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The role of the family in the social and economic empowerment of individuals
by Zitha Mokomane

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Introduction

Propelled by the widespread notion that it plays a key role in, among other things, pro-poor growth, good governance, improved service delivery, poverty reduction and social integration, the concept of empowerment has, over the past decade, become an increasingly common and recurring theme in the discourse on sustainable socio-economic development and a key concern in the preparation of the post-2015 development agenda. However with possibly more than 30 definitions¹ revolving around such notions as power, participation, capability, autonomy, choice and freedom, agency, control over one's own destiny, increased resources and capacity, and improved quality of life, empowerment remains an appealing yet very abstract concept in development circles. This article makes an attempt to consider how such an ancient institution as the family can contribute to the empowerment of individuals, and what changes in family roles entail in terms of new possibilities for empowerment.

What is empowerment?

Broadly construed, empowerment can be described as the enhancement of the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomesⁱⁱ. Consistent with Amartya Sen's capability approach, this capacity can be realized through a variety of social institutions "that contribute to the process of development precisely through their effects on enhancing and sustaining individual freedoms"ⁱⁱⁱ, such as democratic institutions, civil liberties, a free press and public deliberations. The World Bank^{iv}, for example, posits that, while there is no single model for empowerment, elements that are almost always present when empowerment efforts are successful include the following: access to information; inclusion or participation in decision-making; accountability; and local organizational capacity. Through *access to information* citizens become informed and hence better equipped to take advantage of opportunities, access services, exercise their rights, and hold State and non-State actors accountable. *Inclusion or participation* in decision-making, on the other hand, ensures that the use of limited public resources builds on local knowledge and priorities. Where there is *accountability*, public and private sector actors are held answerable for their policies, actions and use of funds. Lastly, *local organizational capacity* refers to "the ability of people to work together, organize themselves and mobilize resources to solve problems of common interest"^v.

The family is an institution universally viewed as the "basic unit of society", but it has not received much consideration in the debates and literature on empowerment. While, admittedly, the institutional power of the family structures in general and the dysfunctional nature of some families in particular have the ability to foster the oppression of certain family members (especially women and children), and to cause or perpetuate inequalities in individual opportunities to achieve, the family in its various forms has, on the whole, consistently been shown to be a major institution for carrying out various functions that ensure sustenance, as well as the social and economic empowerment of its members and of society at large. This crucial role of families has been recognised at the global level: in the words of former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, stable, functional families "have major, albeit often untapped potential to contribute to national development and to the achievement of major objectives of every society ... including the eradication of poverty and the creation of just, stable and secure societies"^{vi}.

The family as a pathway to social and economic empowerment

Of the four key dimensions of empowerment (legal, political, social, and economic)^{vii}, the family's basic functions of socialization, nurturance and economic support play a major role in the social empowerment (defined as the capacity of individuals and groups to foster the relationships and institutional interactions necessary for their well-being and productivity) and economic

empowerment (namely, the ability of people to choose the productive activities to engage in and the overall terms of such engagement) of individual family members.

Socialization

The family's role in socialization is well-known. Socialization is a process through which children learn formal and informal norms of social and interpersonal interaction by acquiring accumulated knowledge, a sense of belonging, basic personal and social identity, a capacity for love and intimacy, attitudes and beliefs, as well as the moral and social values of their culture; socialization encompasses important components of social empowerment. Thus, when well-executed, the socialization exerted by parents and other adult family members can enable children to develop and grow into adults who can make independent and appropriate decisions, engage in new activities and create, throughout their lives, attachment relationships with peers. The rich social networks created by the socialization function also increase access to information, material resources and social relationships that can enhance the social empowerment of individuals throughout the life course.

Nurturance

Another vital dimension of family life, nurturance is an essential function that entails the provision of members with the love, emotional sustenance and overall nurturance that they need to be happy, healthy and secure. This function is reflected, *inter alia*, in the collectivistic orientation, which is characteristic of many societies, where it underscores the need for all family members to support each other, take care of parents in old age, and assist in the socio-economic maintenance of the family. The provision of childcare support by grandparents and other family members, for example, can be invaluable in facilitating parents' participation in the labour force and eventual economic empowerment. In many countries in Africa, where the HIV/AIDS pandemic has had a devastating impact on family structures and has brought orphanhood and the increasing vulnerability of children, the support of the grandparents has been often indispensable for the well-being and emotional health of children.

There is also an emerging body of evidence showing that the nurturance function of the family can greatly contribute to the social empowerment of people with disabilities and those undergoing chronic illness management and treatment by creating and providing the practical and psychosocial support for self-care that facilitate the individuals' achievement of their health and other goals. All in all, by enhancing relationships with significant others, the nurturance function positively impacts on a wide range of social empowerment dimensions, such as family cohesion, satisfying relationships, as well as improved communication, problem-solving and decision-making skills.

Economic support

Through this function, which plays an instrumental role, individual family members acquire stability and financial security as they are provided with basic resources that enhance their development and physical survival, such as food, clothing and shelter. The function essentially contributes to the economic empowerment of individual family members by playing a “role of insurer of last resort, providing aid and solace when all else fails and preventing temporary setbacks from becoming permanent”^{viii}. An example of this could be seen during the recent global economic downturn, when many suddenly unemployed individuals turned to their families for assistance in paying off credit; paying rents or mortgages, helping with childcare while looking for a job after being laid off, and a place to stay and find shelter after a home closure.

This familial function is also particularly important in the economic empowerment of individuals in many developing countries, where there are limited or no social security systems or pensions, insurance contracts, banks, and credit unions facilities to provide financial safety nets for individuals facing economic setbacks. In such settings, the extended family, through its wide circle of relatives, is a major resource for meeting basic needs in terms of food, shelter, and clothing in times of economic and social crisis or setback.

Conclusion

While it has been left largely unexplored in academic and policy debates related to empowerment, it is clear from the evidence in the literature^{ix} presented here that the family is one of the most vital institutions than can ensure individuals’ social and economic empowerment as succinctly summarized by the following statement:

The family plays a key role in preventing social alienation because it is the one structure individuals are part of by birth rather than by choice. Even if all other institutions fail individuals, they can always turn to their family in times of difficulty, if the institution of the family is functioning. Without the family to fall back on in times of stress, the likelihood that individuals leave society and enter the underclass, when, for example, they face unemployment, increases^x.

The overall conclusion is, therefore, that the family is definitely worthy of consideration as an integral component of the empowerment agenda and, indeed, of all efforts directed at achieving sustainable development. Two assets of the family—family capital and family resilience—are particularly worthy of consideration in that regard. These emphasize the importance of non-material resources, which,

while not easily measurable, have a significant effect on the family's ability to shape the future and empowerment of its members. The concept of family capital, for example, borrows from the literature on social capital, where the latter refers to "those social relationships that allow individuals access to resources possessed by their associates, and to the amount and quality of those resources upon which people depend for social, economic and emotional support" Belsey, M.A., (2005) *AIDS and the family: policy options for a crisis in family capital*. New York, United Nations,p. 17).

Family resilience, on the other hand, refers to the ability of families to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges, and is especially critical for the most vulnerable individuals and families, such as those families that have a higher likelihood of breaking up as a consequence of external economic, social and/or political factors; families that are unable to meet the basic needs of their members in areas such as shelter, nutrition, physical and emotional care; families in which there is physical and psychological exploitation, discrimination as well as abuse of individual members; and families characterized by injustice in the distribution of rights and responsibilities of family members. Overall, families and their members demonstrate resiliency when they build caring support systems and solve problems creatively—all essential elements of empowerment.

In conclusion, while the potential role of the family in social and economic empowerment has been illuminated in this article, the precise pathways to this remain outstanding, as does the exploration of the role of the family's role in other forms of empowerment. Further research in that regard is critical, as empowerment increasingly takes centre stage in international development arena.

i Fraser, E.(2010), "Empowerment, Choice and Agency", Helpdesk Research report

ii World Bank, 2012. *Empowerment*. Available from <http://go.worldbank.org/S9B3DNEZ00> Accessed September 3 2012

iii Sen, A. 1999. The possibility of social change. *American Economic Review*, 89 (3), 297.

iv World Bank, op cit

v Ibid

vi

Preparations for and observance of the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2004. Report of the Secretary-General, United Nations General Assembly, 59th Session, A/59/176 (July 23, 2004), par. 4

vii

Voipio, T. 2012. *Poverty reduction guideline of the OECD-POVNET*. Paper presented at the UN Expert Group meeting on Promoting Empowerment of People in Advancing Poverty Eradication, Social Integration, and Decent Work for All, New York, 10-12 September 2012.

viii

Canning, D., Mitchell, M., Bloom, D. & Kleindorfer, E.L. (1994). *The family and economic development*. Boston: Harvard Institute for International development

ix

All references can be availed on request

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Canning et al., op cit.

➤ **The Notes on the Meeting on Social Cohesion in the Arab World**

During the fourth meeting of the MENA region in Rabat, in May 2014, on the topic of social cohesion in the Arab world, convened by ICSW together with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, one of the participants in the meeting, Mr. Patrick Venturini, the Secretary-General of the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions, was asked by the organizers of the meeting to summarize the debate, highlighting some of the salient features of the discussion and presenting the conclusions. Mr. Venturini has kindly shared his notes with the ICSW Newsletter, which are presented below.

Summary and conclusions

The organizers of the 4th ICSW meeting in Rabat did me the honor of asking me to present a summary of the discussions and draw the main conclusions.

Before attempting to respond to that request, I want to clarify that my presentation constitutes more a set of personal observations on the work of the conference rather than a true synthesis, in the academic sense of the term. That said, with all the nuances and specific reservations required for such a task, here is what I found important at the end of our work.

I will start with several observations, and then address some paradoxes and finally discuss the courses of action.

The findings

1. First the obvious: it was a particularly rich day, sometimes complex, always fruitful and exciting. To a certain extent, that was due to the magnitude and importance of the subject, located at the very heart of the current problems that our societies face.

2. Despite the differences among the various interventions, a strong consensus emerged, especially when it came to the enumeration and description of the foundations and components of social cohesion.

Many conditions were presented as necessary but sometimes not sufficient, which seemed, intuitively, quite understandable. The following elements emerged, sometimes with variations in the terminology:

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- Notions or concepts such as "shared values", the "sense of belonging" (social fabric/ties), and "respect for the other and/or pluralism";
 - The emphasis on rights, which should be guaranteed, and the importance of legal mechanisms and the institutions that support them;
 - It was stressed that, "the state cannot/should not do everything," and that civil society certainly has a role to play;
 - Social cohesion requires a certain degree of confidence; it is a factor in democracy. In the same vein, social cohesion needs a certain degree of social and political stability, which it may contribute to forming.

3. A consensus was also reached that social cohesion is a dynamic, not a fixed concept: it is not something that is irreversibly acquired, far from it. Like any precious commodity, like every capital, it must be preserved, protected, and made fertile.

The consensus that I have referred to -- whether relative or absolute -- is not surprising, given the composition of the assembly and the identity of the speakers.

4. Another finding, one that generated some concern, was the fact that the economic dimension of social cohesion was merely touched upon, despite its deserving a thorough analysis.

First, because the lack of social cohesion comes with a cost, often significant, even if not always easily measurable: it requires additional public spending to offset gaps and to cushion certain social shocks; it reduces competitiveness, deters some foreign investments, etc.

Furthermore -- and this we cannot overemphasize, especially at this time -- a well-conducted social policy is in itself a productive factor, i.e. it generates significant comparative advantages. For example, imagine a situation where, in an integrated regional bloc, such as the European Union, the economy was regionalized, but social policy was essentially guided, in the name of the principle of "subsidiarity", by national policies -- that would lock people into a "horrible funnel" (to paraphrase the poet Rimbaud). And unfortunately, that is what is happening now.

5. In my view, another notable absence in the comments presented was the lack of reference to the "social partners" (employers' organizations, trade unions) in the context of the social dialogue. Meanwhile, the role they play at the national and even regional or international levels and their impact on the level of social cohesion is fundamental. More than ever, a structured and productive social dialogue is needed in modern society.

What is to be done?

The major question now is what to do.

Several speakers called for a paradigm shift or a change in "model". The problem is that such a comprehensive change, or even an evolution, cannot be instituted by fiat, neither nationally and even less internationally, at a time when in many countries the ideologies of globalization and their respective models, particularly when they appear to be imported, are met with great suspicion, if not rejected outright.

What strikes me personally is the existence of a number of *paradoxes* that objectively complicate the definition of a new paradigm of social cohesion. Paying a price for some schematization and simplification is inevitable here, I will touch briefly on four such paradoxes.

1. First paradox: national autonomy. Several speakers pointed out that it is up to each country to define its own model. Certainly true! But how can we fail to mention at this stage the growing importance of several "meta-events" that are due primarily to or are at least greatly accelerated by globalization:

- The development of information technology and communication (ICT) in our societies. Is it really possible to ignore that the information society, the various audiovisual media and the Internet convey, implicitly or explicitly, through images and messages, values that are sometimes completely at odds with some traditional values, or present the latter in a simplistic manner? Moreover, recent examples have shown the important role played by social networks in the mobilization and development of popular movements.

- In that context, phenomena such as individualization, materialization, marketization and the rise of extremism (political, religious) can be seen as a

- The same applies to demographic changes (with differences between North and South), along with such phenomenon as migration and urbanization.

2. Second paradox: the time factor. As has been repeated with good reason, social cohesion is a matter of values, legal frameworks, structures and institutions, all of which fall within the medium- to long-term time frame.

Now we are seeing an acceleration of history that stems from our failure to take into account the long term. That aspect, coupled with increased media coverage that encourages "short-termism", creates an artificial urgency and promotes impatience, which people feel when faced with some of the problems we have society and can lead to the emergence of false solutions and the success of false prophets. Certain decisions or policies do not live up to their predicted effect and are forgotten the next day (this is a manifestation of what Jacques Delors called "a Kleenex society").

3. Third paradox: pluralism. Social cohesion is based on shared values. But this pre-requisite, i.e. that we respect each other's differences and diversity and promote multiculturalism, makes it objectively more difficult to arrive at shared values on a daily basis. It is easy to proclaim diversity as an asset, but reality is not that simple..

Similarly, the freedom of expression - a fundamental right in any sense - is also an entropy factor.

4. Fourth and last paradox: the margin for maneuver. No matter what the interests are, the actual margin for maneuver available to policy makers is reduced owing to external constraints (e.g. economic constraints deriving from membership in regional groupings, the effects of globalization: international speculation, the impact of credit-rating agencies, etc.), or the shrinking of horizons mentioned above (constraints of election cycles and platforms, globalization and the speed of information, increased expectations experienced by populations when international comparisons are possible, etc.).

Courses of action

Personally, I do not today see prospects emerging in the short or medium term -- mainly for the reasons mentioned above -- of radical, strong and durable alternative paths. This is not surprising: we are dealing with core social problems.

That is absolutely not a reason to sink into passivity. On the contrary, we need to come up with actions based on our beliefs and established certainties:

1. Defend what has already been achieved and fight for the values that underpin social cohesion.

2. Recognize and promote the role of the representative organizations of civil society as essential factors for preserving and strengthening the social fabric and social ties (through increased participation in defining, improving and implementing public policies for the development of participatory democracy).

In that respect, the role of the CES-IS and its advisory function should be revitalized, modernized and upgraded: it is simply a matter of good governance!

3. Develop a more integrated approach to the economic and social dimensions.

4. In particular, enhance flexibility, openness, innovation and confidence, and thus empower women and youth, and therefore their representative organizations.

In conclusion, let me say a word on the subject of the "social protection floor", which some of you know very well, and the efforts of the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (AICESIS) in that area.

AICESIS and ILO are bound by a particularly fruitful partnership agreement, signed in May 2012. Within that framework, the two institutions have jointly organized international conferences on topics of common interest. After having successively addressed, with growing success, the theme "The Social Protection Floor" in May 2012 in Geneva and the theme "The role and impact of the CES-IS in facing the financial, economic and employment crises" in December 2013 in Madrid, they decided to organize, in November 2014 in Seoul (Korea), a new international event, this time on the theme "The role of the CES-IS and social dialogue in the establishment of a social protection floor for all. "

This brings me to my real conclusion: the prospects for future cooperation between the ICSW and AICESIS. For my part, they seem to me potentially fruitful. You can count on me to develop the links forged today, and, specifically, as a first step, to develop the exchange of information and promote the participation of a representative of the ICAS in the coming conference in Seoul.

➤ **The Melbourne Declaration on Promoting Social and Economic Equalities**

We, the participants of the Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development, meeting in Melbourne, Australia, on 9 – 12 July 2014, have examined the *promotion of social and economic equalities* – the priority issue of **The Global Agenda** adopted by our three sister organizations - IASSW, ICSW and IFSW. We express our profound concern about the growing inequality between and within nations and deplore the negative consequences, which damage individuals, relationships and communities and threaten peace and stability across the globe. As social workers, educators and social development practitioners, we see the consequences of social exclusion and structural inequalities every day in our work. They include discrimination, deprivation and the denial of basic human rights (political, social, cultural and environmental).

We strongly believe that the promotion of equality, human rights and sustainability, and the accompanying values of social justice and inclusion must be at the centre of the new post-2015 development framework to replace the Millennium Development Goals.

We support the inclusion of a stand alone commitment on equality within the post-2015 development framework. The equality goal should aim at eliminating all forms of discrimination and social exclusion. We believe that social protection schemes, including the Social Protection Floor initiative, are a viable and practical way to begin promoting social and economic equalities.

We call on the international community to address this acute and most pressing issue urgently.

We call on global and national leaders and governments to take decisive action to promote social and economic equalities and to support social workers and social development practitioners who have to deal with the daily consequences of the unjust economic and social policies.

Given that equality, human rights and sustainability are all interlinked, and reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we reaffirm our commitment to our Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development.

➤ **Useful resources and links**

Based on analysis of the available evidence, the 2014 Human Development Report "***Sustaining Human Progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience***" released recently by UNDP takes a people-centered approach, and makes a number of important recommendations for achieving a world which addresses vulnerabilities and builds resilience to future shocks. It calls for universal access to basic social services, especially health and education; stronger social protection, including unemployment insurance and pensions; and a commitment to full employment, recognizing that the value of employment extends far beyond the income it generates.

For more details please go to: <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hdr/2014-human-development-report.html>

The International Institute of Social Studies in Hague has published a working paper "The Last Mile in Analysing Well-Being and Poverty: Indices of Social Development". This study presents the

ISD database and highlights the differences, similarities and complementarities with other measures of well-being, including around income poverty, multi-dimensional poverty and human development.

For further information please refer to:

<http://www.indsocdev.org/resources/ISD%20Working%20Paper%202011-03.pdf>

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