

Measuring Empowerment in International Development Projects

As part of our commitment to the development of just societies, *Just Governance Group* understands the importance of promoting knowledge and exchange in development practice. In recent years, the Group has evaluated and monitored development initiatives seeking to achieve “empowerment” of a beneficiary group as an outcome result. After conducting an evaluation in the Middle East (see below) JGG began to study how empowerment was measured by others.

In this first issue of *Co-Praxis*, we summarize common approaches and techniques to measuring empowerment, share our own reflections and provide links to relevant documents. We hope this bulletin helps readers develop an understanding of the main concepts, elements, and preferred methods for measuring empowerment.

Evaluating Empowerment in the Middle East

The JGG Executive Director conducted an evaluation of the [McGill Program in Civil Society and Peacebuilding](#) in 2010 in Jordan, Palestine and Israel. During that evaluation she had the opportunity to discuss how the program partners measured empowerment of the individuals and communities that they support. She also had the opportunity to ask the beneficiaries to tell their own stories.

The Rights-Based Community Practice Centres that form part of the multi-institution and multi-country network seek to demonstrate empowerment through the analysis of individual and collective stories in their presentations, progress reports and [publications](#). In addition, the Centres’ staff and peer counselors map the change in a beneficiary’s behaviour in so far as his or her ability to take action directly with public agencies.

Generally, the Centres’ beneficiaries move through a transformative process beginning with the need for information on opportunities and resources as well as practical support to write a letter or make a phone call to the duty-bearing public institution. After a period of time, individual rights holders (beneficiaries) begin to advocate for themselves directly with the duty-bearing institution without support. Each individual is unique with regard to their understanding of the opportunities and resources and their own agency; therefore, the degree and length of support varies. Another indicator of empowerment is the capacity and interest of individual beneficiaries to join collective advocacy initiatives that seek social or political change to benefit a broader sector of the community.

As part of the evaluation methodology the JGG evaluator asked women to tell their stories by describing how they arrived at the Centre, the new skills they had learned and how they had applied those skills. For example, Palestinian women who were learning Hebrew explained how they were now able to claim health benefits for their family at municipal Family Welfare offices in East Jerusalem. Women in Accra, West Bank explained how they had organized a committee of notables in the community to help resolve individual and collective problems after learning about women’s rights and violence against women. More often than not their new skills and self-advocacy led to the desired result; however, it was clear to the JGG evaluator that the journey had been as important to the women as the end result.

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Key Documents Reviewed

- [Masser, Adam L. *Measurement Methodologies for Legal Empowerment of the Poor*. UNDP Oslo Governance Centre Discussion Paper, 2009.](#)
- [Malhotra, Anju. *Conceptualizing and Measuring Women's Empowerment as a Variable in International Development*. World Bank, Research on Women, 2002.](#)
- [Brook, Simon and Jeremy Holland. *A Mixed-Method Approach to Measuring Empowerment in the Context of Social Policy Monitoring in Jamaica*. The World Bank, Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Network, 2009.](#)
- [Jupp, Dee, Sohel Ibni Ali, and Carlos Barahona. *Measuring Empowerment? Ask Them. Qualifying Initiative Outcomes from People's Own Analysis - Insights for Result-Based Management from the Experience of a Social Movement in Bangladesh*. SIDA Studies in Evaluation, 2010.](#)

Defining and Measuring Empowerment

In the key documents reviewed, empowerment is understood as ***the ability of an individual or group to utilize resources for the achievement of a desired result that leads to an improvement in their political, economic, legal, and/or social condition.*** It requires the existence of opportunities and the possibility to make choices. This process involves the active participation and self-advocacy of the individual or group. Facilitating empowerment involves skill development and ongoing but diminishing levels of support.

Common Empowerment Concepts

- *Resource and Opportunity Structure*—refers to the presence of institutions, information, and other social, economic, political, and cultural domains or structures that allow the actor to make a choice to bring about a desired outcome.
- *Agency*—refers to the ability of people to be significant actors in the process of change and make strategic choices to positively affect life outcomes.
- Empowerment requires the existence of choice and opportunity to choose, as well as the achievement of a (desired) result.
- The empowerment process is non-linear and depends largely on experiences gained from opportunities that are context specific.
- Different aspects of empowerment may be achieved asymmetrically and at a different place in different contexts.
- Lack of resources or opportunity structures are barriers for empowerment. This is often referred as *disempowerment*.

Measurement Practice

While there are distinct approaches used to measure the effectiveness of empowerment projects, the most common measurement tools include: report cards, focus groups, interviews, storytelling, surveys, drama, mapping, drawing, writing, and document review.

- To measure empowerment, the evaluator should assess whether an opportunity structure is present.
- Tracking changes in the availability and exercise of choice over time and comparing these changes across populations is an important component of empowerment evaluation.
- Measuring empowerment should be participatory and inclusive.
- A mixed-method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative data is preferable.
- The evaluator needs to recognize that empowerment is context-specific and non-linear.

JGG Reflections on Measuring Empowerment

- At JGG, we question one aspect of the literature's empowerment definition: Is obtaining the 'desired' result truly a requirement to conclude that a person or group is empowered? Often, the individual or group may have the resources available to make a choice. However, the exercise of that choice through a self-advocacy process may not necessarily result in the "desired" outcome. In this instance, we believe it is possible to argue the individual or group is still empowered.
- In cases where the "desired" result is not achieved, it is important to examine the obstacles or factors that resulted in a different outcome.
- When measuring empowerment, a practitioner should also examine the cultural, political, social, legal, psychological, and economic constraints encountered by the individual or group.
- Obstacles to empowerment (or disempowerment) in one domain (for example, the legal domain) may limit individual or group agency in other domains (such as social or economic); thus evaluators should analyze multiple domains to understand empowerment in the whole context of the subject or beneficiaries.
- JGG also attempts to identify dimensions of change or shifts in power relations that influence opportunities and capacity for action.
- It is important to examine the presence and degree of self-advocacy in the process of choice.

Additional Resources on Empowerment

World Bank, *Empowerment*

United Nations Development Programme, *Women's Empowerment*

OXFAM, *Empowerment through Inclusion: Women in Decision-Making*

Inter-American Development Bank, *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*

Commission on Women and Development, *The Women Empowerment Approach: A Methodological Guide*

World Economic Forum, *Women's Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap*