**Featured article:**

- **Promoting empowerment of people: ways and means**

**By Wenyan Yang**

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Empowerment is emerging as a central theme in development discourse. As a principle, it is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and various international conventions and declarations (for example, the Declaration of Social Progress and Development, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Future We Want, to name just a few). As an “applied” concept, it was initially associated with the promotion of gender equality. Its rising prominence in the discourse of development is reflected, perhaps paradoxically, in the fact that scholars and organizations in the field of

development have been using the term in various contexts, which has lead, allegedly, to over 30 definitions (see Fraser 2010)<sup>1</sup>.

That popularity grew partly out of the re-thinking of approaches to development. Increasingly, the role of people as agents of change and the importance of participatory process and institutions in enabling change has been recognized. This has resulted in a re-focusing of global development efforts towards creating enabling environments for people, especially the people whose lives these efforts are supposed to improve, making them part of the decision-making rather than mere passive objects to be affected by policy.

In general, empowerment has been used mostly in the context of increasing the resources, assets and capabilities of disadvantaged and marginalized social groups to engage and exercise greater choice and control over their own development. It is also widely acknowledged that as an approach to development, empowerment should go beyond often fragmented group-specific measures to encompass a coherent agenda focusing on improving people's well-being.

It is commonly recognized that empowerment is a long-term dynamic process affected by and resulting in changes in norms, values, rules, institutions, behavior and social relations. This process involves the strengthening and expansion of the capabilities and resources of citizens, as well as the creation of an enabling environment that includes institutions and mechanisms of effective participation. Furthermore, it has been shown that empowerment does not by itself ensure desired outcomes, it has to be complemented by capable and responsive decision-makers whom empowered citizens can hold accountable.

### **People's empowerment and social development**

Empowerment of people is critical to achieving poverty eradication, full and productive employment, and social integration, the three core objectives of social development as defined by the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development. Policies and strategies to promote empowerment will advance those objectives, while measures to further social development also reinforce and advance the empowerment of people.

The Commission for Social Development focused its attention on "Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all" during its 2013-2014 cycle, and adopted the first intergovernmental resolution on that theme in February 2014.

### **Toward a working definition of empowerment**

While the empowerment of people refers to "increasing the resources, assets and capabilities of marginalized social groups to exercise greater choice and control over their own development.", there are some key aspects of empowerment that are most relevant to social development. These key dimensions of empowerment could be summarized as follows:

Social empowerment refers to the capacity of individuals and groups to foster the relationships and institutional interactions necessary for well-being and productivity. It is the process of cultivating self-confidence and a sense of autonomy by the marginalized and of taking actions collectively or individually to effect change in social relations and in the institutions and processes that exclude

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This popularity has resulted in some to even argue that "empowerment" has become a "buzzword" whose meaning are not well defined, thus leading to confusion and difficulty in its operationalization.

social groups and keep them in poverty. That aspect of people's empowerment is closely linked to social integration and poverty eradication. It raises awareness and builds the capabilities of people for participation.

Economic empowerment enables disadvantaged and marginalized populations, through access to jobs and livelihoods as well as basic entitlements, to exert greater control over their resources and choices in areas such as health, housing and education. Economic empowerment is not only critical to poverty eradication and the promotion of productive employment and decent work, it is also instrumental in strengthening the participation of disadvantaged and marginalized people and groups in decision-making. Experiences have demonstrated the self-confidence-boosting and autonomy-raising effects of earning income among women and other generally disadvantaged and marginalized groups and individuals. Individuals and communities with access to and control over resources, including income and natural resources, have greater ability to engage in political and social processes. Moreover, economic empowerment plays an important role in facilitating social integration through participation in economic activities that create a sense of belonging and involvement.

Political empowerment refers to a population's ability to influence processes and decisions that affect their well-being. Promoting responsive governance and enabling citizen participation are considered to be part of the realm of political empowerment. Promoting political participation is an important pathway to empowering people and increasing government accountability and responsiveness. This often involves improving democratic institutions and processes (including the decentralization of power), expanding access to information, facilitating citizens' engagement with decision-making processes individually and collectively, and promoting public participation in the planning and delivery of social services.

Legal empowerment concerns strengthening individuals' abilities to exercise their rights and the institutional capacity to respond to the needs of people. Empowerment of disadvantaged social groups, such as women, youth, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and older persons, also requires the elimination/amendment of discriminatory laws and provisions and improved access to justice and legal instruments.

### **Policies and strategies to promote people's empowerment**

Empowerment is a process with mutually-supporting components. It requires an enabling environment that supports policies, a capable and informed population and a change in attitude. Experience shows that empowerment is necessary for sustained poverty reduction. In fact, simply allocating a certain portion of a national budget has proven to be insufficient for national poverty reduction strategies to be sustainable. It requires empowerment of people by involving them in the decision-making process to improve their own lives. Such a people-centered approach gives people choices, enables them to claim their rights but also makes them accountable for their actions.

This calls for the formulation and implementation of ***inclusive and comprehensive policies and strategies*** that are consistent with international norms and contextualized to suit national development priorities and circumstances. The following are some common elements that have been shown to be effective, thus, should be considered by national governments and their international partners.

Strengthening ***human capacities*** is necessary for people's empowerment. Investment in quality education and skills-training opportunities, particularly for young people, as well as basic health care, is essential for empowerment and improved livelihoods. In addition to political will and the provision of adequate financial resources, concrete and practical measures that are appropriate for the national and local context are also needed to remove cultural and physical barriers to full access to educational opportunities and other essential social services.

**Social protection** further helps individuals and families build human capital, as well as other assets, and improve their livelihood prospects, thereby empowering them socially and economically. Social protection systems should be developed progressively so as to ensure sustainability, as levels of coverage and benefits can be expanded over time and remain effective in empowering people. When well organized and with due consideration of its sustainability, social protection can lead to greater socio-economic equalities, equal opportunities, equal access to social services and broad-based participation.

**A well-functioning labour market** is needed for employment creation, empowerment and poverty eradication. In order to promote decent work that economically empowers people, economic growth and good governance must be accompanied by employment generation, which, in turn, needs functioning markets (including a labour market) and a robust private sector. In particular, an enabling environment should be created to support job-rich economic growth, open markets and increased opportunities for all. It involves the development of a favourable regulatory framework for enterprise and entrepreneurship development and investment in people and infrastructure, including connectivity. At the same time, macroeconomic policy should include employment promotion as one of its objectives. Empowerment through economic institutions such as cooperatives also contributes to the creation of decent employment as well as poverty reduction and social integration.

**Information and communication technologies (ICTs)** contribute to multiple dimensions of empowerment. Public policies on information and communication technologies should foster wider use of ICTs. Such policies should include the development of technology infrastructure and public access, engagement in public-private partnerships, and the promotion of content in indigenous and local languages.

**Strong, responsive and efficient institutions** provide the tools and mechanisms necessary for the full participation of all citizens. This involves putting people at the centre of decision-making processes, creating the conditions for people to exercise choice and freedom, including efficient administration, institutionalized procedures and processes, as well as investment in infrastructure and technology.

**The legal framework** ensures access to justice and constitutes an important enabler to empowerment. In that regard, international legal instruments help to transform national policies, legal frameworks and strategies. It is important to prioritize the implementation of internationally-agreed programmes of action, conventions and norms in the national context through the removal of social, political, legal and economic barriers to meaningful participation by all members of society, especially with regard to disadvantaged groups. Birth registration has been proven to be critical for members of disadvantaged groups to claim their rights.

## **Conclusions**

Empowerment is a policy approach that unleashes the initiative of people. Depending on the country context, priorities as well as the ways and means to promote empowerment will vary. The following represents some common areas for action:

1. Investment in education and health to strengthen the capability/capacity of individuals and communities;
2. Improvement in access and rights to productive assets, including land, property, natural resources and financial services, by disadvantaged groups;
3. Establishment of universal social protection, even at a nationally-determined minimal level;
4. Promotion of inclusive and job-rich economic growth;

5. Transparency and access to information, including through the utilization of ICTs;
6. Establishment of the rule of law and access to justice;
7. Building democratic institutions, including accountable and responsive government.

As the empowerment of people is a dynamic and long-term process that consists of mutually-supporting components, it will require the commitment of national and international partners, as well as the active involvement of people to bring about its progressive realization.

### **References**

**Fraser, E.** (2010), "Empowerment, Choice and Agency", Helpdesk Research report.  
**United Nations**, Reports of the Secretary-General, "Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all" (E/CN.5/2013/3 and E/CN.5/2014/3) [*on-line*]  
<http://undesadspd.org/CommissionforSocialDevelopment/Sessions.aspx>

***The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and may not necessarily reflect a position of the ICSW Management Committee or United Nations Secretariat.***

### **Call for action: The Social Protection Floor concept must be the core social objective of the post-2015 global development framework**

The Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors, established in 2012, is a coalition of more than 70 civil society and trade-union organizations from around the world. The members of the Coalition represent a diverse group of NGOs, but they are united in their approach to social protection, seeing it as one of the key pillars of social justice and inclusive socio-economic development. That approach is reflected in the statement of the Global Coalition launched at the side-event on 18 February during the work of the 52<sup>nd</sup> session of the Commission for Social Development in New York. That side-event was organized by the Coalition in cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the International Labour Office. The ICSW was instrumental in the conceptualization of the statement; at the above event in New York the statement was introduced by Michael Cichon, the President of the ICSW.

In the words of the statement, "as this world becomes significantly richer, no woman, no man and no child need live in social insecurity, poverty and apprehension". The participants of the Coalition believe that the International Labour Organization's Social Protection Floor Recommendation no.202 (2012), which emerged from the joint Global Social Protection Floor Initiative of the UN system, is a cornerstone for meeting the objective of ensuring security, removing the fear of destitution, and protecting standards of living when people are sick, unemployed, disabled and old, or cannot work or when they have to care for infants or sick family members. It can address the inequality and discrimination that women experience in accessing basic social services, economic opportunities and resources. Emphasizing the gender dimension of social protection schemes, the statement specifies that "the role of women as caregivers must be explicitly addressed by social protection programmes, as must be the difference in access to services, work and productive activities between women and men". Underscoring the importance of universal social protection floors, the Global Coalition holds that "the two-dimensional strategy of the recommendation, extending basic social security guarantees to all and ensuring improved quality of protection, should be adopted as a guide in developing an **overarching social protection goal** for social development in the framework of the post-2015 development agenda". The statement of the Global Coalition was also submitted to the meeting of the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board, which took place on 18 February 2014 in New York.

For more details please see: [http://www.ilo.org/newyork/events-and-meetings/WCMS\\_235028/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/newyork/events-and-meetings/WCMS_235028/lang--en/index.htm)

## **ICSW speaks out on empowerment**

*Statement by Sergei Zelenev, Executive Director, International Council on Social Welfare, at the 52<sup>nd</sup> session of the Commission for Social Development, UN Headquarters, 18 February 2014*

Empowerment has become a core objective for many social movements and organizations. There is a widely shared agreement that every person should be empowered during their life-course, starting with getting a fair start in life and throughout. Being well-fed, well-educated, staying healthy and enjoying social protection is an integral part of empowerment. Being empowered is a 'win-win' combination for society and for its prosperity and resilience, when everyone is able to make better life choices and participate fully in society. It is a joint responsibility of society, families and, of course, individuals to work together to make that process a reality. The Commission for Social Development should be congratulated for taking up such a cross-cutting topic as empowerment, which has enormous political and practical significance, as a priority theme for its deliberations. On behalf of ICSW I wish the delegates and all other participants of the Commission fruitful and successful work.

Addressing the priority theme in its complexity we are striving to provide meaningful input not only into the discussions in the Commission for Social Development but also into the discussions shaping the post-2015 development agenda after the Millennium Development Goals expire. The intention to put people at the heart of a new global partnership aimed at eradicating poverty and transforming economies through sustainable development, as outlined in the Report of the High-Level Panel<sup>2</sup>, is inspiring. But we should be also realistic and see what needs be done and how it should be done. This goal of "leaving no-one behind" is impossible to achieve without reducing inequalities and promoting social inclusion. And another important point here, stemming from the Report of the High-Level Panel, is that "targets will only be considered 'achieved' if they are met for all relevant income and social groups".

ICSW fully subscribes to the conclusion of the Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors that social protection is one of the foundations for inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. It can simultaneously address the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability and preservation of livelihoods. It can have a transformative role in contributing to long-term inclusive and sustainable growth, while also enhancing resilience against natural and manmade disasters, as well as economic and social crises. We believe that the social protection floor concept described in the report of the advisory group chaired by Michelle Bachelet and defined in ILO Recommendation No.202 must comprise the core social objective of the post-2015 global development agenda. ICSW supports having a specific stand-alone goal on inequalities be reflected in the post-2015 framework. Apart from the normative importance of this area, such inclusion could improve accountability for reducing inequalities (and hence improved monitoring of both processes and outcomes, resulting from better quantitative and qualitative data).

Today, when we are aiming at integrating the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability into one agenda, we also realize that disempowered people cannot achieve this goal. Empowerment is, therefore, closely linked with inclusive growth. We cannot move forward without specific, targeted efforts to embrace the poorest and most marginalized communities, so that they are connected to economic and political systems. After all, the well-being of those communities also depends on and is integrally linked to sustainable access to arable land and water, as well as energy. It is our joint responsibility to define how targets are to be refined, what indicators are to be used and what multi-stakeholder accountability means in practice.

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<sup>2</sup> A NEW GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP: ERADICATE POVERTY AND TRANSFORM ECONOMIES THROUGH SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT . The Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (on-line) <http://www.un.org/sg/management/beyond2015.shtml>

The ICSW's experience on the ground, in many regions of the world, has shown that empowering citizens and creating responsive, accountable governments are two sides of the same coin. That interdependence is impossible without democracy and democratic societies that provide mechanisms for participation to all, including marginalized groups. People want to participate fully in society, have a voice of their own and have access to the decision-making processes that affect them. A participatory approach to governance promotes the empowerment of people. Civil society has a vital role to play in this process.

The written statement of ICSW to the 52nd session of the Commission for Social Development can be accessed at:

<http://undesadspd.org/CommissionforSocialDevelopment/Sessions/2014/NGOsStatements/WrittenStatements.aspx>

### ***Useful resources and links***

#### **Civil Society Forum at the UN convened in advance of the 52<sup>nd</sup> session of the Commission of Social Development**

The Civil Society Forum was organized by the NGO Committee for Social Development in joint sponsorship with UN-DESA Division for Social Policy and Development and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, New York Office. The Forum was convened on 10 February 2014 to prepare civil society participants to participate in the 52nd session of the Commission for Social Development as well as in ongoing discussions related to conceptualization and evaluation of the post-2015 development framework. Speakers were invited to address and critique the Commission's two-year focus on empowerment, coming up with the Forum's own vision and recommendations that reflected perspectives from civil society geared at promoting core goals of social development, in the context of inclusive and transformative efforts and post- 2015 development agenda.

The Declaration of the Forum is available at: <http://www.ngosocdev.net/>

The archived webcast is available at:

<http://undesadspd.org/CommissionforSocialDevelopment/Sessions/2014/CivilSocietyForum.aspx>

#### **Newborn crisis threatens progress**

Despite the remarkable progress that the world has made in the fight to cut back child mortality in recent years, achieved through action on immunization, family planning, nutrition and treatment of childhood illnesses, as well as by improving economies, child mortality, according to the recently released report prepared by the international charity **Save the Children**, "remains one of the great shames of our modern world". Every day, 18,000 children under five die, and most from preventable causes. In fact, far less attention has been paid to tackling the life-threatening dangers facing children when they are newborn and most vulnerable – at birth and in their first month of life. The report outlines the key way to stop newborn deaths, namely, to ensure that essential care is provided around labour, delivery and immediately afterwards, when the risks are greatest.

For more details please go to:

[http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGIpI4E/b.8989373/k.E376/Ending\\_Newborn\\_Deaths\\_Ensuring\\_Every\\_Baby\\_Survives.htm](http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGIpI4E/b.8989373/k.E376/Ending_Newborn_Deaths_Ensuring_Every_Baby_Survives.htm)

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