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Chairman Neangmalea Village Development Committee, Samaki Mean Chey District, Kampong Chhnang Province, Cambodia, 21 August 2007. Photo by author.

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Summary

“The marginalized are born every day”, [yet they] “are now literate, they can count money, they claim their rights, they even defend others”.

Two statements made in short succession in a village meeting in Tanzania, September 2007

Why this study?

“Empowerment” is one of the concepts of modernity that has enjoyed an explosive career over the past fifty years. It is also a key concept in the plans and program reality of numerous development agencies, including the Lutheran World Federation. This report is an adaptation of one written for the Federation following visits to two of its associated country programs. It has been made possible not only by the LWF’s liberal attitude to let the author use the research material, but even more so by the pertinence of the Lutheran experience for the empowerment debate.

In fact, in the Global Strategy that the LWF Department of World Service has adopted for the period 2007-2012, the empowerment approach is one of three strategic approaches, on an equal footing with the integrated and the rights-based approach. The synergy of the three in the LWF field programs is expected to make the paramount endeavor - upholding the rights of the poor and oppressed - more effective and more sustained.

The field programs have accumulated a wealth of experience from designing and delivering empowerment programs. Initially, this study was meant to help the LWF condense this experience into programmatic standards inspired by good practices; we understand it is still being used to this end. However, already in the course of fieldwork was it apparent that the LWF programs offered such densely woven lessons, insights and interrogations about the community empowerment process that a good part of these should be made available to a larger audience.

Readers will of course want to see proof of why this material should be relevant outside the LWF ambit. While it cannot claim representativeness for global approaches, the interplay of agreement and diversity between the Cambodian and Tanzanian record is such that readers may expect many of the findings to be applicable to other contexts as well. At the same time, the two observed programs remain firmly moored to the basic tenets of the LWF as a faith-based community that itself invested decades of spiritual reflection before it formally adopted an empowerment strategy.

The material for the study comes from LWF key documents, social science literature on empowerment and from the field visits that the consultant carried out in two programs, LWF Cambodia and the Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service (TCRS) in Tanzania. These organizations have been conducting community empowerment

programs for a number of years and offer, apart from contemporary data, vivid institutional memories of their program histories.

In the sequence of major chapters, the background is initially set through the history of empowerment thinking inside and outside development cooperation, leading to the place that the empowerment approach holds in the current LWF global strategy. Much space is devoted to a detailed description of the program practice in Cambodia and Tanzania. Lessons are gathered on what is likely to work well in other contexts too. Empowerment is not directly observable although many of its conditions and outcomes are; this study seeks to shed light on the special challenges of measuring and monitoring empowerment. Empowerment programs, like other development interventions, need to be examined for sustainable effects. Eventually, one has to bluntly face the question: *“Does it work?”* The grassroots record gives one answer; but it would be almost meaningless without considering the life chances of the empowerment concept at higher levels of the aid chains and development debates.

The concept: Christian seed, secular growth, convergence in LWF

Long before empowerment was discussed, let alone incorporated into LWF strategies, Christian authors in the USA of the 1960s were the ones who planted the seeds of the concept and of the movement in a small number of articles. They were soon marginalized by other disciplines – sociology, psychology, education. In the late 1980s, management science started a new wave of empowerment, one aimed at employee productivity and almost diametrically opposed to the sharing of real power that the seminal thinkers had had in mind. Empowerment has since remained a very broad umbrella concept that embraces demands for power shifts side by side with more consensual capacity building ideas.

Its vagueness has provoked criticism, but this has not stopped empowerment from coming to prominence in international development, particularly after the 2000-2001 World Development Report gave it official stature. In the philosophy, if not the practice, of the big international development institutions, the concept nowadays holds an equal place with economic growth. Although serious empirical studies on the effects of empowerment in poverty reduction are rare, the idea of poor people and communities growing more empowered sits well with an older idea, that of stages of development.

In the LWF, empowerment thinking has been gaining ground since approximately 1997. Its excellent fit with other strategic elements, however, is not due to the same factors as in secular development agencies. Rather, doctrinal developments since the 1970 Evian Assembly prepared the ground for the empowerment strategy. God gives people dispositional gifts like life, dignity, freedom, capacity, knowledge. Empowerment is similarly dispositional; in their observed manifestations, the gifts from God and human acts of empowerment overlap constantly.

A second powerful influence in favor of empowerment has been the experience that the field programs made with integrated rural development programs. The limitations of these programs advocated for a stronger focus of control in the assisted communities and in the poorest families themselves. The current World Service strategic plan continues the option of older approaches for the marginalized and vulnerable. It calls for change in several social locations - in attitudes and knowledge

as much as in programs and institutions and in their physical infrastructure. The assumption is that empowered mentalities as well as improved livelihoods will allow the poor “to take control of their lives”.

Applications in Cambodia and Tanzania

How this works in practice is demonstrated with material from the two field programs. They have been active for many years, in Tanzania since 1964, in Cambodia since 1979. Both started transforming their rural development programs towards an empowerment approach in the late 1990s. Both pursue the same paramount goal of empowering the poor; both are doing so by partnering at several tiers of social organization, with a critical focus on village communities and on the poorest households.

However, at the lower levels of program objectives, outputs and indicators, LWF Cambodia has developed a more complex system than TCRS’, which appears simpler and more easily manageable. The fundamental assumptions on how empowerment works are also different. In TCRS, a critical-mass philosophy posits that the marginalized, once their mobilization exceeds a critical threshold, will have irreversible effects on the dynamics of the entire village community. LWF Cambodia works with comparatively few partner households relative to village development committees. These intensively looked-after households provide templates for the village elite to actively take care of the poorest in their midst, down to specific household development plans. The optimism that these philosophies express may be warranted from experience so far, but they have not yet passed a cogent test among graduated communities¹.

Beyond activating and assisting the poorest families in the partner villages, the empowerment programs have been benefiting their entire populations by strengthening village government, community-based organizations and the local services that they administer. The magnitude of the village populations served by them is similar in both countries, close to a quarter million people.

Curricula vs. self-assessments

Typically, villages and households stay in the program for several years. Both programs aim to broadly structure this long and intensive phase into an early self-discovery, repeated facilitated actions, and increasingly independent ones. The transitions are operated differently, however. TCRS follows a curricular approach, moving village leaders and participating marginalized adults along their tracks in class-like units measured in quarter-years. LWF Cambodia lets villages and households progress across self-assessed levels of competencies; the partners stay in each of them as long as they feel it necessary.

These same differences fashion the criteria on which TCRS and LWF Cambodia decide the phasing-out from their programs of communities and households that are considered sufficiently empowered to take care of themselves and to continue working in networks with neighbors and allies. TCRS anticipates graduating a village

¹ At the time of this writing (April 2008), the second study of the sustainability of empowerment structures in villages from which LWF Cambodia had phased out a number of years ago is nearing completion, in the same area that Cossar (2005) had studied earlier.

once a majority of its marginalized persons who are in the program have become empowered. LWF Cambodia graduates when the candidates feel the time has come for this step. A complication may arise when village development committees and partner households do not progress at the same speed. Villages may stay in an “accompaniment” status for some years after graduation.

A progression of capacities

There are strong commonalities between LWF Cambodia and TCRS in the build-up of competencies in the groups being empowered. From recruitment to graduation, village organizations and partner households pursue an empowerment career that can be described in ever higher levels of competencies and capacities. Initially, the program creates basic self-confidence and rights awareness. These are translated into tools (plans, budgets, meeting patterns) and actions, all to be evaluated by the participants themselves.

Figure 1: Project flow chart of Borun village development committee, Cambodia



Standing beside what arguably is the world’s largest Gantt chart, the secretary of the development committee in Borun village, Bavel district, Cambodia, explains the sequencing of village projects in its annual work plan (Borun VDC 2007). The ability of the committees that we met in the program villages of LWF Cambodia to keep track of a large number – in some places more than 30 – distinct projects was amazing. Many projects were included in plans and charts *pro memoria*, i.e. even if no movement was expected during the planning period. This agenda diversity may be facilitated by the relatively high field staff intensity; it stands out from the planning capacity of poor, relatively undiversified rural communities in earlier community development eras.

At a second level, the concurrent flow of collaborative processes within the village community crystallizes in some kind of a master plan, for example the three-year

rolling plan of Tanzanian village councils. The battle cry “We have a plan” was loud and clear in most of the villages visited. The third level is gradually attained as villages extend their solidarity and resource networks beyond their own boundaries. In households, the analogue may be newly gained committee membership in one of the community-based organizations.

The programs are carried out by well-practiced field administrations. Since “empowerment” does not correspond to any particular profession or trade, the organizational form is essentially territorial-segmentary, not so much differentiated on functional lines. Field workers, however, are recruited from different professions and NGO careers and are mixed in teams of varied expertise and experience. The staffing patterns are distinctly different between the two programs. LWF Cambodia has more staff, filling frontline positions with persons recruited from outside. In Tanzania, with its greater scarcity of academically trained manpower, TCRS to a greater degree relies on volunteers.

Besides the village councils (Tanzania) / development committees (Cambodia), there is a significant diversity of community-based organizations that play complementary roles in service delivery and in networking across tiers and issues. Of special importance in both countries are the savings and loan associations. Although they struggle with tensions among member self-management, access for the poorest, and access to outside capital sources, they foster alliances between the poorest and the village middle class that are helpful for the overall success of the empowerment strategy.

Networks and plans

This last observation transitions into the good-practices elements that can be gleaned from the two programs. Both work at several tiers of local society and government. In addition, they have created intermediate-level networks that translate between lower and higher tiers. Neighborhood-based self-help groups, special-purpose village-level committees, and volunteers such as the TCRS animators increase the organizational density between household and village government. The programs have infused them with meaningful activity. A bias to the poorest members of the community goes hand in hand with advocating universal rights (such as the right to education) and improving community services that are used by all.

A pivotal element in the empowerment process is organized planning. Plans are important as documents because they let different partners who are not always present coordinate and update expectations. More important is the process by which households and communities cycle from initial assessments, to planning one or several projects, execution, and evaluation, with broad participation in all stages. The “empowerment process circle” that LWF Cambodia created was widely noticed at a Social Development Summit in Brazil.

Collections of action plans are then integrated at a higher level in return for resources that they have sought. The ability, not only to plan, but to participate in plan integration, is one of the characteristics of empowered individuals and communities. Not surprisingly, the zeal to plan is greatly aided by government decentralization policies that provide both resources and structure for the generation and selection of local projects. The process is most clearly formalized in the district plan integration

workshops in which the village development committees in Cambodia participate. Plan integration provides the meeting ground between rights-holders and duty-bearers.

What should be in the village development plans? The substantive areas in which empowerment programs have shown the best effects are hard to determine. There are no obvious patterns in which certain traditional components of integrated rural development fare better than others among empowered households and communities, say, health better than agriculture, or education better than savings and credit. In fact, the very idea of privileging some sectors over others seems contrary to the empowerment approach. One can observe, however, that the programs were more successful in harnessing expertise and assistance in some sectors than in others, for example, in Tanzania more successful in education than in agricultural extension. The question then concerns the choice of expertise that a particular empowerment program internalizes vs. that which is better procured in the market.

Rights and advocacy

If plans essentially are compilations of projects from different sectors, the involvement of empowerment programs with rights is more profound. In Tanzania and Cambodia, the insistence on the fact that everyone has rights, that those of the weakest must be protected, has worked nothing short of a cultural change, particularly in the lives of women. *After* this first step of asserting the “right to have rights”, the rights-based practice of holding duty-bearers accountable becomes more forceful. The strategy that integrates these various strands in a sufficiently abstract, yet highly motivating formula is condensed in the LWF Cambodia’s advocacy definition: “*The empowerment of the vulnerable, the enlightenment of the powerful*”.

Monitoring empowerment

The measurement and monitoring of empowerment is a challenging affair because empowerment cannot be observed directly. It is inferred from preconditions and outcomes. How development NGOs, including the LWF, with their typically limited data analysis capacity can demonstrate empowerment, is a complex of many open questions. Some recommend going away from variables- and indicators-based systems, in favor of case-based methods and stories such as of most significant life changes, but these qualitative approaches may demand even stronger analytic resources if the product is to be more than a trivial collection of vignettes.

The LWF Global Strategy defines evidence-of-change indicators. These mix dispositional and behavioral terms; they make sense only once country programs specify them in a locally adapted monitoring system. Not surprisingly then, the programs in Cambodia and Tanzania have developed distinct monitoring approaches. LWF Cambodia centrally sets a template for village self-assessments. It integrates assessment data with plan figures on an indicator-by-indicator basis. The TCRS practice, if not its formulated philosophy, permits more local initiative, which some project managers have seized in order to document progress in a dynamic perspective.

The village self-assessment process developed by LWF Cambodia has, with suitable simplifications, potential for wide application in other community empowerment programs. Known as “Village Graduation Guideline”, the instrument is well documented and has been noted in the international social development arena. Apart from specific instruments that have already proven their value, further work on

empowerment monitoring should acknowledge the human resources constraints in field programs. It should start with a minimalist monitoring program, using indicators that can be linked back to the World Service mandate and its biblical foundations, then gradually expanding it apace with country program capacity and translating it into development and project language. If empowerment programs can consistently document their sustained presence in remote areas, status improvements in oppressed groups, and reductions of violence, a core monitoring need will already be accomplished.

Institutions, economic growth and sustainable empowerment

What can the experience of LWF Cambodia and TCRS in Tanzania tell us about the sustainability of empowerment? A successful initial mobilization – which both programs have achieved – does not mean that the effects will persist. For this to happen, an appropriate institutional framework needs to be in place; this has been recognized by the LWF’s “Guiding Principles for Sustainable Development”, which emphasizes the viability of local communities. The Cambodian and Tanzania experience points also to the importance of national institutions, particularly the decentralization programs that take resource decisions closer to the communities. Political stability and economic growth in those two contexts manifestly have been strong enablers; whether they are necessary conditions everywhere for empowerment to work is undecided.

In Cambodia, the LWF withdrew from 25 villages in 2002. Subsequent research revealed that strong empowerment effects persist in these communities. TCRS has not yet had the opportunity for a similar sustainability test, but the strong mobilization of village councils over more than one plan period makes it seem unlikely that these communities would collapse back into a low-energy state.

Can programs be scaled up?

In the context of sustainability, the dominant idea is for the change agent to phase out successful communities and households. But there are good rationales also for “moving up” rather than “moving out”. The logic is similar to that of the NGO “scaling up” debate, emphasizing the value of innovation, diversification and indirect effects. LWF Cambodia has started to deliberate some ideas, such as in agricultural marketing and girls’ education. The same program has helped numerous communities to weather land conflicts peacefully; the challenge now is to make the government’s land titling program accessible and effective for all.

What has been missing is the vision of scaling up, a concept that has occupied a broad space in civil society debates of recent decades. Perhaps it is already implied in the vision that the LWF has developed for its advocacy work from village to central government: “The empowerment of the vulnerable, and the enlightenment of the powerful”.

Does empowerment work?

Empowerment works. It works at least to the point of strong initial mobilization of poor village communities and of their poorest households, as demonstrated in Cambodia and Tanzania. But grassroots success is a poor predictor of a concept’s longevity higher up in the aid chain and in the global market place for ideas. These

two levels – the local and the global – need to be distinguished when we assess the effectiveness of empowerment approaches.

As far as the local goes, a fairly substantial list of success factors can be abstracted from the experience of the two study programs. Prominent among them is the simultaneous mobilization at several tiers, but most focused on village decision making bodies and poor households. Above these two, effective mechanisms are needed for the village to interact with government; the district integration plans in Cambodia provide, if not a standard, a useful exemplar.

Outside the channels that are part of the government structure, successful empowerment programs broaden organizational capacity through a variety of community-based organizations. No final typology for them is feasible in this study, but savings and credit associations appear to be in great demand and even capable of building alliances between the poorest and the village middle class. The diversity of organizations and channels supports the advocacy work up and down the tiers of government and society.

Experience suggests that villages benefit from staying in the intensive program phase for a period of five to ten years. More important than such rules of thumb are the processes of *deciding* who should be included in the program, and when they should leave it. LWF Cambodia and TCRS each demonstrate the viability of a different decision process, the first stimulating intricate self-assessment processes in which communities determine their own maturity, the latter following a curricular framework in which program staff assess progress and continuation. Which decision mechanism is the more appropriate depends on whether the communities can handle self-assessments of appropriate complexity, and on the amount and quality of staff support.

Empowerment in the global marketplace for ideas

The LWF pursues a global strategy with equal emphasis on empowerment, rights and integrated approaches. Other international organizations that subscribe to empowerment may combine it with the same or other leading concepts. But one must not presume that all will accord empowerment the same equal footing with others among their master concept. For example, human rights – many of LWF’s traditional donor agencies profess rights-based policies – form an international normative regime, a status that empowerment has not attained. Nobody could possibly blame poor program outcomes on “empowerment violations”.

Organizations like the LWF who make empowerment one of their master concepts thus run a strategic risk. How can they believe that the concept will continue to resonate well in the world of development cooperation notorious for its fashion swings? Technological and cultural innovations can dramatically alter the alliance with other concepts and policies on which empowerment depends for credible success. Microfinance offers a classic example. Begun as a conspicuously empowering activity, it is now being run as commercial operations. These follow market criteria and, once weaned from subsidy, no longer depend on the empowerment narratives.

There are two reasons for optimism in as far as the robustness of empowerment is concerned. Concepts thrive on the ability of its promoters to harness ideational

brokers who translate them to other intellectual and policy communities. Several times, empowerment has enlisted powerful brokers. In richer nations, for example, the self-help movement became firmly institutionalized because its activists engaged allies in discourses that bought it wide legitimacy. In the development community, the World Bank elevated empowerment to the same footing with growth. The growth of civil society enlarges the pool of such potential brokers.

Second, poverty and exclusion are structural issues that have not lost their political momentum. Contention over distribution and redistribution of wealth and power will continue. Around cleavages in society, groups will organize; some will make power explicit and put out calls for empowerment. Programmatic ideas will be advanced, funded and translated into practice, perhaps with new terminology, but in the spirit of the empowerment imperative.

[Sidebar:] An empowered divorcee and the limits of empowerment

Mrs. Celestina Crisant is a widow and farmer in Chanika Village, Karagwe District, Tanzania. She enrolled in the Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service (TCRS) Community Empowerment Program in 2005. Her success and her struggles to cope with new problems highlight the scope and limit of the empowerment programs that this study analyzes. For this reason, this small profile of someone who arguably deserves to be called empowered was chosen for the sidebar of the report's summary.

The TCRS district manager, Erasto Kamihanda, and the chairman of the Chanika village council, Damian Kafanabo, took this researcher to meet Mrs. Crisant at her home in September 2007. We were received in a beautifully arranged small entrance room in a new house. Its floor was covered with fresh hay and two mats, with the family's sewing machine being the centerpiece of the reception area. Mrs. Crisant offered us coffee beans in pretty woven baskets. Manifestly, this was a lady, if poor, with an innate sense of beauty.

Asked how she had lived before she moved into this house, Mrs. Crisant described her life as one "of many struggles." Mother of eight children, she was left to raise them alone when her husband absconded. After a divorce, she obtained and cultivated a farm plot and kept her children in school.

After a complete household census determined the most economically marginalized households in Chanika, TCRS invited Mrs. Crisant to join the program. She followed all the usual classes for new participants, although she says that she best remembers the farming topics. From crop sales, she managed to buy another plot, cultivate more, and build this improved house.

Also, Mrs. Crisant was able to buy a sewing machine, meant for the eldest of the three children still at home, her daughter Zawadi. At the time of our visit, Zawadi was understudying a seamstress in the village, already the second such arrangement. She had failed the entrance exam to the government secondary school; the family could not afford a private school. Becoming a seamstress was seen as a useful second-best. However, with Zawadi's as yet very low skills, sewing jobs were few and far between.

Mrs. Crisant was able to acquire her second farm plot, improved house and sewing machine by investing her farm proceeds, without loans. Considered successful, she was still occasionally visited by the program's neighborhood animator and recently attended training on composting. The council chairman too had visited her in her home occasionally, as he did with other individuals following the TCRS program. Despite the family's much improved

position, Mrs. Crisant said she was worried. She was growing older, working both plots was getting harder, and Zawadi had not yet established herself in life.

Figure 2: Mrs. Celestina Crisant, of Tanzania, and her daughter Zawadi



Mrs. Crisant must have crossed the nadir of her life before joining the program. She had acquired a farm plot earlier and was able to send her children to school. She was lucky to live in Chanika, a village that had cooperated with TCRS since before the start of the empowerment program, and had dynamic councilors caring for the weaker section of the community. Karagwe has known economic growth in recent years; assumedly many households in Chanika too had seen their incomes go up.

The empowerment program picked up Mrs. Crisant on a positive dynamic that already existed, both in her personality and in her social environment. Two things, though, are noteworthy: the collaboration among TCRS, the village elite and the marginalized that made Mrs. Crisant's selection into the program possible, and the speed at which her condition improved, as seen in the household assets that she proudly pointed out.

Mrs. Crisant is a poor, but empowered person in the sense that she made choices to improve her life, seizing the opportunities that came her way. Yet she herself pointed to the limits of her success, in the slowly decreasing stamina that was making farming more arduous and in the failure to educate her daughter through secondary school, at a time when good jobs in Tanzania increasingly require this much or more education. Zawadi's difficult apprenticeship is an instance of what some researchers have called forced improvisation or tinkering among the poor, the condition of "never quite making it" and a question mark on the ability of empowerment programs to send the poorest onto a consistent growth path.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
CBO	Community-based organization
CEF	Community empowerment facilitator
CEO	Community empowerment officer
CIP	Commune Investment Plan
DWS	Department of World Service
ECLOF	Ecumenical Church Loan Fund
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
IDP	Internally displaced person
IGA	Income generating activity
LoC	US Library of Congress
LWF	Lutheran World Federation
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PM	Project manager
PMD	Planning and Monitoring Document
RDRS	RDRS Bangladesh, formerly Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service
SACCOS	Savings and credit cooperative society
TCRS	Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VB	Village bank
VDC	Village development committee
VGD	Vulnerable group development
WFP	World Food Program
WUG	Water user group

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The persons who made this study possible, contributed insights and documents, or cared for my education and personal comfort are many. To name all of them, starting with the LWF World Service head office and the programs in Cambodia and Tanzania, and remembering all those who traveled to meet me in their rural stations, would require that I copy the staff lists of these organizations. Even then, gratitude would not be rendered without noting all those who went out of their way to contribute from their personal angles in the villages and homesteads visited.

Unfair as it may appear, I will therefore thank World Service, LWF Cambodia and Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service (TCRS) collectively for their multiple support and enumerate by name only those who, in documentation, translation and data collation, critically fashioned my perceptions to a degree of silent co-authorship. In Geneva, Duane Poppe and Maryssa Camaddo helped refine the terms of the study as well as the structure of this report over a period of more than one year. In Cambodia, Kem Sambaddh accompanied me on both field trips, shouldering the entire translation burden, in a truly heroic effort, conversation by conversation. In Tanzania, the burden was shared among Everready Nkya, Pantaleon Kambona, Erasto Kamihanda and

Beatus Mbunda, who each handled all verbal communications with Swahili speakers in one of the four visited districts, with great intensity.

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I am grateful for the opportunity to present an early version of key findings to the LWF Field Directors' Meeting in Switzerland in November 2007. The response of an attentive and knowledgeable audience has helped clarify the interpretive framework.

I am equally grateful for permission to use this material to reach out to readers directly. The present version of this study follows the original closely. I removed the discussion of standards for LWF empowerment programs as it had addressed an internal audience. I have added, in the final chapter, some speculative thoughts about the vitality of "empowerment" in the sphere of development concepts. If this attempts to generalize some of the conclusions, it is still true that the empirical side is entirely due to the LWF field programs into which I was invited. The responsibility for any errors, factual and conceptual, of course, rests with me.

The reader of this report will be chased from one purportedly universal concept to the other, from poverty alleviation to decentralization, not to mention all the instances of "empowerment". It is the small, humble, entirely local illustrations of a mighty concept that deserve to be remembered better; they communicate in gentler tones what is truly human about it. A field worker who traveled with me over a long distance showed this side of the empowerment story when he confessed:

"You know we have talked so much of big things. But, I tell you, in this empowerment there is more. I have seen how the poor, after they study in our literacy classes, write little love letters. The wife sits down in front of the house and writes some lines on a piece of paper. And since they don't travel, the husband is there and reads it while she is writing to him. And then he sits down and writes one to her, and she reads it right there. Seeing this makes me happy."

Aldo Benini

Washington DC, April 2008

Background and Purpose

Why this study?

“Empowerment” is one of the concepts of modernity that have traversed amazing careers. Unknown fifty years ago except in the strictest legal meaning, the term now occurs in more than 20 million documents referenced in popular search machines. Most current uses are outside the legal language. Many are associated with movements, groups of people and policies in and for developing countries, including in the strategic plan and program reality of the Lutheran World Federation.

In the LWF Department of World Service Global Strategy 2007-2012, the empowerment approach is one of three strategic approaches, on an equal footing with the integrated and the rights-based approach. The synergy of the three in the LWF field programs is expected to make the paramount endeavor, upholding the rights of the poor and oppressed, more effective and more sustained.

This study was begun as an effort to clarify the empowerment concept as currently used in LWF field programs, particularly in relationship to community selection, length of community support, criteria for, and modalities of, community graduation and phasing-out of support. In addition, it was to highlight how empowerment moves in step with rights and with integrated needs provision.

However, it became soon obvious that the conceptual challenges were more formidable than the technical terms of reference suggested. By nature, empowerment is not directly observable; it can only be inferred from observed acts contributing to it, and others subsequently flowing from it. This presents particular challenges for monitoring and evaluating empowerment programs, but the elusive character of the concept pervades the discussion of all of its aspects.

This report uses LWF documents, social science literature on empowerment, rights and integrated program delivery as well as field notes and monitoring data from two field programs that the author visited in summer and fall 2007. One of the programs visited – LWF Cambodia – is directly implemented by LWF; the other host organization, TCRS in Tanzania, is a legally independent so-called “associated” program.

Chapter structure

The report is divided into eight main chapters. Each of them, except the last, offers a chapter summary to let readers recapture the key points. Most chapters elaborate, in a sidebar section, on a particular aspect worthy of illustration with field experience or with the summary of an external thread of discussion or remarkable study.

The chapter “Empowerment – The Career of a Concept” traces the origin and stupendous public career of a concept that, fifty years ago, was virtually unknown outside its strict legal usage. It probes its rapport with the social medium that the term gives away, power, and notes the conflation with other codes, notably from the education and social protection areas.

The report then follows empowerment into the domain of development cooperation. Despite a rapid diffusion of the concept, by now making empowerment discourses more prolific than generic rural or community development, empirical knowledge remains scant. We then look at empowerment in the three dimensions of time, target groups and content. Empowerment programs go through phases, aim to involve marginalized and excluded persons and communities, and enhance capacity in a number of collaborative processes in any of the traditionally defined sectoral and technical fields.

The next chapter turns on the LWF proper. It enumerates doctrinal sources guiding the Federation *in toto* as well as forces causing field programs to move towards the empowerment approach. This will appeal chiefly to readers familiar with the LWF, but the subsequent reflections on the relationships among the three strategic approaches ought to have value in other contexts as well.

The long chapter “The Practice of Empowerment Work in LWF Programs” brings the findings from the Cambodia and Tanzania program visits into a detailed structure. It opens with a nutshell history of these country programs and with select aspects of the environment in which they currently operate. The goals and objectives of both programs are built around empowerment; as management tools, however, they are differently structured. These official programmatic documents are contrasted with the meanings that the grassroots – frontline staff, member of village councils and coordination committees – attach to empowerment.

Again, the approach and practice in both countries are dissected in three fundamental dimensions. In the social, the programs work at several tiers, although with major emphases on village communities and on the very poor households. In the time dimension, both programs have built tools to structure the recruitment of participants, guiding them through a multi-year intensive phase, and then graduating them. In the substantive dimension, participants acquire increasing levels of competence, ranging from initially very basic skills, rights awareness and self-confidence, to detailed planning, and hence to more self-reliant networking with external actors. A final section on organizational aspects discusses the type of field administration that empowerment programs favor, with greater use of field staff in Cambodia and of community volunteers in Tanzania.

The following chapter moves us closer to good practices, by collecting observations on things that worked well in Tanzania and Cambodia. One can easily see that the empowered communities are not performing from an academic scorebook; they are embedded in networks that span several tiers up and down the administrative ladder. The programs face a difficult task of managing continuity and necessary transitions at the same time; they have succeeded by conserving considerable degrees of freedom in selecting participants, although in distinct ways between Tanzania and Cambodia. In the substantive dimension, success is found, not in favoring this or that sectoral domain over others, but in creating mechanisms for planning and plan integration. Empowerment is expandable when it combines with a suitably abstract and yet powerful advocacy perspective, which the Cambodia program has found in the formula “*empower the vulnerable, enlighten the powerful*”.

The chapter on monitoring systems is of hybrid character, mixing theoretical, observational and speculative material. Measuring empowerment shares the same challenge with endeavors to measure any other dispositional concept that is not directly observable. The Global Strategy proposes evidence-of-change indicators that mix behavioral with dispositional terms, to be specified in the country programs. In fact, LWF Cambodia and TCRS have each created their own distinct system. A piece in the LWF Cambodia's monitoring toolbox, the "Village Graduation Guideline", is known beyond the country; it is the cornerstone of the entire self-assessment process of the village communities in the empowerment program. Here as in Tanzania, however, the limitations on analytic capacity are serious, leading us to recommend that LWF should start with a minimalist monitoring program, using indicators that can be linked back to the World Service mandate and its biblical foundations.

Discussing the difficult question of whether empowerment is sustainable fills its own chapter. One of the promising signs that we found in both programs is the far-reaching re-specification of leadership roles, in diverse committees and assignments into which the empowerment work breathed real life. Only the Cambodia program has so far supplied an empirical test of sustainability, by phasing out over twenty villages and then after some time re-observing the quality of its collective endeavors. However, the sustainability debate should not be limited to criteria of moving *out*, but also include opportunities to move *up* by responding to new development challenges resulting from earlier successes. There is a missing link between the sustainability and the scaling-up debates in empowerment.

The final chapter builds on the optimism that empowerment works, at least in a first, yet far-reaching mobilization of communities and poor households. The synergy of supporting empowerment at several societal tiers, the important diversity of community-based organizations, the opportunities to scale up from solid achievements all inspire confidence in the approach. However, what works at the grassroots may not work in New York and Geneva. We conclude therefore with reflections, largely of a speculative nature, on the longevity of the empowerment concept in the global marketplace for ideas.

Empowerment – The Career of a Concept

Empowerment, as a concept beyond the narrow legal term, is about forty years' old. Its meanings, and our familiarity with the word, usages and underlying theories, have kept changing. All the same, it has its root in “power”, a medium of social exchange whose structures are rarely present in empowerment talk. Other programmatic codes such as from the world of education are mixed in. This chapter gives a barebones account of the conceptual evolution and the diversity of the participating societal resources.

A modern concept

The march of empowerment thinking has been rapid, powerful, and perhaps worldwide. But it has not been straightforward. Multiple meanings have come to stick to it, and to the uninitiated it is not obvious who or what is empowered or empowering. Paradoxes have accumulated. The initial focus was on *persons* – individuals, groups, communities – that were to have more power of one kind or another. Increasingly, we are talking about *things* that empower, particularly technologies that have become cheaper and more easily accessible. In richer countries, many will remember their first purchase of a personal computer as the beginning of a new lifestyle. In developing areas, mobile phone service, scaled up in well known campaigns such as Grameen Phone in Bangladesh, or evaluated to dollar-and-cents benefits such as in a study of fishermen in Kerala popularized in *The Economist* (*Economist* 2007a), is considered empowering. One of the empowerment paradoxes is that for those who cannot afford these technologies, exclusion and poverty may become harder.

Origin in Christian writing

It therefore seems worthwhile having a look at the origin and diffusion of the empowerment concept. If we can trust bibliographic databases, 1966 is its approximate birth date, the year when an article in “*Christian Century*”: “Christmas Baskets and Power” used the word for the first time. It defined empowerment as “*decreas(ing) the dependence and powerlessness of people*” (Eichenberger 1966: ; as communicated by Bartunek 2008). In fact, after Eichenberger’s seminal piece and before the first empowerment article in any other discipline appeared (sociology, in 1973), all other articles on the subject were carried by religious journals (three more between 1969 and 1971). This establishes the origin of the concept among religious thinkers, at least for the USA, during a time when liberation theology made its mark beyond Latin America. After sociology, the concept diffused to education (1975), psychology and social work (both in 1978) and after a further decade’s gestation to management journals (1988) (Bartunek and Spreitzer 2006: 261).

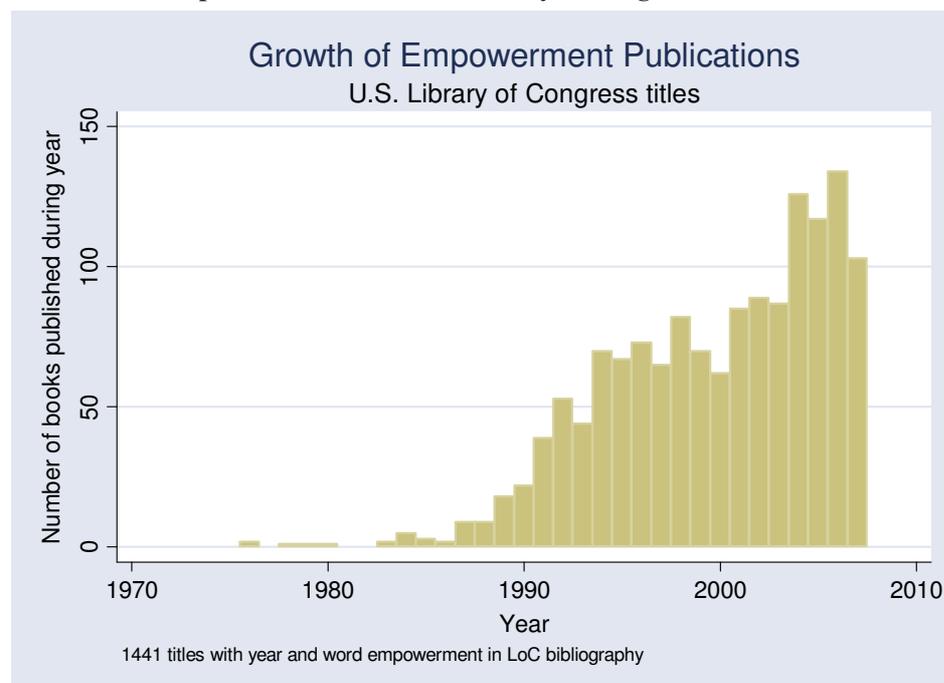
The first book to use “empowerment” in its title was “*Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities*” (Solomon 1976), in the US civil rights and urban community revival contexts. This may suggest that oppositional social movements owned the concept. However, soon after 1976, “empowerment” gained currency also on the conservative side of the political spectrum. It has since percolated into numerous and diverse practice fields, from social casework to education, and into social movements from left to right, so much so that even a paradoxical claim like

“Prisons That Empower” (Hannah-Moffat 2000) should no longer surprise us. In an intelligent sociological interpretation, Bröckling (2007: , in German) identifies “empowerment” as one of the main strategies in the development of modern subjectivity. He assigns to it a place side by side with such mainstays of modernity as “creativity”, “quality”, and “projects”.

After an incubation period, fast growth

The pace at which the usage of “empowerment” expanded can in part be measured using the United States Library of Congress bibliography. To the extent that this country dominates cultural production in present-day world society, cataloguing a book in the Library of Congress reflects a minimum hurdle that an idea has to take in the marketplace for publications. After Solomon’s 1976 book, few others passed this test in the next ten years, a time that may be considered an incubation period. Starting around 1987, the number of books with “entitlement” in the Library of Congress bibliographic fields has grown tremendously. After an initial spurt, growth between 1994 and 2003 was feeble, but the US market for empowerment books has since found new vigor.

Figure 3: Books on "empowerment" in the US Library of Congress



More interesting than the subtle changes in the growth rates is the question why this explosion happened in the ideas’ market. After all, Solomon’s book had come out at the tail end of the US civil rights movement, at a time when the country was retreating from its progressive New Deal and Great Society enthusiasm. In such a climate, one would not expect any great upswing for a term coined to strengthen the underclass.

Congenial for the helping professions

Although Bröckling himself does not say so, his interpretation leads us to suspect that the popularity of the “empowerment” concept has a lot to do with the growth of the helping professions. In the wealthy societies of the West, “help”, offered by licensed professions as well as by a motley crowd of practitioners, forms an emergent

functionally differentiated subsystem of its own right. Social workers, psychotherapists and other helping professions, no matter how diverse their philosophies, face a common challenge. They need to return their clients “back to the world”. The clients can cope with this world only if the help they received has a persistent effect. This effect is conveniently circumscribed by a disposition like “empowered”.

Once returned to their own, the former clients must not passively rely on the environment, however enabling or clement this may be, but must show “agency of their own” – hence, not surprisingly, the strong focus that empowerment advocates of all hues place on self-attribution phenomena (Bröckling 2007: 192). Many appear to perceive society as sharply divided into powerful and powerless people and, as a consequence, tend to bundle very diverse problem situations into one definition – lack of power as the root cause. One may think that, in the developing regions, the “social exclusion” paradigm has reinforced such perceptions. In the rich world, besides the empowerment that the helping professions dispense, there is another kind that seems to be the lure more of the “included”. The highly paid information professional whom his corporate employers imbue with a kind of structured autonomy volunteers longer working hours, managed with the help of the “empowering Blackberry”.

Criticisms

In time, the empowerment philosophy has come in for a kind of criticism similar to that aimed at participatory development (Cooke and Kothari 2001: ; Williams 2004). Cruikshank (1999), in her critical analysis of community action programs, pointed out that the powerless did not exist until the advocates of empowerment so defined them. The powerless are looked after by a new cadre of professionals who do not prescribe specific courses of action, but ascribe status. They are careful not to degrade the powerless into passive aid recipients, but determine who shall be activated in the first place. In the same year, Weissberg brought out his “The Politics of Empowerment” (Weissberg 1999), an all-out attack on the concept from a conservative stance. Removing his angry politics, two observations merit greater consideration.

First, empowerment language is strongly self-recursive, making serious program evaluations all but impossible; most of the claims to their good effects are so opaquely formulated that it is unclear what kinds of observations would falsify them. Second, most of the empowerment writing happens in secluded academic quarters, by researchers and activists who do not commonly share much life experience with those for whom they prescribe empowerment strategies. They may, for example, call for the empowerment of inner-city students, but would not willingly send their own children to such schools. In other words, the language gulf aligns itself with class and situational barriers. This does not discourage the empowerment discourse, even though those to be empowered may themselves hardly talk it in their own underprivileged *lebenswelt*.

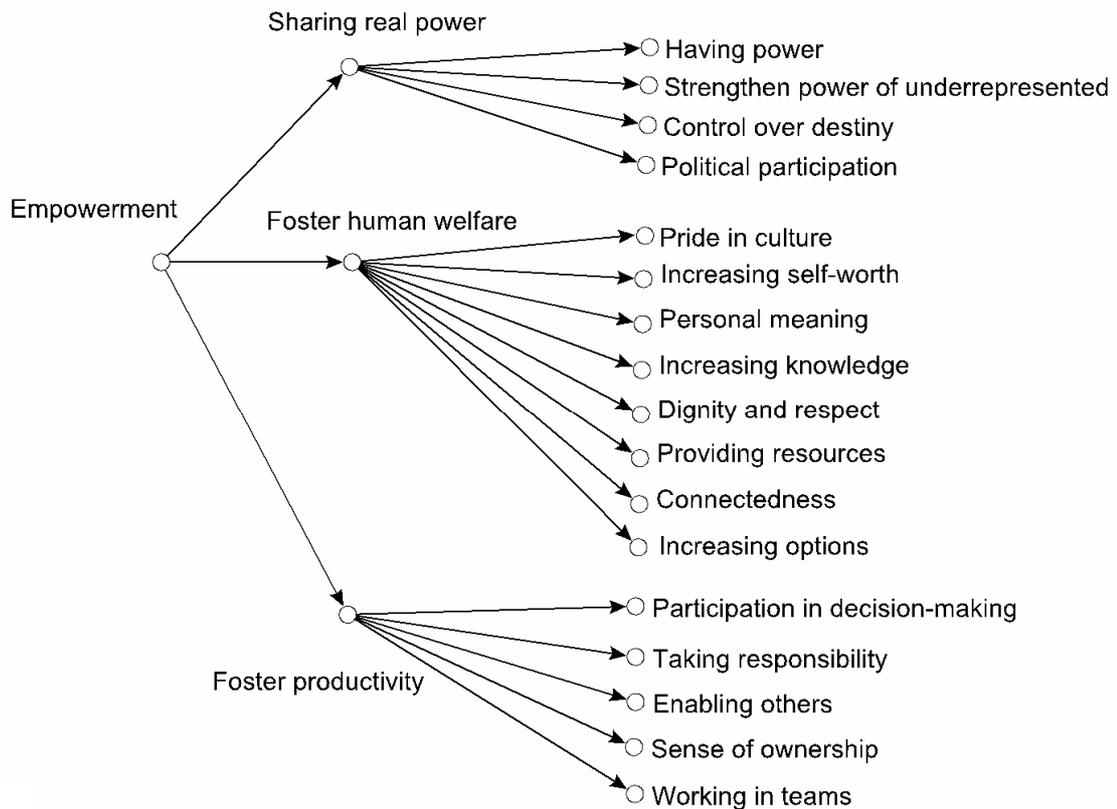
The medium of empowerment: Power?

Regardless of the cultural niche in which empowerment has grown as concept and discourse, some basic coordinates have to be taken: About whom do empowerment advocates speak? Whom do they want to empower? In what institutional realms are the empowered meant to advance?

To shed light on those questions, we again turn to two bibliographic data sources, Bartunek and Spreitzer's (op.cit.) analysis of journal articles and the book titles in the Library of Congress. Two different methods each yield different, though complementary answers.

Bartunek and Spreitzer, dissecting a sample of 318 out of over 3,000 articles on empowerment published between 1966 and 2000, classified the uses of the term into 17 meanings that they established inductively going through the material. They grouped these into three broad categories, as in this diagram:

Figure 4: Meanings of empowerment broadly categorized



Note: After Bartunek et al. (2006: 260, Table 1)

A protean concept

In the perspective of the poverty and oppression, this scheme does not directly tell us who the addressees of empowerment are. But it has the advantage to warn us that relatively soon after the concept diffused from religious literature to sociology and to other disciplines, its initial intent of “sharing real power” was diluted. Other, politically less contentious broad realms of meaning came to dominate. Their multiple specific meanings can be grouped, as Bartunek et al. did, into “fostering human welfare” and “fostering productivity”.

Empowerment as productivity increase seeped in first via education (in the seventies) and later, in the nineties, was eagerly adopted by the management literature. In its corporate perspective, the emphasis on productivity comes almost natural; Bartunek et al. comment that this “almost turns the original meaning on its head. Rather than

providing the less powerful with ways of getting more power, the more recent definitions fit empowerment of individuals into the broader needs of the organization (ibid.: 267). They call empowerment a “protean concept”, after the Greek god Proteus, who could change forms at will.

To find out the addressees of empowerment, the over 1,600 titles in the bibliographic information in the Library of Congress tell us more. As almost-sentences, these titles are open to content analysis. We keep this to a simple word frequency analysis, as in the following table.

Table 1: Most frequent key terms in "empowerment" book titles

Key term	LoC titles	Key term	LoC titles
women [wom*]	17.8%	work	2.4%
community [communit*]	7.7%	people	2.2%
development [develop*]	7.4%	world	2.2%
political, politics	5.5%	black	2.1%
education	5.0%	leadership	2.1%
social	5.0%	personal	1.9%
Africa, African	3.5%	participation	1.9%
economic [econom*]	3.4%	rural	1.7%
health	3.3%	management	1.6%
power	3.1%	youth	1.5%
gender	2.9%	poverty	1.5%
India, Indian	2.6%	Bangladesh, Bangladeshi	0.9%

Note: Based on 1,603 titles with “empowerment” in their title field, including undated works.

A number of observations leap to the eye. The paramount finding is that empowerment speaks to women’s issues more than to any other specific group, institution or region. Together with “gender”, women are addressed in more than a fifth of all Library of Congress listed books on empowerment.

This is followed by two “collective singulars”, “community” (as a group) and “development” (as a process). It would be an over-interpretation to deduce that empowerment philosophies are chiefly communitarian; there is also a (smaller) literature promoting individual empowerment. But clearly the impulse to improve the condition of entire communities has been maintained since the birth of the concept.

Despite poverty, not primarily an economic concept

The frequency table leads us to think that the political, educational and social connotations of empowerment are stronger than the economic ones. In the same vein, the relatively low prominence of “poverty” in this set of book titles is slightly surprising. We will later meet case study communities participating in empowerment programs in which income generation for the poorest invariably is a key ingredient. We will also briefly reference a study that looks at the determinants of both personal empowerment and economic welfare (Lokshin and Ravallion 2002).

In geographic terms, Africa as well as the two South-Asian countries India and Bangladesh have made it into the list of most frequent terms. If empowerment in Latin America has not made a great inroad in the US book market, several of its

countries are more strongly present in Web searches, as we have seen. What does China, a country that has achieved rapid poverty reduction, have to say? Not much by the number of titles in this set. However, two of the five titles on China almost programmatically span the tension between *people* that are empowered and *things* that empower: local government (Wang 2003) and the Internet (Zheng 2007).

Finally, we need to point out a cluster of empowerment concepts that centers on self-help movements, particularly in wealthier countries. Patients' self-help groups seem to be leading such efforts, which overlap also with the women's movement and with youth work. The term "health" appeared in over three percent of the evaluated book titles. The redefinition of individual subjectivity that Bröckling (op.cit.) sees as the root of the modern empowerment movement at large may be more openly celebrated in this cluster of the literature. A title like "*My pledge to myself: a poetic handbook of empowerment for young people*" (Knight 2006) captures its spirit well. However, such manifestations are not necessarily marginal, nor are they entirely divorced from the community-based and developing-nation empowerment streams. Particularly the patients' movements signal a more active kind of institutional clients², an evolution that is certainly relevant in the context of social exclusion and re-inclusion.

The big question then is: Where does all that leave power? What is the power that the subjects of empowerment are to receive or conquer, enhance and exercise? Who is to give it to them, from whom is it to be taken? What will it help the newly empowered to achieve? As critics noted, empowerment writers are long on epithets like "the age of empowerment", but short on explaining their concept of power (Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan 1998).

In the set of Library of Congress titles, "power" appears relatively frequently in connection with the institutional realm that is commonly associated most closely with it: politics. Taken together, "power" and "politics" (or "political") can claim the second rank behind books on women and empowerment. How differentiated a power analysis these works offer, is another question. Bröckling (2007: 192-93) notes a tendency among empowerment authors to lump groups of very diverse individuals into one groups defined by one thing: they lack power. In other words, they grossly simplify a political landscape inhabited by very different people, some of which may indeed be powerless in almost every possible sense of the word, while others may enjoy significant, if not easy to discern powers.

Power and other codes

Authors working more directly in the field of development cooperation have also struggled with a deeper understanding of power within empowerment and – we address this later (pages 49 sqq.) – rights-based policies. For the World Bank, Csaszar (2004) reviewed power-theoretic foundations of such approaches, only to conclude that "*power is a complex and multi-layered concept that lacks a universally accepted definition*" (ibid.: 137). One might leave it there and turn to more practical questions were it not for two reasons that surface in empowerment debates time and again.

² Loukanova and Bridges (2007) found no fewer than 3,942 articles in the professional *medical* literature of English language that dealt with empowerment between 1980 and 2005. Significantly, those focused on patients (n=1,742, 44%) outnumber those focused on providers (n=1,162, 29%), and on society (n=1,038, 27%).

Zero-sum or win-win

First, there are unresolved differences between those who conceive of power as a zero-sum game and others who believe in win-win situations. The first variety seems to dominate empowerment thinking particularly in the highly politicized Latin American development circles. By contrast, institutional design thinkers assume that actors on both sides of societal cleavages can enhance their powers for mutual benefit. The title of the above-cited Chinese study “Mutual empowerment of state and peasantry” (Wang 2003) is indicative of this collaborative philosophy. Obviously, the possibility of mutual gain is key to the chances that those in power will allow their subjects to rise in any power dimensions, or whether they will fight such endeavors to their teeth.

Challenging translations

Second, whenever “empowerment” is translated into other languages, the lack of a direct equivalent becomes apparent. In some major languages, translation attempts have preserved the reference to “power” while for other languages acceptable translations rely on other concepts. The box below lists terms used by the LWF, together with their basic definitions, in Spanish, French, and Portuguese. Stern, Dethier et al. (2005: 394, n.7) are not the only ones to note that the Spanish “empoderamiento” is an obvious Anglicism, although one meant to convey the power concept. The French “autonomisation” is closer to the idea of modern subjectivity à la Bröckling (op.cit.); some French authors (e.g., Hofmann 2003), therefore, prefer the use of the untranslated “empowerment”. The Portuguese “capacitação” entirely abandons power in favor of a different concept, “capacity”. This needs some deeper consideration because it is at the roadforks of important organizational decisions.

[Sidebar:] Translations of “empowerment” in LWF documents

Spanish: Empoderamiento

En enfoque de empoderamiento construye las capacidades de las personas, como individuos y como miembros de comunidades, para lograr resultados para ellos mismos. (LWF 2006a: Slide 8)

French: Autonomisation

Cette approche vise à conférer aux individus comme aux membres des groupes et des communautés concernés la capacité et les compétences nécessaires pour accéder à leur propre autonomie. En dotant les gens et les groupes locaux de connaissances, de compétences et de façons de voir différentes qui élargissent leurs possibilités, la confiance qu'ils ont en eux-mêmes s'en trouve renforcée ; on leur donne ainsi les moyens de prendre leur destin en main. Cela signifie que les individus doivent être étroitement associés à tous les aspects de leur propre développement, depuis l'analyse de la situation jusqu'à la planification en passant par la mise en œuvre, le suivi et l'évaluation. Il faut pour cela les inciter à apporter leur contribution dans la mesure de leurs moyens et sous toutes les formes possibles, qu'il s'agisse d'idées ou d'orientations, de temps ou de travail, de matériaux ou d'argent. (LWF 2007a: 2)

Portuguese: Capacitação

O enfoque de capacitação proporciona capacidade e competência tanto de forma individual como também na forma de membros participantes de grupos e comunidades para a obtenção de resultados para eles próprios. Pelo municiamento das pessoas e grupos locais com conhecimentos, as habilidades e atitudes que alargariam suas opções, sua confiança

própria pode ser elevada e assim podem estar cada vez em melhores condições de terem controle das suas vidas. Isto significa que as pessoas devem ser activamente envolvidas em todos os aspectos do seu desenvolvimento desde a concepção e planificação até à implementação, monitoria e avaliação. Isto por sua vez, exige que as pessoas sejam motivadas para contribuir tanto e de tantas maneiras quanto possível por via de ideias, liderança, tempo e trabalho ou materiais e dinheiro. (LWF 2007b: 2)

Power and capacity

The power and capacity interpretations are widely different. They use different communication media, in a sociological (Luhmann 1975: ; Luhmann 1997) but also in an everyday sense. Power communicates actions that motivate other actions – actions of obedience meant to avoid less rewarding alternatives (Baecker 2004: 8). Power, by relating actions to actions, is different from other media that motivate experience rather than action, and which thus leave it open what action will eventually follow. This is exactly the case of “capacity building”, in which an empowering agency acts on the cognitions, skills and other assets of the empowered – regardless of how these will later use their enhanced capacity. In everyday language, empowerment via power helps the formerly powerless to “resist” – think of “resistencia” as a rallying value in Latin American social movements – while empowerment via capacity-building creates “can do” dispositions.

Dispositions and Sen’s capabilities model

Both interpretations may be necessary and in practice may fluctuate into each other continuously. The powerful can no longer assume automatic obedience on the part of their subjects once these have more power, and their calculations may depend on observations of their subjects’ new capacities. Vice versa, the transfer of cognitions, skills and assets takes place in an arena in which power is tested continuously, such as over the elite capture of social service subsidies meant for the poorest. One may want to eschew these questions and simply assume that empowerment is a dispositional term (Carnap 1936: ; Raatikainen 2003), like the elastic quality of a rubber band that we see only when the band is stretched and released. A dispositional understanding of empowerment may approach, in development philosophy, Amartya Sen’s capabilities model of development (Sen 2001) in which the empowered are freed to realize their full functions in society. Such an understanding moves empowerment into the vicinity of rights approaches (Schneider and Zúniga-Hamlin 2005: 569).

However, this is not yet sufficient for a solid basic understanding of how empowerment possibly functions. Power, as one of the classic communication media besides truth/values, romantic love, and property/money (Luhmann 1997: 332-58), is relatively straightforward. It is exercised in political processes such as elections, in law and litigation, in social movements, and in forms closer to its underpinning evolutionary origin, physical violence. Regardless of zero-sum or win-win beliefs, the guiding distinction of powerful/subject and its domesticated version legal/illegal are well understood across groups and institutions.

Power lives in politics, but does capacity have a home?

The same cannot be said of capacity building. The distinction capable/incapable is not correlated to any one major institutional realm in the way power is to politics. What programs would transfer capacity is undefined at first. There are two candidate

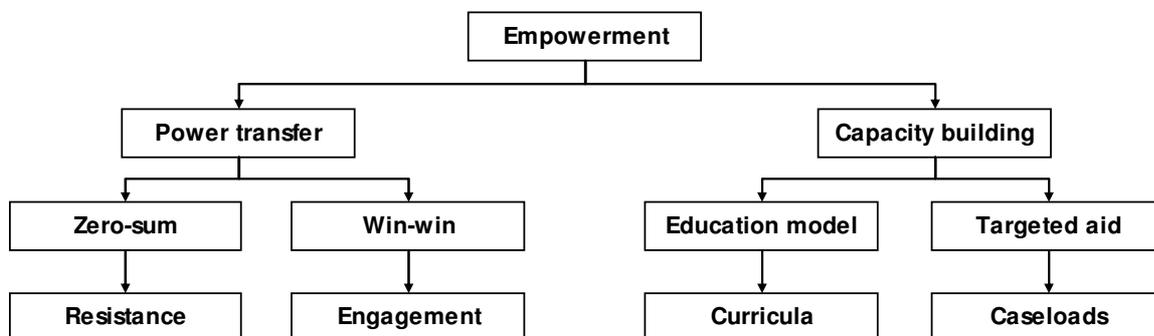
institutions. From education, one may borrow the guiding distinction teachable/not teachable³, which can apply both to learners and to subject matter. This criterion is attractive where individuals and groups to be empowered need to acquire the cognitive frames necessary to cooperate, claim rights and hold office bearers accountable. It is basic to the design of adult literacy programs and other curricular approaches to empowerment. It acknowledges also the possibility that the poorest, oppressed or excluded may face special learning handicaps, which empowerment programs need to take into account. The pre-packaging of teachable subject matter in ways that meet the needs of those to be empowered is a classic strategy flowing from the education model. Programs to give poor women in Bangladesh mobile phones as income-generating projects exemplify the success of this distinction.

From the perception of injustice to the definition of caseloads

The education model is not the only one inspiring capacity building for empowerment. Its rival is the institutional sector vaguely known as the helping professions, whose guiding distinction is help vs. non-help in response to observed conditions of social inequality and exclusion (Baecker 1994: ; Bango 2005: 278; Kleve 2005: 39). In wealthier societies, social casework and allied programs execute the help/non-help code, mostly applying legally mandated criteria. In developing countries, targeted aid applies it (Ravallion 2007). The targeting may rely on different methods; we will, for example, find that our case study programs use participatory methods as well as household surveys. Common to both is the translation of observed social inequality into categorized social problems, and hence into cases that helping organizations can process in accordance with their policies, budgets and timelines (Fuchs and Schneider 1995: 213). To stay within our example, we will find that the poorest in the village communities that one of our case study programs adopts are redefined as “marginalized” even though the thus targeted and their communities do not use this term. The degree of marginalization in poor households is established through surveys; in each surveyed village, a number of the highest ranking marginalized individuals are admitted into the empowerment program. The numbers are derived using assumptions of efficient field worker and community animator caseloads.

We summarize the various models of empowerment in this diagram.

Figure 5: Models of empowerment



³ The German language dichotomy “vermittelbar / nicht vermittelbar” expresses the basic code of the education system more aptly.

These models operate simultaneously, not least because most individuals and communities are exposed to several empowerment endeavors, among which different perceptions and strategies prevail in variable mixtures. These may or may not sail under any empowerment banner, and may be delivered by organizations with very different philosophies and external links. And even within one and the same explicit empowerment program, different situations may activate one or the other of these models more prominently.

The point to emphasize is that empowerment is a very polyvalent concept. Empowerment outcomes are not as simple as losing or winning an election, or a legal contest. And while mobile phones for poor people have an obvious empowerment dimension, measuring who gets phones and for how long, while important, does not tell the whole story. We thus anticipate difficulties, but no logical impossibility, in monitoring and evaluating empowerment. Also, we cannot grasp empowerment by simply looking at those in need of it, but must understand also the logic of organizations that “do” the empowerment.

Chapter summary

“Empowerment” is one of those modern concepts that have seen a rapid and far-reaching diffusion while at the same time taking on more numerous meanings. While it was originally coined by religious thinkers, very soon other disciplines came to dominate the empowerment discourse. In the eighties, management theory adopted the concept, in ways that foster corporate productivity, and which run counter to the intentions of the seminal thinkers. Empowerment is a wide umbrella concept.

Some have asked why it has had such a successful career. For one thing, it has an excellent fit with modern subjectivity, similar to other versatile devices like “quality” or “project”, mixing subjective-psychological and collective-institutional connotations seamlessly. The growth of the helping professions has contributed, due to their structural necessity to “return clients to the world”, for which empowerment offers at least a partial answer. The empowered patient, once discharged from hospital, negotiates health care and job market with greater sovereignty.

As least as far as one can notice in the US literature, the women’s movement and gender issues have been major drivers of empowerment discourse. The search for vibrant communities and the agendas of the developing world provide other fertile territories. In geographic terms, other than the USA, Africa, India and Bangladesh are conspicuous places on the empowerment map.

He who says empowerment says power; and the question of what kind of power is given or taken does not go away. Authors who investigated fundamental intents established three separate clusters, “sharing real power”, “fostering human welfare” and “fostering productivity”, usually of organizations. The latter two can arguably be combined into a capacity building interpretation of empowerment.

In real-life situations, power as well as capacity interpretations are at work simultaneously, with different models on offer within each of them. Power may be contested in zero-sum or rather in win-win games, and capacity may be created following an educational or rather a social protection model. The important realization is that the underlying guiding distinctions are different. The power medium motivates

action through action, by threatening and avoiding less pleasant alternatives, and by its never entirely suppressed origin in physical violence. By contrast, binary codes like “teachable / not teachable” and “help / no help” leave open the ensuing specific actions, working primarily on the experience of those to be empowered. The programs that these codes guide aim at different outcomes: power at redistributing positions and resources, capacity at exposures packaged in curricula or caseloads. But with empowerment being such a polyvalent concept, we repeat that one should expect multiple codes intermingled in most practical empowerment programs.

Empowering Development

After “poverty” and before “rural development”

When our empowerment exploration turns away from the country in which the concept originated and moves on to the developing world, we find a similar incubation period. Its beginning is more difficult to date than in the domestic usage in the USA. As a likely first, Friedmann (1992) used “empowerment” in the title of his “The Politics of Alternative Development”. He made no reference to any international bodies using the term literally. He tagged the origin of alternative development thinking to a speech, in 1969, of the then director of the Sussex Institute for Development Studies (*ibid.*: 1). Under its own name, the “empowerment” concept did not come to prominence until the late nineties (UNDP 1998) when its affinity with such values as autonomy, distributional justice and democratic participation fell in tune with the post-Cold War *zeitgeist*. In different lingo, the concept itself had been powerful for several decades, such as in the Freirean lineage.

Prominence through the World Development Report

The literal proliferation within development networks was greatly helped by the World Development Report 2000-2001 (World Bank 2001). Part 3, “Empowerment”, embraced two chapters that elaborated the concept in specific perspectives – making state institutions more responsive to the poor (Ch. 6), and removing social barriers and building social institutions (Ch. 7)⁴. Since then, two developments have been remarkable. First, the number of Web-searchable documents that carry the term “empowerment” has surged ahead of older, more neutral domain name uses such as “rural development” or “community development”. The number of Google hits is now more than a quarter of those for “poverty”, one of the root conditions of the entire development enterprise. Approaches that had their heyday before the advent of the Worldwide Web, such as “integrated rural development” are dismally outdistanced. Newcomers, such as the “rights-based approach” are still way behind, as this table makes clear.

Table 2: Google hits for key development terms

Search term	Returns (in millions)
Poverty	71
<i>Empowerment</i>	21
“Rural development” or “community development”	approx. 14
“Rights-based”	1.5
“Integrated rural development”	0.3

Note: Google hits 25 October 2007

Second, in terms of the relative importance that the term carries in the public mind, the birthplace of “empowerment” is no longer its strongest abode. Even on a measure biased to the English language like “Google Trend”, the United States ranks eighth behind several developing nations. In October 2007, South African Web users performed the most frequent searches using “empowerment”, followed by India, the

⁴ The report used the term sparingly. In both chapters, only 11 instances of the root “empower*” appeared all in all.

Philippines, and four Latin American countries⁵. South Africa's lead is perhaps unsurprising – a country with a strong English-literate minority and vibrant politics aiming to empower the disadvantaged. This testifies to the global spread of the empowerment concept although in itself it says nothing about the substantive associations. To these we now turn our attention.

The poverty of what we know about empowerment

Since the World Development Report 2000-2001, leading World Bank researchers have summarized current Bank doctrine on empowerment in “Growth and Empowerment. Making Development Happen” (Stern, Dethier et al. 2005). This collection of economics lectures not only enshrines the two-pronged attack on poverty that the title implies, but also takes stock of what they know and don't know about empowerment. Their assessment that “*many parts of the story are still unresearched, because research is even less advanced for this topic than for the investment climate*” (op.cit.: 225) agrees with our impression that despite a wealth of partial studies empirical research summaries are not readily available.

Why that is so is open to speculation; also, other researchers may not agree with this assessment. The research agenda that Stern et al. propose for empowerment is still rather closely associated with a growth and productivity agenda. Questions that they expect future research to answer include:

- “*What kinds of institutional changes improve accountability in and provision of basic services?*”
- *What kinds of incentives make service providers perform effectively?*
- *Under what conditions do public-private partnerships work well?*
- *What kinds of interventions change individual and social demand for better opportunities for all?*
- *How can government institutions act in a way that facilitates, encourages, and responds to social action, as opposed to simply imposing desired patterns and mechanisms from the top?*” (op.cit.: 232).

Although these are not hostile to liberation or social justice agendas, they are certainly not couched in any liberation or justice language. In a different spirit (although under contract for the Bank!), Malhotra et al. (2002) detail various research efforts made to measure empowerment for one particular group, women. They review 45 studies, both quantitative and qualitative. Two thirds of the studies sought to estimate the effects of women's empowerment on some other outcomes of interest. For example, if women were more empowered, how would this affect the health of their children? In one third, empowerment itself was the outcome of interest. Studies from Asia dominated, not least so because women's participation in micro-credit programs in this region offered some easily measurable covariates of their empowerment. In terms of hierarchical levels, most studies measured empowerment only in individuals and households. Yet there was a small, but significant (about a fifth of all) fraction that investigated several levels, say, by incorporating in the analysis characteristics of the local communities in which the women lived.

⁵ The qualification “relative importance” matters. Google Trend computes a normalized measure, the frequency of searches using particular terms relative to all searches assumed initiated in a country.

In many areas, findings about the empowerment of women in particular domains were not in strong agreement. For example, among the four reviewed studies of micro-credit in Bangladesh, two concluded that credit empowered women, and two did not (op.cit.: 33). We cannot go into a detailed harvesting of this literature, and instead wish to point out two studies that have direct significance for the interpretation of our own case study material. One, speaking to women's empowerment, compares individual and community effects; the other is set within the World Bank's growth and empowerment framework.

Two empirical studies that matter

Mason and Smith (2003: ; as summarized in Alsop 2004: 37) reviewed studies of women's empowerment in 56 communities in Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Apart from reminding us that empowerment was multidimensional, the authors established an important regularity among these very different settings:

Community was a far stronger predictor of women's empowerment at the individual level than were individual traits. This is important for our purposes because the case study programs in Tanzania and Cambodia both combine empowerment strategies at the community as well as at the individual levels.

Lokshin and Ravallion (2002) act as in-house heretics when they ask, in the face of the World Bank's relatively new love for empowerment, whether

“redressing power inequality — by taking actions that *selectively empower those with little power* — should be seen as a *distinct policy objective*, side-by-side with the more traditional aims of reducing poverty and inequality in terms of economic welfare” (op.cit.: 2; italics added).

They address this question through an econometric model using household survey data from post-communist Russia. Respondents assessed their personal power as well as their economic welfare. At first glance, power and welfare rankings were weakly associated, and this could be taken “*to suggest that there is ample scope for an empowerment policy agenda that is qualitatively different to that for raising economic welfare*” (op.cit.: 24). However, this impression was radically changed when the researchers looked at the characteristics that caused higher or lower levels of power and welfare. They found identical factors favoring both. In conclusion, “*the characteristics that are good for raising individual economic welfare are also good for empowerment*”, and “*any scope for distinct [empowerment] policies largely rests with idiosyncratic differences*” (ibid.: 24-25).

The Lokshin-Ravallion results leave us with two important questions. First, can empowerment programs succeed unless there is strong economic growth, in other words, the addressees of the programs and sufficiently many people in their social networks are earning more? Can they succeed in local economies that stagnate or even contract? Second, if distinct empowerment policies require difficult-to-define “idiosyncratic differences”, then the role of local knowledge will be much stronger than in standardized support programs. Suitable arrangements to elicit and use such knowledge will be critical.

[Sidebar:] A rich piece of research - Empowerment in post-war El Salvador

Vincent McElhinny's dissertation on *"Inequality and Empowerment: The Political Foundations of Post-War Decentralization and Development in El Salvador, 1992-2000"* is remarkable as a solid piece of empirical research for several reasons (McElhinny 2006). Studies of the depth and breadth of his – he wrote a whopping 900 pages – are still rare; this work is one of the few, if not the only one, accessible from the Latin American world; it combines an ambitious theoretical foundation with survey data and process analysis.

Although McElhinny does not use the same words, he very clearly parallels the difference in the fundamental interpretation of empowerment as zero-sum vs. win-win games. He calls the first variety "empowerment through conflict" (ibid.: iv), the second "empowerment through invitation". The conflictual kind *"implies a bottom-up, zero-sum contestation over political benefits, as well as the very rules and privileges that assure elites a cut of any subsequent benefit distribution"*; the invitational variant is *"is a top-down, elite brokered process of political negotiation, premised upon a positive sum distribution of the benefits and a prior acceptance of the rules of the game"* (ibd.).

The beauty of his research is in linking pre-existing inequality to the outcomes of the Salvadorian decentralization policies that were to empower local communities. He sets out to test his assumption that the poor improve their livelihoods in sustainable ways and gain more favorable power positions if they collectively contest inequality. His test-bed are three municipalities, similar in socio-economic background, yet contrasted in civil-war history. One had an insurgent, the second a hard-line counter-insurgency, the third a moderate counter-insurgency record. After the war, all three were exposed to the same policies.

McElhinny then shows that the insurgent municipality had started producing greater equality *during* the war years; it was here that a process of diminishing inequality was reinforced by the decentralization after the war. This municipality was able to

"collect more local taxes, provide better services, achieve efficacious participation and attain more far reaching institutional coordination. The persistence of high inequality in both counter-insurgent cases weakened mechanisms for participation, accountability and transparency that in turn made decentralization highly susceptible to bureaucratic resistance, corruption and the prioritization of elite interests – in other words, political capture" (ibd.).

The framework and findings concern us in several ways. For one, the two case study programs, LWF Cambodia and TCRS in Tanzania, act in a larger environment of current decentralization, with resources made available to the communities that they have been assisting. Second, decentralization can be contentious, and McElhinny treats this as a (from the perspective of the poor) positive element in securing empowerment gains. This contrasts with the rules of the game set by "empowerment by invitation", particularly in fragile post-war situations in which mobilization without violence may itself be an empowerment objective.

In a critical reading, one wonders after 900 pages whether this necessarily is a study of empowerment, or whether the same hypotheses and tests could have been assembled in a simple "The historical and socio-economic correlates of decentralization outcomes" framework, without necessitating an elaborate theory of empowerment. We notice two problems that feed this suspicion, and we share them here, not to detract from the value of this rich study, but because they may compromise empowerment thinking elsewhere too, including potentially in the monitoring of LWF programs.

First, McElhinny explains community achievements, and even higher-level political outcomes (such as political stability), as the product of two factors. These are resources and agency. Resources (various kinds of capital: economic, human, social and political) are converted into

achievements by “agency”, the ability of the community to define goals and act upon them (ibid.: 27). Different communities use different agency strategies, which he classifies by the combination of planning intensity (high vs. low) and some kind of distinction like “rational individualistic vs. cultural embedded”⁶. This may sound very academic, but similar distinctions are employed in practical language in our study programs, in expressions such as “This village council now has a plan”, or “The village assesses its progress by involving all community-level organizations.” The strengthening of the agency of the poor is a universal empowerment objective.

Unexplicably, then, between agency and the outcomes of empowerment (the community achievements), McElhinny inserts a psychological box. Resources and agency produce achievements via mediating attitudes: trust, self-confidence, efficacy and satisfaction. This is a self-defeating move because it immunizes his theory from failure: if resources and agency do not produce the expected achievements, it must be so because the persons involved were lacking in trust, or efficacy, etc. These variables should be subsumed in the human or social capital measurement, in order to keep the theory informative. McElhinny’s problem is one in which we all can fall: when the psychological manifestations of empowerment are used to mend our explanations of why certain empowerment policies work or don’t work.

The second problem of general interest paradoxically arises from one of the many strengths of McElhinny’s research. This is one of the few empowerment studies that collected enough survey data to test multi-variate models of empowerment. In his case, one of the objectives is to test whether the impact of conflict experience on current political participation holds when we control for various resources and attitudes of the participants. This is important because the insurgent / counter-insurgent history determines the mileage that the communities get out of the decentralization policy. In fact, with data from a sample of over 700 interviewees, McElhinny demonstrates that the personal experience of conflict increases participation in conventional (“empowerment by invitation”) as well as protest (“by conflict”) activism (ibid.: 714 sqq.). These are not mutually exclusive forms; the same types of participants engage in both. One may take solace from this finding; it implies that mobilization has fairly persistent effects so that participation endures even when formats and issues change.

It is almost disingenuous to point fingers to a problem when statistical models behave so firmly as his do. The links in the regression models to various forms of resources too are persuasive. However, the models no longer relate to agency, the key transmitter in empowerment. Whether achievements ultimately are greater under high or low planning, under individualistic or group approaches, or any combination thereof, this survey does not tell. But these are crucial strategic options in many empowerment programs, such as in the provision of economic capital to the poorest household either through poor people’s local savings and loan associations or through commercial micro-lenders.

This study from El Salvador highlights two broader points. First, the post-colonial experience of Latin America is perhaps more contentious than, say, that of Tanzania, though certainly not more than that of Cambodia. But her empowerment programs are cast in concepts that make public contention more expected, or even more accepted; the “positive function of conflict” is scripted into these programs. Second, we all have theories of how empowerment works, and this one rests on many active research traditions. However, as empowerment is never directly observable, our indirect measurements are usually deficient, and the match between key assumptions that should be tested rigorously and the data often remains less than adequate. McElhinny compensated with extensive process analysis; practitioners do not have time to write up observed processes in 900 pages, but they should take heart from his work and should endeavor to document their work in meaningful narrative mini-studies.

⁶ In tables, he uses the terms “spontaneous” (corresponding to a rationally calculating individual actor) and “contingent”, which one may understand as collectively determined or culturally embedded (ibid.: 37).

Dimensions of empowerment: Time, groups, content

Because “empowerment” is a process giving somebody greater power, it operates in time, and its temporal structure is of concern, not only in order to know whether the result is persistent or ephemeral, but also to observe the dynamic and transitions from the “before” to the “after”. The “powerless” who passively receive or actively conquer power are, as all collectives, internally diverse, not only as individuals, but as actors of different aggregation and size; thus we want to know who is empowered. In the process, actors build the ability to be, have or do certain things of which they had not been capable before; thus arises the substantive dimension of power, its content.

Time: Phases of empowerment

The empowerment practice community has always posited that those to be empowered will pass through several stages or phases en route to empowerment. The process begins at a point when the person or group is observed for the first time and, presumably in most cases, is “powerless” or meets the corresponding category on other attributes that the observer (such as a LWF field program unit) may habitually use to describe her. Often, one would think, this initial contact happens already with the practical objective of recruiting this person or group into a program meant to lead them to empowered states (as opposed to, say, a one-time survey interview contact).

Phase models, of course, are not restricted to explicit empowerment contexts, but are widely used by organizations that purport to change the capacity of their clients, most notably the education system. Such process models are applied also to larger entities. We take an arbitrary example, although one not entirely divorced from “empowerment”: Evans (1995) looks at groups of local entrepreneurs in an “embedded autonomy” perspective (something like “empowered through networks”). These entrepreneurs, vis-à-vis the economic support programs, “*were at first indifferent bystanders, the tempted entrants, then supportive but difficult clients, and eventually ex-clients with other, more attractive options*” (ibid.: 224).

Similarly, phase models exist for individuals to be empowered. Bröckling (2007: 199, op.cit.) reports that many have been influenced by Erikson’s psychology of maturation (Kieffer 1983), in which the individual passes through subsequent phases called

- Era of entry
- Era of advancement
- Era of incorporation
- Era of commitment.

All of those, of course, are highly dispositional terms; one cannot, without additional assumptions, directly observe whether an individual is in, say, the advanced or committed stage. The implied message seems to be that between the recruitment into the program (“entry”) and the state in which the client can be responsibly discharged (because he is now “committed” to the desired change), there are not one, but several distinct phases of progress. The client initially advances, then incorporates the message.

Figure 6: Household stages of progress and poverty cut-offs (Krishna)

Table 4-1. *Stages of Progress and the Poverty Cutoff*^a

Stage	Peru (Cajamarca and Puno)	Kenya (western)	Uganda (western and central)	India		
				Andhra Pradesh	Gujarat	Rajasthan
1	Food	Food	Food	Food	Food	Food
2	Clothing	Clothing	Clothing	House repairs	Clothing	Primary education
3	House repairs	House repairs	Primary education	Debt payments	Primary education	Clothing
4	Purchase small animals	Primary education	House repairs	<u>Clothing</u>	Debt payments	Debt payments
5	Primary education	<u>Small animals</u>			House repair or roof	
6	<u>Purchase small plot of land</u>				Renting a small tract of land to farm as <u>sharecropper</u>	

Sources: For Peru, Krishna and others (2006c); for Kenya, Krishna and others (2004); for Uganda, Krishna and others (2006b); for Andhra Pradesh, Krishna (2006); for Gujarat, Krishna and others (2005); for Rajasthan, Krishna (2004).

a. Dashed line indicates the poverty cutoff, as defined by the community groups.

[from (Krishna 2007: 65)]

However, there are phase models that are much closer to observational language, not surprisingly those used by village people themselves. Krishna (Krishna, Gibson-Davis et al. 2006: ; Krishna 2007) developed a model of “*stages of progress*” through which poor households pass. He developed this from studies in several countries, having people define poverty cut-offs in each study community. These cut-offs mean that once a household has met basic needs such as food and clothing and has been able to make the kinds of investments that communities regard as preconditions to escape poverty, they are no longer considered poor by local standards. These scales of basic needs met and assets acquired vary from country to country, except for food at the most basic level, as the diagram shows. These stages are strictly observable, such as through interview questions.

Social: Whom to empower

The question who should be empowered does not have straightforward answers. Even a moral imperative such as the LWF’s “Uphold the rights of the poor and oppressed” needs, during program design and implementation, definitions that are more specific. The fact that historically women have been the largest status group of oppressed persons (Epstein 2007) does not in itself explain the dominance of women’s empowerment in the Library of Congress titles analyzed above; it took the women’s liberation movement to bring this to the fore of the agenda. Similarly, the poor have not naturally enjoyed an assured place in empowerment programs; for much of

modern history, classifications of poverty were essentially between the “deserving” and the “undeserving poor”, resulting in reform and aid programs that often were the very opposite of empowering (Driver 2004).

Although there are nowadays internationally recognized poverty definitions, such as the famous “one dollar a day” line, classifications *within* the poor may change. As an example, the succession over time of “landless”, “very poor”, “hardcore poor”, “ultra-poor” and others in Bangladesh rural poverty classifications comes to mind. Whether these distinctions are actually helpful for those most in need, or whether they chiefly serve the positioning of NGOs in the aid market, is a different and difficult question. There is a “*fine line between poverty and extreme poverty*”, and empowerment programs need much time and patience for “*acquiring a genuine knowledge of the aspirations of the very poor*” (Anonymous 2000: 110). Regardless of where the line is drawn, the idea of requiring a selection of clients for aid programs (including those aimed at empowerment) and of measuring and classifying potential clients remains universal. Only the modalities and possible unintended side effects differ.

From integration to inclusion

While this sounds all very general, a small number of more specific observations can be made. For one thing, in broad cultural terms, the moral basis for selecting the poor and oppressed into programs seems to have changed. The deserving / undeserving paradigm operated with the idea of a normative order into which some of the poor could be re-integrated, while the dangerous rest had to be isolated and controlled. This social *integration* model has largely given way to a social *inclusion / exclusion* model (Kleve 2005). In this moral-free understanding, the poor and oppressed remain excluded in the sense that they have no stable status in one or several of the functional subsystems of society. Most commonly, they have little money to buy things; their inability to pay removes them from interactions in markets and networks in which the better-off move routinely. Whether society at large follows this non-moralistic re-assessment is an open question. In Bangladesh, for example, the rural elites seem to divide the poor no longer by virtue and merit, but rather in terms of potential productivity (Hossain 2005). In the United States, by contrast, recent welfare reforms were channeled by a re-moralization of poverty, with the notorious attacks on “welfare mothers” and similar targets of culture wars (O'Connor 2001).

Moreover, loss of status in one institutional area often leads to cascading loss in others. Exclusion and deprivation expose to hunger, ill-health and violence – one of the reasons why corporeality plays a much stronger role on the social periphery than in the power centers of society⁷. Empowerment programs fighting for the re-inclusion of the excluded, therefore, must address several needs and several institutional areas almost at once. They also need to take a keen interest in the local institutions that may be able to assist the inclusion of the poor and oppressed. This constellation can be used to build bridges from the empowerment approach to rights and integrated approaches.

⁷ In unsurpassed keenness, Luhmann (1997: 632-633) formulated: “Whereas in the realm of social inclusion people count as persons, of those excluded barely their bodies are recognized”.

Individuals and institutions

The other consequence for determining whom to empower also derives from the importance of local institutions. Empowerment programs cannot stop at enrolling the poorest or most oppressed, they also need to relate to those who run helpful or unavoidable local institutions. Some among these or among their supporters may be exploiters and oppressors; others may be indifferent or supportive, and all will be of variable technical competence. The result will be a multi-level program, in which it is not immediately obvious to which level the bulk of the program resources should flow.

The various levels may include actors above as well as below the immediate target level, the poor households – institutions at various tiers, but also particularly vulnerable individuals within the households, notably the women, children, sick or elderly. The consequences in terms of program complexity, and therefore ultimately program efficiency, have hardly been noticed in the empowerment debates.

Substantive: What power, what capacity

The substantive dimension of empowerment is less easy to unlock than the social and temporal dimensions. There is a simple formal reason for this. Often, the selection of groups to be empowered takes place in a hierarchical dimension, with individuals, households, village communities in the informal lower part, and larger groupings that may or may not completely follow the administrative tiers from village to sub-district and higher up.

Both temporal and hierarchical descriptions have the advantage that they use ordered sets (years 1998, 1999 etc.; household, village, commune, etc.) and are thus easier to observe and evaluate. Of course, the contents of empowerment are just as important. This dimension is not naturally ordered – several domains are concerned side by side, in terms of basic needs or institutional areas. It is thus more easily complexified by fuzzy qualitative scales (excluded – admitted – receiving basic service – receiving quality service, etc.). In empowerment narratives, this dimension comes to the fore in such demands as for “schools in which our children actually learn something.” From access to service, the empowered want to reach up to quality service.

Because it is difficult to exhaustively, or even representatively, designate the content of empowerment in technical or sectoral terms, we may need to look at it differently. One possible way is to consider what gets converted during the empowerment process into the desired outcomes. In his very detailed study of rural community empowerment in El Salvador, McElhinny (2006: 28 and 43; see sidebar earlier in this chapter) uses such a conversion model, going back to the ideas of Sen (see page 29 above). Individuals and communities have resources. They also “have” agency, the “ability to achieve” rather than the achievement itself. Agency is stronger or weaker depending on resources and on the socio-political environment that allows the agents to make more or less productive use of resources. Resources, when “multiplied” with agency, if you like, produce empowerment achievements such as

- Meeting basic needs
- Social and political representation
- Resource mobilization
- Problems solved locally

- Advocacy (ibid.: 28).

McElhinny emphasizes that agency, the ability to achieve, is just as important for empowerment as the achievements themselves. This resumes a well-known theme that empowerment is both process and outcome, and enriches it with a perspective of conversion – the poor have various assets, although most of them modest; these assets are transformed, with a potentially large multiplier depending on empowerment conditions, into desired outcomes, some of which then help to further accumulate assets.

Chapter summary

In the arena of international development, the literal usage of “empowerment” came to prominence towards the end of the 1990s. Arguably, the 2000-2001 World Development Report opened the floodgates for its wider adoption in the academic and practice communities. Since then, empowerment has expanded within Web-accessible knowledge bodies to more than a quarter of the space that the entire poverty research holds, and has left behind older areas such as “rural development” and “community development”. It has risen to claim equal stature with growth in World Bank doctrine.

Despite its swift policy ascendance, surprisingly little empirical knowledge has been published on how empowerment functions in developing countries and communities. For some policy areas that made tall claims (such as for the effect of micro-credit on women’s empowerment), researchers seem deadlocked in contrasting evaluations. One of the long-running sub-themes is that community is strongly shaping individual outcomes, and in a series of Asian studies of women’s empowerment, community was a stronger predictor than individual traits. Another study, methodologically sophisticated, concluded that on the basis of data on individuals (in Russia) there was no rationale for any policy objective of empowerment separate from economic welfare. It did leave the door open for “idiosyncratic factors”, which we may take to mean that local knowledge, notably of the village community, remains critical. A sidebar reports a study from El Salvador, in which the historical fight against inequality is shown to be a forerunner of empowerment achievements capitalizing on current decentralization policies.

The chapter then looks at empowerment in the three fundamental dimensions of time, social group and substance. Phase models of empowerment, of the kind we know from abstract theories such as of individual psychological growth, have not been universally transferred to empowerment thinking in development. But across a wide range of cultures and communities, poor people have relatively stable and concrete ideas of the “stages of progress” through which they will escape poverty. In the two country programs visited, phase-model concepts were operating as well. The question of who was to be empowered is answered through local classifications of the poor. Increasingly, it appears, ideas of the deserving poor who can be reintegrated vs. the undeserving ones have been replaced with a view of poverty as social exclusion. Empowerment, then, accomplishes the re-inclusion of the excluded, which can be successful only if programs address several basic needs and institutional areas. Such requirements explain the multi-level strategies working with individuals and communities at the same time and offer conceptual bridges to rights-based and integrated approaches.

The Place of Empowerment in the LWF Global Strategy

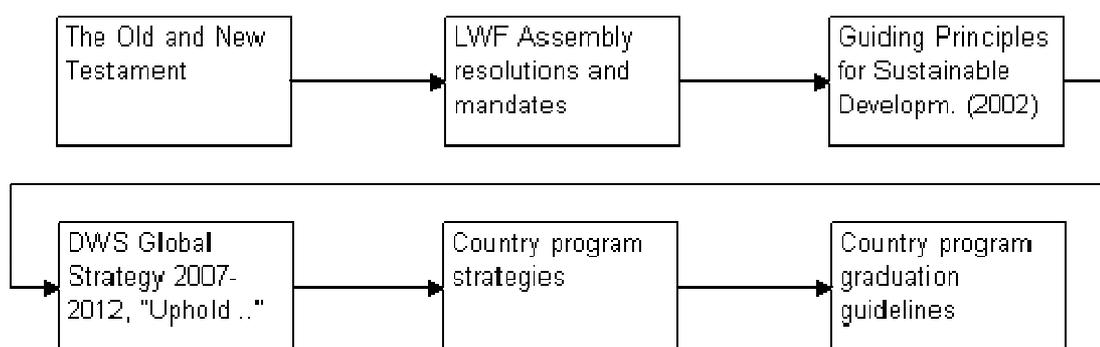
Origin and foundation

We saw earlier (pages 22 and 33) that the diffusion of the empowerment concept went through an initial incubation phase, both in its birth country, the USA (approx. 1966 to 1986), and in the world of international development (approx. 1992 to 1997). In the LWF, an informed guess (Bueno de Faria 2007) is that the term was first used around 1997 or 1998, initially in the Geneva headquarters. It was adopted from consultants, notably through work on qualitative assessments that the PME system encouraged.

Ten years later, the empowerment approach has become one of three strategic approaches in the Department for World Service (DWS) Global Strategy 2007-2012 (LWF/DWS 2007: 9). The Global Strategy promotes it on the same footing as the integrated and rights-based approaches. The approach has thus advanced from a mere vocabulary addition to a long-term central commitment.

This career of a concept was made possible by the strong fit that “empowerment” has with the core message of the Lutheran movement. It is lodged in a set of values that emanate from the prophetic and gospel promises. These connections appear across a series of documents that followed each other over several decades resulting in the current Global Strategy. The Strategy in turn inspires and guides country-program directives. This chain of authority speaking to empowerment-specific policies can be arranged in a hierarchy of sources, such as, conceivably, this:

Figure 7: Hierarchy of sources in the empowerment values context



In this ordered context, a chain of reasoning can be started with the promise conveyed through the prophet Isaiah, as prominently done for the “Principles for Sustainable Development” (LWF 2002: 7):

“For I [the Lord] am about to create new heavens and a new earth.....No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime....They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit, they shall not plant and another eat;They shall not labor in vain or

bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord – and their descendants as well.” (Isaiah 65:17a, 20a, 21-22a, 23)

Empowerment as a dispositional gift from God

While some may want to relate the Isaiahan passage more immediately to the rights-based approach (or even to parts of a contemporary international norms regime such as the Millennium Development Goal regarding child mortality reduction), the connection with the empowerment philosophy is made on the same page [7]:

“God bestows upon human beings the *life, dignity, freedom, capacity, and potential know-how* to participate productively – ‘to till and keep the garden’ – with one another and with respect for the limits of creation” (ibd.).

through the series of dispositional gifts: life, dignity, freedom, capacity, knowledge. The empowerment concept, regardless of its numerous interpretations, is closely related to the defense and creation of such potentialities in human persons and societies.

It is important to see that the connections between the value-based sources of the DWS strategic approaches, including “empowerment”, are accomplished through modern-day interpretations. For example, the assertion that

“Human rights principles are the legal expression of the God-given dignity of every human person, which the church is called to protect and promote” (op.cit.: 30)

goes back to the 1970 Evian assembly debates.

Sustainability brackets faith and practice

Other motives to adopt the empowerment approach were of a more practical nature. The ecumenical development debates emphasized “*the sustainability of communities rather than the sustainability of development per se*” (op.cit.: 17); in order to make community projects sustainable, people had to take ownership; ownership had to be fostered through empowerment work (Bueno de Faria 2007). In this logic, empowerment is the means to a programmatic end, sustainable development.

While means-end relationships at that level may have an element of arbitrariness and instability, as every collection of social values does (Luhmann 1997: 340-344), the practical demands recognized in Geneva provided the link to the adoption in the field programs. Here, the empowerment approach was much driven by local problem definitions. A long-time manager of the Cambodia program observed:

“*We have gradually developed the IRDP [integrated rural development project] approach into a community-based and people-centered empowerment and RBA [rights-based approach], based on the self-identified needs of communities and their poorest members and on our Cambodian working context in rural areas. These changes were rather driven by needs and problems faced by communities and poor people than by theories, e.g. by common land problems caused by government sales of state land to*

multinational companies as economic concession and land grabbing by the influential elite” (Weinmann 2007).

The Cambodia field experience was not alone in working out its transition between old and new program philosophies. The nineties saw increased exchanges of visitors and ideas among the Asian programs, and the movement of directors between Africa and Asia programs (Lynam 2007) also helped in the adoption and adaptation of the new strategic approaches.

It is thus fair to locate the genesis of the strategic approaches at the confluence of three streams of communications:

- The theological and praxis debates inside the LWF
- International development debates
- Experimentation within, and feedback from, the field programs.

[Sidebar:] Sustainable communities and empowerment

What makes communities sustainable has, of course, been debated also outside the LWF. Without communities, sustainability can be investigated in global terms, particularly as an issue of intergenerational justice. Positions may vary, between those for whom growth is still a primary objective while ecological imperatives are accepted to constrain it, and others for whom the earth is finite and non-growing. With communities included in sustainable development, the balance between environmental stewardship and the creation of wealth has to be struck in a way that *“simultaneously enhance[s] local social relationships”* (Bridger and Luloff 1999: 381). For, it is in the local community that social exclusion and environment degradation *“are most keenly felt and where successful intervention is most noticeable”* (ibid.: 380).

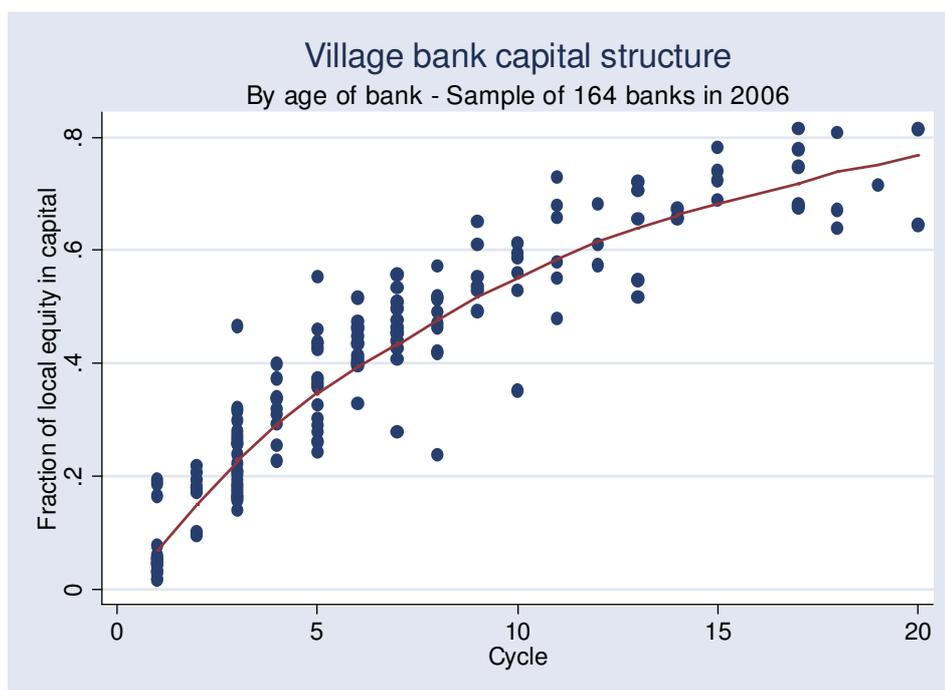
By definition, sustainable development works in the long run whereas the community empowerment programs in the LWF ambit rarely have been active in the same communities for more than a few years. Thus we are hard pressed to demonstrate how empowerment programs set in motion “enhanced local social relationships” with a promise to be sustainable. We can have a rare glimpse at one such process, however, looking at village banks that the LWF Cambodia has supported in its partner villages.

In cooperative-like self-help organizations that pool local resources, the degree of local equity is a tell-tale sign of economic success as well as of member identification and mutual trust. Village banks are local savings and loans associations that grow essentially apace with the savings that members entrust and with retained profit from lending, with only initial investment from LWF and no access to commercial or government sources of capital. Most of the savings and all of the retained profit are from local incomes. The growth of local equity in the village banks, therefore, is a valid indicator of “enhanced social relationships” if not sustainable development per se (The devil’s advocate would point to the possibility that people saved income from tree logging).

We were able to compile data on the capital structure of 164 village banks. The banks had been in operation for between 2 and 20 six-month lending cycles, in other words between one and ten years. The diagram on the next page shows the trend and dispersal of local equity with age.

There is a clear trend towards greater local equity. Banks active for more than ten cycles (five years) operate with more than half of their capital from local resources continuously renewed by their members.

Figure 8: Local equity in Cambodian village banks



This, of course, is no proof that empowerment programs achieve sustainable communities – the chapter on sustainability will return to the question, see page 137 -, nor is the absence of external finance ideal. But the LWF Cambodia’s empowerment program does inject a dynamic that enriches social relationships in the quest for sustainable communities, and village bank data helps to visualize it.

The rights of the poor and oppressed

Upon this substrate of faith, insight and experience, the Global Strategy document sets the anchor for its strategy and program approaches. It recalls the mandate, vision, mission and core values for the work that the World Service is to do in the period 2007-2012 (LWF/DWS 2007: 5). All these operate under the paramount imperative to “uphold the rights of the poor and oppressed”, the motto taken from Psalm 82.

- The “Mandate” establishes the World Service as a witness to God’s healing, reconciliation and justice, in unison with its 140 member churches.
- The “Vision” projects a future in which “people of the world liv[e] in just societies in peace and dignity, united in diversity, and empowered to achieve their universal rights, to meet basic needs and quality of life”.
- The “Mission” is to respond to, and challenge, the causes and consequences of human suffering and poverty”, and to do so “inspired by God’s love for humanity”.
- The “Core Values” guiding the World Service work are

Dignity and justice
Inclusiveness and participation

Accountability and transparency
Compassion and commitment.

In clarifying the empowerment concept, it is not easy to offer comment on the Global Strategy foundation, if any were needed. One of questions to ask is about the function of such statements. Although there is an assumption that the core values will guide World Service “in all its actions” (ibd.), values are too abstract to help select specific actions. Rather, in discussing alternatives that the practical world offers, these values will help rally consensus behind the course decided. This implies considerable flexibility, interpretation and even immunity to disappointment.

A thought experiment may enliven the point. What would happen to the Global Strategy if the very poorest and most oppressed proved to be less capable of empowerment than its vision presumes? Such a question is not academic; in one of our case studies – Tanzania -, the experience with the current empowerment program concurs that the most vulnerable have not benefited very much. This calls for a local reinterpretation of the empowerment concept (such as for persons with disabilities, or AIDS orphans), and for practical modifications.

A marriage of the global and the local

In fact, one has to realize that “the rights of the poor and oppressed” themselves are the result of a modern interpretation. The vulgata “*iudicate pauperi et pupillo egeno et inopi iuste facite*” and the King James’ “defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy” name a subset of the (potentially, probably) oppressed – orphans. The wording in the Global Strategy goes above that specificity, only to find out that in the field some programs are faced with daily challenges of empowering communities to care for orphans.

This dialectic between the general and the specific, the global and the local is the beauty of the empowerment approach. The question of whether women are oppressed has been settled; what matters is that in thousands of women LWF programs have planted the self-concept that they have rights, that they are not someone else’s property, but rather themselves can own property. Similarly, whether street children are to be regarded as oppressed or simply neglected, is a matter of one’s “sociodicy” (Morgan and Wilkinson 2001); meanwhile empowerment programs are motivating neighbors to take care of dying patients and their young children.

Interpretations of “empowerment”

Beyond the explication of its foundation, the Global Strategy dovetails into program strategy and organizational strategy. This reflects the loose coupling between goal programs and formal organization, an advantage of flexibility that international development NGOs may enjoy more than other types of organizations do⁸. For our purposes, the elements of program strategy are more relevant even though in a section

⁸ To the extent that the LWF represents an international development NGO, that is. What this ultimately means is that financial and human resources constraints are more limiting than technological lock-ins. After all, the LWF does not own factories whose machinery, once installed, determines the feasible lines of products. As long as it can raise funds and skilled people, very diverse combinations of LWF programs and organizational arrangements are possible – at least in theory.

on “Modes of operation” it overlaps with the organizational strategy. It is under “Program” that the strategic approaches, including empowerment, are defined.

As in our theoretical tableau, empowerment as an LWF approach can be considered in several dimensions. Here we explore it in the three standard dimensions in which the description of any social system proceeds – time, groups, and content.

Three dimensions

As to the Who, the priority groups are succinctly defined as the “*marginalized and vulnerable poor people whose livelihoods are threatened by the effects of natural and human-made disasters, with special regard to IDPs [internally displaced persons] and refugees, women and those affected by HIV and AIDS*” (LWF/DWS 2007: 7). There is an elaboration in geographic terms, with a preference given to “*remote and vulnerable areas, where adequate local capacities and services are not available*” (ibd.). As indicated earlier, such target group definitions, when applied in practice, are subject to local re-interpretation. They are reworked in language and partly also substance, through poverty classifications and landscape images. The “ultra-poor” of the Brahmaputra “chars” (sandbar island communities) in Bangladesh and the “marginalized” in “forgotten villages” in Tanzania (TCRS 2007c: 9) come to mind as examples from the LWF ambit.

Presenting the What of the empowerment approach deserves an extended quote from the Global Strategy. We italicize the elements that we single out for specific comment:

“The EMPOWERMENT APPROACH builds people’s *capacity and competence*, both as *individuals* and as participating members of *groups and communities*, to achieve results for themselves. By equipping people and local groups with the *knowledge, skills and attitudes* that broaden their options, their *confidence* can be built up and they can be empowered to take *control of their lives*. This means that people must be actively involved in *all aspects* of their development, from assessment and planning to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This requires motivating them to *contribute as much* and in as many ways as possible, whether it is ideas and leadership, time and labor or materials and money” (op.cit.: 9).

“Capacity and competence” in the opening sentence suggests that the empowerment understanding leans more towards “capacity” and less so towards “power”, in the sense of the communication media discussed on page 29. The involvement both of individuals and of groups and communities confirms the multi-level approach that the dependence of the poorest on better functioning local institutions demands. The language of “knowledge, skills, attitudes, confidence” may capture more than one challenge. It may mean that unless cognitions and emotions can be modified, the poor and oppressed cannot go all the way to reaping the fruit of other types of changes such as better service delivery. How mental changes can be stabilized in poor and oppressed milieux is another question, one that only informed country strategies can deepen. It may also mean, in conjunction with “contribute as much as possible”, that the “software” component of empowerment should not be overtaken by the “hardware”. Active involvement in “all aspects of their development” prefigures the idea of cycles within cycles, a movement in which the concerned group embarks on

the next major practical action only after it has, through its own deliberations, evaluated the previous steps.

Control of their lives

Finally, “taking control of their lives” reminds one of some of the flamboyant declarations that the community development movement used to make in its early days, as in “Man Takes Control” (Erasmus 1961). Some of this is intuitively plausible, but other connotations are dangerous. When oppressive conditions are lifted, subjects enjoy greater choice. Young people, for example, in more gender-equitable societies, are free to choose their spouses. But the assumption that with greater skills and self-confidence, the poor will control their lives over-simplifies the interplay of structure and agency. The poor, in their great majority, may in fact be trying hard to take charge of their own lives; it is in large part their material poverty that forces them into an unending game of tinkering and improvisation, sending many back to square one. Cleaver, who studied how poor people in Tanzania used social relationships actively (Cleaver 2003), borrowed the French term “*bricolage*” (tinkering) to express the drive as well as the limitation. This may be the element of the empowerment definition in the Strategic Plan that needs careful review the most, perhaps in deliberate provocation from an economist perspective such as asset accumulation (Moser 2007). The debate on micro-credit programs, in which RDRS Bangladesh is deeply invested, may provide a starting point.

The way the Global Strategy defines the empowerment approach is somewhat hybrid, part vision-mission statement, part nutshell program description. For field program purposes, it has to be elaborated in a different language. For example, the Tanzania program (TCRS 2004a: 19) breaks it down into participation, economic security and access to services objectives, each with multiple associated indicators.

Phasing out, not scaling up?

In the temporal dimension, the empowerment approach in the Global Strategy has not been elaborated into the kinds of phase models common in the general empowerment literature (see page 38) or, as we shall see, practiced in some of the field programs. Instead, it shares with the other approaches a concern for planned phasing out. Under “Geographic Focus Areas” (op.cit.: 7), the Strategy directs that “*World Service will remain in these operational areas as long as the entry criteria remain valid, while working on an exit strategy for the earliest possible disengagement*”. As one may expect, in field programs criteria for phasing-out decisions are developed in greater detail. What one notices in the Global Strategy is a focus on exit strategy, but no discussion on scaling-up empowerment programs in countries where they have worked well.

The relationship with the rights-based and integrated approaches

It has already been mentioned (page 43) that the empowerment approach is on par with two other strategic approaches, the rights-based and the integrated ones. The relationship among the three is as yet widely unexplored, and may be perceived as evolving during the very mandate of the Global Strategic. The rights-based approach is newer and in its ascending phase. Conversely, while the multiple needs of poor people advocate integrated solutions, skepticism over the delivery of integrated

development projects, particularly because of their coordination demands, is strong. Tellingly, in 2007 LWF field program staff received training from a rights expert of a partner agency; conceptual strengthening in integration matters happened indirectly, under the banner of PME reforms.

We will first discuss some aspects of the rights-based approach and then – with less material on hand – some of the integrated approach. One of the difficulties noticed in Tanzania and Cambodia was that field staff were using the terminologies of the three approaches interchangeably to a degree that was almost arbitrary. If this is indicative of yet another layer of development lingo percolating down the line without deeper conceptual understanding, then the distinctions should be worked out more palpably. We offer a small conceptual model of the relationships among the three approaches.

The Global Strategy says that

“The RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH first and foremost involves building up *rights awareness* on all levels, both among the powerless and the powerful. Development objectives are also *human rights* objectives. An emphasis on human rights in the context of development helps to focus attention on the *structural inequities* that cause and maintain impoverishment and exclusion. Conscious reference to human rights standards and objectives helps to ensure that the *root causes* of poverty and exclusion receive proper attention in the formulation and implementation of development programs, and to guard against narrow *technical objectives* becoming the reference point for development activities. This approach also reduces the risk that the poor are seen as needy *objects of charity*” (LWF/DWS 2007: 9).

As before, elements singled out for comment have been italicized. An awareness of subjective rights is key to agency and participation; it ties in with the high value that the poor attach to the defense of their dignity, often rated higher than material gains even by the poorest (Benini 2006). Rights “*can be understood as a form of political capital that enables people to make claims to other types of assets*” (Ferguson, Moser et al. 2007: 273); claiming them within the international human rights framework strengthens the hand, if not of the rights-bearers directly, certainly of their organizers and advocates.

Rights, technical expertise, charity

Whether the human rights semantics, or any rights semantics for that matter, is adequate for attacking structural inequities and the root causes of poverty and exclusion, is beyond this study. The normative style of expectation inherent of all rights may make for slower learning than accelerating economies and politics demand. Field visits in Cambodia and Tanzania raised doubts whether the community empowerment programs can mobilize the expertise needed to quickly and effectively resolve technical problems that the participating poor were facing in some recurrent types of situations. The awareness-raising components of empowerment programs work on both normative and cognitive expectations. They convey human rights concepts as well as basics of planning and budgeting that allow the cooperating individuals and communities to make better informed resource decisions.

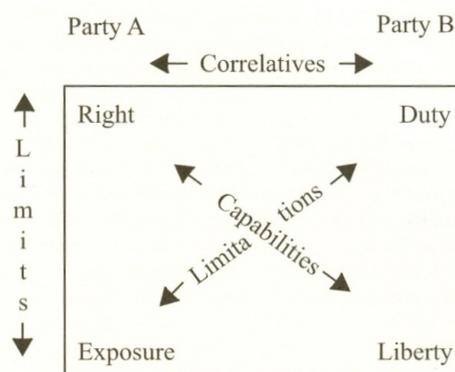
In that sense, the opposition to “narrow technical objectives” may be misplaced, as the warning about charity seems to be. Persistent technical failure would undermine the legitimacy of programs, no matter how strong their rights basis. Similarly, charity fills important gaps in survival strategies, gaps that the social and temporal synchronization of formally programmed assistance leaves uncovered. It is hard to conceive of any society, rich or poor, in which charity by relatives, neighbors and friendly strangers is functionally obsolete.

Rights and empowerment in parallel

These considerations should be read together with the historic context of rights-based approaches to development. They have evolved in parallel with the empowerment approaches, similarly favored by the end of the Cold War, but also by the struggle for a new international economic order. The Cold War environment had been hostile to the wider adoption of social and economic rights from an evolving Human Rights regime. As the Cold War thawed, a number of landmark events, starting in the mid-eighties with the UN Declaration on the Right to Development (1986), prepared the ground for an accelerating diffusion of rights-based approaches into development practice (Schneider and Zúniga-Hamlin 2005: 569). NGOs have played an important role in the “advocacy of advocacy”, but criticism has grown also of the rights-approach being adopted superficially, without adequate translation to field staff culture or adequate analysis of power relations (e.g., VeneKlasen, Miller et al. 2004: and others).

Regardless of the historical background and the effectiveness of specific implementations, the rights of poor people are important because they create duties on the part of others, notably public authorities. Ostrom (2005: 145), who has worked extensively on poor communities and their rights to common-pool resources such as public forests, points to another important pair of correlatives. Beyond the intuitive “rights – duties” pair, there are “liberty - exposure”. These are cross-linked with the first pair, as shown in the diagram below.

Figure 9: Rights in relation to duties, liberty and exposure (Ostrom)



For example, a human-rights duty on the part of a public authority exposes it to demands from those invested with the corresponding right. A poor widow in Bangladesh has a rightful demand to receive priority consideration from the local Union Council in the allocation of a Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) card and the public assistance benefits that it confers. This four-way scheme also links rights to

freedom although we cannot immediately say whether liberty, seen as limited by duties, neatly concurs with Sen's concept of "development as freedom to" (Sen 2001). The link to empowerment is through the use of "capabilities" that emerge from the rights from freedom.

The mastery of rights across several levels

There are two more conceptual pieces needed for a fuller appreciation of rights-based approaches:

- First, the realization of a rights-based approach goes through a phased process of *defining, interpreting and implementing* the rights of the poor and oppressed. This progression from a (human rights, United Nations, NGO, central government, etc.) concept to recognized local entitlements is the product of struggles among different groups of people (Ferguson, Moser et al. 2007: 275). These elements are graphically illustrated in the case study that the LWF Cambodia 2005 Annual Report offers. It chronicles how rights-based advocacy was used to resolve a land conflict that affected poor people in five villages (LWF 2006b: 3).
- Second, pressing demands that are enshrined in the rights of the poor and oppressed involves, in most cases other than well-routinized claims, advocacy across several *levels*. "Levels" applies not only to the persons and groups active in obtaining legitimate goods, services, or protection, as well as the administrative tiers delivering them. Levels encompass also languages and normative regimes (such as customary law in the village, statutory law in the courts, even international human rights law), as Ferguson et al. (op.cit.: 278) emphasize. In NGO parlance, the required horizontal and vertical coordination activities are often called "networking".

While the "empowerment" concept has run into a number of fundamental criticisms (conceptual, see page 24; empirical, page 35), rights-based approaches, to our limited knowledge, have not been challenged in the core. Rather, practical limitations have been pointed out. Apart from remarking on the unthinking, opportunistic or superficial adoption by some of its followers, the critical literature has pointed out that the poor, as one of their survival strategies, cultivate clientelist relations with powerful actors – the very type of dependency that frustrates the explicit use of rights. In fact, the diversification of helping relationships has lately surfaced as an important theme in vulnerability and informal insurance studies (Bramoullé and Kranton 2007: ; Fafchamps and Gubert 2007); they seem to demonstrate active network building on the part of poor people, often deliberately beyond their village communities. Such networks favor informal channels that at best may be indifferent to, at worst undermining, rights-based approaches. The relationship between rights and clientelism is the central theme in Schneider et al.'s (op.cit.) study of rural Peru; the authors recommend opportunistic and hybrid strategies to displace traditional local elites. It is difficult, however, to see how such a recipe might work successfully everywhere.

Are rights domesticating?

A last point is that networking within rights-based approaches is limited by coordination capacity. This may provide a natural bridge to a discussion of the integrated approach, which has often been criticized for its coordination demands. But there may be more to it, particularly in situations where movements of the poor engage the legal system in the furtherance of their rights. In the capacity interpretation of empowerment, the ability to effectively invoke the courts and legislations is beneficial. A more politicized “resistance” interpretation may see legal involvement contingent on the overall political dynamic; all too often in history have ruling elites offered legal procedures to oppositional movements until these wound up domesticated and estranged from their member bases⁹. An intermediate position might hold that by engaging with administrations, courts and legislations, the empowered poor, and the organizations supporting them, need to adapt to the rhythm and frameworks of the former. The empowerment gains may then come in two forms: as collective advantages (such as government resources), and in representation, being accepted as a partner. The latter ties back with the dignity so important to the poor.

“Rights-based approaches”, writes Thin (2002: 85-86), “are typically contrasted with ‘needs-based’ approaches to development, which emphasize the technical challenges of meeting basic (and mainly material) needs. In practice there is considerable overlap and it is probably more fruitful to see a rights-based approach not as an alternative but rather as encompassing both the strategic emphasis on social transformation (addressing root causes of injustice and poverty) and practical steps to ensure that more immediate needs are met”.

If this assumption is correct, it considerably abbreviates the need for a separate discussion of the integrated approach. The Global Strategy (ibd.) sets down that

“The INTEGRATED APPROACH gives consideration to the fact that various lines of action interlink with or affect other areas or lines of action. Environmental issues, HIV and AIDS, gender and many other thematic areas are not addressed separately but are considered integral parts of all lines of action taken in any given sector. As a result, many development initiatives can be tailored for positive impact on multiple aspects of community life”.

It is not obvious why the Global Strategy places the integrated approach at the same level with the empowerment and rights-based approaches, rather than in a more subordinate instrumental role (a means to the empowerment goal). Arguably, effective integrated program delivery is more of an administrative achievement than proof of a balanced, fulfilled life quality on the part of program users. Moreover, the more the poor are in fact empowered, the more their own vocal expression of needs, preferences and opportunities should become one of the most effective contributors to program integration.

Second, the undeniable fact that many needs and need-fulfilling systems and development phases are interlinked does not imply, on the part of LWF programs, an automatic ability to *“tailor many development initiatives for positive impact on*

⁹ An observation often made in the sociology of law and of social movements. For an example from the empowerment literature, see Morgen (1988), summarized in Weissberg (1999: 47-48).

multiple aspects of community life”¹⁰. The degree to which complex programs can make multiple, flexible local adaptations and remain effective and efficient is contingent on numerous factors. Mobile telephony may be one of the most promising ones, altering the cost and speed of coordination to an extent that makes a renaissance of integrated approaches possible.

[Sidebar:] Land conflict in Tumdop Trakuon

Land conflicts in Cambodia are pervasive, but their constellations and dynamics are very diverse. Not all communities are currently the object of land conflicts, nor is the state party to all land conflicts. Powerful people may be the ones grabbing land; and frequently relatives argue over land. The implementation of land laws has remained problematic. The threat of violence is often very close.



Tumdop Trakuon, a partner village of the LWF in Bavel district, counts some 250 families. The village territory measures 1,600 hectares, of which 516 ha are precious paddy land (Tumdop Trakuon VDC 2007). Some time before 2007, military occupied some 300 ha paddy. The village staged protests; to better argue its case, the development committee produced a village master plan.

In response to Tumdop Trakuon’s activism, the Ministry of Interior affirmed its rightful title. The soldiers left, but shortly thereafter the same land was reoccupied by settlers that a sham NGO for disabled persons, set up in Battambang, brought in. The provincial authorities have since ordered the NGO to be dissolved, but the settlers have not moved.

Figure 10: Village master plan, Tumdop Trakuon, Cambodia

LWF staff presented this as an instance of a pattern in which a decision is given in favor of the village, but the authorities fail to implement it. LWF has trained representatives of numerous villages in land law and non-violent conflict resolution. It believes that wide horizontal and vertical networking can oblige the authorities to become more responsive (LWF Cambodia 2007b). This belief needs to be tested against the equally plausible domestication thesis (see above).

¹⁰ An example from RDRS Bangladesh may illustrate the point. RDRS’ support for commune-based federations of poor people has been highly empowering for women in the *social* realm. Moreover, the federations themselves emphasize the need for *income*-generating measures for destitute women. Yet, RDRS’ capacity to strengthen federation businesses has remained dismal, perhaps with the one big exception of roadside tree plantations (Benini 2006).

Empowerment equal integration plus local control?

In a lucid self-observation, the Tanzania program commented on the relationship between the integrated and empowerment approaches:

“In the end, the actions [of the Community Empowerment Program] may be very similar to those undertaken in the IRDP [integrated rural development] approach, but the difference is that local people themselves are in charge, defining and directing their own development, which bodes well for longer-term sustainability of the process” (TCRS 2004a: 6).

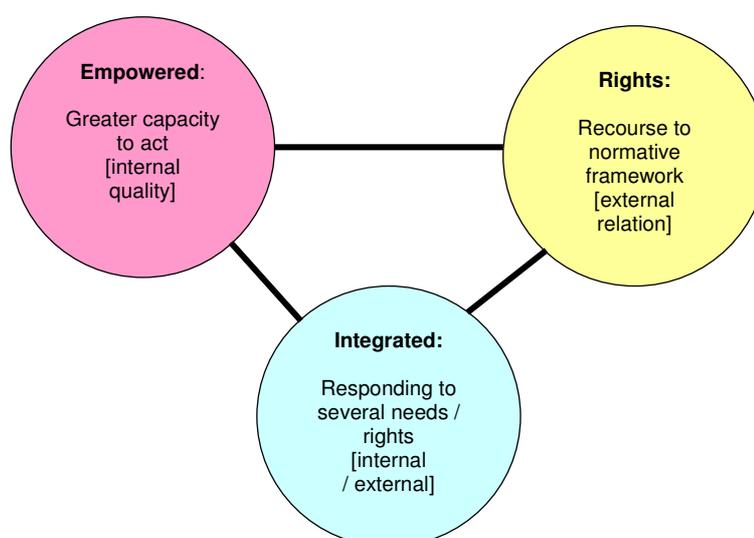
This is consonant with the Global Strategy’s admonition to “*play a facilitation role more than a leadership role*” (op.cit.: 9). However, there is a downside to this, at least for the most vulnerable of the poor. Empowerment programs may no longer offer the same tight integration of multi-sectoral programs, with extension workers from different technical services literally knocking at the doors of the same poor households, as they did in the heydays of IRDP optimism.

If so, how much of the integration burden nowadays is on the poor themselves, who are left to search for solutions to their problems in the government and NGO “market place”? In a study of mobility in and out of poverty in Bangladesh, Sen (2003: 527) found that households successfully fleeing poverty were the ones who “*demonstrated the ability to integrate various anti-poverty strategies*”. There are significant portions of the poor who do not have the resources to organize that kind of integration by themselves. For them, well functioning local institutions supported in the empowerment approach are all the more important.

A distinction among the three approaches

Given the above, a relationship diagram for the three approaches can be attempted. The motivation for something like this grew out of the – in most cases not very productive – requests for field staff in the visited programs to explain their differences.

Figure 11: A possible interpretation of the three approaches



In this diagram, the direct referents of the three approaches are not all of them the LWF. Rather, the main actor in the empowerment approach is the individual, household, community enrolled in the program; integration is pursued by the LWF (or other development) program and by local institutions, and the movers of rights are the claimants, opponents, legislators, advocacy groups, law enforcement agencies, etc. – a host of protagonists, for whom the common trait is reference to external norms.

In this scheme of distinctions, empowerment refers primarily to an internal quality, disposition, or capacity. Rights refer to expectations that are upheld externally and against failure (although decisions to claim rights and perform duties, or not, are made locally). Integration refers to balancing diverse needs and rights among a multiplicity of actors (and perhaps normative frameworks). This view subsumes advocacy in the integration function although traditionally integrated development and advocacy are seen as elements of different, almost opposing, approaches.

Chapter summary

“Empowerment” as a new catchword knocked at the doors of LWF Geneva around 1997. Ten years later, it has become one of its strategic approaches. This promotion happened because of a suitable fit with the Lutheran tradition and values. They fit because God gives people dispositional gifts like life, dignity, freedom, capacity, knowledge. Empowerment is similarly dispositional. In their observed manifestations, the gifts from God and the human acts of empowerment overlap constantly. While the vocabulary of empowerment arrived relatively late, doctrinal developments since the 1970 Evian assembly prepared the ground for the new strategy. Human rights are now seen as a legal expression of the dignity that God bestows on every person.

In the field programs, empowerment emerged from the struggle with practical problems. Exposure to the international development debate reinforced the new way of thinking and planning. The parenthesis around doctrine and practice was supplied by the need to make programs sustainable, in LWF’s conviction that it is the concrete and local communities that must be sustainable.

The empowerment approach is part of the strategic plan under the motto of upholding the rights of the poor and oppressed. This moves the empowerment close to the rights-based approach whereas the neighborhood with the third strategic approach, integrated development, is less straightforward.

We then consider empowerment in the three dimensions of partners, subject-matter and time. The social dimension is clearly determined by the option for the marginalized and vulnerable even though in practical work these groups always need local definition. In the substantive dimension, the strategic plan is suggestive more of a capacity-building rather than of a power-transfer reading of the concept of power. It calls for change in several social locations, in attitudes and knowledge just as much as in programs and institutions, including in their physical infrastructure. Empowered mentalities as well as improved livelihoods will allow the poor “to take control of their lives”. This aspiration is not fully endorsed by the sociology of poverty¹¹ and

¹¹ In “Poor People”, Vollmann (2007: 145) calls attention to the “numbness” that is one of the adaptive self-defenses that may come in the way of their empowerment. In the much-noted “The Economic Lives of the Poor”, Banerjee and Duflo (2007: 162, 165) observe that many poor are entrepreneurs

merits discussion and review. In the temporal dimension, the strategic plan does not outline, and even less detail, the kinds of phase models that we will find in the field programs. It limits itself to a concern with phasing out, without noting the option of scaling up empowerment programs that have proven effective.

Historically, outside the LWF, the convergence of rights and empowerment grew stronger in the post-Cold War environment. Yet the LWF was able to adopt both on its own spiritual platform. The awareness of subjective rights is key to agency and participation at the center of the empowerment process. Others have presented rights as political capital that lets the poor make claims on other resources; this provides a possible bridge to the integrated approach.

The coexistence of the three strategic approaches is not without potential conflicts: Rights-based approaches are more demanding of the conceptual understanding of field staff. By claiming their rights, the poor and their organizations may have to conform to the rhythm and formats of duty-bearers. It may not be the business of a Global Strategy to investigate such conflicts; we will meet them in the field. But in the further development of guidelines structural tensions between the three approaches ought to be kept in mind.

Finally, to help make the distinctions clearer among the approaches – these are not three different terms all meaning the same thing; they mean different things -, a possible interpretation of their relationships is offered in a diagram. This considers empowerment as an internal quality of agents, rights-based work as a reference to external frameworks, and integration as a balancing of the two.

because this is “*easier than finding an employer with a job to offer. [...] The businesses they run are inevitably extremely small, to the point where there are clearly unrealized economies of scale. [...] They are captive to their] social network in a setting where the social network might be the only source of (informal) insurance available*”, none of which favors control of one’s own life.

For readers not swayed by those arguments, it may be helpful to take an advance on some of the findings that another researcher, Rica Terbeck, obtained from a survey of poor participants in one of our study programs. She elicited impacts of the community empowerment program in Kibondo district, Tanzania, on various quality of life dimensions. The impact on “independence from others” was the weakest of all measured impacts, with approx. 45 percent of the interviewees reporting a positive change, compared to almost 95 percent for daily survival and equally for health, and 75 percent for the quality of housing (Terbeck 2006: 31).

The Practice of Empowerment Work in LWF Programs

We detail the practice of empowerment work with illustrations and analyses from two country programs, LWF Cambodia and TCRS Tanzania, the latter being a formally independent NGO associated with the LWF. These countries differ in numerous traits that impact on the shape and outcomes of the programs; they also share a number of common elements that militate for similarities in the programs.

Most critically, the post-colonial histories of Cambodia and Tanzania are at opposite extremes. Cambodia suffered one of the most brutal sequences of wars and genocide in the twentieth century; the LWF intervened to assist a war-affect population. Tanzania has been a haven of stability and – with rare punctuations such as an armed conflict with Idi Amin’s Uganda - peace, a country with a Lutheran mission heritage a hundred years’ old, and a host to sizeable refugee populations from neighboring countries. TCRS began as a refugee assistance agency.

Despite a more placid post-colonial history, Tanzania has remained poorer than Cambodia. On all but one of the following indicators extracted from the latest Human Development Report (UNDP 2007), it carries a less favorable value. The exception is the Gini index of income inequality, suggesting that Tanzania is a more egalitarian society.

Table 3: Select Human Development Report indicators

	Tanzania	Cambodia
Human development index (HDI) (rank 2005)	159	131
Human development index (HDI) (value 2005)	0.467	0.598
Gender-related development index (GDI value undated)	0.446	0.594
Life expectancy at birth (years 2005)	51	58
HIV prevalence (% aged 15-49 2005)	6.5	1.6
Adult literacy rate (% >14y 1995-2005)	69.4	73.6
Gross domestic product (GDP) p.c. (US\$ PPP 2005)	744	2,727
GDP annual growth rate (% 1990-2005)	1.7	5.5
Extremely poor (<US\$1 a day % pop. 1990-2005)	58	34
Gini index	34.6	41.7
Aid as % of GDP (2005)	12.4	8.7

Note that, at purchasing power parity, per capita incomes in 2005 were almost four times higher in Cambodia. During the previous fifteen years, this discrepancy was aggravated because of stronger economic growth in Cambodia. However, in recent years, both countries have seen stronger growth in real per capita incomes. This is important because we believe that the communities and poor households participating in the empowerment programs have benefited from strong and wide-spread growth, and that the programs would have been less successful had the ambient local economy been less vibrant.

History and environment

The two country programs in focus each look back to an organizational history that predates the beginning of their community empowerment programs. At least in TCRS, several of the current program villages had been involved in the previous, i.e. integrated rural development, phase. In both programs, some of the technical activities

that loomed large in the integrated phase continue to receive support, although under different modalities. For example, a vital activity in Cambodia, one that is not normally associated with community empowerment, is being continued in some of the current program villages, to make them safe and livable: mine clearance. Overall, the influence of program history may be larger than what contemporary reporting suggests, with activity templates and seasoned community leaders that had their first ascendancy before the empowerment days and are of service to this day.

Cambodia

LWF came to Cambodia in 1979, after the Vietnamese pushed back the Khmer Rouge. In the eighties, LWF contributed to the reconstruction of the devastated country, chiefly in the agriculture and water supply sectors. The United Nations-supervised national elections in 1993 ended Cambodia's international isolation and changed the political environment of NGO work. After an external evaluation in 1994, LWF began integrated rural development programs, with major activities in "*community development and human rights, water and sanitation, food security, income generation, health, education, environment and disaster preparedness*" (LWF Cambodia 2006b: 10). In response to the massive needs and risks faced by the returnees, projects were taken up also in resettlement assistance and landmine clearance. In 2002, LWF closed one of its IRDP clusters, which thus became an observatory for sustainable village self-management (Cossar 2005).

At the same time, it initiated a further major program reorientation emphasizing more participatory, rights-based and empowering elements (inwent and LWF 2006: 1) and reducing infrastructure support. By 2006, the LWF program was active in 397 villages in six "*Integrated Rural Development through Empowerment Projects*" (IRDEPs) operating in the three provinces of Kampong Speu, Kampong Chhnang and Battambang (LWF Cambodia 2007a: 7)¹². It administered resources worth US\$ 3.4 million and had a staff of 302 (LWF Cambodia 2007a: 5, 20, 28). In another key statistic, within the 397 project villages, it worked closely with 2,807 particularly poor households known as "Partner Households".

Tanzania

In the words of a recent TCRS strategy document (TCRS 2007b: 1-2), the organization

"was initially established during 1964 in the then Tanganyika, and was the first Lutheran World Federation Department for World Service (LWF/DWS) field programme in Africa. TCRS dates back to May 1964, when an agreement was signed between the LWF/DWS on one hand and the Government of the Republic of Tanganyika on the other hand, allowing TCRS to start refugee and relief operations in Tanganyika. It was established as a collaboration between the LWF and the World Council of Churches, in partnership with the Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT).

¹² Another document – Planning and Monitoring 2006 – 2008 – lists 456 project villages in 8 IRDEP units (including Kandal/Takeo phased out in 2002), with a total population of 300,053 (LWF Cambodia 2006b: 15).

In the first 20 years of operation, TCRS was mainly involved in the development and management of semi-permanent settlements for Burundian, Rwandan, and Mozambican refugees in the south and west of Tanzania. These settlements were joint projects of UNHCR, the Government of Tanzania, and TCRS. In more recent times, TCRS has been an implementing partner of UNHCR in the large scale refugee emergencies in Kigoma and Kagera Regions, concentrating on camp management, water & sanitation, and logistics work.

In 1984, TCRS began development work with Tanzanian communities, initially in Singida and Kigoma Regions.”

In 2006, TCRS became an independent Tanzanian NGO while maintaining an associate program status with LWF. The transition to an empowerment approach had already been initiated between 1999 and 2001. Called the “Empowerment Project First Phase” (1999-2001) and “Second Phase” (2002-2004), work continued in 25 villages of Kibondo District, Kigoma Region, an area that had already been in IRDP programs since 1986. The same project involved six villages each in the districts of Karagwe and Ngara (Kagera Region) in the first phase, and twelve in the second. In 2005, work there was continued under the “Community Empowerment Program First Phase”.

As a result, village communities of the Western border region enrolled in the empowerment program have been exposed to an evolving approach for considerable time, with several of them recruited already in the IRDP era. In this second phase, the Empowerment Project was extended to 19 villages in Kilwa district, of Lindi Region, in the coastal belt, a chiefly Muslim area. Another program area, Morogoro District in the region of the same name, was added in 2005 – 2007, with 12 villages enrolled.

In total, the TCRS Community Empowerment Program was active in 2007 in 86 villages with an estimated total population of approx. 230,000. At the household level, the program worked closely with approx. 17,000 adults, often the husband and wife in the same family¹³.

In 2006, TCRS reported total expenditures of US\$ 4,2 million (TCRS 2007d: 22). Most recently, it opened a new empowerment project with a greater emphasis on food security in Kigoma district (TCRS 2007c). The community empowerment program had 43 persons on its payroll in 2007; the refugee assistance program in Kibondo, by comparison, employed 408 (Jackson 2008).

Goals and objectives

The multiple functions of organizational goals may be presumed for empowerment programs as well. Goals set guidelines for action, justify the organization in the eyes of its stakeholders, provide standards against which it will be evaluated, motivate staff, volunteers and even participants from outside to be good workers and advocates, and, to a degree, advise the organizational designs that translate them into action. While it is natural to start with a description and discussion of LWF Cambodia’s and TCRS’

¹³ Most of these are planning figures set in 2004 (TCRS 2004a: 15), for lack of more recent actuals. Village figures for Kilwa and Morogoro are 2006 actuals (TCRS 2007d).

goals, one must keep in mind potential divergences between official and operative goals. If the empowerment of the poor is the paramount goal of the organization, further down the line everyday work may follow more mundane project definitions and targets. Fortunately, in modern development NGO planning, formats known as logical frameworks (logframes) have created practical ways of documenting the translation from high-level desirables to more specific activities¹⁴. Such frames were created and shared by these two programs as well.

Cambodia

The architecture of goals, objectives, targets and other variables denoting desired states of affairs in the Cambodia program is elaborate and intriguing, with its own unusual beauty and challenges. A program planning matrix eleven pages' long in the "Planning & Monitoring Document (PMD) 2006 – 2008" (LWF Cambodia 2006b: 49-59) indexes the complexity of the task. It is a well ordered complexity, particularly at the lower levels of outputs and impact indicators, and through its atypically (for NGOs) close integration with financial reporting.

At the higher levels – goal and objectives -, the increase in elaboration is minor. The paramount goal carries three elements, which the formulated objectives essentially repeat, adding a fourth concerning the LWF's own performance. The PMD, in its program summary, states (op.cit.: 4):

Goal

Empowered rural communities, and partner households manage development process by themselves, know and advocate for their rights and obtain improved and sustainable livelihoods.

Objectives:

- 1. Empowered communities manage development process.*
- 2. Empowered communities know their rights, solve conflicts within their communities and advocate for their rights with duty bearers outside their communities.*
- 3. Empowered communities obtain sustainable and improved livelihoods.*
- 4. Strengthened organization with improved effectiveness and efficiency for the sustainable implementation of the Program.*

At first sight, each of the first three elements, although the word "empowered" is used for every one, is loosely associated with one of strategic approaches in the LWF Global Strategy: the self-managed development process with the empowerment approach, rights and advocacy with the rights-based approach, and livelihoods with the integrated approach. But this parallel would not go very far; conflict resolution points as strongly to the empowerment function as to rights, and a self-managed development process is first and foremost an integrative achievement.

Sustainability in numbers

A more compelling reading is apparent when we consider the connection between objectives and sustainability. The Cambodia program has specific objectives, which at

¹⁴ For background and critical analyses of logframe-based NGO-donor interactions, see e.g. Ebrahim (2002) and Bakewell et al. (2005).

this level are called “impact indicators”, to enable communities to continue to work together in development and human rights after they are considered sufficiently empowered and are phased out. At the highest level – the goal of creating empowered communities and households, the program 2006-08 was to render 157 communities so empowered that they could be phased out, in addition to 73 already empowered and graduated ones. With similar precision of targeting, 1,923 households were to be led to a level fit for phasing-out, added to the 1,079 ones graduated previously (ibid.: 49).

At the level of three objectives relating to communities and households, targets are set for the numbers of communities, respectively households to be in one of four levels of capacity expressed by a small number of impact indicators. For illustration, Table 1.1. in the planning matrix (ibid.: 49), against the objective “Communities manage their development process”, anticipates these year-end distributions:

Table 4: Cambodia impact indicator example

1.1 Total number of functioning Village Development Committees with following capacity to manage development process by themselves

Capacity	Baseline	2006	2007	2008	Total
a. low	17	67	82	79	
b. improved	117	113	100	82	
c. advanced	123	109	119	108	
d. graduated/ empowered	48	79	107	158	158

At the end of the three-year program period, another 158 villages were to have development committees with a level of competency fit to phase them out (if other criteria too were met); at the same point in time, $79+82+108=269$ communities would remain in the project portfolio at less advanced levels, among them presumably many freshly enrolled ones.

Presenting more tables at this juncture would be tedious. The reader understands the basic assumption that empowerment, in its various dimensions, can be measured – at least on an ordinal scale from “low” to “ready for graduation” –, and the advance of communities from one capacity level to the next is predictable enough to make indicators into annual targets¹⁵. Importantly, these targets include the phasing-out. They also speak to sustainability since graduation decisions are taken on the basis of capacities fit for longer-term functioning. The measurement of communities and household on these indicators, of course, is intriguing – how do we know that the development committee in village XY was at an improved capacity level last year? The Cambodia program has done pioneering work in this area, which we will summarize in the chapter on monitoring.

¹⁵ Admittedly, these tables leave a degree of ambiguity. One needs to assume that each year-end distribution results from a transition matrix for that year, one that shows also the recruitment and exit figures. Without that information, it is not clear how many of the low-capacity units are fresh recruits, and how many are old members stagnating at that level. Similarly, at the upper level, there is a difference between “empowered and ready for graduation” and “empowered and actually graduated”. Moreover, at least theoretically, units may exit from a lower level less than fully empowered.

Substantively, some more detail on the livelihoods objectives is worth noting here. This objective, at the impact indicator level, is broken down into four components (op.cit.: 50-51):

- Economic livelihoods
- Social livelihoods
- Environmental conservation and sustainable resource use
- Management and mitigation of disaster risks

As before, end-year targets by four capacity levels are set for each of them.

Non-quantitative impact indicators are set for the LWF program performance objective. These are less directly linked to the empowerment objectives and do not warrant discussion here.

Considerable complexity at the lower logframe level

The lower levels of the planning matrix are considerably more complex. Below the objectives, outputs are declared. These are illustrated in two ways. Qualitatively, a number of “main activities” are listed without numeric qualifications. Quantitatively, one or two “output indicators” are appended, with the actual baseline at the start of the program period, and targets for subsequent program years. These indicators are themselves composites and several have additional thresholds built in. For example, the activism of village development committees is evaluated via this operational definition: Count the number of “VDCs with 40% of female members implementing village development plans” (ibd.: 53). This would equally disqualify an all-male committee with 100 projects carried out and an all-female one doing no projects. The beauty of this system lies in the close connection that the program has established between outputs and budget lines, with an intricate allocation scheme. Doubts arise about the link between target tracking and useful learning. If, in the above-mentioned output indicator, performance trails the target, is it because many committees had no plan, or because they failed to bring in at least two women among the five members?

Tanzania

The goal and objectives of the TCRS Community Empowerment Program have very close parallels with those enumerated from Cambodia. As in this program, they are set out in a Planning and Monitoring Document (TCRS 2004a: 19, 41-45). The mechanics of the lower prescriptive levels, particularly annual output targets, is different, though, reflecting the strong curricular approach that this program has developed to community empowerment.

The goal is to have “*Marginalized communities enjoy fundamental human rights and dignity, and [to be] empowered to achieve self-reliance and a sustainable quality of life*” (ibd.: 19). The triple vision of a self-controlled development process, of guidance by a normative regime (human rights), and needs fulfillment is clearly present. The wording is different from that used in Cambodia, with, for example, less obvious emphasis placed on rights advocacy. The concern for sustainability predictably leads to a phasing-out rationale, as we shall later see.

Three objectives are formulated, one for communities, and two for the very poor households, called “marginalized people”. They each come with two or three impact indicators. These are not phrased as numeric targets. Some demand that progress be measured separately on the side of women as well as of men:

Table 5: TCRS Community Empowerment Program objectives and impact indicators

Objective	Impact Indicators
1. Communities have more active citizens with more transparent, competent, and accountable leaders.	1.1 Increase in attendance by marginalized persons at village and sub-village meetings. (male/female) 1.2 Rolling 3-Year Village Action Plan and accounts published annually, appears in District rolling plan, and is fully resourced
2. Marginalized people in target villages improve their economic security through sustainable livelihoods.	2.1 Improvement in standard of housing. 2.2 Increase in ownership of household assets such as radios and bicycles. (male/female) 2.3 Increase in surplus food stored in household.
3. Marginalized people in target villages increase their access to public services which secure adequate quality of life.	3.1 Village public services improved and maintained. 3.2 Village public services used by marginalized (male/female).

As is common with empowerment objectives, some of the impact indicators involve composite objectives. In fact, some that are composite on more than one dimension. The community activism objective calls for men and women to attend meetings, in their neighborhoods (sub-villages) and at the village center. There they meet with their leaders, whom the program helps to make “transparent, competent, and accountable”. These qualities are revealed through the presence of, and response to, three-year plans and annual accounts. The plans successfully compete for support by the district administrations and, from whatever sources, are fully underwritten.

The objectives concerning the marginalized refer to a hierarchy of needs – food, shelter, those calling for other assets – that are met in the household. They also refer to services rendered at the community level which the marginalized can effectively tap if and when they need them.

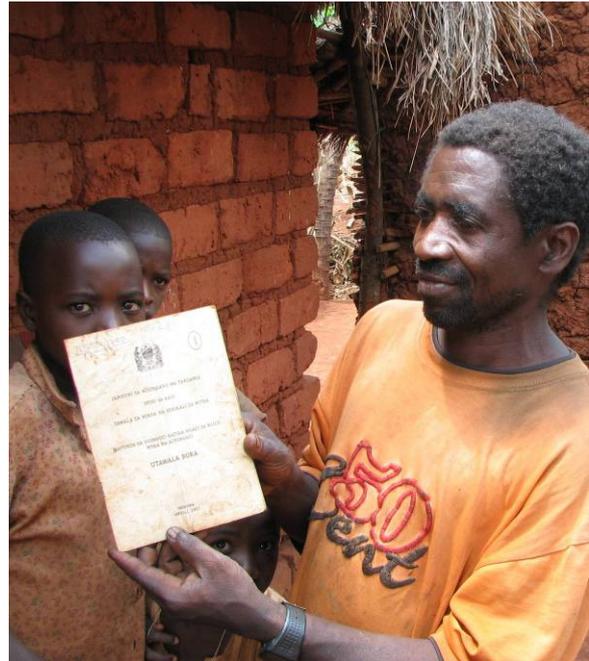
Grassroot meanings of empowerment

That the head offices of LWF Cambodia and TCRS should be producing documents defining and refining the meaning of empowerment comes at no great surprise. After all, they maintain the balance between the various approaches to development that the larger LWF strategy privileges and the implementation machinery.

But what meanings do the partner communities and households attach to the concept? Although they, or rather their elected committees, produce a variety of written documents, these deal chiefly with practical aspects of empowerment, and hardly ever with definitions or concept catalogues. Similarly, field staff and volunteers, who are the critical transmitters of empowerment concepts and experience, may be exposed to training materials spelling out meanings and strategies of empowerment, but this does not tell us how they carry out their important role as translators between program and community response.

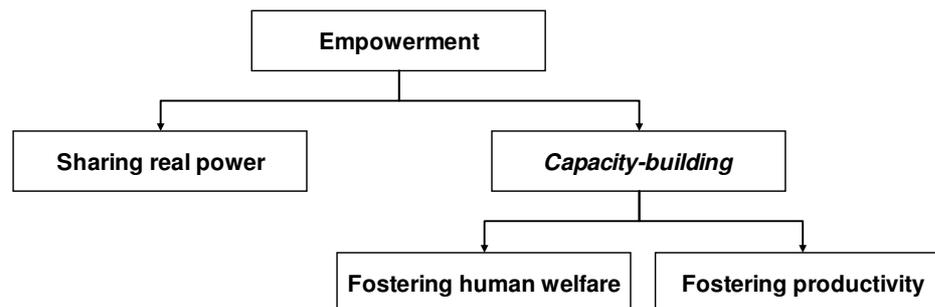
Figure 12: Literature on citizen rights in the citizens' homes

The district administrator and this researcher were about to leave the meeting place of a neighborhood small-project group in Nyagwijima village, Kibondo district (Nyagwijima Village Council 2007) when we spotted two brochures left by the wall of a member's home. One of them was a small booklet that the Government of Tanzania distributes on the basic rights of citizens. We failed to ask how the group, or the member for that matter, came to own it. Yet, its presence in a group of empowerment program households (and not, or not only, in the village council office!) refutes simplistic beliefs that at the bottom of the social hierarchy, among the poorest, empowerment and related concepts, such as of rights, are present only in applied, simplified, everyday language extracts.



In meetings with village development committees (Cambodia) and village councils (Tanzania) as well as in group discussions with field staff, a great diversity of meanings was manifest. These instances were offered through various rhetorical devices - through simple re-wording, underlining of the component most important for the speaker, before-after comparisons, or practical examples. This diversity had to be reined in through a category system of some sort; in a first approach we used Bartunek and Spreitzer's 17 meanings grouped into three major broad headings (see page 25 above). Their system seemed suitable because it relates to the distinction between zero-sum (power) and win-win (capacity building) interpretations:

Figure 13: Broad meaning categories - "sharing power" and "capacity building"



While this scheme formed useful vessels for an initial assignment of grassroots and field staff expressions, it soon became apparent that many of them carried multiple meanings or found no natural home in any of the 17 specific meanings that those authors had peeled out of a very different context. We therefore limit its use to illustration, giving one typical expression to each of the specific meanings activated in these conversations. Numeric statements are made only where trends are stark. More importantly, the scheme helps us discern what elements are dear to the poor of Cambodia and Tanzania, but are not yet captivated by a scheme originating in the West.

Table 6: The meanings of empowerment - sample statements

Broad category	[*]	Specific meaning	Sample statement
Sharing real power	1	Having power	Land grabbing: Before people would just keep quiet. Now they join together, protest against it (Tumdop Trakuon VDC 2007).
	2	Strengthen power of underrepresented	People already have power, but the government forgets about them, so there is a need to <i>strengthen</i> people (LWF Bavel project staff 2007).
	7	Control over destiny	We are strengthening our innate rights (Borun VDC 2007).
	11	Political participation	We teach the rights and responsibilities for each type of leader, also for the community, from sub-village to ward level (Kahungya, Ruilonge et al. 2007).
Foster human welfare	3	Pride in culture	
	4	Increasing self-worth	“Empowerment” also means “self-discovery” (Kagari, Mmassy et al. 2007).
	5	Personal meaning	The grassroots can manage themselves. I do so for myself, and also for the community (Neangmalea VDC 2007).
	6	Increasing knowledge	The primary focus was on education; it made us aware that we have a role in making life better (Kipindimbi Village Council 2007).
	10	Dignity and respect	
	13	Providing resources	The individual determines what he will do; he owns the process; he mobilizes resources around him (Kamihanda 2007).
	14	Connectedness	We established our network capacity (Tumdop Trakuon VDC 2007).
	15	Increasing options	“Empowerment” means improving the quality of life in a sustainable manner (Runyaga Village Council 2007).
Foster productivity	8	Participation in decision-making	[This approach] gives power and confidence to communities by means of participation, involving them in the full circle from problem assessment to annual evaluation (LWF Samaki Meanchey project staff 2007).
	9	Taking responsibility	Start with your own effort, seek help only once you meet your limits (Tzinga Kibaoni Village Council 2007).
	12	Enabling others	The leaders are now able to plan (Kibingo Village Council 2007).
	16	Sense of ownership	We see it [this project] as ours; it is our pride; we are all part and parcel of the outcome; if things go wrong, we feel bad (Tzinga Kibaoni Village Council 2007).
	17	Working in teams	We share responsibilities among many of us (Borun VDC 2007).

Note: [*] – these numbers are those used in the original table by Bartunek et al., *ibid.*, who numbered the specific meanings in the order of their first historical appearance in their corpus of journal articles on empowerment. We reproduce them here for convenient referral if readers wish to compare with the original.

What do these sample statements, plus a host of other related ones not included here, tell us? The breadth of meanings that community representatives and field staff assimilated is indeed as important as the cognitive map used by empowerment thinkers in Western academia. There are very few specific meanings that are not directly filled with the explanations and illustrations elicited in our encounters; there are several more that go beyond the 17 items in the table.

The “pride in our culture” theme, important in the black empowerment context in the USA, has no analogue in the empowerment understanding and practice in Cambodia and Tanzania, at least not manifestly so in the communities listened to for these meanings.

There were few statements that could be meaningfully associated with the “personal meaning” category; this is simply due to the method of eliciting these meanings in committee and council settings, not during visits at partner households. Had this exploration been done at this level too, it would probably have yielded a good crop of such statements. The overlap would be particularly significant with the numerous observations made that the empowerment process created confidence in individuals (and communities) to plan and act in novel ways. But it is fair to say that people generally spoke in “we”-terms, and rarely in the first person singular that we would expect in personal agency statements. Individual women, speaking of changes that the programs had helped bring about in the lives of women, would speak for the collective, not their individual life trajectories, except to mention their own IGA projects.

“Dignity and respect” was not used in these words, but one of the major themes, particularly in Tanzania, would fit in with it very strongly. This is discovery and ascertaining that women have rights. They are not the property of others, but may own property. Many communities singled this out as one of the major achievements of the empowerment approach.

Rights, awareness and exercise

In fact, the Bartunek et al. scheme is clearly insufficient in our context when it comes to individual and communities becoming aware of, then actively claiming, their rights¹⁶. It does not offer a natural category to which to assign the numerous rights-related statements that our interviewees made. It is important, however, to distinguish two achievements of the empowerment programs with regards to rights. The first is the discovery for some groups, notably women, that they *have rights* (“the right to have rights”¹⁷). The second is the active exercise of *known rights* once confidence, organization and priorities come together to do so.

The material extant is mildly suggestive that the first component – a new rights awareness – played a relatively greater role in Tanzania while statements of active exercise were more numerous in Cambodia. This goes hand in hand with the

¹⁶ In fairness, it should be added that these authors recognize the civil rights movement in the USA as one of the earliest inspirations of the empowerment movement.

¹⁷ Ignatieff (1999) cites the expression in the context of legal philosophers and theologians who believe that human rights ultimately rest on religious foundations; for unless every human being is sacred, there is no reason to protect their dignity with rights.

observation that networking was a concept more often noted in Cambodia whereas Tanzanian interlocutors greatly emphasized education and knowledge acquisition. Whether these differences are real-life or just terminological is difficult to say; if rights conversations in Tanzania were more about discovering that women do have rights (and that they had not been aware of that before the empowerment program), certainly the stories of poor people empowered to run for elected office were just as numerous as in Cambodia.

[Sidebar:] A contrarian voice in the empowerment chorus

Almost refreshingly, the harmony of community voices singing from the empowerment sheet was upset by the rare discordant note struck by members of a village council in Tanzania who were angered by the behavior of this researcher and his entourage. This was in Miguruwe village, Kilwa District, where TCRS had been working since 2003. Anger may have prompted them to say things that a more affable meeting would have omitted.

Our small group, including the area facilitator responsible for this village, arrived at the appointed mid-afternoon hour. The village council was busy with another meeting and asked us to wait. It was not clear when we would be able to meet with them. To save time, we reversed the normal order of meetings in a village and proceeded to see two small groups of marginalized people in their project sites, a brick kiln and a vegetable garden. We were accompanied by one of the councilors; his presence did not stop people who happened to work at those sites from making critical remarks about the lack of support that they experienced from the village council.

When the meeting with the council finally began, several councilors took issue with the slight of protocol that our improvised walk to the project sites carried. In short succession, they formulated several criticisms, some of which can be summarized as their own reading of the empowerment approach and practice in this community. Others were leveled at the performance of the area facilitator and are of no concern here.

Slightly reordering their literal statements, the essential argument ran like this (Miguruwe Village Council 2007): *“Much has indeed been done since TCRS arrived here; but this does not constitute empowerment. Many activities were begun, few have been accomplished. Empowerment means the ability to finish projects. We did receive education, this was necessary, but this phase is over. Now TCRS has to concentrate on how to support our IGAs and help us fill the shortfalls in this current bad drought. For example, we lack spare parts for irrigation pumps. TCRS failed us with those and did not live up to agreements in other areas either. We were promised 65 school desks; we have been able to make 45 only so far. We have not yet seen anything that is empowering.”*

While most of these criticisms are peculiar to project history (and possibly disingenuous for lack of support for their own poorer community members), they raise some questions of general validity. In all community development, there is a tension between widening options and leading selected options to fruition. In professional terms, this tension is often manifest between generalists (who dispense or receive education) and specialists meant to remove specific technical roadblocks (for example, extensionists and farmers who know how to fix a broken pump).

Second, in a rights-based climate, the NGO fielding empowerment programs comes to be seen as a rights and duty bearer itself, and this can be formalized in specific project support agreements. When communities notice that agreed projects are not followed through, they may express stronger disappointment than they would vis-à-vis stake-holders who did not firmly commit. Also, tolerance for mistakes and delays may wear off faster in disaster or pre-disaster situations (as in this drought), when incomes and reserves contract. In other words, the complaint of the Miguruwe councilors implicitly touched on the intriguing rapport between economic growth and empowerment.

Finally, their criticisms suggest that communities may set their own minimum thresholds above which they agree empowerment is taking place. These may concern the process (“We want to see these projects finished”) as well as about the results (“These IGAs have to produce real income”).

Approaches and key elements

Social dimension: Communities, households, individuals

The community empowerment programs in Cambodia and Tanzania work at more than one social and administrative level. The strongest focus is on the local village community and on households. Additional attention is paid to specific members of higher-level units (communes and districts, rarely the province, in Cambodia; wards and districts in Tanzania) as well as of lower-level ones (individuals in the household), as programs demand.

The village community itself may need systematic intervention at more than one level; typically, in Tanzania, villages are composed of several distinct sub-villages, with TCRS area facilitators relating mainly to the village councils, and local volunteers (animators) living and working in some or all of the sub-villages. In Cambodia, villages are smaller (compared to the average population of Tanzanian villages), and Village Development Committees, the LWF’s major partners, are less firmly institutionalized than the next higher unit, the communes and their administrations. Here the commune is essentially a conduit for village projects and plans to make it into the annual district plans.

Achieving critical mass

Working with groups located at more than one level may be inherent in the empowerment approach, at least where it pursues the idea of creating a countervailing power to the entrenched power elites that be. Already Freire, in his “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (Freire 1970), posited the need for a “critical mass” of mobilized people; gathering the multitudes calls for approaches that achieve multiplier effects by operating on several levels. The critical mass rationale is clearly present in the TCRS empowerment program, with the idea that once the majority of marginalized households in the village have been mobilized, a self-propelling effect will take hold in this group, bringing them into the mainstream of village life and pulling along also the remainder of the poor. In Cambodia, the reasoning was different; the LWF is reaching out to some of the poorest households (“partner households”) directly because this connection is deemed critical in overcoming the relief approach (Sam 2007b); by demonstrating viable self-help strategies for the poorest households, the local communities receive a template for supporting their neediest members.

The differences in the rationales for partnering with households – critical mass vs. templates for community responsibility – are reflected in program coverage indicators. The total populations of the active program villages were of a similar nature in the Cambodia and Tanzania programs. Cambodian villages had much smaller average populations compared to Tanzania; LWF was working with a larger number of villages and therefore formal local planning entities (397 village development committees) than TCRS (86 village councils). By contrast, the number of partner

households per committee or council was low in Cambodia – less than 1.5 for each member of a five-member committee, compared to the estimated four per Tanzanian village councilors (a village council has 25 members)¹⁸. One might say that, in the treatment of households, LWF Cambodia pursued a demonstration approach, TRCS a mobilization one.

Table 7: Select program coverage indicators

	Cambodia (2006)	Tanzania (2007)
Empowerment program villages	397	86
Estimated population in program villages	261,230	233,000
Average village population	662	2,593
Partner households	2,807	8,500
Estimated partner household population	14,877	40,800
Directly partnered to total population ratio	6%	18%
Partner households per VDC resp. village council	7.1	98.8

Does the village elite want the poorest involved?

The combined focus on villages and households is obviously premised on the possibility that elites will admit work with the poorest, or better, will actively support it. This premise cannot be taken for granted everywhere. In Tanzania, for example, great diversity of village elite attitudes towards the poorest was all too evident; and several local self-help groups complained that village councilors, presumably from better-off families, were not interested in their progress and did nothing to help them (e.g., Kikole Village Gardening Group 2007). TCRS field staff interpreted elite attitudes in part as indifference, in part as hostility (Muagabure, Saidi et al. 2007). In this view, councilors do not easily accept responsibility for their marginalized community members. Since the determination of who is to be considered marginalized is made through a TCRS-led detailed household survey, many councilors consider working with individual households and self-help groups a pure TCRS affair. They themselves stay concerned with community projects, for which they want TCRS support. The other extreme also exists, with long-standing community council leaders knowing most or all of the marginalized recruited into the program, encouraging them to participate in community events, and visiting them, at least occasionally, in their homesteads (Chanika village council chairman and SACCOS officers 2007). The empowerment approach is used also as a safeguard against elite capture of resources and of participatory spaces, which is a constant danger even in community-driven development (Platteau 2004).

[Sidebar:] The language of designating the poorest

In their English-language pronouncements, LWF Cambodia and TCRS refer to the participating households by their own linguistic conventions. LWF uses a term that focuses on the relationship, “partner households”. TCRS highlights a social diagnosis, the “marginalized”.

¹⁸ These figures were calculated making a number of assumptions where baseline data or program statistics left gaps. The TCRS partner household population assumed that 17,000 adults would be enrolled in 2007, normally two adults from a marginalized household, and that average household size was 4.8, a value found in a recent (internal) Kibondo program assessment; thus $17,000 \times (4.8/2) = 40,800$. The total population in the LWF Cambodia program villages is based on reported baseline figures, adjusted for actually enrolled vs. planned villages, thus $300,053 \times (397/456) = 261,230$.

In TCRS everyday practice, in the Swahili-speaking universe, “marginalized” is barely used. The communications vacillate between poverty concepts and project and programming terms. Swahili offers a number of poverty terms, such as *maskini* (poor), *fukara* (very poor, “has nothing”; considered bad language), *daifu* (weak), and *duni* (very poor), *maskini wa maskini* (the poorest of the poor) (Reveta 2007). In sharing household survey results with village councils, TCRS may use a combination of *duni* with the programming term *mlengwa* (target person, singular), *walengwa* (plural), or *kikundi cha walengwa* (target group).

The term “marginalized”, which implies social exclusion and is very appropriate in the numerous communities with poor residents unknown to authorities, is not used in village conversations. A summary statistic displayed in poster size in the council office in Nyagwijima, Kibondo (Nyagwijima Village Council 2007) exemplifies the *duni / walengwa* pairing. As one can see, this is not the raw count of the marginalized, put a breakdown into male / female, illiterate / literate of the 127 + 123 = 250 adult standard program intake. In other words, the poverty classification used here focuses not primarily on local structure and need, but on organizational capacity and programming.

Figure 14: A poverty statistic display in a village council office

2007 NYAGWIJIMA						
IDADI YA WATU WENYE HALI DUNI WANAO JUA KKK NA WASIOJUA KKK						
KIJIJI	WATU WENYE HALI DUNI (WALENGWA)		WALENGWA WANAO JUA KKK		WALENGWA WANAO JUA KKK	
	ke	me	ke	me	ke	me
NYAGWIJIMA	127	123	55	24	72	99

UFUATIRIAJI WA WALENGWA WETU WALIOKIK MAFUNZO WASIOJUA KKK 2007				
KIJIJI	IDADI	KUTAMBUA NA KUTAMUKA HERUFI NAMBA	KUTAMUKA, KUSOMA HERUFI NAMBA	KUANDIKA KUUNGA SENTESI INSHA
NYAGWIJIMA	107	28 / 16 ke / 12 me	28 / 16 ke / 12 me	28 / 16 ke / 12 me

Source: (Nyagwijima Village Council 2007)

This is nothing particularly surprising, but it is not a testimony to empowerment either. The logic of poverty classifications in the West followed similar institutional motives. For example, during US reform movements prior to World War One, “the duality between cultural meanings and social practices [was] operationalized explicitly. Reformers’ classifications of the poor (distressed, destitute, fallen, deserving, homeless, indigent, misfortunate, needy, poor, stranger, and worthy) are shown to be embedded within a hierarchically ordered meaning system by the structuring of organizational practices (giving advice, giving food, giving money, paying a person to chop wood, placing a relief applicant in an asylum, and so on)” (Mohr 1998: 362). TCRS here basically applies the logic of rationing (there are 250 places only); its sharing of poverty statistics with village councils may go back to Lutheran traditions of poverty policy in Europe, with their emphasis on the unitary responsibility of one relief provider, the government (Kahl 2005).

Within the household and above the village

How does partnering work with entities above and below the two focus levels, the village community and the very poor households? At the level of individuals within partner households, direct selection by program staff or local committee members is rare. It does occur for certain purposes. In Cambodia, for example, LWF staff and VDC members cooperate in the selection of children for school support, which constitutes an additional selection level below the partner household (Mey 2007). In Tanzania, the marginalized are identified as households (via the initial survey), but program intake is in terms of adults from these households, in order to control animator workload and the size of gender-specific adult literacy classes. By and large, however, the intra-household distribution of the program benefits is shaped less by selecting members than by policy. The kinds of household and small-group supports and community facilities that the program offers, together with other factors such as government policies, determine participation of, and impact on, different positions in the partner households.

Looking upwards, to communes, district, provinces in which the program villages are embedded, the partnering works differently. Each of these entities was specifically selected in one of the steps of getting to new program villages, but subsequent collaboration with them has remained selective and instrumental to the needs of the villages and partner households. The key bonding devices are village development plans or specific village projects that need sanction, technical integration or financial support from a higher entity. Financial vehicles created under decentralization policies that give districts funds to support village projects have created stronger incentives for this integration. At times, however, projects supported within the empowerment program are themselves located above the village; this is notably the case for secondary schools, which, in Tanzania, are often set up at the ward level. Moreover, although LWF Cambodia and TCRS do not support district administrations financially (they may underwrite projects in district plans, though), the emphasis on institutional capacity building has helped them as well. In Cambodia, through cooperating with LWF, commune and district administrators have sharpened their project formulation skills (Mou 2007: ; Suon 2007).

Is any empowerment approach conceivable that has a different focus, as far as group levels are concerned, than that on villages and on poor households? The danger of elite capture and the need to break poverty traps, mental and physical, in the poorest parts of village society seem to preclude it. However, over the longer term, in the evolution of enabling environments, limitations and opportunities may change. The experience of RDRS Bangladesh is illuminating in this regard. For many years, RDRS had access to the poorest basically at the household and neighborhood small-group levels. With the advent of union-level federations, RDRS and the poor found a common forum at a higher level (comparable, perhaps, to Cambodian communes). Progress in micro-credit, rural communication, and general education made intensive cooperation with target households unnecessary (and financially infeasible in a changed aid environment). The current empowerment challenges in the RDRS working area seem to have their novel focus more at the community level and above, in cross-level mechanisms, but admittedly also in improving the effectiveness of programs that take specific services to the poor and extremely poor.

Time: Recruitment, intensive middle stage, phasing-out

The partnership between village communities and LWF programs goes through phases, from initial selection through an intensive intervention phase, and then onward to graduation, with post-graduation contacts of variable intensity and formality. Similarly, partner households go through different stages. The term partnership itself indicates, beyond the connotations of equality and sharing, a middle ground between full membership and episodic usage. Village councilors in Tanzania, for example, are not on TCRS' pay-rolls, but they have frequent interactions with its field staff and animators over several years. Seen from TCRS' angle, with its expectations of how village communities will progress, these follow a client career. Conversely, in the eyes of village councilors, the TCRS program is one element in the unfolding history of their own community, summarized perhaps in a few project item lines within their village development plan that they update every year.

Moving from phase to phase, and from step to step during the intensive intervention phase, is the result of numerous decisions. We consider here how those on recruitment and graduation are made, and the devices that set the rhythm of progress in mid-career.

Recruitment

It is almost self-evident that before a poor farming household X in remote village Y is invited to join an empowerment program, a considerable number of prior selections are made elsewhere. In the most generic terms, villages and households are selected through a hierarchical expert judgment process. Provinces are selected before districts, districts before villages, villages before households. At each level, information pertaining to a set of its members (e.g. the districts within a province known to be poor) is collected and evaluated. Experts, administrators, elected bodies and personnel of other NGOs may be consulted. The criteria may in part be pre-established, such as when TCRS' country strategy (TCRS 2004a: 2) commits it to select intervention areas that

- are relative low levels of development,
- offer geographical clustering for operational efficiency, and
- are traditionally hosting refugees.

Within the pre-selection, additional criteria are adduced, and information along them collected. In selecting districts for program extension, TCRS relied initially on a kind of district development index that government had calculated in the spirit of UNDP's human development index. Subsequently, while visiting districts, TCRS staff would collect more specific data from the authorities there (Shija 2007a). Similarly, when LWF Cambodia was prospecting for two new potential project areas in 2007, it started with a pre-selection of four provinces. Teams then worked their way down through several tiers to the point where they conducted conversations with small samples of villagers. Five criteria for program areas were observed (LWF Cambodia 2007c):

- Remote and vulnerable rural areas
- Numerous very poor communities and households
- Evidence of environmental destruction, human rights abuses and poor disaster risk management
- Scarce government and NGOs services

- Feasibility for LWF to implement a program in the area.

The last point is not explicated in the document, but one may assume that, as in all practical area selections, program capacity, particularly existing budgets and funding prospects, set limits to the intake and, knowing this, to the search in the first place. Overall, the process of consultation and the working out of an informed consensus – the search team in Cambodia, *op. cit.*, emphasized this together with field verification – may be more important than the validity of the selection model. The process has to be satisficing (in decision theory terms; Gigerenzer and Goldstein 1996), it need not be optimal. Conceivably, the “forgotten villages” that TCRS seeks to empower are remote and under-serviced, but perhaps not the most neglected ones in the entire region – simply because the initial search cannot cover all. The consultation is important, also for the quality of the relationship with the stakeholders in the units that ultimately will be selected.

[Sidebar:] The place of history in the selection of partner villages

The accounts that LWF Cambodia and TCRS senior staff offered of the selection of villages did not assign any official role to the history of local development projects. Areas currently well serviced by other NGOs obviously are less of a priority; and during the search for new project areas, staff do consult with other NGO personnel. But earlier NGO exposure does not seem an important decision factor.

However, village representatives often couch the experience of being selected into the empowerment programs in the wider context of their history of cooperating with other development programs and NGOs. Committee members in Trapaing Kbu Sva village in Cambodia detailed the short history of their community – the village was founded in 1998 – chiefly in terms of NGO contacts. A village development committee had initially been formed in 2000. The international NGO CARE worked there for several years; by the time it phased out in 2005, the old committee had collapsed. Whether this happened as a result of CARE’s withdrawal, or rather the collapse prompted CARE to withdraw, was not made clear, but LWF’s assistance in revitalizing the committee was essentially seen as a continuation of earlier development efforts (Trapaing Kbu Sva VDC 2007). The point of comparison can also be the previous work of a local NGO (Thmei VDC 2007: similarly about a committee revived by LWF) or an earlier development approach of the same LWF program. In Tanzania, villages that participated in the integrated rural development programs prior to the empowerment reorientation seem to have produced a number of leaders capable of formulating the current partnership by contrast to the earlier development model as well as to their anticipated self-sustained development work in the future (e.g., Chanika village council chairman and SACCOS officers 2007).

It is an open question whether village communities with a richer NGO project history find ways to actively recruit themselves into the empowerment programs. One would assume that those who have articulate leaders are attractive as key informants already from the selection phase. In many developing countries, the density of NGOs in rural areas is so high that hardly a sub-district is left without at least some villages with significant project experience. These collaborations are often discontinuous and of mixed success. We have no conclusive evidence on the role of this accumulated experience and relations capital, but cannot exclude that it may play a larger role in selection and later success than the documents and interviews with the program staff suggested. This is part of the larger question of whether local “history matters” for the success of empowerment programs.

Recruitment decision and actual start-up

Finally, as regards the recruitment of communities, there is a difference between the selection, if you like, on paper and the process of getting them involved in practical

work. An in-principle selection may have to be made, within a short period of time, of all the villages meant to be in particular program segment, notably in order to move forward the funding, staff recruitment and government approval processes. The actual work in the villages so chosen may get started slowly at a pace that staff training and community ownership from the very start dictate. Thus, in the Bavel district of Cambodia, all the assessments needed to make village selections were done in very quick succession (around 1996; Mey 2007), but actual work built momentum gradually. In Tanzania, the community empowerment program was initiated in 6 – 10 villages per district, with the exception of Kibondo, which leapt to 25 villages right away because of its strong headstart from long-standing integrated rural development and refugee program work (TCRS 2004a: 6).

Once a village community has been finally selected for the empowerment program and a working relationship has been established with its leaders, selection of units at a lower level – the partner households – can proceed. The tools used for partner households selected differed greatly between the Cambodia and Tanzania programs.

LWF has laid down a detailed guideline for the selection procedure (LWF Cambodia 2005). This directs staff to meet the poorest families, and with special priority families headed by women, families with disabled persons, and landless families. The initial assessment is made by project staff, and then jointly by staff and village leaders. A participatory wealth ranking method is used, as in many other contexts because *“people living in precarious conditions are well aware of the existence of others, around them, who are poorer than themselves. They can lead outsiders to the most hidden and most downtrodden families”* (Anonymous 2000: 111). However, poverty and special handicaps are not the only criteria; the staff evaluate also attitudinal factors that make it likely that a selected household will stay committed to work with the staff and the village development committee.

TCRS has chosen a more information-intensive approach. Once a village has been selected, all households, rich and poor, are enumerated for a socio-economic profile that determines the selection of poor households into the program and, in theory, serves as a baseline for later impact measurement. The effort is considerable; the household survey in a new project area may take as long as six months. The economics of this information is debatable. For example, in the new Kigoma Rural District Community Empowerment Programme, in each of 17 villages an estimated 1,500 households (7,500 residents, approx. 5 persons per household. TCRS 2007c: 11) were to be surveyed. Subsequently, these large bodies of data would be used to select 250 adults / approx. 2 adults per household = 125 households in a given village. TCRS staff justified this approach because the marginalized are so scattered throughout these far-flung rural villages that the presence of many had been unknown to village councilors. The councilors appreciated the survey as a much needed local micro-census exercise that provided them with data for other planning needs as well.

The baseline definitions for these TCRS surveys had earlier been left to district managers (TCRS senior staff 2007), and only for the more recent program additions has the headquarters in Dar-es-Salaam been able to give active survey design and data management support.

Intermediate phases

Once communities and households have been recruited, they spend an intensive period of several years in the empowerment program. The monitoring of their progress and, even more basically, the planning and management of program activities demand distinction of finer phases and identification of transition points between intake and graduation. There is no universal scheme for parsing the empowerment progress in time or substance, but both the Cambodia and Tanzania programs have their own devices. In this, they are similar to the phase distinctions that empowerment thinkers have made in very different contexts. We refer back to, for example, phase models for individual empowerment used in Western psychology, guiding the patient from entry to advancement, and hence to incorporation and commitment (page 38). The need for phasing appears universal, the specifics are not.

The solutions that LWF Cambodia and TCRS have worked out in this regard are sufficiently different to shed some revealing lights on the dynamics of observing and managing advancement during the intensive program period. At the same time, these differences are a matter more of degree than of principle, tempered by the need for flexibility and the use of learning “loops” rather than linear progressions.

Curricular structure vs. self-assessed transitions

In broad-brush terms, TCRS follows a curricular approach, with a pre-defined sequence of interventions that together fill a standardized five-year curriculum. LWF Cambodia lets village communities transition into four levels of empowerment based on annual self-assessment exercises, with no pre-defined durations for the periods a community chooses to stay at particular levels.

TCRS was encouraged by a country program evaluation in 2003 to formalize its empowerment experience in a curriculum. It has created one that offers

“two courses, one for marginalized people who are the direct target group, called the Community Empowerment Course, and one for village leadership, the Local Leadership Empowerment Course” (TCRS 2004a: 15),

with different tracks for literate and illiterate marginalized people during the first year and a half. Illiterate adults taken in from the poorest households undergo special literacy and numeracy training during three-quarter years; their curriculum is the same as that for the literate poor from the second half of year 2 to the end. Another element of this curricular approach is the formation of small groups, corresponding to classes in educational institutions, a device for breaking down the complexity in the social dimension. The 25 members of the village council plus the neighborhood animators and suitable numbers of marginalized within a neighborhood offer themselves as manageable groups.

For leaders as well as for marginalized people, the curricular approach organizes a learning model that has three broad phases and a number of repetitions for incremental capacity building. If we consider the household survey, participant identification and initial group formation activities to be part of the preceding recruitment, the intensive phase has these major components:

extra-curricular factors as well (TCRS senior staff 2007). TCRS endeavors to respond with the necessary flexibility. For example, in 2006 it realized that the health issues of the marginalized demanded greater attention. In 2007 health classes were added, which are always full, also with people from outside the target group. Not all activities are pre-plannable, and empowerment curricula are truly empowering only when they pace themselves to their participants (Kamihanda 2007).

Empowering the village leaders

The basic structure of the local leadership empowerment course is the same, although its timing and contents are different from those of the courses for the marginalized. Selection of the village takes place earlier in interactions at higher levels and then, as far as the curriculum is concerned, in the initial months during what TCRS calls “*village entry and sensitization of leadership to TCRS Empowerment Curriculum for village development*” (TCRS 2004a: 18). The first year, corresponding to the self-discovery phase for the marginalized, is taken up by various training and sensitization activities, specifically in:

- leadership definition and responsibilities
- HIV/AIDS, gender and community-based development planning
- communication skills, minutes and record keeping
- participatory planning, resource mobilization, implementation monitoring, and evaluation.

Those are preparatory steps towards the major goal post set for the village leadership – the creation, implementation by priority actions, and revision of a 3-year rolling plan. As at the level of the marginalized, there is a repetition of “facilitated” actions (the first two priority actions of the village council), followed by a “monitored” action. The steps within these actions are less finely graded, as far as the course diagram tells, than for the marginalized; only “implementation” and “evaluation” are distinguished. The process from village entry to graduation is expected to take 4 ½ years.

“Where we are” in Tanzanian and Cambodian villages

The self-presentation of communities and formerly marginalized persons in the TCRS program is primarily in terms of activities and projects. Village councilors explain to the visitor that they have a plan for the village, and what its priority projects are, and that their finances are transparent, vide the budget and expense accounts shared with the villagers. The difference between a secondary school in planning, under construction and in operation, for example, is important in terms of costs and benefits already accruing, or to be faced in future, but is rarely presented as speeding the community to the next action and eventually to graduation.

By contrast, the village development committees supported by LWF Cambodia locate themselves clearly within the four-level scheme that the LWF has defined, and document this by the use of assessment pro-formas detailing the level determination. The levels are defined as “low capacity” (Level A), “improved” (B), “advanced” (C) and “graduated / empowered” (D), although D may be more correctly called “ready for graduation” as long as a community has not been formally graduated.

A detailed “graduation guideline”

The “Village Graduation Guideline” (inwent and LWF 2006) lays down a detailed scoring system. LWF staff help the development committees and other civil society organizations work through it during the annual self-assessments. Its seven substantive dimensions will be detailed later in this report. The exercise produces a total numeric score, which determine the overall capacity grade (the “level”) given the village (ibd.: 24).

It is not entirely clear whether other evaluative elements are involved. Certainly, the villages know at which level they are – they themselves have made the determination. Field staff may influence the outcome to a certain degree. The front-line Community Empowerment Facilitators would object if a newly recruited village graded itself above Level A right away²². Also, there may be occasional motives for empowered villages to understate their capacity, in other words prolong their C-level self-assessment in order to delay graduation as a D-level village. But overall, the committees and the communities that they represent seem to understand the entire cycle from planning to evaluation as a way to ultimately graduate out of the program.

While the villages are free to remain at a particular level as long as they please, in practice there are relatively narrow time variations. Most transition from A to B within 2-3 years, and from B to C after another two years (Nuon 2007). Typical lengths of stay in level C were not offered, but the whole empowerment process at the village level is supposed to take between five and seven years (ibd.). The only practical consequence of dealing with a community that has placed itself at a particular level is in staff intensity. Less empowered communities receive more staff time. For example, a facilitator looking after an A-level village should at most be looking after one more village, one in C-level, because his work in the A-level one is so demanding (Sam 2007a). Apart from that, the self-assessed level tells LWF little about the need for specific trainings and the resources to budget for the community (ibd.).

Partner portfolios and budgeting

Internally, LWF therefore needs and uses additional instruments to structure its work with the portfolios of communities moving through its empowerment program at self-determined speeds. Budgets, notably for an appropriate staffing pattern, are based on objectives, but also on empirical rule-of-thumb knowledge as to how needs will evolve, and how their provision can be costed. Counting on its donors to provide these resources, LWF foresees specific training requirements and opportunities in a detailed three-year community training tableau (LWF Cambodia 2006b: 42-44). This is still flexible enough to admit local variations in numbers, dates and target groups. To pick just one example, considerable training is being done on land law. Whereas the project in Battambang foresaw a steady 600 participants per year, the one in Samaki Meanchey applied for comparatively few places for 2006, to ramp them up tenfold

²² Amusingly, in one village (Thmei VDC 2007), we found that the spider web diagram visualizing the self-assessment results in 2007 had been doctored, as evident in the use of whitener on the poster version. We were told by the facilitator that the original, slightly more advanced scores had been “an error”, and “they [the committee] were told to redraw it” back to the minimum levels of 2006. This could raise a suspicion that A-level scores are essentially administratively defined and serve the interest of the field staff, who thus find it easier to subsequently demonstrate positive change.

two years later. And while these projects send staff and village leaders to the land law trainings, the one in Oral mobilizes participants chiefly from its partner households (ibid.: 42).

A similarly structured phase model is followed for the partner households, equally predicated on a self-assessment tool (LWF Cambodia 2005: ; LWF Cambodia 2006b: 138 sqq.). In the time dimension – which is the focus of this section -, one would want to know above all how far these poor households have advanced by the time the village development committee grants the entire community the D grade “empowered and ready for graduation”. As far as is known, such correlative distributions have not been produced by the LWF monitoring cell, but from their diagrams on community and household achievements in 2006 (LWF Cambodia 2007a: 8), it would appear that households rate their capacity more conservatively than villages do. The typical (median and modal) village is in C (advanced); typical partner household capacity is in B (improved). This lag shows up at graduation time; staff in the projects visited pointed out that the economic position of poor households was not usually fit to be called “empowered” when the same was already true of their communities represented by the village development committees (LWF Samaki Meanchey project staff 2007: ; Mey 2007).

Phasing-out

It is in the criteria for graduation that the Cambodia and Tanzania program differ sharply. Village graduation in the TCRS empowerment program is driven by observed progress in partner households. A village can be graduated when over 60 percent of the enrolled marginalized persons are ready to graduate (TCRS 2004a: 16). How this readiness is to be established is subject to local understanding. It may be in terms of planning faculty; “*once an individual can plan and evaluate, he can be graduated*” (Shija 2007a). In Kibondo, staff use household surveys to estimate an index from household assets and incomes as the basis for graduation (Nkya and Chago 2007b). The manager of the Karagwe unit felt that other measures of success needed to be included, such as the literacy skills that the marginalized gained and used through the empowerment project (TCRS senior staff 2007).

TCRS expected to graduate around 3,000 of the 17,000 enrolled marginalized people by the end of 2007 (TCRS 2004a: 39). Since we do not know the annual cohorts entering the 5-year curriculum, that proportion tells us nothing about the speed of, let alone the achievements justifying, graduation. The variation in graduation criteria is similar to that originally allowed for baseline measurement. Common to all is a bottom-up critical mass model that assumes self-propagated empowerment effects once a certain threshold of empowered people has been crossed.

In Cambodia, responsibility for graduation is deemed to rest with the village development committee and the Provincial Department of Rural Development (PDRD). Practically, the committee assessment is the basis for the phasing-out decision. LWF, as the facilitator of the process, most likely has its own influence. Commune and provincial actors are involved symbolically, during the “hand-over day” (Mey 2007). The presence of LWF staff who know the partner households in the community may favor consideration also of the latter’s position in the graduation decision. But overall one comes away with the impression that the phasing out is determined more by village-level considerations. This is so not least because,

compared to TCRS, the partner household-to-village ratio in LWF Cambodia is much lower. One may speculate that the severity of land conflicts too accounts for some of this. When livelihoods are threatened chiefly by forces from outside the community, the observed defensive capacity of the development committee and of the civil society as a whole is much more critical than that of the partner households, who constitute a small fraction of all the households in the village.

What happens after graduation

LWF Cambodia has documented how some of its graduated communities continued to cooperate – more on this in the chapter on sustainability, page 142 – and has a policy in place for their further accompaniment (LWF Cambodia 2006c). Staff are withdrawn at graduation; the village development committee is supposed to look after the partner households by its own efforts. LWF stops supporting infrastructure projects even though it may continue to support “software measures” during the “accompaniment phase”. Practically, accompaniment means continued capacity building for the development and village bank committees, through training (chiefly on leadership), workshops and exposure visits (Mey 2007). It includes help also with the formulation and forwarding of project proposals to other funding sources, as well as through preferential selection of partner households for trainings (Nuon 2007) (how this last element can work organizationally after staff have withdrawn is not clear).

Documented experience of post-graduation communities is not available from the TCRS community empowerment program because none of its communities has yet been formally phased out. However, another project fills that gap, at least in part. The so-called “Same Rehabilitation Project” (TCRS 2004b: 12) was led by TCRS between 1996 and 2003, in an area of the South Pare mountains ravaged by a long drought. It was handed over to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania Diocese of Pare in 2003. The continuous vitality of these eleven mountain communities has inspired in TCRS senior staff the confidence that empowerment programs can have sustainable effects, even in remote and difficult environments. To this day, Same is a favorite destination of exposure visits for staff and community leaders of TCRS and church programs elsewhere in the country.

Are partners transitioned individually or in groups?

In summary, there are clearly important temporal structures in the empowerment process, and the programs formalize and formulate them each in their own specific logic. But one should perhaps not make too much of the differences between the Tanzanian and Cambodian phase models. Both strive to balance structure and flexibility, and both are subject also to external constraints. As much as is feasible, the programs allow every empowered community and household their individual pace. Yet, program logic and funding oblige these programs also to transition their partner units in groups, such as at the beginning and end of a project. All the communities in the Same project of TCRS, as we just saw, were handed over at the same time, regardless of individual differences in their empowerment; and the same happened to 25 villages that LWF phased out in the Takeo and Kandal provinces in 2002 (Cossar 2005).

Substantive dimension: Capacities and competence

The PME documents of LWF Cambodia and of TCRS enumerate a number of distinct areas in which the empowerment process is to create lasting change. In Cambodia, the seven criteria on which communities assess their progress annually stake out the areas of enhanced capacity and competence:

- The management of the development process
- Awareness of rights, conflict resolution and advocacy outside the community
- Economics livelihoods
- Social and cultural livelihoods
- Environmental conservation and sustainable use of natural resources
- Disaster risk management and mitigation
- Gender empowerment and equality.

In Tanzania, the substantive dimensions of empowerment are most succinctly described by the statement of goals and objectives – they include enhanced participation, economic security, and access to services (TCRS 2004a: 19). Each of these comes with a number of more specific competencies that the poor, and also the community leaders, will exercise once they are empowered.

Three levels of competences

Common to these competence and capacity “landscapes”, if you like, is the fact that they appear at three different levels. They manifest themselves in skills and attitudes that individuals have newly gained. Second, groups work together for purposive action that encompasses all the stages from analysis to planning, hence to action and evaluation. And finally, the new capacities are gained and used in processes that cross vertical and horizontal group boundaries; these are referred to as “networking”.

At the first level – that of individual skills and attitudes – the creation of basic self-confidence in the poor is a key outcome of the empowerment process. In earlier days in Tanzania, for example, many among the very poor women would never show up at a health clinic. They would give birth at home, always. The problem was not reluctance on the part of medical personnel to serve them; it was their fear and lack of self-confidence that were debarring them (Katwe Village Council 2007: ; Runyaga Village Council 2007). However, it would be wrong to consider lack of self-confidence as a strictly personal problem, as the word “self” may suggest. Many of these women were unknown to the authorities; they had no public identity in their villages. They did not exist outside their families and immediate neighbors. TCRS, by its household surveys and group organization, exposed their existence and created a public awareness around which the new self-confidence could be nurtured.

Similarly in Cambodia, where LWF found that the mere fact that its staff were visiting very poor villagers repeatedly helped to create self-confidence. A key ingredient of the budding self-confidence was the program’s ability to plant in the poor the dream that they could improve their lives (Chann 2007b: ; Mey 2007). The external device that stabilized their self-confidence was not so much the constitution of a public identity – villages in Cambodia are smaller, and one would think that most residents knew each other before LWF arrived -, but their own household

development plans that LWF helped them make and link to the village development plan.

To what extent the empowerment program needed to induce *self*-confidence in community leaders, as opposed to the poorest among their fellow residents, is difficult to reconstruct. Certainly, greater confidence between leaders and the governed is an outcome that the process reinforced. It was a precondition for subsequent greater effectiveness of the village councils and development committees. In Tanzania, a village executive officer remarked that the community nowadays carried through what the council decided; this had not been so before. A woman present in the same interview explained that the new planning and accounting skills helped everybody to understand how much money there was and for what purpose – “*it has become difficult to steal from us*”. She attributed the higher implementation success to this transparency (Njinjo Village Council 2007). In other words, what at first sight might be counted as attitudinal change in *individuals* is being stabilized by technical skills and physical outcomes to become the property of *groups*. In the same village of Njinjo, many of the poorest had built enough confidence to start a local savings and loan association (known as SACCOS); on the day of our visit, bricks were being molded with which to build their own office.

Stabilizing the new attitudes

Attitudes are notoriously unstable, and how greater self-confidence, trust in others and technical skills can be stabilized is a question that goes to the heart of sustainable empowerment. The mechanisms of stabilization are several. One is precedent where previous conditions denied positive attitudes, and where now a pioneering new case breaks down the walls for many others. In Tanzania, the message that women have rights was made much more powerful when widows deprived of their inheritance complained and village councils (and in some cases, courts) upheld their right and ordered property to be restituted (Kambona 2007b: ; Nyagwijima Village Council 2007).

Stability comes also from the continuous contacts and messages from outside (notably from field staff and animators) and practical achievements, however modest in the beginning. The repeated income earning projects of households and small groups have this effect. At the community level, a succession of infrastructure projects may do the same. Thus LWF Cambodia takes care that all training courses result in some action plan. And all must be evaluated by participants (Nuon 2007).

Parallel collaborative processes

This is close to the second level of competencies, those induced by the purposive action of entire groups. The process circle model that LWF Cambodia worked out over the years (inwent and LWF 2006: 2) expresses the concept most aptly. Here the content is not so much the achieved project, but the process that takes the collaborating individuals and groups on a never ending journey. The journey goes around and around, from assessments to planning to implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and then back to assessments initiating the next project. The essence of this is a concurrent flow of collaborative processes, rather than a fixed list of distinct technical competencies. The latter, of course, are not unimportant; they are given direction by the wider social environment, for example towards those capacities needed to produce goods and services that the market will take. Technical failure is

disempowering; self-help groups in TCRS-assisted communities in the Kilwa region who were growing very productive tomato gardens but could not take their produce to urban markets saw in it a confirmation of their remote, isolated state in the forest (Kipindimbi Village Council 2007). Above the individual projects with their breakthrough and setbacks, this second level of competency lives off the multitude and interactions of changes in the mobilized communities.

“We have a plan”

Although the empowerment concept emphasizes the process character and the open-ended nature of collaboration, its success crystallizes in the often-heard “We now have a plan”. This proud expression refers to both the process and the document, such as a project list tacked to a wall board at a place that the public can inspect. In fact, it is the burden and discipline of planning that sets the empowered stage apart from the earlier, dissolute state of affairs. This discipline goes a long way beyond the simple list of projects that express desired additions to individual and community welfare; it calls for the practices that enable actors to realize projects. As a result of leadership training by TCRS, for example, councils in several villages for the first time started to keep records (Tzinga Kibaoni Village Council 2007).

Plan documents are not only for display; they also demonstrate a style of expectation that is more normative, in other words a shared resolve to carry through agreements, a greater immunity to disappointments *en route*. Other normative components can be integrated into the new planning habit, sometimes flexibly together with anticipatory schemes. Since TCRS provided training in land law, “this council has had occasion to use this law almost daily” (Runyaga Village Council 2007). It was after the council developed a plan that the village of Njinjo started to maintain its roads (Njinjo Village Council 2007). Anticipating land titling action by the government, the village of Borun in Cambodia created its own detailed land distribution plan, with information copy preemptively filed with the commune council (Borun VDC 2007).

Compared with Tanzania, the program villages in Cambodia had “more plans”, although not necessarily more achievements. It was amazing to see Cambodian village development committees drawing up project lists with thirty different items or more. Some items would not see any movement during the planning year, but they were nevertheless retained *pro memoria*. The function of this wealth of projects was not obvious. One may speculate that such an extensive organizational memory can be maintained due to relatively high staff intensity. The question is whether the continued inclusion of dormant projects has an opportunity cost, particularly also for LWF in terms of staff attention and reporting, or whether the advantage of rapid reactivation prevails when new opportunities arise. Some projects are simply displaced “by more urgent things” (Nuon 2007), but they may return. The large number may also have a learning value for the active search of resources outside LWF.

Generally, documents produced by Cambodian village development committees were meticulous, neat and clean, with an ability to produce detailed maps that were not only topologically correct, but strove to be to scale. Committees often did not have permanent space to display them, and they could be stored in different member households. There were admixtures of document types that may have owed more to their use in some participatory toolbox – village transect sketches, for example – than to the core concerns of the community, perhaps an expression of field staff trying out

many different formats. By and large, however, documents for public display were of three kinds: last year's activity report, the work plan for the current year, and, slightly less prominently, the latest self-assessment results.

Community-level projects in the plans of the typical TCRS village were fewer than half a dozen. Within the marginalized program participants, household development plans as separate documents did not appear to exist. The village projects were monitored chiefly for their complete fundability, with typical mixtures of labor and local material contributed by the community, as well as cash and "industrial materials" expected of TCRS and district councils. Some councils were explicit that among the modest number of projects that they were carrying at any one point in time most would be executed. Councilors in Katwe volunteered an implementation rate; *"about 80 percent of our village plans are carried out"* (Katwe Village Council 2007).

Estimates of costs and materials, alongside the lists of projects of which they were part, council budgets, and lists of committee members would cover a large part of the wall space in cramped village council offices. Some councils gave prominence also to results of the TCRS village survey, often as a poster-size table displaying a village census breakdown along a few categories of interest. Documents produced by the empowerment program would share space with materials from other sources, such as posters on crop diseases from an agricultural extension service. The current relevance of some of the displays was doubtful, as seen in the habit of tacking notices on top of other documents. In one of the village councils met (Njinjo Village Council 2007), the expansion of records and plans spawned a small effort to document the history of the village community, a behavior not uncommon when community relations are reformulated, and new professionals such as teachers come to reside in the community²³.

[Sidebar:] Plans beget interrelated social relations and documents

In several places, we have indicated that the importance of having a village development plan can hardly be overstated as a milestone in the community empowerment process. Plans are documents as well as social action systems. As documents, they are kept side by side with other documents, sometimes in meaningful, mutually reinforcing associations, at other times perhaps only as a storage coincidence. The build-up, in parallel, of documentation, conceptual schemes and social relations that leads to the first village development plan and beyond, is a fascinating aspect of empowerment, although one that has hardly been investigated.

In the photo below, four councilors of Njinjo village in Kilwa district, Tanzania, pose in front of a village office wall covered with posters and poster-size summaries of various types of village information (Njinjo Village Council 2007). We notice two posters that explain the operating mode of TASAF, the Tanzania Social Action Fund, a tool within the government decentralization policy meant to fund village projects (Braathen and Mwambe 2007). Barely

²³ It would be presumptions to assume that local historiography beyond the oral traditions did not exist prior to the consequences of the empowerment programs. They may very well have been there, particularly through the work of religious leaders. We simply have not had enough time to enquire about its occurrence and function. In the European modernization processes of the 19th century, new professional groups (doctors, teachers, other small intellectuals) came to be influential enough to share power with the old land-owning elites; and their work influenced the way local communities expressed their identities.

seen in the upper right corner is the total of the annual council budget, TSh. 43 million. Below the budget, another chart, with a Venn diagram, lists committees and institutions with whom the council cooperates. Hidden from this segment, further up on the wall, the councilors hung a hand-drawn village map with the locations of sub-villages and a tabulation of important events in the recent history of Njinjo, including an attack, in 1983, by seven lions.

Figure 16: Village councilors in Njinjo, with office posters



In fact, the council was expecting more than half of its budgeted US\$ 33,500 income from TASAF. The following table gives a breakdown of anticipated income and expenditure. This budget is not balanced. Notably, local taxes will not fully fund the recurrent council expenditure, let alone any of the development projects. One needs to assume that shortfalls in expected contributions will simply cause some of the newer projects to be postponed, in favor of completing others that have already been started such as the construction of a new council office.

Table 8: The Njingo village, Tanzania, council budget for 2007

INCOME - 1.0 INTERNAL SOURCES		EXPENDITURE RECURRENT	
	TSh.		TSh.
Levies on:			
Logging	80,000	Conferences	280,000
Woods	100,000	Stationary	80,000
Market	200,000	Travelling	600,000
Cashew nuts	60,000	Independence Torch	40,000
Maize	50,000	Ward District Council	300,000
Sorghum	50,000	Levy collector allowances	94,000
Palm oil	120,000	Market transport	36,000
Local breweries	252,000	Emergencies	200,000
Sub Total	912,000	Sub Total	1,630,000

[Table continued next page]

2.0 EXTERNAL SOURCES

District Council	1,000,000
PEDP classroom	3,190,000
PEDP house	3,600,000
TASAF	24,000,000
TCRS	2,000,000
T.A.G	7,200,000
JORUMU (SELOUS)	1,000,000

Sub Total **41,990,000**

TOTAL INCOME **42,902,000**

US\$

US\$1 = TSh. 1,280 33,517

Note: Translation by Adam Jackson, TCRS Dar-es-Salaam

DEVELOPMENT

Contribution to food nursery	40,000
Teacher housing	3,190,000
Classroom	3,600,000
Village Office	3,500,000
Nursery school	7,200,000
Well drilling	4,200,000
Construction of market	5,300,000
Furniture	1,500,000
Ward secondary school	5,000,000
Police post	3,600,000
Police house	3,600,000
Making desks	1,000,000
Construction of village roads	932,000
Sub Total	42,662,000

TOTAL EXPENDITURE **44,292,000**

US\$

34,603

Some types of development projects require brief comment. Njinjo, far from the district headquarters, over time gained the status of a mini-center for a cluster of villages deep in the forest. It boasts a daily market as well as the only commercial guesthouse in the area. The council wishes to fortify this status by convincing the government to open a police outpost and by enlarging the market. Police officers would need to be attracted with suitable staff housing, a challenge universally present also in school and health services expansion. Most of these projects are premised on the government supplying and paying the personnel to operate them. Some would improve the council revenue through larger market and brewery levies.

Overall, the Njinjo budget is testimony to the dependency of the empowerment strategy on larger economic processes such as the funding available under decentralization schemes. Compared to the expected TASAF contribution, the ability to tax local riches such as the lucrative timber logging remains insignificant. Such imbalances express the current state of socio-political relations among villages, government and outside organized interests. While the empowerment program, enhanced by the rights approach, supports demands on perceived duty-bearers like TASAF, the political economy of natural resources is not yet part of the common reflection. At this stage, the major achievement is the capacity of the community, through its council, to debate the range of its collective projects in a unified format that makes preferences and compromises more rational and the local players more accountable.

The third level: Network competence

The above example of the Borun committee filing its land distribution plan with the commune council provides a convenient bridge to the third level of substantive capacity, networking beyond the boundaries of the immediately collaborating groups. In some of their statements, LWF Cambodia and TCRS seem to conceive of networking in efficiency terms. *“Networks and partnerships build strength through solidarity and unity in purpose and practices. Joint undertakings create efficiencies in implementation through the organized combination of human, material, and financial resources”* (inwent and LWF 2006: 5). One should ask whether, before it can stimulate efficiency, networking is decisive for the relevance and the effectiveness of

what communities and individuals take up as projects. Without the network that the empowerment program made available, would the people of Borun have known enough of official land titling programs in order to produce their own plan? Would their initiative have been seen as legitimate by the commune council? In other words, networks exist not so much to vehicle advocacy agendas; they define them.

At least in one major “guiding ideas” formulation, LWF Cambodia has presented a networking concept that has greater long-term promise than efficiency concerns do. It describes its work as the combination of the “enlightenment of the powerful” and the “empowerment of the vulnerable”. The first is to be promoted by policy advocacy informed by grassroots experience. The second is strengthened by issue advocacy that the program structure in the field supports (Mueller 2007a: Slide 4). Both advocacy thrusts grow by the strength of up-and-down networking. Networking happens horizontally as well, for coalition-building, learning and perhaps other purposes. We offer an example from the education area. LWF has used its empowerment program to offer scholarships to children from among the poorest households. The parents of many of these students are illiterate. Through the network that binds village development committees, LWF field staff and the Department of Education, non-formal literacy classes for such adults have been arranged (LWF Cambodia 2006a: 5).

TCRS talks of networking more pragmatically. Its first networking achievement is to bring the marginalized out of obscurity by confronting the village with the survey results. As we have seen, individuals and sometimes entire households who had lingered unknown on the fringes of the village become entities for the council and for other fellow villagers. The next tier of networking comes into force when the marginalized benefit from community infrastructure. A study in Karagwe found that 85 percent of them use village-level services (TCRS senior staff 2007), particularly in education and health care. As a result of yet another level of networking, the government starts supplying village services with more resources. An important instance is the assignment of teachers to schools built or expanded under the empowerment program, which, given the teacher shortage, is not automatic.

Again, what is the substance?

In the perspective of this section, we believe that the substance of empowerment is largely indifferent to particular technical fields although once a field becomes important in the local context mastering its technical aspects matters clearly – schools, in the last example, cannot function without teachers. Instead, empowerment results from the interplay of enhanced capacities at several levels – the self-confidence of individuals, the ability of groups to manage purposive action, the two-way use of networks across groups and tiers.

In this view, the substantive dimension becomes strongly aligned with the social, in a progression from the individual, to the household, and thence to communities and even larger entities. Yet, the two dimensions remain different. In the social dimension we look at who becomes empowered. In substance, the “What is it?”-question, empowerment shines forth in identities (self-confidence), in expectation management (planning), and in the pairing of codes (truth and power) that would stay more disjointed without the networking effort.

Organizational aspects

What machinery do LWF Cambodia and TCRS rely on to serve the communities and individuals that they wish to empower? None of the classic professions, nor of the modern technical trades, has a direct and immediate correspondence to empowerment²⁴. A specialty-driven organizational form is thus unlikely; instead we expect organigrams to remain geared towards the segmentation of households and villages in space, rather than towards specific functional requirements of the process. For similar reasons, field staff positions may have to be filled with persons overqualified for the ultimate specific tasks, simply because task repertoires are open and demand a degree of abstraction that the actual activities, had they been known in advance, would not impose. Thus, we anticipate a type of field administration that is primarily territorial (around village clusters), and functionally specialized in the second degree only.

Predominantly generalist field staff

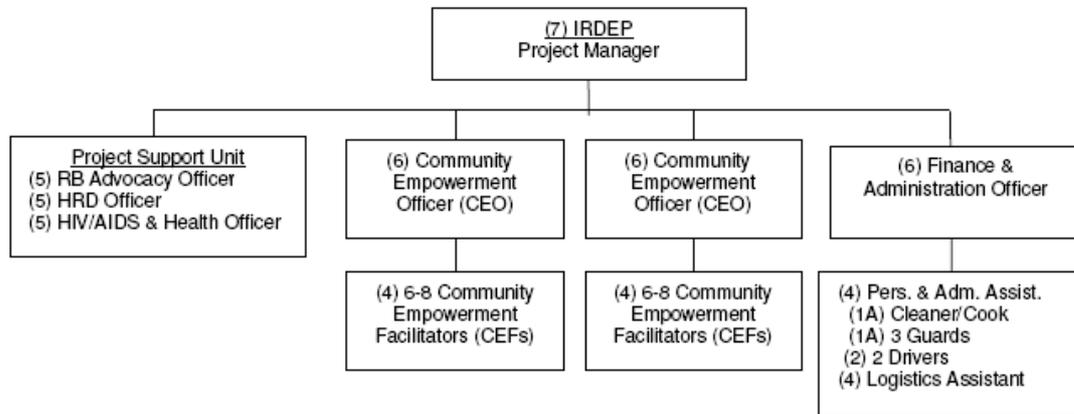
Yet, in the Cambodia and Tanzania programs, that is not the entire story. Their response to these challenges has differed between them and over time. LWF Cambodia compensates for the lack of a genuine empowerment profession by hiring staff with university background. It privileges candidates from the disciplines of health, agriculture and management, with a view to so mixing them in local projects that they also serve as technical specialists in their particular fields. To compensate for their narrow disciplinary outlook, the new recruits receive in-service training in such empowerment-related skills areas as

- Community development
- Gender
- Participatory approaches and facilitation
- Rights and advocacy
- Active non-violence
- Training of trainers,

during their first two years (Chhuon 2007). Most of the recruits are then placed in the essential boundary-spanning positions of the field organization, the community empowerment facilitators. To further press the empowerment orientation of its field staff, LWF did away with a number of technical specialists in 2005. It replaced them with a standardized adjunct staff of three specialists in each of its Integrated Rural Development and Empowerment Projects – a rights-based advocacy officer, a human rights development officer, and a HIV/AIDS and health officer. The resulting organigram, at the project level, shows them to be the only specialist staff besides those of the finance and administration unit (LWF Cambodia 2006b: 67).

²⁴ Psychotherapists may disagree with this statement, but their claim is not relevant here.

Figure 17: LWF Cambodia project-level organigram



This scheme has the advantage that it is more or less expandable and contractable at will, by changing the number of frontline units – facilitators working under one empowerment officer – as well as the ratio of villages to facilitators. The latter varies closely with the empowerment level achieved by the villages, with the more advanced receiving less staff time. Also it provides for an approximate matching of hierarchical levels between LWF and government, with facilitators understood as essentially village-level workers, their supervisors (perhaps) knowing all the project villages in a commune, and the manager a regular interlocutor of the district governor’s.

[Sidebar:] Living and working close to the poor

In 2002, LWF Cambodia moved the office and staff campus of the Samaki Mean Chey project from the provincial headquarters to the district after which it is named. Initially, this caused some strain with the provincial administration, but this has subsided to the point where government officers travel willingly from the provincial capital to Samaki Mean Chey in order to attend LWF trainings. Both the staff (Nuon 2007) and the local authorities (Mou 2007) consider the move hugely successful. LWF is now closer to the program villages and responds to their needs in better informed and faster ways. In fact, other NGOs such as World Vision have started to emulate the LWF policy of locating project offices as close to the villages as feasible.

Village committees in other districts, too have favorably commented on the benefits of staff living with them or in nearby project camps, sometimes adding that things got really better after roads were improved (Tumdop Trakuon VDC 2007). Similar comments were heard in Tanzania (Nyagwijima Village Council 2007). While we immediately think of logistical advantages, others have pointed out other qualities that result from closeness. Spatial proximity, however, has to be translated into social closeness:

“Often the poorest are excluded and out of reach. This exclusion means that typically, the very poor’s situation and their own efforts to emerge from poverty will not be known to an outsider. For the outsider to acquire an in-depth knowledge of the very poor, tools are needed. For example, a close proximity for a long period of time may be necessary for acquiring a genuine knowledge of the aspirations of the very poor. But for proximity to work, the very poor need a clear understanding of the intentions of those who want to help them. That is, reciprocity and mutual understanding are basic conditions to establish trust on which knowledge can be built and shared” (Anonymous 2000: 110).

Staff recruited from outside vs. local volunteers

TCRS works with smaller district staffs because it operates in a different tradition. Between its field staff and the marginalized households (and for many routine tasks also vis-à-vis village councils), it has inserted a layer of local volunteers. These “animators”, as they are called, place TCRS closer to approaches of “*animation rurale*” in Francophone Africa (Prokopy and Castelloe 1999), although a direct philosophical influence has not been claimed. The pros and cons of local volunteers vs. workers recruited outside would revisit a debate forty years’ old, which we cannot indulge here; in Tanzania, the historic scarcity of higher-education and the associate staff cost favor volunteer arrangements. As a result, district projects have small numbers on their pay-rolls (between 7 and 12 staff). Most are the frontline workers known as “area facilitators”. They each are supported by 8 – 10 animators (TCRS 2004a: 27-28). An animator generally works in one, sometimes in a few sub-villages; this worker level thus also mediates between two historically well established administrative tiers, the village and its sub-villages.

Area facilitators have varied professional backgrounds, some from specialized community development training institutes. In the western districts, many served in other NGOs. In the newer Kilwa project area, they are less educated and less experienced. In either region, almost all technical expertise has to be harnessed from outside TCRS, and the difficulty of doing so is being felt most strongly in agricultural extension, a field performing poorly in Tanzania (Braathen and Mwambe 2007).

Partner to worker ratios

Earlier (with a table of select coverage indicators on page 70), we demonstrated that the Cambodia and Tanzania programs pursued different approaches to mobilizing the communities and households to be empowered. The same would be expected concerning target group-to-field worker ratios, given what we know about their contrasting staffing strategies. However, this depends largely on the choice of indicators, particularly the inclusion or not of volunteers in the denominators. If we assume that contacts with the representative bodies of the village communities are largely covered by the staff (which is not entirely true of TCRS), the ratios are surprisingly similar. Conversely, by counting in the volunteers for the household contacts, the ratios again are similar, as this table shows.

Table 9: Target group to frontline worker ratios

	Cambodia (2006)	Tanzania (2007)
Empowerment program villages	397	86
Partner households	2,807	8,500
Frontline staff	157	48
Village animators	0	340
Councils or committees to staff	2.5	1.8
Partner households to (staff plus animators)	17.9	21.9

Note: Sources on program staff: Cambodia – facilitators only (LWF Cambodia 2006b: 69); Tanzania – area facilitators and animators (TCRS 2004a: 27-28). As before, we assume that two persons per marginalized household were enrolled in the TCRS program.

Although the organizational solutions may be different, obviously the underlying functional requirements – such as for an effective contact frequency – acted on both programs in similar fashion.

Community-based organizations

It would be unsatisfactory to leave the description of organizational arrangements with the technical metaphor of “machinery”. The impression that the same considerations apply to empowerment programs as to any bureaucratic social service agency would be misleading. Already TCRS’ animators do not fit well with such a scheme. Moreover, both programs empower communities and poor households also by strengthening a variety of community-based organizations other than the formal councils and development committees. These organizations are partners in their own right; they are not part of the LWF or TCRS internal organization, nor are they simple appendices of the village councils and development committee or of higher-tier administrative units.

This study cannot offer an exhaustive typology of community-based organizations supported by, or even founded in the process of, the community empowerment programs. Examples are school committees, farmer field schools, water user groups, forestry committees, and community-based health networks. As far as key documents tell, neither LWF Cambodia nor TCRS use any standard list of basic types. There are no comprehensive statistics of their presence or membership. Only selective aspects of their behavior are captured in the empowerment monitoring systems. For example, LWF Cambodia made it a point in its 2006 Annual Monitoring Report to reflect the increased competencies of its partner households in the fact that, out of 2,807 partner households, 116 individuals had been elected into the committees of some of their local community-based organizations (LWF Cambodia 2007a: 11).

The special importance of savings and loans organizations

A type of community-based organization prominent in both programs is loan and savings associations, known as “village banks” in Cambodia, as “Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies (SACCOS)” in Tanzania. These associations not only are functionally specialized, responding to the universal needs for safe deposits, returns on savings, and debt finance. They are also important learning arenas for the cooperation and management skills of the poor; they build alliances between the poor and the village middle class; they create more opportunities for horizontal and vertical networking. Faithful repayment of many small loans builds trust for larger cooperation elsewhere in community life (Neangmalea VDC 2007). Also, because they are financial institutions, they open insightful monitoring windows on the sustainability of the empowerment programs. Where they compete with outside microfinance providers, they offer a quasi-experimental test of whether the empowered communities can hold their own, or whether the empowerment programs favor modes of incorporation into the larger society that will ultimately prove evolutionary dead-ends.

The two country programs differ in how they program their support for these organizations. LWF Cambodia costs the entire support: “*The direct cost for the establishment and training to 257 village banks amounts to USD 422,783 or USD 1,645 per village bank over 3 years*” (LWF Cambodia 2006b: 123) and sets aside places for village bank trainings in each of the regional projects. Tanzania follows a

decentralized approach; the SACCOS are not even mentioned in the TCRS 2005-2007 planning and monitoring document. Instead, a government regulation is used to test the worthiness of support in each village: SACCOS are required to have their own separate office. The willingness of the poor organized under the empowerment program to lead the office construction and to contribute material and labor triggers TCRS support for registration, part of the construction cost, set-up materials such as stationary and safes, as well as training of committee members. In practice, many SACCOS may have been operating for considerable time before they build their own office; and the TCRS contribution can be substantial. In Katwe village, for example, the office construction took TSh. 6.4 million (approx. USD 5,000), two times the value of all loans made out so far, with TCRS contributing four fifths (Katwe Village Council 2007).

If these associations are seen as extensions of the empowerment program – which they should -, then the participation of the poor holds a number of challenges. In Cambodia, commercial microfinance providers are competing with the village banks quite strongly; they offer, as one of their sales arguments, service that does not require the customer to attend so many meetings. They posit few cognitive and training requirements, explaining contracts partially so that, for example, customers do not know that their land can be foreclosed if they default (Nuon 2007). By contrast, village bank committees struggle with better ways to improve members' understanding of purpose and procedure and with their own administrative techniques (Neangmalea VDC 2007).

In Tanzania, SACCOS entrance fees and minimum required savings have been too high for many of the marginalized households; they could not join. This is being revised (Kamihanda 2007). Still, some of the marginalized are dead afraid to take out loans, for fear of not being able to repay (Peter 2007); for others the major attraction is not loans, but the safety of deposits. Women like to keep some of their money in the SACCOS so that their husbands cannot tamper with it (Chanika village council chairman and SACCOS officers 2007). In some villages, the poor have emulated the SACCOS model by their own initiative, without formalizing it, stipulating monthly contributions that they can afford (Kahungya, Ruilonge et al. 2007). SACCOS are attractive also for the emergency loans that they offer; these are strictly limited but offer some defense against life's vicissitudes, even in situations of which outsiders may not normally think, say, when a child's education is threatened because the parents cannot immediately pay school fees.

None of the TCRS-supported SACCOS has managed to receive a capital injection from the national bank mandated to support them; and TCRS itself has been applying caution in the growth of SACCOS operations, making sure they remain organizations managed by the poor. In this spirit, the acquisition of external funds must follow demands by the members themselves (TCRS senior staff 2007). The same seems to hold for the village banks in Cambodia (Mueller 2007c); LWF does provide lending capital to a degree, but as they age and become more successful, the village banks have been able to rely more on savings and retained earnings. They are not yet effectively networked with credit wholesalers.

A hybrid organizational form

The organizational machinery of the empowerment programs thus is a hybrid animal. It combines normal bureaucratic agency with volunteer elements (particularly in TCRS) and with local associations that are not formally part of the organization, but are so closely supported that they assume a de-facto member status. This study has little detailed knowledge of them. Therefore, readers might arrive at widely diverging conclusions, seeing the community-based organizations as the soft underbelly of the programs or as the essence of empowerment itself. Perhaps both are true at the same time; it appears that the poorest are not immediately competent for full participation, but by slowly growing into it, they may eventually improve control over their livelihoods and reduce vulnerability through the collective solidarity that their associations enshrine.

Chapter summary

The two study countries, Tanzania and Cambodia, both have large numbers of extremely poor persons. But the level of poverty and those of several important human development indicators are nevertheless significantly different, with per capita incomes in Cambodia being close to four times those of Tanzania. The most important difference, and one whose impact on the shape of the empowerment programs is easy to notice, is in post-colonial history. Cambodia's was one of the darkest chapters of the twentieth century; Tanzania largely enjoyed peace and political stability, if at the price of economic stagnation until a few years ago.

Similar goal, different programming

In both countries, LWF programs have been active for many years, in Tanzania since 1964, in Cambodia since 1979. Both programs underwent significant transformations over time, with different early program histories, and later philosophically similar integrated rural development and, since the late nineties, community empowerment programs.

LWF Cambodia faces the challenge of structuring its work in a dynamic rural environment with pervasive land conflicts. It has responded with a system of goals, objectives, outputs and indicators held together in an elaborate program matrix. Its empowerment approach keeps a constant focus on the sustainability of the work of its partners, manifest in precise graduation targets. The underlying assumption is that empowerment can be measured and translated into annual targets. This programming has burdened itself with considerable complexity at the lower levels of outputs and activities; doubts remain whether the organization can actually manage the complex analysis that would be needed for useful learning off the reported targets and actual performance.

The paramount goal of the TCRS program may be similar to LWF's in Cambodia, but its tableau of objectives and indicator table is simpler, and in theory should be more easily manageable. The program aims to strengthen communities with empowered citizens and leaders, and the poorest with better livelihoods and access to better services.

While the program goals are succinctly formulated, in the conduct of everyday program work out in the field, empowerment assumes a very large range of meanings.

With our material it is impossible to tell the preponderant colors from the rare shades; yet some contrasts do show. In its relationship with rights, the empowerment work in Tanzania seems to be particularly effective in creating a first basic human rights awareness in persons, particularly women, who had been ignorant or silent on their “right to have rights”. The advocacy work in LWF Cambodia gives the impression of helping the poor to exercise rights that are already well known, but earlier had been difficult to press. In Tanzania, we encountered what during this research must have been the only contrarian voice about what constitutes, or doesn’t constitute, empowerment, suggesting that villagers have their own standards of how empowered they are.

Mass mobilization vs. elite responsibility

The empowerment programs are multi-tiered. Both have essential partner groups at two levels, household and village. The relative emphases given these tiers differ between Cambodia and Tanzania. TCRS works with a critical-mass philosophy that posits that the marginalized, once their mobilization exceeds a critical threshold, will have irreversible effects on the dynamics of the entire village community. LWF Cambodia works with so few partner households relative to village development committees that one cannot help the interpretation that they are essentially templates for the village elite to actively take care of the poorest in their midst, down to specific household development plans. The optimism that both these philosophies express may be warranted by the larger life experience of the program staffs, but the accumulated program experience is not sufficient to offer a meaningful test yet.

In reality, the programs are benefiting the entire population of the partner villages, by strengthening village government, community-based organizations and the local services that they administer. The magnitude of the program village populations served is similar in both countries, close to a quarter million people.

Stages of the empowerment process

Both programs have specific arrangements of ushering villages and households through the typical stages of a “client career”, as horrible as this term may seem to readers averse to organizational lingo. Villages are recruited into the program through a hierarchical expert judgment process, meaning that a train of selections is followed from provinces to districts to intermediate units to villages, at every stage using documented data and access to knowledgeable individuals. Within a selected village, households are selected by different methods. In Cambodia, field staff and committee members meet with families about their wealth rank and motivation. In Tanzania a full census of households yields information useful for village councils beyond the one-time caseload identification.

The selection of villages may be completed within a short period of time, but the start-up of practical work may be staggered out among the selected villages. Villages and households then stay in the program for several years. Both programs aim to broadly structure this long and intensive middle phase into an early self-discovery, repeated facilitated actions, and increasingly independent ones. The transitions are operated differently. TCRS follows a curricular approach, moving village leaders and participating marginalized adults along their tracks in class-like units measured in quarter-years. LWF Cambodia lets villages and households progress across self-assessed levels of competencies; the partners stay at each of them as long as they feel

it necessary. In practice, there is more flexibility in the TCRS program than the stiff curriculum suggests, and perhaps slightly less in Cambodia than self-assessing villages and households may assume, given the intimate knowledge of the field staff and the necessities of program periods.

These same differences fashion the criteria on which TCRS and LWF Cambodia decide the phasing-out of communities and households that are considered sufficiently empowered to take care of themselves and to continue working through networks of neighbors and allies. TCRS anticipates – it has not yet done so practically anywhere – graduating villages once a majority of the marginalized in the program have become empowered. The assessment is clearly household-driven although in the definition of specific indicators district managers enjoy some latitude that will allow them to take council competency and service quality into account.

LWF Cambodia graduates when the candidates feel the time has come for this step. A problem may arise, however, in that village development committees and partner households do not progress at the same speed; there are indications that poor households take longer to advance to the “ready to be graduated” empowerment stage than the committees do. After graduation, villages stay in an “accompaniment” status for some years; whether this is effectively used to further assist trailing households is not known.

Levels of competencies

From recruitment to graduation, village organizations and partner households pursue an empowerment career that can be described in ever higher levels of competencies and capacities. Initially, the program creates basic self-confidence and rights awareness. These are translated into tools (plans, budgets, meeting patterns) and actions, all to be evaluated by the participants themselves.

At a second level, the concurrent flow of collaborative processes within the village community crystallizes in some kind of a master plan, for example the three-year rolling plan of Tanzanian village councils. The battle cry “We have a plan” was loud and clear in most of the villages visited. There are differences between Tanzania and Cambodia, at least in style. Village plans in LWF Cambodia surprise by the large number of items they carry, including numerous ones on which no immediate movement is expected. Tanzanian village councils put fewer items into their plans and seem more concerned about the full funding for each of them.

The third level is gradually attained as villages extend their solidarity and resource networks beyond their own boundaries. In households, the analogue may be newly gained committee membership in one of the community-based organizations. Observers given to sociological speculation may see a parallel between the three levels of competencies and the hierarchy of social systems. The first level reminds us of simple interaction systems: persons are together who were not habitually, such as when a very poor person attends a village council meeting; new concepts are acquired in small groups such as in adult literacy classes. The second, “We have a plan” level consumes elements of formal organization; decisions are made and formalized such as on the selection and execution of village projects; normative and cognitive expectations are re-arranged, such when the village works out an annual budget, and expenses against it are authorized as collections come in, modulated by harvests and

farmers' incomes. At the third level, the networked stage works with the material of society at large, with strategic use of the codes of truth and power in advocacy programs, and with language that makes communications from remote corners available to addressees in the center of power, such that, in the non-linear extreme, the flap of a butterfly wing in a village redirects the traffic in Phnom Penh.

Hybrid organizational forms

The programs are being carried out by well-practiced field administrations. Since “empowerment” does not correspond to any particular profession or trade, the organizational form is essentially territorial-segmentary, not so much differentiated on functional lines. Field workers, however, are recruited from different professions and NGO careers and are mixed into teams of varied expertise and experience. The staffing patterns are distinctly different between the two programs. LWF Cambodia has more staff, using persons recruited from outside in frontline positions. In Tanzania, with its scarcity of academically trained manpower, TCRS to a greater degree relies on volunteers. However, when these are figured in, we find similar participant household-to-worker ratios, obviously responding to a common functional requirement in terms of contact and motivational intensity.

Speaking only of villages and households hides the importance and diversity of the various community-based organizations that play complementary roles in service delivery and in networking across tiers and issues. Of special importance in both countries are the savings and loan associations. They operate in a tense field of autonomy, access for the poorest, and access to outside capital sources. The diversity of these organizations and initiatives, together with the complexity of the LWF Cambodia and TCRS machinery and of government district and line administrations, makes for hybrid organizational forms of the empowerment programs. These are part classic development bureaucracy, part local government, part voluntary association. Against such a background, the success of empowerment should be considered a pleasant surprise, rather than a predictable program outcome. These success factors are the subject of the next chapter.

What Works in Empowerment Programs

No strict cause-effect relations

The chapter title, “What works?”, is a call to causal analysis. Unraveling the cause-effect nexus in the Tanzania and Cambodia empowerment programs, however, is virtually impossible, so rich and localized are the factors and outcomes to consider. In lieu of stringent causal relationships, what one can hope to further, if never fully achieve, is a revelation of certain sequences of action that, in the consensus of the program staff and participants, are associated with positive or negative outcomes. The ones credibly leading to positive ones are collected in a “this works” treasure box.

As in earlier chapters, the ordering scheme in which we deposit the rich empirical material is simple. We move in the fundamental dimensions in which the description of any social system can proceed – the social, substantive and temporal dimension. Within each of these, certain leading ideas can be helpful, and naturally, when arguing within one dimension, variables from the other two will always provide some or most of the answers. For example, phasing out is a temporal concept first and foremost; it signals a transition from an earlier to a later stage. But, apart from a concern with typical durations that successfully (or less so) phased-out participants spent in earlier program phases, the reader will above all want to know on what substantive criteria someone was phased out. Was he able to look after himself, or was he in a program terminated for financial strictures?

The guiding ideas capable of weaving the material into the three-dimensional grid are relatively straightforward for the social and temporal realms; it is much harder to find a natural organizing principle in the substantive dimension.

Embedded in networks

The social dimension can be extracted around the idea of embeddedness (Granovetter 1985). This concept, from social network theory, suggests that the relations among the participant communities, households and individuals are embedded in actual social networks rather than in the abstract filaments of empowerment programs. Obviously, this is an extreme view that reality corrects incessantly, not least because the life of many of the networks is created and terminated by the plans and budgets of the LWF empowerment programs. But embeddedness is still key to “what works”, through such things as integration with government plans and community-based associations that bring together the poorest with other, more resourceful players.

The temporal side looks at continuity, sequences and transitions. The idea of wheels within wheels, of strategic repetitions, of path dependence belongs here. In Tanzania, for example, we have seen that the curricular approach posits an overlapping repetition of entire action sequences from assessments to evaluations. However, before this action series may begin, special care is taken of the illiterate participants, who are invited to join literacy classes.

In the substantive dimension, order is much harder to create. The concept of communication media with their codes and programs may provide some. One can review the place, not only of power, but also of truth, love, property and money in

empowerment programs, and how they contribute to success and failure. This offers a bridge to the rights-based approach. Rights are a kind of political capital that the poor have or don't have, depending on conditions, including the program history. Similarly, the ability of the poor to make payments, or not, as a result of their program participation tells us more about "what works". But in these aspects much of the reality on the ground remains unknown. As a result, this chapter mixes descriptive and speculative elements to a certain degree.

Success in the social dimension: Embeddedness

Embeddedness is created both horizontally and vertically. Vertically, it places actors from one administrative or hierarchical level in interaction with those of a higher or lower level. Horizontally, neighbors, next-door village communities, other functional groupings with an opportunity to cooperate provide bonding points. All of these have been judged as contributing to empowerment, if mostly through anecdotal evidence that is long on group achievements and short on the capacity for networking.

An example from Tanzania builds the case. In Kibingo village, Kibondo district (Kibingo Village Council 2007), from among the standard 250 marginalized persons enrolled in the program, 200 formed eight income-generating groups, raising crops and smallstock. Group formation was not the first step in mastering the complexity of relating 250 people to the program; this had already been done by assigning each of them to one of the sub-village animators. However, the animators were at first nothing but general-purpose tools, waiting to be given specific jobs. They found them in, among other things, demonstration gardens and training assignments.

Intermediate building blocks

More importantly, the group projects created internal cohesion and success among small building blocks in the community that could then be spun out into other networks and actions, growing a wide gamut of activities from tree plantations to HIV/AIDS training and more. The new potential was summarized in different conceptual frames. The council chairman put it in a language that looks upward and beyond the small groups: "*Poverty has been reduced. The leadership is more empowered. Everybody in the community has rights*". An elderly farmer asked: "*Now that we can sell surplus food, where can I get improved beans?*" sounding a cautious note about the technical and market integration of the empowerment initiatives. A woman, in a more intimate perspective, pointed to the effect from group and community projects on families: "*Nowadays there is greater family happiness*".

The formation of small neighborhood groups runs as a constant theme through the community empowerment narratives. The Cambodia program systematically encourages the formation of solidarity groups of seven to ten partner households (Mueller 2007b). Probably none of the members ever talks of the groups in this language, as "solidarity groups", but by being embedded in an intermediate unit between household and village, made up of familiar, like-situated persons, some of the uncertainty of engaging in the program goes away, and positive effects of joint efforts are reaped and appreciated.

There is, of course, always a coordination cost, for members as well as for those supporting the group from outside; and the two empowerment programs have said little about it. For example, it may well be true that the poor go to meetings more

often, not only of their own small groups, but also of the larger village constituency. Whether they attend with any regularity²⁵, what the very poor and handicapped are able to do, how good their language skills are to make their case in public, may not be expressible in any single empowerment metric. In many villages of the TCRS program marginalized participants were subsequently elected to the council, proof that enough poor people gathered to cast the needed votes (Kagari, Mmassy et al. 2007: and others). The argument of bearable coordination costs can be made also for Cambodia; as villages mature and rate themselves at higher competency levels, LWF reduces its staff intensity; yet collective activities go on unabated.

Alliances with the middle class

The idea that the empowerment of the poorest flies on the wings of intermediate groups is not done justice if we consider these only as devices for breaking down the relational complexity between numerous individuals and large communities, or between individuals and distant outside organizations. Empowerment programs create networks also of a kind that embed the poorest more strongly with more resourceful groups, such as the village middle class, in areas where they share a common interest strong enough to cooperate. An example repeatedly given this researcher is from the Tanzanian savings and credit associations, SACCOS. We have already mentioned the benefits and challenges for the marginalized to be SACCOS members. Middle-class villagers, who tend to have more money than the poorest, and therefore less of a problem to come up with fees and minimum savings, look for convenient means of keeping their cash safe. The SACCOS do this for them. Better educated and socially positioned middle class members lend organizational skills to these associations, which then become an extended meeting ground between them and the poorest. It would be fascinating to know more about how this affects the chances of the poorer members to obtain loans, or whether they are discriminated against as bad risks (as is well known, for example, from the microfinance world of Bangladesh).

This generalizes beyond credit and savings. An observer from Latin America emphasizes the personal qualities of some people situated above the poorest, yet drawn to them: *“Within each community, there are people who consistently express their solidarity with the poorest. These people are not necessarily leaders, but they are essential in establishing a consensus within a community to help those who are left out. They are also indispensable actors in the development of specific programs”* (Anonymous 2000: 111). In the TCRS villages, help for AIDS sufferers would often come from women volunteers who were clearly middle class (Katwe Village Council 2007).

Beyond common interest and personal disposition, alliances between the poorest and the middle class favored by the rights discourse in empowerment programs *“because it focuse[s] on universal rights, such as the right to education, rather than simply the rights of the poor”* (Ferguson, Moser et al. 2007: 284). This type of positive energy clearly cannot be accounted for with the embeddedness concept, but is a genuine

²⁵ The chairman of the Chanika village council was emphatic that the *“marginalized nowadays attend village meetings regularly – and not only that: they don’t need follow-up any more. They go to have vaccinations on their own initiative. They continue [with other parts of the empowerment program] themselves; for example, we see them build toilets”* (Chanika village council chairman and SACCOS officers 2007). In other words, coordination costs have gone down; other welfare effects have gone up.

contribution from the outside program. In its effects, however, the exercised rights may well wind up embedding the poor in networks that give them more access to resources enjoyed by the richer segments of village society.

Integration with higher tiers

Another apparent success factor is adequate embeddedness with higher tiers. This is a matter of particular importance for village councils and development committees. It comes in several flavors. Governments may mandate particular organizational structures for its own agencies, but they may not become practical until their value is tried and tested during the empowerment program. In Tanzania, for example, village councils are to elect and operate seven special committees. Earlier, most of these were not functioning. *“TCRS breathed life into them”*, claimed councilors in Kiduduye (Kiduduye Village Council 2007), *“our security committee now organizes night patrols; the environment committee passed bye-laws. We fined eight persons for starting bush fires. Also, we passed a rule that every house must plant 15 tree seedlings per year”*.

The basis for re-specifying councilor and committee member roles may vary from place to place, and from issue to issue. It may be cultural reinterpretation such as when changed attitudes towards domestic violence result in the creation of domestic violence subcommittees (LWF Samaki Meanchey project staff 2007), or organizational decisions such as when the creation of a community health center gives a health committee something real to do for the first time. In Tanzania, elected village councilors often did not know their roles; the TCRS leadership training program filled an educational gap (Kahungya, Ruilonge et al. 2007: ; Rusohoko Village Council 2007). Legally and in theory, roles had been defined by higher authorities; it took the empowerment program to make the expectations understood and acceptable.

In addition to facilitating role learning and role re-specification in the local context, TCRS and LWF Cambodia expose communities to growing contact with other NGOs and funding sources. The general finding in Cambodia is that villages, while they are in the Level-A stage of empowerment, consider themselves almost exclusively dependent of LWF. Later, most of them learn to cultivate contacts with other agencies. This reinforces the need for training and case-wise assistance in project design and better “proposal writing”, the interpretation that several committees gave when asked what they meant by further “capacity building”. Basically, this amounts to an effort to acquire skills for remote interaction. One may take this as a sign of departure from patronage models in which clients are resigned to only their patrons dealing with distant stakeholders.

[Sidebar:] The diversity of contacts between village and development agencies

Chanika, a community in Karagwe, Tanzania, has a very active village council and local savings and credit association (SACCOS). The council reported that it was negotiating a water supply project with the World Bank, an unusual claim worthy of a small case study below (see page 141). We asked the chairman (Chanika village council chairman and SACCOS officers 2007) with which other development agencies he was in regular contact. This is his ex-tempore enumeration:

1. The diaconia wing of the Lutheran Church, was a natural partner, given the local church affiliation.
2. "Tatri" [possibly incorrect for TARI, Tengeru Agricultural Research Institute (TARI), near Arusha] was an agricultural research institute conducting farm trials, about the nature of which he did not elaborate.
3. "Kenibap", which he presented as an NGO working on the improvement of indigenous banana trees.
4. KALIDEP [Kagera Livestock Development Program] sought to improve dairy cattle. It was a government project funded by the Dutch.
5. "TASAF" was the Tanzania Social Action Fund, a government program set up under international debt relief agreements. In Chanika, the fund was paying for the construction of a secondary school administration block.
6. The chairman knew of a women development and legal aid NGO, which had started training some women, but could not name it in the conversation.
7. "MVC" he spelt out as the "Most Vulnerable Children" program [by the Department of Social Welfare in collaboration with UNICEF]. In Chanika, MVC gave out blankets and soap (which he called "tokens") for AIDS orphans and widows.

The list gives away a considerable, but not overwhelming, diversity of contacts with outside agencies that support development programs besides TCRS'. Most of them – with the hypothetical exception of the church's diaconia – were providing very narrowly defined services, with a clear preference for in-kind contributions. Even TASAF had underwritten one specific project; there didn't appear to be a dialogue between the Fund and Chanika on a broader development program for the community, and there was nothing like a block grant from this source.

The chairman's knowledge of these organizations' mandates was in some cases limited to their specific activities in his village – MVC is actually more than just blankets and soap – and in others exceeded local detail such as when he knew that the dairy cattle program was being supported by the Dutch. It is remarkable that the chairman knew about the existence, if not any detail, of debt relief and, as a result, special facilities available for Tanzanian communities.

A chicken-or-egg question

One of the manifestations in numerous communities of embeddedness with lower and higher tiers is the presence of a development plan, and the integration of the plan with those of other tiers, notably higher ones able to provide support for some of the community projects. We will revert to plans and plan integration as an important element of the empowerment process below, under the substantive dimension. However, it is more than a rhetorical question whether the extended diversity of contacts comes first, providing the fertile ground for community planning, or whether the "here is the man with the plan" gives the village the necessary legitimacy to enlarge its network. TCRS' curricular approach as well as LWF Cambodia's 86 occurrences of "plan" and "planning" in the village graduation guideline (inwent and LWF 2006) suggest that the plan comes first, followed by the strategic exploration of outside resources.

Empirically, this could be tested by comparing how the Cambodian communities rate themselves on the four indicators of "Criterion 1: Capacity to manage the development cycle" (ibid.: 26), and how the lags in indicator levels are distributed. For the more general use in "what works in empowerment" discussions, the ability to *re-specify roles* at the bottom (poor households), middle (councils, committees) and top (higher tiers and outside agencies) is critical. The TCRS program manager in Kibondo made the same point. He told some of his animators (Nyagwijima Village Council 2007) while he was trimming banana trees in their demonstration garden with his own

knife: “*You are animators. Your people here are farmers. You need to set an example of what it is we want to make possible in the community.*”

Success over time: Continuity and transitions

In the time dimension, the success of empowerment programs appears to be grounded in two parameters: conserving sufficient degrees of freedom, and a judicious equilibrium of continuity and transitions. Both, obviously, need explaining. This is also the place where time and criteria of graduation can be suitably discussed.

In contrast to universal programs, notably the government’s, that purport to be operational everywhere, for everyone, and regardless of other non-programmatic factors, empowerment programs are premised on deliberate selection bias. They reach out to the poorest, support ventures supposed to empower, and anticipate termination once some observable criteria are met. They claim considerable plasticity for that, perhaps least so in the social dimension, more in the temporal and substantive ones. In the social dimension, flexibility is given away by stipulating membership or outcome requirements, for example, that certain committees must have a quota of female members, or that a program new to a district must first go to its most disadvantaged villages. It is recaptured in the other two dimensions by allowing the speed and contents of action to be set by the participants.

This leaves a lot of sequencing and scaling-up options. Typically, in the districts covered by LWF Cambodia, respectively by TCRS, differing fractions of the villages are included in the program (see sidebar). At least in Cambodia, LWF appears to be actively deliberating going to new districts, rather than expanding to more villages in the current ones. The programs are able to hedge their options while they explore the future with host governments, donors and the communities extant.

[Sidebar:] Program flexibility - Remaining degrees of freedom in selecting participants

To gauge the reservoir of selectable program participants, we look at community populations and participants taken in so far, in sample districts that offer the necessary data.

In **Tanzania**, Ngara District in the West may serve as the example.

- In 2002, 225,000 Tanzanian citizens as well as 55,000 Burundian refugees were resident in the district. TCRS by that time was working in 12 priority villages, which totaled a population of 34,700 in 7,214 households. Surveys had established 9,532 marginalized persons there, or 28 percent of that population (Kambona 2007c: 3), of whom “2,463 were adults”.
- The program in Ngara employed four area facilitators and relied on forty animators. On the grounds that a facilitator was able to supervise ten animators, and an animator should not relate to more than 50 marginalized persons (Kambona 2007b), the program took in $4 * 10 * 50 = 2,000$ persons. In addition, it started working with $12 * 25 = 300$ village councilors.
- That meant that roughly 15 percent ($34,700 / 225,000$) of the indigenous population in the district was living in the priority villages (first level of selection). Assuming that on average two persons from a participant household were enrolled (typically husband and wife), over 80 percent ($2,000 / 2,463$) of the eligible households in the priority villages entered the program (second level selection). Assuming that the proportions

of marginalized to all, and of adults to all in the household were the same in the remainder of the district, approx. $[2,000 * (9,532 / 2,463)] / [(9,532 / 34,700) * 225,000]$ = 13 percent of the marginalized population in the district lived in program households at the time.

For **Cambodia**, we use figures provided by the district governor (Mou 2007) and LWF program manager (Nuon 2007) in Samaki Meanchey. We also use the fraction of very poor households in the district, according to the PMD 2006-2008 (LWF Cambodia 2006b: 25), which is $2,569 / 8,921 = 0.29$.

- As per latest information, the district was subdivided into 9 communes with 85 villages. It had a total population of 67,727, in 13,655 families. LWF, according to the governor, was active in six of the communes, and there in 54 villages, with a total population of 41,648 in 8,447 families. The manager reported 45 active and 11 graduated villages. Intensive work was going on with 380 partner households in the active villages.
- LWF was thus active in two thirds of the communes in this district (first level of selection). Although we do not know the total number of villages in the active communes, the simple expectation, $(6/9) * 85$, is close to 56, and thus the assumption is that the program covered those communes completely (second level of selection). The enrolment of partner households from among the very poor is estimated as $380 / [(2,569/8,921)*(56/54)*(45/56)*8,447] = 19$ percent (third level of selection).

The TCRS program thus reserved itself a much greater room for maneuver at the higher level, in the selection of priority villages. Within these, it stretched out hands to the large majority of poor people. The obverse is true of the selections that LWF Cambodia made. It works with the majority of the villages in the district, and possibly all in the selected communes. The direct partner household link is with a minority of the very poor.

These choices are strategic and in tune with the empowerment and graduation models of these country programs. TCRS' philosophy foresees empowerment self-propagation throughout village society once a critical threshold in the marginalized being empowered has been crossed. It makes no explicit assumptions of such effects on the relationship of village communities with district administrations in step with the fraction of involved villages.

In Cambodia, the two-way advocacy model as well as the practice of integrating development plans at the district level militate for dense village coverage but demand little in the way of enrolling the poorest households in a given village beyond demonstrating a viable template for joint community – household responsibility.

It is no wonder, then, that the programs look at possible program expansion in different ways, with TCRS feeling pressure to go to uncovered villages in the existing districts (TCRS senior staff 2007), and LWF Cambodia prospecting in new provinces (LWF Cambodia 2007c). Empowerment programs in other countries would need to optimize the rapport between these selection levels, considering their local conditions. The federation movement in RDRS Bangladesh, for example, rode to success on the choice of all local communes (Unions) in the working area and on a self-limitation to high-quality member groups that RDRS credentialed for each local federation. However, when RDRS stopped forming and graduating new groups, the lack of a tradition in federations to pursue their own member recruitment became a weakness.

Are flexible choices really so good for the communities?

While this flexibility is certainly an asset to the LWF and TCRS management, it is far from obvious what it does to the participating communities. Letting them proceed at their own speed is considered a virtue, part of empowerment. But there is very little

data to decide whether the actual calendar of local projects is due more to the needs for internal debate and community ownership, or rather to unresponsiveness of the external resource environment. Is this village still without access to a secondary school because it has not been able to agree with neighboring communities on the desired location for a new school, or because program funds for school construction have been used up for this year, or because the government has made it clear it cannot provide teachers? In Tanzania, an observer of recent decentralization policies opined that while parallel funding vehicles in theory gave more options to communities strong enough to deal with district administrations, in practice they often canceled out. Multiple PRA approaches, lack of capacity to scrutinize village projects, discretionary funds for electioneering councilors meant that the social boundaries between villages and development bureaucracies were growing less permeable (Noordholland de Jong 2007). In Cambodia, “two-way advocacy” is used for, among other things, softening up resource blockages. At the same time, it is a contingency formula apt to manage disappointments since there are no naturally built-in time limits.

Part of the response may be in a voluntary commitment to predictable timeframes. In Cambodia, the LWF enters into written project agreements with communities. The committee in Neangmalea was convinced that they were “*so successful because we carried out our agreements with LWF within the agreed timeframes*” (Neangmalea VDC 2007). This is not always easy; as empowered communities negotiate larger and larger networks of outside partners, these dealings must give less emphasis to the farm calendar, and more to administrative schedules. For example, “*in the past, villages and partner households held their annual self-assessment and development planning workshops in November. [In 2006], they were moved to June and July so that Village Development Committees (VDCs) were able to integrate their Village Development Plans into the Commune Investment Plans (CIPs) in August*” (LWF Cambodia 2007a: 4), apparently with some difficulty during the June-July labor peaks (Chann 2007a). In Tanzania, these things may be settled more informally. In a vague subjective impression, it appeared that villages in the relatively new Kilwa area program were more impatient about delays than in the Western districts, where many councilors had known TCRS since the days of integrated rural development programs and understood the character of the empowerment program by contrasting it to a different experience.

Open-ended knowledge, time specific projects

The key to success may be found in creative combinations of open-ended broad actions and of time-bound specific commitments. The early transfer of modest assets in TCRS, simple hand tools for very poor farmers, bicycles for animators, opened a door for other, more demanding collaborations, with less certain outcomes and a need for greater flexibility.

Continuity of social relations while physical projects ebb and flow may be almost a reformulation of the same thing. This point was made very strongly by the district governor of Samaki Mean Chey, Cambodia (Mou 2007). For him it was important that LWF facilitated elections to village development committees. Some of the committees were already into their fourth three-year terms. This continuity mattered a lot; villages having this benefit were changing faster. He saw two factors at work: the general transfer of knowledge to the community via the committee and other local organizations, and the project-specific contributions such as labor to dig ponds.

Communities nowadays maintain these structures, usually with the help of special committees. While failures, such as in deep wells, are punctuated events, the care is organized and continuous. The villages have “deep-well committees”.

How does the dialectic of continuity and transitions work across the phases of the empowerment process, from recruitment to phasing out, a sequence that is already defined by at least two distinct transitions (and perhaps more, in the middle part, such as when TCRS reorganizes the initial groups)?

The recruitment stage appears less problematic than phasing-out, but this may deceive. Obviously, much is dictated by organizational capacity. An empowerment program recruits villages and individuals up to the numbers that it can accommodate within its resources. Slots may then be filled in the order of some perceived need, such as by starting with the poorest villages. As was mentioned earlier (page 74), in order to have a comparison basis, assessments may be completed within a relatively short period, but the start of practical work in the various units initially selected may be staggered out over a longer period. This is in line with the conservation of degrees of freedom.

If you recruit them, why are we responsible?

A potential problem arises with the attribution of recruitment decisions²⁶. This is clearly evident in the Tanzanian case. Its curricular approach involves a standard intake in a village of 250 adults from among those whom the household surveys determined to be marginalized. In some villages, the council did not know the full count of marginalized; in others, it was known but deemed less important than the recruitment figure. Such councils (e.g., Kasange Village Council 2007) tended to consider the empowerment work with the poorest households a TCRS affair, seeing their own responsibility limited to the community-level facilities supported under the program.

Other communities understood the survey categories and outcomes as well as the logic of admitting to the program only a number of individuals whom TCRS could assure of adequate field staff and animator contact. Councilors in Runyaga, for example, said they were surprised by the poverty rate that the survey in 2005 revealed. Out of 976 households in the community, 360 were rated marginalized. A (non-standard) 325 persons were selected into the program; the same councilors knew about a recent survey (by TCRS, presumably) that identified 205 of them ready to be graduated (Runyaga Village Council 2007). In other words, this council, rather atypically, “distinguished the distinctions”, between problem (marginalized / better-off), opportunity (fit to enrol / not fit), and response (enrolled / not enrolled). In others who collapsed these distinctions into one (in the sense of “250 are in the program, by TCRS’ decision; no one else was considered”), local program ownership may remain fragile.

Flexibility after recruitment

After recruitment, the speed is set, in theory and perhaps also in first practical approximation, by the underlying empowerment approach. Curricular approaches, like TCRS’, tie transitions to the end of pre-defined curriculum elements. Self-

²⁶ The theoretical context for this observation was given earlier (page 30) as the help/no help-distinction guiding observations.

reflective models, like LWF Cambodia's, set substantive criteria, then let participants find out the time when they have met them. In practice, the Tanzanian program is more flexible than that, and the Cambodian perhaps slightly less so. To illustrate, Tanzanian village councils are renewed in elections every five years; TCRS had to adjust its curriculum delivery to the needs of novice councilors (Shija 2007a). Marginalized program participants may be phased out sooner or later, depending on household re-survey results. Conversely, in Cambodia, village self-assessments are held once in a year; between them the program status remains unchanged. Also, when LWF moves out of a region – as in Takeo and Kandal (Cossar 2005) –, there remain no ungraduated villages behind.

Is one approach better than the other as regards phasing-out? We do not know on the basis of those two programs. Again, from the intent of empowerment, it may seem preferable to have communities and individuals decide for themselves. Apart from a possible vested interest in staying with the program – the question whether Cambodian villages for that reason delay moving from C (“advanced”) to D (“ready to graduate”) –, so much depends on the information-processing capacity of those who make this determination. The village self-assessment format in LWF Cambodia is successful, but it is also complex, and little leads one to believe that it could be adopted as successfully just about anywhere else. By contrast, TCRS conceives of graduation within a kind of “critical mass” theory (see page 69), which may be crude and untested, but has relatively simple information and process requirements.

If self-assessments are desirable, so is some external measure

Beyond the Tanzania and Cambodia programs, one could think of the graduation process in more general, if vague terms. The self-assessment part seems universally desirable. It may need simplification for other contexts. But correlation with some other, externally measured, or at least externally calibrated, variables seems equally desirable. Given the multi-tier nature of the empowerment programs – poor households and village leadership –, a multi-level measurement would seem appropriate. To fabricate an absurdly simple, but instructive example: “How many of the enrolled households are nine-month food-secure?” and “How many girls were 12 years’ of age last year, how many passed out of primary six, how many went on to secondary school?” would supply two community measures, one based on households, the other based on the interaction of individuals and service institutions. The self-assessments could then be mapped against the matrix of external measures. The expected agreements and surprising deviations would inspire an informed discussion, perhaps leading to better phasing-out decisions.

Success in substance: “We have a plan”

We have already warned our readers that pulling out of the empowerment experience of Cambodia and Tanzania successful subject matter areas is more arbitrary than identifying such elements in the social and time dimensions. There are good elements, and we shall point to some in a moment, but they do not form such a coherent set that the obvious questions could be fully answered. One of these concerns the elements of the previous approach, the integrated rural development. Which of its components proved most essential, or most productive, under the empowerment programs? This seems an important question, but regrettably this study cannot provide the answer.

However, there is one element that communities in both countries strongly emphasized as a key to their success. This is the novelty of having a plan, or rather a multiplicity of plans, both for the development of the village community, and, with differing degrees of formalization, for the participating poor households. The plan as a document itself may mean little; it is a pivot bearing the axles of greater embeddedness; it lives off good village governance and household lifestyles. But it has in the eyes of the villagers who compare this era to earlier ones – without a plan or with imposed ones – an importance hard to overestimate. It stimulates all of these: public debate, consensus and commitment, two-way advocacy, and resource mobilization.

Figure 18: A household development plan in Cambodia



Partner households with LWF Cambodia have development plans also in the sense of a document. In this example from Neangmalea village (Neangmalea VDC 2007), the plan was designed as a seasonal activity chart. The lady carrying the toddler, the head of this household, brought this poster-size project list out of her new house. The roof was not yet rain-proof, but the structure was much more solid and spacious than the decaying hut in which she and her grandchildren had lived before. The lady to her left was a village development committee member and may well have been the one assigned to continuously look after this family.

The improvements that the household head and the committee agreed upon in this plan included poultry-raising. She and others complained that nothing could be done to keep the chickens from dying in the dry season. This illustrates the more general question whether empowerment programs are able to mobilize the technical expertise and resources for which earlier integrated programs made specialized, if expensive provisions (such as, in this case, vaccination against Newcastle disease). We refer to the problem of optimal internal expertise in several places in this report, also with regards to TCRS.

At the beginning was introspection

Early collective self-analysis steps the community into the plan creation process. Councilors in two Tanzanian communities looked back on it in complementary reminiscences: *“We started by analyzing our social life, what we had, what we lacked. We made a plan for one or two years; everybody participated; everybody contributed financially through the sale of crops”* (Ruhatwe Village Council 2007). *“We used to lack education. TCRS provided training, as a result of which we realized ‘we could do it’. Now we have a long-term plan. We have a dispensary under construction, but the training should have priority and should continue”* (Kipindimbi Village Council 2007).

The empowerment programs also change the planning styles. This holds for both government tiers above the village and the village authorities themselves. In Tanzania, government *“only builds plans by sending officers from district HQs. TCRS creates them together with the leaders”* (TCRS Dar-es-Salaam senior staff 2007). In a meeting that joined residents from two villages, some ordinary citizens gave their councils credit: *“Even the work of the village council nowadays is much different. In years previous, action plans came from above; now they involve the whole community”* (Councilors from Kirusha and Murutabu villages 2007).

[Sidebar:] What is in a plan? How does the plan relate to good governance?

The meeting in the primary school of Murutabu village in Ngara district, Tanzania on September 9, 2007, was unusual in that it brought together a sizeable crowd of councilors and ordinary citizens, not from one, but from two villages, Murutabu and Kirusha. Since speakers took turns without telling to which they belonged, the usual strategy of establishing the history of cooperation with TCRS in terms of survey results, trainings and projects could not work. Instead, we took advantage of the varied audience and its rich experience by discussing more typological and abstract questions (Councilors from Kirusha and Murutabu villages 2007).

Asked for examples of what was in their development plans, speakers offered items that, from a logical framework perspective, one would place at different levels. They included, in the order of growing abstraction:

- Adding some more classrooms to an existing school
- Achieving universal food self-sufficiency, in a way that will take care also of our most vulnerable children
- Building a stable economy.

Clearly, in terms of a transportable project that can, for example, be presented to the district administration, only the classrooms qualify. A number of classrooms may be a target, with a known price tag; achieving self-sufficiency an objective to be translated with the help of household and farm surveys; building a stable local economy a vision from which other objectives may flow. For the speakers, they all were part of their plans. The debate turned quite lively when one of the participants ventured that building a stable economy was not feasible in Africa, and others objected and called him back to the local challenges of his village. For an outsider, it was refreshing to note that the plan concept motivated a wide-ranging debate, and that empowered citizens were not domesticated by logframe straightjackets.

In this and other meetings, the term “good governance” was used, or at least translated back as such to the foreign visitor, often in conjunction with the village development plan. We asked about practices that illustrated the concept. This list is from meetings in Tanzania:

- The council keeps files.
- It has a suitable office building [as opposed to, say, using a political party meeting hall].
- Meetings are well attended.
- The council has committees that function.
- The village has a three-year rolling plan.
- The council publicizes an annual budget.
- Income and expenditure are accounted and transparent.
- The council has raised some discretionary funds, including an emergency fund.
- Councilors have better managerial and citizen involvement skills.
- Projects are carried out because citizens honor commitments [i.e., the citizens go along with council decisions]
- Service facilities work better by providing staff housing.

Some of the practices respond to what we would consider basic formal requirements of administration, such as record-keeping; others, such as citizens' willingness to financially contribute to projects voted by the council, touch on political participation. One may ask whether the three-year rolling plan is the linchpin around administrative and participatory concerns. It would be a worthwhile exercise for TCRS monitors to collect and analyze a representative sample of village plans.

Plan integration

“Plan consciousness” is equally lively in the village communities in empowerment programs in Tanzania and Cambodia. In both countries, plans are moved upward for integration at higher tiers. The information on the plan integration process was richer in Cambodia than in Tanzania, for reasons that remain speculative. LWF Cambodia made sure for this researcher to meet with at least one district governor and one commune chief who would speak about the process from the experience at their respective levels. TCRS interlocutors were focused more strongly on the interaction between poor households and the village communities, volunteering little about the mechanics of taking projects up higher.

Essentially two elements were stressed: the plans of TCRS empowerment program villages finally became part of district plans; district administrations were supposed to support them, but would often call on NGOs and simply see which projects these would underwrite. In addition, service extension projects had to be cleared with the district so that the government would take over the operating expenses later. However, district administrators had meager travel budgets; one of TCRS' contribution to the inter-tier plan integration was to support them with transport (Kahungya, Ruilonge et al. 2007: ; Kamihanda 2007). Second, the TCRS program created in each of its project areas a district management committee, with some village animators, church representatives, the government district planning officer, and occasionally some retired notables volunteering their prestige. These management committees seemed to serve more as a sounding board for potentially difficult stakeholders, and less the technical aspects of plan integration. Our information is not detailed enough to suggest which of these elements can pass into a “this works” list, but obviously logistic support in project coordination has a long tradition in development programs of all kinds. These practices operate against a background of generic decentralization challenges in Tanzania at which we hinted earlier (page 105).

In Cambodia, the integration processes are clearly multi-level. All partner households are to have a written plan. These plans are then taken to the village development committee (Chann 2006). Village plans are brought to the consideration of the commune council, to be integrated with the commune plan known as the Commune Investment Plan (CIP). CIPs are taken to a district integration workshop, which produces temporary agreement on priority projects. With this endorsement, communes start prospecting for external support, among UN agencies, NGOs, government departments, members of parliament. For some small projects that fail to attract outside support, the commune may have funding from its small block grant.

Burden sharing

Later in the year, projects are re-discussed in the district, producing an Integrated District Plan. LWF, other NGOs and district authorities coordinate their respective contributions to approved projects. For example, if land law training courses are needed in the next year; LWF will lead them in a certain number of villages, and cadastral office experts will conduct them in others. Once contributions and broad schedules are agreed, the district formally subcontracts with the NGOs. For example, LWF will agree to support a number of village pond excavations. It will subsequently report and discuss plan achievements and variances.

The chief of Peam commune in Samaki Meanchey district illustrated the thinning out of projects with some figures (Suon 2007). In his commune, in early 2007, the 12 village communities proposed 37 projects. Of these, 14 or 15 were submitted to the district. He did not say whether the district rejected any, but noted that LWF underwrote 10. Only one other project was picked up by an agency other than LWF, a bridge to be paid for by the Department of Agriculture and the World Food Program²⁷.

Since the plan integration process moves up and down the administrative ladder, the work of go-betweens is important. In Cambodia, the village development committees are supported in this shuttle diplomacy by the LWF staff, specifically the community empowerment facilitators (Chann 2006). The provision of transport for district officials by TCRS in Tanzania implies a similar mediation role, although perhaps a less intensive one.

Practice in addressing duty-bearers

At the same time, the involvement of village representatives with district administrations – such as through the plan integration workshops in Cambodia – prepares them to work with outsiders more assuredly and to remain less focused on the NGO directing the empowerment program. LWF Cambodia and TCRS essentially facilitate a process, giving village representatives skills to address duty-bearers. The plan integration process further reinforces the habit of prioritization (LWF Cambodia 2007b). There is little quotable material to indicate how these skills keep growing with exposure, and how they are transferred when village leadership changes. This knowledge gap is not readily closed by the development literature on empowerment;

²⁷ We have no recent comparison data on the pass rate of projects reviewed in district integration workshops. The 11/37 rate in Peam in 2007 is close to what was reported from the early stages of the decentralization program: “In 2002, 1,283 Communes in 17 of Cambodia’s 24 provinces submitted 33,553 requests. There were 9,372 positive responses (28%) by departments and aid agencies, and 14,010 temporary agreements were signed for additional [unsolicited] projects” (Romeo and Spycykerelle 2003: 18).

there is a tiny bit on participatory planning in Kerala, India that sheds light on these challenges. The major conclusion there seems to be that the system generated too many plans in parallel, did not leave participants enough time to discuss them vertically or horizontally, and thus obliged them to basically repeat the types of projects that they knew already from previous periods (Sudhakaran 2004). This is not the situation of the programs studied in Tanzania and Cambodia, which have linked village communities to district-level processes in a participatory approach that was new and an achievement. But if in highly educated Kerala “*lack of expertise at the lower level to prepare an integrated project is a major issue*” (ibid.: 56), caution is recommended in generalizing from LWF Cambodia’s and TCRS’ successes.

Empower the vulnerable, enlighten the powerful

One should not close the analytic view at the district level. The planning processes seek to create common ground between state and community – in Cambodia this means non-violent interaction; in Tanzania it may mean less patronizing administrative styles – that will make the decentralization programs more pro-poor. The empowerment programs build up the demand side for services at the time when the supply side is still poor, but less and less so (LWF Cambodia 2007b). The project-specific negotiations with communes and districts promote the kind of two-way advocacy that is to empower the vulnerable and enlighten the powerful (Mueller 2007c). But this is a much more powerful “*idée directrice*” than the plan integration nitty-gritty and deserves to be a major structural element in any empowerment architecture.

With the plan integration process bringing together state and community and thus, at least from the perspective of the rights-based approach, duty-bearers and rights-bearers, this is the point to bring up the results of rights-awareness in the LWF Cambodia and TCRS empowerment programs.

Levels of rights and rights-awareness

Conceptually, empowerment brings rights and rights awareness into play at three levels. It creates a concept of having rights in persons or groups who did not have any personal rights awareness before, or were not powerful enough to express and pursue their rights; in other words, it affirms the “right to have rights”. Second, it makes duty bearers accountable who, by legal instruments that their agencies have adopted, are obliged to engage with the rights bearers. Human rights and their derivatives belong here. Third, and least discussed, empowerment includes affordable and effective access to justice for those with limited resources, but with a legal dispute or problem to resolve.

The link between the empowerment program and the first-time awareness that a large group of persons – women – have rights was argued most strongly in Tanzania. The rights that women in these villages discovered as existing are diverse – right to own property, right to inherit, right to be educated, right to receive a plot of land not cultivated by others yet, in an incomplete list – but the paramount achievement is to discover that they were meant to have rights at all, and not to be property of others who had rights over them. Similar accounts of radical discovery – “*The LWF taught us human rights*” (Neangmalea VDC 2007) – could be heard in Cambodia, but they were less universally given.

For the second level, we limit ourselves to the right to personal integrity and the duty for state agencies to enforce it, in the specific form of domestic violence. In both countries, staff and village representatives concurred that the programs made domestic violence a public issue, created cooperative structures to address it (in Cambodia, village subcommittees on domestic violence, who may take complaints to higher authorities). The decrease in domestic violence as a result of LWF human rights training was reported also by authorities (Suon 2007) as well as from the graduated villages that Cossar visited in the Takeo and Kandal provinces (Cossar 2005: 11). It thus seems to be a lasting effect. The major change is in public climate and private attitudes; the number of cases formally adjudicated appears to be minor (LWF Samaki Meanchey project staff 2007); the effect is mainly preventive²⁸.

In the Tanzania empowerment program, it is notable that the domestic violence theme was reinforced by TCRS' long-standing collaboration with UNHCR and its fight against sexual violence in refugee camps. Animators and HIV/AIDS volunteers in Rusohoko shared an office next door to UNHCR and the NGO Redeso, its subcontractor in anti-violence measures. They recalled workshops that TCRS conducted with women from both camp and villages. In their assessment, "*domestic violence has been brought into the open, it is being solved, but there is still a long way to obtain justice. Both men and women suffer from the problem*" (Rusohoko Village Council 2007).

The third level concerns retail justice, the kind of access to predictable dispute resolution, particularly in private contracts and in dealings with routine administrations, that citizens in nations at advanced human rights and economic development levels take for granted. For many others, access to such justice may not be affordable. The areas in which poor people need such justice, through speedy, inexpensive, comprehensible means, are not necessarily limited to property and administrative matters; they easily shade into violent and criminal ones, including violent domestic disputes. The legal philosophies in which some of these rights constellations have been deliberated, for example recently in the concept of "microjustice" (Barendrecht and Van Nispen 2007), are not necessarily in agreement with the human rights discourse. By what we know, there has been no consequential discussion of this level of rights in the Cambodian and Tanzanian programs. However, informal dispute resolution has become an important service that the federations of poor people supported by RDRS Bangladesh render to the community, demonstrating that empowerment programs can succeed in this line as well.

Empowerment and rights

Not only the program directors, but also some of the field staff have reflected on the deeper connection between empowerment and rights. The manager, Ngara district, Tanzania, sums up for us: "*Empowerment cannot be done without the rights-based approach. We gave training in rights to both leaders and the marginalized. The latter now say: 'These are my rights'. But the duty-bearers remain reluctant. Thus empowerment and rights remain inseparable*" (Kambona 2007a).

²⁸ Some LWF Cambodia staff (LWF Cambodia 2007b) advised caution in assessing these claims. The measurement of domestic violence is problematic. Rights awareness among women has led to greater willingness to approach public authorities; more cases are reported. This does not necessarily mean that the overall incidence of violence has gone down.

[Sidebar:] A local node of knowledge

The expression “local knowledge” occurred several times in the early parts of this report. It is reasonable to assume that this knowledge is part of the “idiosyncratic factors” that account for the success or failure of empowerment programs, as distinct from those that work purely on income growth. As we saw (in summarizing Lokshin and Ravallion 2002), these factors, and with them local knowledge, are not easy to identify. Rarely are we in a position: “See, this is how it works in this village”. We only assume that local people, among them the empowerment program workers, know things that others don’t, and that they are able to put this knowledge to the benefit of those to be empowered. This is very vague.

At times, however, we encounter some of these workers in situations that make it straightforward to see how global and local knowledge interact. Take the case of Ms Evergrace Kahungya, one of four area facilitators working in the TCRS Karagwe district unit (Kahungya, Ruilonge et al. 2007: ; Katwe Village Council 2007). During the week, Evergrace lives in a small studio in Katwe village, close to the council office. On her table, besides the inevitable agency documents and work notes, she carefully stores a number of missionary and development publications.

Figure 19: Evergrace Kahungya, Area Facilitator and node in a knowledge network



The reader may spot, besides other titles, the “Mkukuta” brochure, a publication disseminated by Save the Children Fund and Policy Forum, two civil society actors that seek to broaden knowledge of citizens’ rights to government services. Evergrace, who supervises a number of neighborhood volunteers, is one of the staff members equipped to translate for the benefit of the community new concepts that percolate from government policies and civil society debates. And she is the one to collect from the local partners, then summarize for TCRS, the response that the application of extraneous concepts elicits in villages and households. Translated upward, her analysis of what people do and tell should reinforce advocacy and, at least in theory, ultimately policy innovation. Key to advocacy impact are persons like Evergrace who can translate both ways.

Chapter summary

Compiling a catalogue of good practices from the experience of just two country programs would not be considered a valid exercise. This is all the more so because the communities and households involved are not executing abstract, academic empowerment concepts; they move in concrete networks, for projects that promise to better their lives. Not surprisingly, they use the word “plan” more often than “power”.

Nevertheless, LWF Cambodia and TCRS share a number of practices that have worked well in both contexts. Some of these, it is reasonable to believe, will be similarly effective in other contexts; others have had success in those two countries due to enabling conditions that may not recur everywhere.

Connecting networks

First of all, and fundamentally to most other things to follow, the empowerment programs created intermediate-level networks that translate between lower and higher tiers in the local society and with government. They have infused these networks with meaningful activity. Neighborhood-based self-help groups, special-purpose village-level committees, volunteers such as the TCRS animators increase the organizational density between the household and the village government. Ward committees and commune councils link the village to the lowest tier of government that commands significant discretionary resources. As a central node in the larger network, the village coordination body – the council in Tanzania, the development committee in Cambodia – has been systematically strengthened.

The programs are biased to the poorest members in the community, and they strive to foster responsibility in the elite to work with them. At the same time, they invest in coalitions between the poor and the village middle class, by advocating universal rights (such as the right to education) and by improving community services used by all. This does not go without tensions, as the treatment of poor borrowers as bad risks in local loan and savings groups shows.

Participating households and village-level communities are made to assess their needs, inventorize local resources and potential outside support, and enlarge their networks of partners and allies in the process of implementing projects and updating plans. Where resources do flow, significant re-specification of leadership and management roles takes place, to a degree rarely met in rural community development of past eras. While we do not have any representative network census, we met some communities who boasted a surprisingly diverse set of partner organizations.

The importance of plans

A pivotal element in the empowerment process is the organized planning process. Plans are important as documents because they let different partners who are not always present coordinate and update expectations. More important is the process by which households and communities cycle from initial assessments, to planning one or several projects, execution, and evaluation, with broad participation in all stages. The “empowerment process circle” (inwent and LWF 2006: 2) that LWF Cambodia created and disseminated may be its best known symbolic representation.

The development plans are important devices also because they guide the cooperation of partners from different social and administrative tiers. Initially, plans may be made because they give the plan-holder purpose and direction. With longer lasting effect, plans are made because more plans are made, and collections of plans are then integrated at a higher level in return for resources that they have sought. The ability, not only to plan, but to participate in plan integration, is one of the characteristics of empowered individuals and communities. Not surprisingly, the zeal to plan is greatly aided by government decentralization policies that provide both resources and structure for the generation and selection of local projects. How well empowerment programs help to bridge the gulf between district and village, is key to their greater or less success.

Managerial flexibility, particularly in selecting partners

The official empowerment creed has it that the participants own their development process. Therefore they dictate the speed at which projects are adopted and executed. This is a credible claim although our visits were not extended enough to make many pertinent observations. What is much easier to pinpoint, although the LWF empowerment documents have not made it a topic so far, are the degrees of freedom that these programs preserve in recruiting villages, households and individuals. Much of their success is due to judicious matching of caseloads to organizational capacities. However, how the programs make and present recruitment decisions, and how the communities then attribute them, all this has consequences. It determines the degree of responsibility that community elites are willing to take for the program components directed at the poorest.

In safeguarding their managerial flexibility, the programs have used a mixture of open-ended broad actions and of specific commitments. There is an educational component – which some communities recognize as more important than the physical projects – that may go through several iterations, but is not bound to specific resource contracts. Conversely, there are project agreements that lay down quantities and values for the contributions that the partners involved are to raise. The continuity in the former has enhanced the efficiency of the latter, aptly expressed by a Cambodian commune chief: *“Villages in which the LWF has helped to ensure continuity across several committee tenures have had better development results”* (Suon 2007).

Eventually, empowered partners no longer need continuous help from the programs; they can be graduated or phased-out. The sustainability aspect is explored in a later chapter. Here, from a good-practices concern, the bases of the phasing-out decision matter. The curricular nature of the TCRS program and the more self-reflective patterns cultivated by LWF Cambodia have produced different graduation philosophies. TCRS depends on its own monitoring of household-level progress; LWF wants the decision informed chiefly by the community’s self-assessment. From a philosophical viewpoint, a self-actuated departure appears more congenial, but in a partnership rich in trust and familiarity, it seems advisable to complement what the community says about its own maturity with a small number of external measures, some gauging the progress of the community, others that of the poorest households.

The optimum level of technical expertise

The substantive areas in which empowerment programs have shown the best effects are hard to determine. We have not been able to spot patterns in which certain

traditional components of integrated rural development fare better than others among these empowered households and communities, say, health better than agriculture, or education better than savings and credit. Some may argue that the very empowerment approach makes this question moot. One can observe, however, that the programs were more successful in harnessing expertise and assistance in some sectors than in others, for example, in Tanzania more successful in education than in agricultural extension. From a good-practice angle, the question then concerns the choice of expertise that the empowerment program internalizes vs. that which it procures in the market. As happened to RDRS Bangladesh in the nineties, some programs may find that they have deskilled too radically and need to (re)build certain types of sector expertise where the socio-political environment does not provide it.

Sectoral expertise is brought in also as part of the two-way advocacy process, with policy expertise translated downwards, and the concrete knowledge of the grassroots summarized upwards. Plan integration provides the meeting ground between rights-holders and duty-bearers. But these plans are essentially compilations of projects from different sectors; compared to them, the involvement of empowerment programs with rights is more profound. The insistence that everyone has rights, that those of the weakest must be protected, has worked nothing short of a cultural change, *after* which the rights-based practice of holding duty-bearers accountable has become more forceful. The strategy that integrates these various strands in a sufficiently abstract, yet highly motivating formula is condensed in the LWF Cambodia's advocacy definition: "*The empowerment of the vulnerable, the enlightenment of the powerful*".

Measuring and Monitoring Empowerment

The challenge, in the abstract

Take almost any definition of empowerment – say, for example, the ability to make choices in one’s life and realize them – and you may expect to hear spontaneous statements from persons and groups that speak to relevant changes in their lives in ways that express valid measurements of empowerment: “*Until some years back, we did not have any secondary schools in the area; now 90 percent of all primary school leavers go on to secondary school*” (Councilors from Kirusha and Murutabu villages 2007). Why, then, is the measurement of empowerment generally considered a challenging enterprise? And: what are the additional challenges that NGO monitoring systems like those used by LWF’s community empowerment programs are facing?

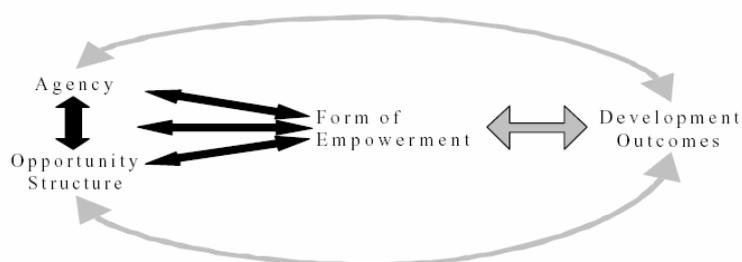
One of the difficulties, as you may expect, stems from the dispositional character of empowerment. Empowerment is a potential, of acting, experiencing, being and becoming; it is observable only through acts of, or in response to, the empowered (and, compared to them, the less empowered). These acts, even when observed without ambiguity, need to be attributed to those who expend, build, or lack potential. Further, if we agree that empowerment is both a process and an outcome, we would want to compare the “before” with the “after”, which calls for measurement at more than one point of time. Since some observed initial acts and conditions create the potential for other observables to ensue, all the challenges of causal analysis apply, plus some more if we want to estimate the strength of the action potentials as a “latent variable”.

To a degree, one should de-dramatize the difficulty. One of the plausible assumptions about empowerment is that the empowered have stronger abilities to formulate, including the process and attribution of their empowerment. This is, in fact, what benefited this study in Tanzania, where we took to asking village councilors directly: For which part of significant life changes that you have enumerated from the past ten years was the empowerment program necessary and responsible? Which changes would have occurred without it anyway (see page 138 below)? To an extent, this procedure, though, is guilty of “selection on the dependent variable”. Visitors do not usually meet the unempowered, and where we do, their empowerment story is not yet very advanced.

The Alsop-Heinsohn generic model

These and similar problems have been noticed by others as well. In 2003 and 2004, World Bank researchers met in workshops to propose conceptual solutions (Woolcock 2004). We mention them here because several of the contributions already carried a core conceptual template which was to become the pivotal framework in a policy research working paper the following year (Alsop and Heinsohn 2005: 6). We reproduce their diagram here with comments on its elements.

Figure 20: The Relationship between Outcomes and Correlates of Empowerment



“Agency”, generally an antonym to “structure”, these authors define as the “ability to make meaningful choices”. “Opportunity structure” is short (or rather long!) for context. “Form of empowerment” expresses the level of control over the situation, from passive access to active participation to influence, finally to control²⁹. From the exercise of agency within the development context, and the level of control achieved, outcomes result. Alsop and Heinsohn cross-tabulate the agency x opportunity x form combinations further with institutional domain (state, market, society) and societal level (local, intermediary, macro).

The bank robber thought experiment

Such a scheme may be useful in encouraging empowerment researchers to follow similar approaches and reporting structures. However, it is so complex that it does not offer an immediate structural model, nor a measurement model. To show why this is so we construe an absurd thought experiment in a domain where “opportunity structure” has some straightforward meaning: crime. Say, we watch an intending bank robber. Arguably, he has greater agency if he owns a gun. He has greater opportunities if he plans his heist in a neighborhood with ten bank branches than in one that boasts a single branch. The urban gun-wielding robber should thus be in control (form of empowerment) and drive away unopposed with \$100,000 in his bag whereas the poor village thug, pointing a knife at the local loan-and-savings checker (which we would rate as some “influence”), is sent running empty-handed. However, the police offer a \$10,000 reward on the empowered robber, resulting in many leads from the public, whereas the county sheriff’s chase after our hapless guy is way down everyone’s priority list. This changes the opportunity structure for the two of them, as measured by the time left to commit more crimes before being arrested for the first.

“Serious” empowerment, of course, is not concerned with such silly things, but the implications for measurement are the same. It is doubtful that empowerment *needs* to be measured in order to understand the interplay between agency, opportunity and outcome. It is equally doubtful that it *can* be measured even when those three are perfectly known³⁰.

²⁹ These definitions no longer appear in the working paper, but are found in a workshop paper (Alsop, Heinsohn et al. 2004: 2).

³⁰ If we had data on sufficiently many bank robbers, we could estimate a model like:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Loot} &= f(\text{branches, gun}) \\ \text{Time to arrest} &= g(\text{loot, gun}). \end{aligned}$$

To do so, knowledge of the “degree of empowerment” is not needed. What is needed, however, is additional knowledge on the world of the “empowered”: that more dangerous robbers provoke larger rewards, which in turn hasten their arrest, a variable not included in the original empowerment model.

Apart from these universal measurement and estimation difficulties that we encounter whenever dispositional variables are used in intervening positions, there are those typical of many empowerment NGOs, including the country programs of the LWF that this study observed. Typically, their resources are different from those of research institutions, and the systems through which they observe their task environment (known as “monitoring systems” in project speak) are not to be confounded with research programs.

We limit the argument to a few general observations in order to get to LWF and country program material soon. Many NGOs do not have the social science resources to design, implement and analyze data collections that would translate the Alsop – Heinsohn model into one capable to estimate effects of agency and context on empowerment, and hence from empowerment on development outcomes. They can contract out the task to appropriate research entities, but many will not be able to interface with them for a meaningful job.

Cases as an alternative to variables-based measurement

A feasible way out of the dilemma is, in theory, to use methods that are not variables-based, but case-based (Abbott 2001: 129-159), usually narrative approaches such as case studies or story-based significant change methods³¹. Such methods are more versatile to express agency (through first-person accounts), dispositions (through modal language, as in “must”, “may”, “need not”, etc., and using fuzzy operators) and local causality (through sequences and thick descriptions of context). A recent feature by LWF Nepal redraws the ups and downs of a refugee girl turned wedding photographer. Deomaya Khadka, after being rejected by a professional photographer and surviving in carpet weaving and camp school teaching, received a camera from a local teacher and professional training from another refugee NGO. As a result of covering many wedding ceremonies, she feels that “*those who hated me .. have now started to love me. [I amaze those] who didn’t believe that girls can become photographers*” (Kharel 2007). In the story, most variables that signal key changes (e.g. “received a camera”) are meaningful only for this case; others (“had contact with outside NGO”) may have universal relevance for empowerment, but their effect critically depends on time and sequence.

The capacity for case-based analysis, however, remains constrained by the variables-based monitoring systems that are a standard element of the grant agreements with NGO donor agencies. The ability to report against logical framework-based monitoring systems is crucial for NGO survival; it dictates the tools and mentalities of a large part of information seeking and providing behavior in their staff. Occasional

Moreover, the functional forms are not plausible: larger loots make it easier to survive incognito, but they also trigger more police resources – where does the latter start to prevail over the first? One conceptual escape would be to consider the money a valid measure of empowerment, and treat life expectancy outside prison as the only relevant outcome. But this only goes to show the dependency of the model on interpretation.

³¹ “Usually narrative approaches” implies that other flavors of case-based analyses, such as typological ones, are the exception in NGO program descriptions. This is likely, but we have no firm knowledge of the frequency of such alternatives. Health programs tend to report on combinations of socio-economic and health status, and some of their reporting templates might qualify as typological.

case-based excursions (say, profiles of named program participants), which are done for illustrative purposes, do not overturn this fundamental constellation.

They do lead to hybrid reporting outcomes – quarterly reports with a dominant numeric style, annual reports with a visual and argumentative appeal that mixes issue presentation with biographic elements. From the empowerment viewpoint, it is fascinating to observe the latitude with which programs mix these styles, and the degree to which these succeed in credibly capturing empowerment beyond simply restating agency, opportunities and outcomes. We will revert to this them in the speculative outlook with which we end the chapter, after describing select features of the monitoring in place in LWF Cambodia and in TCRS.

Current practices in the LWF

The Global Strategy: “Evidence of change”

The LWF World Service strategic plan, its “Global Strategy 2007-2012”, itself is indifferent to the choice of case-wise vs. variables-based empowerment measurement even though internal discussions appear to be favoring most significant change methods as a way to enhance program monitoring in future. Neither content (themes or indicators) nor procedures are directly defined for the program monitoring under the three strategic approaches. The link is made in the sections on thematic areas and on organizational systems. In each of their sub-sections, a number of strategies are defined; to find out whether they work, a small number of indicator-like areas are listed in which positive change is expected. We provide a sample in this sidebar.

[Sidebar:] Evidence-of-change indicators in the Global Strategy

This sample is taken from the “Thematic Areas and Strategic Objectives” section (LWF/DWS 2007: 11):

Strategic Objective 1:

People and communities are prepared for, able to respond effectively to, and recover from all types of disasters and complex emergencies.

Strategies:

- *Build on and strengthen the capacity of communities to prepare for disasters and manage risks.*
- *Prioritize the involvement of women in disaster preparedness and risk management.*
- *Ensure a timely, relevant response with high impact on disaster-affected populations.*
- *Ensure that refugees and IDPs are enabled to fulfill their right to a life of dignity.*
- *Advocate for the rights of those affected by disasters and complex emergencies, globally and at national levels, with special attention to the rights of women, children and other especially vulnerable groups.*
- *Promote durable solutions through resettlement and repatriation.*
- *Be a major player in the ecumenical response to disasters through ACT International.*
- *Be an operational partner of UNHCR and WFP and make links with the ACT network.*

Evidence of Change:

- *Increased capacity of communities to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies.*
- *Women are key agents in disaster preparedness, response and recovery in the communities where World Service works.*
- *An increased number of vulnerable people can rebuild their lives in the aftermath of emergencies.*

- *Those affected by disasters and complex emergencies are protected and enabled to live with dignity.*

The evidence-of-change items present intuitive face validity together with a raw mixture of dispositional and behavioral terms. “Increased capacity” expresses dispositions; it may fully embrace the empowerment idea as well. A community that knows how to prevent emergencies cannot be called anything but empowered. Yet, the people living on the sandbar islands of the Brahmaputra river have no way to prevent the summer flooding; their empowerment would solely be observed through their preparations, response and recovery. Their cooperation with RDRS Bangladesh over several decades offers rich material on every one of the four evidence points; yet, if we asked RDRS for a prediction on how many island people will rebuild there after the next flood, they would be hard pressed. There are generally no clear-cut empowerment models at hand that bring multiple contingent and dispositional terms together in one testable framework: “if an emergency happens”, “increased” (i.e. more than in the past), “vulnerable” (in various degrees), “can rebuild their lives” (recoup livelihoods, find new homesteads, etc.). The stories of survivors may be easy to credit to their empowerment; how would we factor the silence of the victims into the equation?

The Global Strategy looks at the attainment of objectives, pursued within the three strategic approaches, with the broad brush of the international headquarters. In the country programs, finer-grained definitions, local models of development processes and intricate administrative guidelines on how to collect the evidence determine how empowerment will be measured. Some of these local variables (and case descriptions) may be straightforward to fit in with the evidence of change pointers in the Strategy. Others may be country-specific; and some of the Strategy’s evidential concern may remain unaddressed.

Contrasting approaches in Cambodia and Tanzania

Official documents of LWF Cambodia and of TCRS do not detail how LWF Geneva guidelines on the measurement and monitoring of empowerment have been assimilated. In part, this simply reflects the fact that their latest multi-year planning and monitoring documents (PMDs) were written before the World Service produced its Global Strategy. Moreover, TCRS is an independent NGO; and in both programs, local input to measurement definitions plus, at least in Cambodia, the influence of international debates may have fashioned current systems more profoundly than guidance from the Geneva office, which began to standardize monitoring very recently.

Yet, a visitor thrilled with a matter as dry as monitoring will, after just a few conversations and casual reading of a number of guidelines and reports, notice important differences. The two programs monitor their community empowerment programs following distinct philosophical and administrative approaches, even if they have not bothered to theoretically articulate their distinctiveness. In gross simplification, it may be said that LWF Cambodia uses centrally issued guidelines and definitions, and TCRS gives more latitude to the initiative and practical systems that district managers evolve. This contrast would be too harsh if we did not temper it immediately; the unitary definitions in Cambodia resulted from dialogues that took into account hosts of suggestions from field staff and village committees; in TCRS, the PME coordinator at the Dar-es-Salaam head office connects with each of the district managers writing monitoring reports through the editing process.

The differing weights of central vs. local definitions are not the only contrasting moment. Again with risky simplification, one may venture that the perspective of the Cambodian monitors is largely on the integration of output measures with annual targets – in a strict one-to-one indicator target vs. achievement mode – and with financial figures. In this perspective, empowerment objectives can be – and are – translated into annual targets, and allocation schemes are in place to apportion budgets and actual expenditure to each output. By contrast, the system does not pay attention to the covariation of program activities overall; locally, in the partner villages, a holistic view of the empowerment dimensions is systematically cultivated, yet the results, such as from village self-assessments, are summarily ingested by the LWF monitoring system.

The Tanzanian situation is not the exact opposite of the Cambodian. All monitoring reports compare output achieved to targets; and some reports include budget variance. What is different is the efforts, by some of the district managers, to document changes over time. The program in Karagwe, for example, surveyed the housing quality, food security, and household asset value of its individual participants at the end of 2005 and again 2006; for village-level services, it managed to compare indicator values at three points in time. The fraction of the marginalized attending public meetings and utilizing health clinics and schools was also monitored over time (TCRS 2007a). In Kibondo, program staff developed their own composite index of the household economic position intended to inform graduation decisions. Although staff resources and analytic assistance in linking this survey data to earlier baseline information were extremely limited (Nkya and Chago 2007a; ; Nkya and Chago 2007b), ideas to overcome cross-sectional perspectives for more dynamic ones were clearly intriguing the program staff. Kibondo, with its larger infrastructure compared to other districts, occasionally has been able to attract outside researchers to document empowerment progress (Terbeck 2006). The result is a very uneven monitoring landscape, in which local initiative, conceptually and in information volumes, accounts for most of the differences.

LWF Cambodia's self-assessment tool

LWF's three-year PMD presents its monitoring approach interactionally, as a dense, interwoven system of visits, meetings, workshops uniting individuals from all the tiers of the aid chain, village to donor agency. *"Detailed monitoring will include (LWF Cambodia 2006b: 60)*

- *Regular site visits by [Project Managers] PM, Community Empowerment Officers (CEOs) and other senior staff [..]*
- *Weekly staff meetings chaired by CEOs*
- *Monthly senior staff planning meetings chaired by PM*
- *Regular dialogue and meeting with beneficiaries*
- *Periodic workshops/seminars with the CBOs (VDC, VBs, WUGs etc)*
- *Participatory monitoring and evaluation by beneficiaries of activities*
- *Annual self-appraisal of VDCs, CBOs and partner households of their capacity and activities*
- *Periodic visits by Phnom Penh staff [..]*
- *Periodic visits by LWF head office and donor parties*
- *Periodic visits by government representatives".*

These personal encounters are effective because key ones are supported with written templates that originate from, and persist in, systems that go beyond interaction systems. We cannot claim to have seen all important templates that exist for the empowerment monitoring³². But in the entire system, the “Village Graduation Guideline” (inwent and LWF 2006: this is the second edition after an earlier, 2004, version) stands out as the paradigmatic beacon of light illuminating the rationale as well as technique of self-assessment that are part and parcel of the LWF Cambodia empowerment philosophy.

The guideline was written for the purpose of creating an information basis for village development committee graduations, but it applies to committees at all levels of maturity after initial formation. Rather than just supporting decisions to graduate, the tool assists committees to sharpen their annual work plans. Villages not yet organized in a committee partnering with LWF are not assessable with this tool; in other words, it is not a recruitment or intake tool³³.

Before the guideline defines the specifics of measurement, it gives broader background on how individuals, households and communities supported by the LWS pass through different stages from recruitment to graduation. There are three stages, prior to graduation, in the emergency relief, rehabilitation to development continuum. The partners normally stay in this relationship five to seven years.

In terms of skill or capacities formed *en route*, seven stages are marked on a ladder of increasing participation, ownership and empowerment. On one extreme, during the emergency phase, the poor with whom LWF Cambodia has been partnering express needs and receive charity. On the verge of graduation, they are empowered for sustainable development. In parallel, LWF’s role in empowerment changes, from advocating for the people and for the distribution of relief goods to a mere monitoring and evaluation role (ibid: 4).

In terms of the *observed* levels of empowerment, the “Graduation Guideline” presents an intriguing mixture of simplicity and complexity. Several dimensions have to be carefully distinguished.

Every village development committee conducting its annual self-assessment will place itself in one of four empowerment levels. The term “level” here does not have the same meaning as in “household, village, commune, etc.” It denotes development levels expressed in ranges of total scores on the index. The scores result from a cross-sectional measurement (the self-assessment in a given year), regardless of how fast or how slowly the village got there:

“A village within the scoring range of 1-28 for seven criteria is considered ‘low’ in capacity. A village within the scoring range of 29-56 is considered ‘improved’. A village within the scoring range of 57-84 is considered ‘advanced’. While a village within the scoring range of 85-112 is considered ‘empowered/graduated’” (ibid.: 24).

³² For example, there may be a written guideline for the self-assessment of village banks, but no recollection of seeing it.

³³ We point this out in contrast to Tanzania, where the TCRS household census is a recruitment tool.

Those ranges are defined a-priori, based on equal intervals, not after the fact using a statistical model or empirical distribution.

The total village score results from scores that the committees assign to their performance in seven substantive (technical, institutional) areas. LWF calls these areas “criteria”:

Table 10: Criteria for the Cambodia empowerment assessment process

4.2 Criteria development for the empowerment assessment process

- Criterion 1:** Capacity to manage development process
- Criterion 2:** Capacity to know rights, solve right conflicts and advocate for their rights with duty bearers outside community
- Criterion 3:** Economical livelihood
- Criterion 4:** Social/cultural livelihood
- Criterion 5:** Environmental conservation and sustainable use of natural resources
- Criterion 6:** Disaster risk management and mitigation
- Criterion 7:** Gender empowerment and equality

The position on each criterion is measured through four indicators. On each indicator, the committee may rate itself at one of four levels. The contents of these levels correspond to expectations that a low-capacity, improved-capacity etc. committee would typically meet regarding the behaviors implied in the indicator.

The beauty – elegance and coherence – of this 7 x 4 x 4 criterion / indicator / level scheme contrasts with the difficulty that the definitions of levels for many indicators pose. An example will make this easier to understand.

Table 11: Criterion 3 Economic livelihood - Indicator 3.3. Improved small-scale enterprises

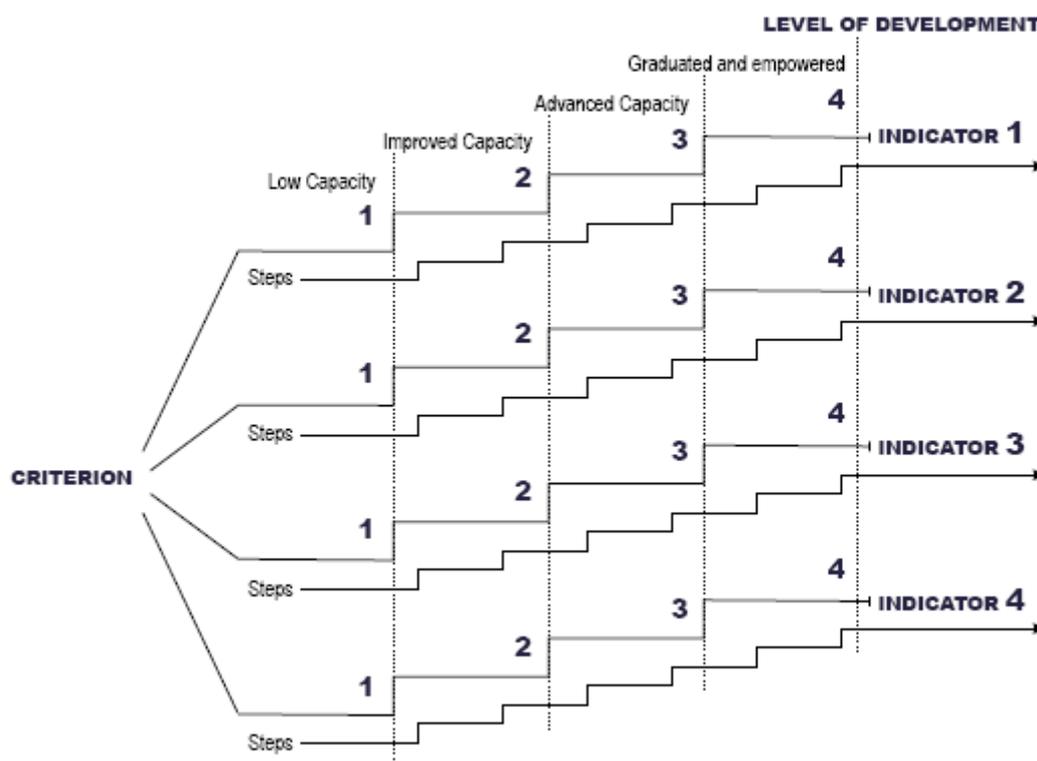
Level	Level definition
4 Graduated and empowered	More households received training facilitated by VDC or other organizations and the number and capacity of small-scale enterprises increased further.
3 Advance capacity	More households received training facilitated by LWF and have started and strengthened their small-scale enterprises
2 Improved capacity	Some households received training facilitated by LWF and started small-scale enterprises with profit
1 Low capacity	There are only few small-scale enterprises in the village with little profit

This and other indicator level definitions in the matrix are noteworthy for their use of multiple items (training – enterprise – profit), mixtures of observables and capacity claims (received training – strengthened enterprises), degrees that need considerable information to determine (little profit – with profit – strengthened – increased number and capacity), and fuzzy quantity operators (only few in the village).

To the extent that the village committees, in their self-assessment information collections and debates, make their own determinations, the complexity of the level definitions may not matter a great deal; the process – the healthy debate that it generates – may be more important than methodological purity.

The complexity does not stop here. LWF Cambodia added to the indicator and level mechanics also the concept of steps. An indicator will always have four levels, but the number of steps can vary between indicators although the diagram supplied in the guideline suggests it does not. It does suggest that there are more steps than levels over the span of an indicator.

Figure 21: Cambodia self-assessment tool: Criteria, indicators, levels, and steps



Again, an example is needed to make this understandable, and we present the steps given for indicator 3.3. above (ibid.: 13-14).

Table 12: Steps used for Indicator 3.3 Improved small-scale enterprises

Step 1	Use of PRA baseline data to analyze the situation, assess needs and identify priority options.
Step 2	Orient the VDC assist them to arrange informational meetings and a selection process for applicants for vocational skills training. (Priority should be given to NFE graduates and partner households. There should be clear and simple selection criteria and the process should be very transparent.)
Step 3	Assist potential applicants to make a business plan that shows that they have a feasible business idea that will put the skills they learned in training into practice. (Business plans should include marketing, economic and technical feasibility, as well as funding sources (included own capital and micro credit.))

Step 4	Support successful applicants to get the necessary skills training to support their business plan. (The skills training may be arranged at the project level or at a vocational training center).
Step 5	Provide or facilitate additional training in the basics of small-scale business, project and money management, marketing, and record keeping if this isn't taught at the vocational training center.
Step 6	Provide orientation on loan management and provide the necessary loan to start up the enterprise. (Follow-up and encourage the receiptiant to run a profitable small-scale enterprise.)
Step 7	Provide or facilitate consultancy service to operating small-scale enterprises, as needed or requested.

The nature of the steps is not obvious. Some appear to be instructions for activities that may be performed prior to the self-assessment. Others may be suggested elements of annual work plans following a gap analysis. They were put in

“because the staff demanded them. They respond to their questions on how we can create the competencies to close identified gaps. But now we need to help them to see the limits of these recipes and the need for unique solutions. Thus, steps are more for the staff, levels for the communities that do the self-assessments” (Mueller 2007c).

The Guideline carries about ten pages' worth of instructions as to how to understand and perform the steps in the 28 indicators, some apparently concerning also how to prepare the informational work for the self-assessments (“Use PRA baseline data ..”).

Correspondingly, as explained earlier, there are $7 * 4 * 4 = 128$ cells with definitions of levels. Many mix several items. Using those, a village committee must make 28 indicator level determinations during its self-assessment. Relating those two sets of information – steps and levels – may be demanding, mentally for each participant, and moreover in time, attention, and consensus capacity for the whole committee.

A foreign reader is thus tempted to assume that the tool is overly complex and unsuited to the limited deliberation capacity of village committees. Senior staff in Phnom Penh shared the same apprehensions, but were surprised pleasantly whenever they observed self-assessment meetings. The committees, supported by field staff, handle the complexity well (Sam 2007b).

They are helped in this greatly by the visualization that LWF promoted for the public presentation of the self-ratings on the seven criteria. Committees have learned, with great gusto, to draw and present spider web diagrams, with seven axes, one for each criterion area. They find that even the illiterate persons in their constituency can appreciate the basic messages. In other words, the documentation itself is empowering.

The sidebar offers a sample.

[Sidebar:] Presenting self-assessment findings through spider web diagrams

The development committee of Neangmalea village, in Samaki Mean Chey District (Neangmalea VDC 2007) has been rating the level of its capacity as “advanced [C]”, though not yet “ready for graduation [D]”, yearly since 2005. In 2004, it had promoted itself from A to B, and then, just one year later, to C.

The committee felt it was worthy of the C-grade because it was a strong committee, knowing people’s rights and able to advocate for them. It was pleased that many women regularly participated in the development planning activities. Its particular strengths, the members said, were:

1. “Strong solidarity
2. Good coordination with NGOs and stakeholders
3. We identified our top priorities.
4. We protect / maintain our achievements”.

The grade in 2007 remained a C, rather than a D, because the committee self-critically established areas of weakness, some of which can be intuited from the shape of the spider web in this photo.

Figure 22: A poster-size spider web diagram of self-assessment scores



The criteria for which the scores deviated for the overall mean of 12 (which triggers the C-grade) are those on the lower half; the committee explained them thus (numbers for easy reference to the list of criteria in the Guideline):

5. Environment [low 8]: “Logging is still intense, jungle is being cleared, people know this is wrong, but for many there is no other livelihood”.

6. Disaster preparedness [low 8]: *“We are helpless vis-à-vis drought. Also, we lack rainwater retention systems, floods keep damaging paddy. We plan to build two ponds, and re-dig some canals, but have not yet done so”.*
7. Gender parity [high 15]: *“Over the three terms of this committee, we have managed to have three, then again three, and lately two women [out of five members]; we have had good member continuity”.*

The committee during our interview demonstrated an astounding command of the details of this community. By the latest count, 757 people lived in 157 families. *“We did a wealth ranking, rating 38 as very poor, 40 as poor, 79 as medium, and no rich families. Our children read in three primary schools. Of the 325 students, 186 are girls, and 37 are from the poorest families.”* Committee members took turns in enumerating village assets more rapidly than the translator could process; they spoke of advocacy and networking challenges displaying a number of neatly drawn diagrams and tables. Yet, they were not content with their management and felt they needed better report writing and project designing skills, and new leadership and mobilization techniques to build trust. In Neangmalea as in several other villages, project proposal writing and “financial techniques” (not only book keeping) for the village bank were identified as areas badly needing improvement.

A devil hiding in the detail

For most readers, this amount of technical exposition on the Cambodian village self-assessment tool will largely suffice. There is, however, an arcane detail that has considerable philosophical implications and as such needs to be noted.

The village committee invites four different working groups to deliberate the progress of the community. The committee itself forms the first group; some common villagers, elderly persons and CBO members the second. Department of Rural Development observers and LWF staff are invited into the third, and other village leaders and commune councilors work together in the fourth group. The initial discussions are held separately, and each group assigns its own scores to the seven criteria. Later, the groups “compare notes” in common sessions; for each of the criteria the mean score is taken over the four groups. A summary sheet template helps with the process.

This has two consequences, both of which may be undesirable, in spite of the greater representativeness that the involvement of so many people other than the committee members may project:

- The averaging drives the scores towards mean values. The variance of the seven scores is probably much less than had it only been for the committee to set them. Thus, the detailed shapes of the committees’ knowledge and vision are blunted in less informative group judgments. In a database (LWF Cambodia 2007d) holding the levels A through D (the numeric scores had not been retained) on the seven criteria given in 224 self-assessment workshops, 79 villages showed no variation at all. Among the 145 with some variation – say, for example, 6 “B”s and one “C” -, uniformity was still very strong. In a statistical analysis, one common factor explained over 80 percent of all variability. Only the ratings on “environmental conservation and sustainable resource use” (Criterion 5) showed significant independence from the general uniform stamp.

- Second, because of the need to simplify the contributions from four groups into one result, the finer-grained ratings that the committee makes on the 28 indicators are lost. Certainly, if any detailed notes are kept in the village, they are not shared with LWF. In the exotic language of statistics, the factor structure of the indicators remains unknown. In ordinary language, the LWF may at best have indirect knowledge (from listening to villagers) that the communities actually mean the same things as the criteria titles in the Guideline convey. In the minds of the designers, for example, primary education (indicator 4.1.) and AIDS prevention (4.4.) are part of the same “social and cultural livelihood” complex; whether the committees conceive of them in the same way, is firmly obscured by the prescribed data aggregation. Maybe there are many who feel that primary education is running smoothly, but that the alarm bells should ring louder on AIDS. The system would not let this signal pass.

How one wishes to evaluate these system characteristics, depends on philosophical convictions. The fact that such a well-conceived system exists in an empowerment program is remarkable in itself. The fact that it is applied regularly and with apparent ease, by rural people who just resurfaced from utter obscurity and oppression, speaks of excellence. The process of self-assessment is part of the empowerment itself. The insights gained in the groups are then used in the elaboration of annual work plans; surely, these practical dividends are more important than statistical profiles.

Yet, any measurement system, howsoever elegant, that obstructs its validity test inspires some unease. Some LWF staff summarized the history of the monitoring system as one initially bent on penetrating the internal dynamics of village empowerment with the help of a great amount of data. By 2005, it became patent that the organization did not have the capacity to meaningfully analyze the accumulated data. The range of variables collected was dramatically curtailed. In 2006 and 2007, the focus was on stabilizing the management processes captured in the new PMD and on stronger integration with financial reporting. It is obvious that in each participating village and in the LWF project and country offices, thoughtful analyses abound; if the connection between the village and the agency instruments were stronger, the lessons learned could be further multiplied. Applied practically, they would benefit the two-way advocacy strategy.

Household surveys in Tanzania

TCRS conducts a full census of households after a village has been selected into the community empowerment program. The census primarily assesses the economic position of the households and is used to determine the households from which adults are selected to fill the intake – generally 250 persons – of individual program participants. District managers seem to have a measure of discretion in defining indicators. The household census in a new district may take up to half a year.

In Kibondo, for example, the census in 2005 that served as the baseline survey calculated a household development index. It was based on the quality of the family dwelling, farm size and production, animals and on two household durables (bicycles and radios).

In 2007, Kibondo staff re-surveyed the participant households in 24 out of the 25 program villages with a view to creating a decision basis for household, and eventually village, graduation. The indicators used this time were similar to the baseline indicators, although not entirely the same. The index was formed out of the house quality indicator, an animal stock index, grain production per family member, a (more diverse than before) household asset index, and an indicator based on the range of profits from micro-businesses.

The percentage of marginalized households in a village deemed ready for graduation varied from a low 3 percent to a high 85 (Nkya 2008). In four out of the 24 villages, more than 60 percent were ready, the mark considered the minimum for phasing out the village. A comparison between baseline and latest measurements was intended for samples of households drawn from the baseline lists in a few villages, but has not yet been done³⁴.

The capacity of the Kibondo unit for empowerment monitoring compares favorably with most, if not all district programs in TCRS (see the sidebar below for a glimpse at a different district). Strong, imaginative local initiative contrasts with very limited data management and analysis capacity and with scant head office support in terms of expertise and actual analyst time. Two reactions to this state of affairs suggest themselves. One is cynical: Who cares about the validity of the monitoring enterprise as long as it produces some results and motivates program staff to take decisions? The other is more sympathetic in that it recognizes that it will take time to strengthen these valuable beginnings, and that the use of resources to this end may not be the organization's highest priority.

[Sidebar:] A partial test of the critical-mass theory in community mobilization

TCRS has a distinct theory of how the empowerment of poor families and progress at the level of the village interact. It basically assumes that once a majority of the marginalized has been empowered (in the sense, for example, of being more food-sufficient), they will claim and gain access to services to a degree that creates irreversible change in community life. While still poor, they cease to be marginal members and fully participate in public affairs, services and facilities. This idea extends to graduation; some documents and district managers mentioned that when sixty percent of the marginalized are empowered, TCRS may withdraw from the community (TCRS senior staff 2007). Some community representatives too observed strong demonstration effects that were bringing more and more of the poor households into the mainstream of village life (Kibingo Village Council 2007).

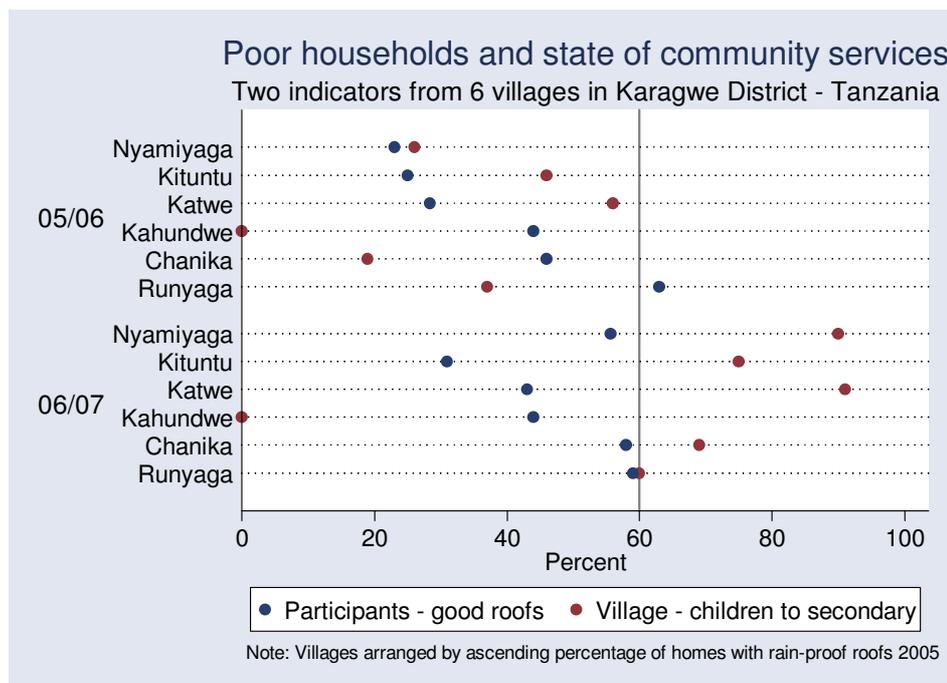
The staff of the Karagwe district program have been collecting data on household-level improvements among the marginalized as well as on the state of village services³⁵. There is generally a marked improvement on all indicators from year to year. The diagram below visualizes the parallel advance in household improvements and community services for six out of the 12 program villages in the district. The selection was made to include three villages

³⁴ As of end of January 2008. A monitoring person from the Dar-es-Salaam head office traveled to Kibondo to digitize baseline data and match it to the latest evaluations.

³⁵ The data is presented in aggregate form (by village); a household-level analysis is not evident. The 2006 annual monitoring report (TCRS 2007a) reports economic security data (homes with rain-proof roofs, months' worth of food stocks, value of household assets), sub-village meeting attendance and use of community services (clinics, primary schools) by the marginalized program participants for two observation dates. It adds data on the state of village services (education, health, safe water, markets) for the entire community for three observation points.

with low levels of economic security among the marginalized at the end of 2005 (fewer than 30 percent lived in houses with good roofs), and three with participant households that tended to be more secure (more than 40 percent). As indicators in this purely illustrative example, we choose the quality of roofs (leaking or not) for its good reliability and the transition rate to secondary school for all primary school leavers in the village (because of the high demand for secondary education in Tanzania and because primary school enrolment is almost universal). House quality was surveyed in December, school transitions were recorded one month later, in January - therefore the notation 05/06 and 06/07 in the diagram.

Figure 23: Household-level improvements and state of community services - Tanzania



Progress appears to take place everywhere, except in Kahundwe, a pastoralist village paralyzed by a water crisis (page 140), where none of the children go to secondary school. Nyamiyaga sets a strong example: The number of the poor in the program who built good roofs over their heads more than doubled within a year – from 23 to 56 percent. In the same village, secondary school enrolment went up from 26 to 90 percent. A small question mark hangs over Runyaga, where monitors reported that the fraction of program participants with good roofs went down slightly.

The quick analysis of these two indicators highlights strengths as well as limitations of the local monitoring effort. The program observes outcomes at both household and community level. It has a theory that allows it to interpret the correlation of progress between the two levels. The perspective is dynamic.

However, although the data may be pertinent and good, the analytic capacity is too limited to provide a valid test. Only village-level statistics are produced. Even at this level, a more appropriate form of analysis³⁶ would demonstrate that the correlation between the dynamics in the marginalized and the one in the village services is not very strong.

Regardless of these limitations, the multi-year approach to monitoring empowerment that Karagwe has taken affords insights that purely contemporary reports do not offer.

³⁶ For example, odds ratios (for communities with enrolment > 0 and < 100 percent) show a weak, but positive correlation of housing progress with secondary school enrolment growth, and a negative one with increasing under-five vaccination coverage.

Future possibilities

Parsimonious indicators, with a link to the World Service mandate

The monitoring of increasingly empowered communities and households in Cambodia and Tanzania has been in the hands of persons who have a deep knowledge of the program. Yet, despite important differences in monitoring philosophies, logical frameworks, tools and field personnel, the ability to analyze the data collected has remained very limited in both programs. The same limitation has been noted, despite a larger and stronger monitoring unit, also in RDRS Bangladesh and, as far as empowerment monitoring is concerned, particularly in its federation support program. We may be faced with a universal handicap, or so it appears.

Although the conceptual complexities of the empowerment process may call for sophisticated monitoring designs, the reality is that the LWF programs in many poor countries have the resources to generate and analyze empowerment data only within parsimonious formats.

What the major foci of a parsimonious empowerment monitoring format ought to be, is difficult to determine in a universal prescription. For a conceptual stimulus at this point, one may consider a minimalist number of empowerment tests that each has a connection with the spiritual bases of the World Service work. These tests could then be modified and expanded considering other general concerns or local conditions.

The minimalist basis is built on two ideas of how the work to uphold the rights of the poor and oppressed is carried out. In doing so, the LWF ventures to the end of the world, much as the biblical mission command prefigures. Within this spiritual, social and geographic space, the work takes guidance from the Sermon on the Mount ethics, notably the value and consequences of peace and humility. These inspirations can then be matched to behaviors of empowerment programs that are observable also in secular program logic. For example:

Table 13: Sample correspondences between biblical concepts and empowerment outcomes

Biblical concept	Concept / <i>observable behavior</i> in LWF empowerment program
“You will be my witnesses [...] even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8)	Sustained presence in remote areas <i>Households graduated in off-highway villages</i>
“Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5)	Status reversals in oppressed categories <i>Women as office holders</i>
“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9)	Reduction in violence <i>Land conflicts resolved peacefully</i>

Starting from a reflection on the rights of the poor and oppressed, and from the biblical remedies to claim them, credible correspondences offer themselves with the conceptual and physical world of empowerment programs. These can be expanded to a level of complexity that the country program will be able to handle with its monitoring resources. While keeping in mind the link to the “healing, reconciliation and justice” mandate, the program side can be reformulated in local and institutional languages that others understand and appreciate. These others may include other faiths, secular management and social science. For example, geographic isolation, oppressiveness of dichotomous categories, physical risks for marginalized persons can

be congenially treated in social exclusion paradigms. Thus, empowerment programs that seek the re-inclusion of the excluded should be able to generate monitoring systems that match process and outcome models of social research closely, if within modest means.

Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods

Where data analysis capacity is one of the limiting factors in monitoring empowerment, the questions readily comes up what *qualitative* methods could do for greater knowledge of the programs and their effects. After all, empowerment always is about choices, and choices realize one from among several possibilities. Possibilities can be proxied quantitatively – distance to nearest town for market opportunities, for example -, but such measures are not always available. What is possible or not may be easier to describe in qualitative language. Moreover, most empowerment theories imply a process that advances in distinct stages; such a presumption privileges narrative methods that handle sequential material naturally.

Thus, qualitative approaches appear particularly congenial in this field. In fact, the LWF is contemplating to use a particular qualitative method – most significant life changes (Davies and Dart 2005) – in its program monitoring. The assumption that qualitative methods are less demanding in analytic capacity, however, would be misguided. In fact, they may be more challenging. The data collection process in much of quantitative research follows a Taylorist industrial organization model, with researchers who know the theory and the instruments on top, and with supervisors and enumerators who know only some of the instruments, further down. Qualitative work is less tolerant of vast knowledge gaps between field workers and analysts.

Particularly if a story-based system has to produce universal narratives from a large number of cases, the analytic demands grow fast. The single-case story only needs to be told, with events and in a style sufficiently appealing to some vague empowerment idea so as be interesting as an illustration of something more general. Multi-case narrative monitoring is more difficult; each important event in a case would need to be explained “as a version of a more generic type of event” (Abbott 2001: 156).

An example may help to explain this. The construction (with help from the district council - or not!) of two dams to mitigate the water problems of a pastoralist community (Kahundwe Village Council and pastoralists 2007) would become “a successful (or not!) act of advocacy with regional government for a vital piece of public infrastructure”. The generic “piece of public infrastructure” is needed because dams may not exist in the recent history of any other communities in focus – these may have clinics, schools, roads as almost universal facilities, or a nature park ranger station (Tzinga Kibaoni Village Council 2007) as a rare oddity, but not dams. The ability of LWF program monitoring units to construct such ideal-type narratives and to persuasively fit the individual narratives to them remains to be seen.

In recent years, mixed-method approaches have become more popular in development research; and some of these are making an entry into empowerment monitoring. For example, a group around the World Bank empowerment team has used “community score cards” in Jamaica to elicit an assessment of a community trait (here: police behavior), broken down by typical characteristics (trust, courtesy, fairness, etc.). Respondents score (from 1 to 5) each characteristic, but also provide a verbal

justification for their choice of score. The material, from the score cards and other methods, was then used to draw a nuanced picture of various aspects of community empowerment, for example, in terms of the “responsiveness of police” to calls from the community.

Stories and maps

It is not excluded that LWF empowerment programs will evolve new kinds of mixed-method monitoring systems. Several factors argue for this. The use of logical frameworks in planning and reporting will continue to generate non-financial quantitative data. Longer-term field staff and community leaders are known to have rich reservoirs of meaningful stories with considerable depth. Even if it is not obvious how to harvest and weave them together; their authors obviously can formulate empowerment instances for the benefit of a larger audience. Some scholars (Rappaport 1995) even have made the case that community narratives are empowerment resources in themselves.

Many of them have been trainees or participants in one or several participatory assessment methods. In Cambodia, for example, several village development committees have drawn detailed village maps, some in the land titling context. Maps are potentially powerful vehicles of inclusion, transparency, and empowerment (Parker 2006). It may be both easy and instructive to select a small set of empowerment projects – say, arbitrarily, three: land titling advocacy, village banks, girls’ school enrolment – and a manageable sample of villages. Around maps of settlements and facilities, monitoring teams would elicit the history of these activities, interwoven ad-hoc with other critical projects. Drawing the sum of all stories and looking at other existing material, LWF could then delineate the effectiveness and efficiency of empowerment efforts.

Similarly, in Tanzania, empowerment could be documented in attractive ways by bringing together more traditional data – from baseline and follow-up household surveys – with narratives such as from life course interviews (Davis 2006). TCRS staff in Kibondo district, for example, with its comparatively larger number of program villages and a wealth of follow-up sample survey data, can draw meaningful small samples of households, stratified on strong / weak village councils, slow or fast household income growth, in a snap of time. Here as in Cambodia the potential for monitoring innovation is considerable. The limits are in creativity, the need for analytic modesty at the same time, the practical value of its products, staff resources and competing tasks. The limits are not in the nature of the empowerment process, however perplexing this may appear at first.

Chapter summary

This chapter mixes theoretical, observational and speculative material. Its starting point is the challenge of measuring a dispositional, rather than a directly observable, concept. Prospecting for models that may have come to terms with it, we summarize and discuss a generic one which is increasingly cited in the literature, the Alsop-Heinsohn model. It is built around agency, opportunities and outcomes. Caution may be in order; with this model, empowerment estimates may be neither necessary nor possible. Moreover, the models that academic researchers, with luck, can estimate are not the ones that development NGOs, with their limited data analysis capacity, typically handle in their monitoring system. An alternative that is increasingly

discussed to variables-based monitoring, case-based narratives, is briefly discussed; whatever its merits, it may not blossom where logical frameworks are part of project reporting agreements.

Global Strategy and country programs

In the section on current practices, we point to the definition of evidence-of-change indicators in the Global Strategy. We reproduce a small segment to show that their language mixes dispositional and behavioral terms; these make sense once they have been re-specified in the country program monitoring systems. We then compare the differing approaches that the programs in Cambodia and Tanzania have taken to monitoring empowerment. LWF Cambodia centrally sets a template for village self-assessments and pushed the integration of assessment data with plan figures on an indicator-by-indicator basis. The TCRS practice, if not its formulated philosophy, permits more local initiative, which some project managers have seized in order to document progress in a dynamic perspective.

We then give considerable space to the flagship tool of the LWF empowerment monitoring, Cambodia's "Village Graduation Guideline". The guideline achieves much more than graduation support; its procedures, definitions and formats are the cornerstone of the entire self-assessment process, a key activity in the empowerment cycle of village communities. Its complexity is considerable, but it is well managed, so much so that village people find it easy to use. LWF has chosen not to seek copies of most of the information that the annual assessments generate; this respects local ownership, but leaves open the validity of the 28 indicators as arranged in the template.

For TCRS, we present monitoring material from two districts, Kibondo and Karagwe. Kibondo in 2007 conducted a large resurvey of marginalized households in its empowerment program. It evaluated the data to the point of determining the percentages of households ready to be graduated in the program villages, but could not relate it back to the baseline data. Monitors in Karagwe compared household as well as village-level indicators over several points of time; this constellation lends itself to a partial test of the theory that household mobilization will force irreversible effects on how the poor participate in community affairs.

Start with a minimalist system

The future will see LWF's monitoring philosophy and practical systems evolve further – but in which direction? We believe that the LWF should start with a minimalist monitoring program, using indicators that can be linked back to the World Service mandate and its biblical foundations, then gradually expanding it apace with country program capacity and translating it into development and project language. With an option all but decided to introduce story-based monitoring, we also address the question of quantitative vs. qualitative methods. We believe that ultimately the field programs will measure empowerment along mixed-method lines, not so much from academic leads, but from a multitude of local opportunity and experimentation.

Is Empowerment Work Sustainable?

If it were only a matter of finding out what happens to empowered individuals and communities after “graduation”, it would be sufficient to observe the graduated entities against a kind of generic bottomline expectation often formulated in the (rather limited) “phasing out” literature. Graduation is considered successful if it results in

- continued voice for the poor
- access to resources, and
- service quality

at the levels achieved before graduation and without aggravating inequities (e.g., Cromer and et.al. 2004: 42). However, the LWF places its post-graduation expectations in the context of a farther-reaching aspiration, the empowerment of communities that become sustainable.

Sustainable communities

The LWF’s “Guiding Principles for Sustainable Development” (LWF 2002) shares its concern for “sustainable communities” with an estimated 770,000 other documents referenced by Google (as of January 2008). Combining that search term with “empowerment” yields close to 68,000 Google hits, testimony of a strong overlap between these two concepts in the structures of our knowledge. If we include either of the two field study countries Cambodia and Tanzania in the searches, the neighborhood is even much closer; the returns with “empowerment” added make up about a fourth of the “sustainable communities” returns.

How is this strong conceptual alliance among community, sustainable development and empowerment borne out by the material that we collected in the LWF Cambodia and in the TCRS programs?

As an initial observation, it is certainly fair to note that both programs have created structures of empowerment work that are well defined, are similar across several projects, and have been tested for many years. At least in Cambodia, this “testing” has to a large extent been handed to the communities directly concerned, through the carefully cultivated art of self-assessments. In Tanzania, the formalized self-assessment apparatus may be less well developed, but the representative body of the empowered village community - the village council – has long been institutionalized as a local government structure and thus is assessed, if you will, in periodic elections.

Effective empowerment so far

Correlating these self-assessments with external measurements of empowerment has been possible within narrow limits only, primarily because the programs’ monitoring systems have not developed such instruments in sufficient degree. However, listening to the empowered communities, many voices can be heard in unison to suggest that the empowerment approach has been effective. The effects are felt at several levels – in the self-discovery, initiative and assertiveness of individuals, particularly women; greater happiness in families; inclusion of previously marginalized persons in public deliberations, systems for planned local development, better facilities and services at

the community level; finally the shared planning and resource mobilization among community, higher administrative tiers and other entities through the networking that the empowerment work amplified.

Our material is not equally persuasive at all levels. In Tanzania, empowerment effects were most palpable for marginalized households and village councils, and were harder to grasp for the interplay between villages and higher tiers. In Cambodia, the plans of partner households, village development committees, communes and districts are well articulated, but the partner households were relatively few, and empowerment effects in the rest of the poorest families have to be inferred rather than observed. On other important segments of the empowered populations, this study has turned a blind eye altogether; for example, both programs have achieved a lot in spreading primary and secondary school education, yet we offer no systematic reflection here on the empowerment of children, or of communities with fast growing literacy levels³⁷. Moreover, strong empowerment effects to date do not necessarily imply high levels of future empowerment. Empowerment may or may not be sustainable. For example, many communities pointed, with justified pride, to schools and clinics that were working well. Many of these facilities, however, had been “rehabilitated”, in other words, they were revived from the ashes of older versions that had been part of some unsustainable development.

Three questions

Caught between the urge to comment on the sustainability of empowerment and the limited empirical material, we nevertheless need to develop some tentative answers to three questions that many stakeholders in these programs will want addressed:

- Would the observed effects have occurred without an empowerment program?
- Will they persist once communities and households have been graduated?
- Where should the programs move on after phasing out the successful partners?

The first is a question not only about attributable program effects, but also about ambient conditions that may have caused the same effects in a longer run, may have caused them in the first place, or may have enabled the effects of the empowerment program. Key candidates are political stability and openness as well as economic growth. The second addresses the more traditional sustainability notion of an effect persisting when its initial external enablers cease to support it. The third encapsulates the idea that empowerment proceeds in stages, and the empowerment work of a later stage can capitalize on the achievements of the earlier.

Empowerment without the empowerment program?

In most of the meetings with Tanzanian village councils, the question was asked whether the reported positive changes would have occurred without the TCRS empowerment program. With roughly equal frequency, one of three typified answers was given:

³⁷ “Systematic reflection” as opposed to “anecdotal evidence”, of which there was a considerable amount. For example, the finding that by providing adequate staff housing, TCRS-supported schools produce better results (they attract and retain teachers more easily) may be noteworthy under “What works in empowerment” but says little about the changing status of children, the value of education in the job market, or the ability of literate communities to create non-agricultural employment.

- Yes, these changes would have come anyway, but TCRS accelerated them.
- No. It was necessary for TCRS to come and remove initial blockages.
- It depends on the type of change. Some types of change – notably better governance – became possible only because TCRS intervened.

Sometimes councilors would add that the positive changes came about largely through the education, also for woman, that villagers received as part of the empowerment program. While financial support (for community facilities) and in-kind asset transfers (hand tools, seeds; to households) were important, nobody credited them with the kind of breakthrough effect that education and training produced.

Growth and stability as enablers

Program staff acknowledged (or even stressed; TCRS senior staff 2007) political stability as an important enabler for the empowerment program to achieve its objectives. People in Tanzania, a host country for refugees, naturally contrasted their largely peaceful post-independence history with the results of war and violence in neighboring countries. In Cambodia, the consistency between program objectives and the country's official poverty reduction strategy (which includes references to empowerment; Royal Government of Cambodia 2005) is seen as an asset that communities can leverage. Stability is seen also in the absence of violence: the fact that a local protest was peaceful is seen as an achievement of the empowerment program (Chhuon 2007: ; Sam 2007b) (Borun VDC 2007), not a taken-for-granted precondition.

The link between empowerment success and growth of the local economies was rarely drawn. In both country programs, an informal belief seemed to prevail that only small segments of national society were benefiting from current growth, chiefly in the centers of tourism and mining, although this assumption rarely surfaced in written documents³⁸. Prima-facie evidence that a fleeting visitor could not help noticing contradicted this assumption; moreover village interlocutors would themselves occasionally draw the connection between higher incomes and empowerment. Housing improvements were conspicuous throughout Tanzanian villages, and seemed to be ongoing even in those villages in Kilwa that reported recent crop failures. Mobile phone towers were going up in remote villages. In Cambodia, construction activity was patchier, but the seemingly universal boom in battery-powered home TV, with an impressively efficient mobile recharge service, suggested that many families had some money for non-essentials.

“The poor”, observed a program participant in Tanzania (Kibingo Village Council 2007), *“are respected nowadays because they wear good clothes”*. Down the market street, a friend of his showed off his new house, built and roofed over three years with small installments of materials that he brought home on his bicycle every time he sold a crop. Resolve to better his life, plan and savings discipline were all due to the

³⁸ TCRS (2007b: 4) noted *“increasing levels of poverty which have been attributed to poor livelihoods of rural people which in turn can be linked to low agricultural capabilities both in crop and animal production, and in marketing of these produce”*.

empowerment program, yet the money had come in because there was sufficient market demand for the kinds of things he could grow and sell.

Where these conditions no longer apply, the empowerment program may lose steam rapidly. The situation of two communities in the Ngara and Karagwe districts of Tanzania illustrates the point. Kasange, a village very close to the border, had been attacked several times by armed elements from Burundi. As a result, the wealthier families all fled to more secure villages. The remaining people were less dynamic. Village councilors formulated numerous requests for material aid, but did not make any connection to the TCRS' work with the marginalized families of the village. Surplus produce could not be sold because the road was bad, and merchants would not send trucks to border villages anyway. Possible joint ventures with other villages closer to the main road were not considered. Nothing seemed to work any more (Kasange Village Council 2007).

Similarly, in Kahundwe, a pastoralist community, people reverted to spending long hours hauling water after three nearby shallow wells had fallen into disrepair. The water problem became paralyzing; community initiatives were reduced to waiting for the district council to authorize funds for two micro-dams supposed to mitigate it. Arrangements for children to have access to secondary education did not materialize (Kahundwe Village Council and pastoralists 2007).

The hard question is how much empowerment poor households and communities can achieve in the absence of income growth. Can such programs be effective in communities with stagnating or contracting economies? Some observers think they can. In Zimbabwe, with its collapsing economy and a raging HIV/AIDS epidemic, an Ecumenical Church Loan Fund (ECLOF) program, backed up with community guarantees, seems to be successful in mitigating the condition of families with AIDS sufferers (Bueno de Faria 2007). In all plausibility, the relationship between empowerment and growth is complex. In Brazil, for example, a country in which economic growth overall played a small role in poverty reduction, worker empowerment seems to have been instrumental in "*translating .. growth into poverty reduction*" (rather than the other way round) (Ferreira, Leite et al. 2007: 6). In South Africa, with its post-apartheid history not meeting the economic aspirations of many poor people, empowerment and growth have occasionally been viewed in opposition to each other (Khosa 2001). Our study cannot decide these weighty issues, but a feeling remains that the programs in Tanzania and Cambodia were successful in part because their participants were riding a wave of economic growth that lifted more boats than their official narratives would have.

Persistence of empowerment effects

Sustainable development has been defined as development that resolves conflicts among economic growth, social justice and the protection of the environment. In language closer to project management, it is measured by "*the continuation of benefits after major assistance from the donor has been completed*" (Young and Hamshire 2000). "Sustainable empowerment", not surprisingly, has been added to the empowerment literature; the term has been used in very different quarters. They range from the President of the Republic of Tanzania (Mkapa 2005: in the context of land rights), to many shades of development activists, to the South African mining giant De Beers claiming to make "*a truly broad based, sustainable empowerment*

transaction for the benefit of our partners, our employees, communities, De Beers and the economy” (De Beers 2005). We mention the De Beers claim both for the extremes of the ideological spectrum that “sustainable empowerment” straddles and for its technical side; the company defined a precise ownership structure within which it holds separate trusts from disadvantaged women, persons with disabilities, and communities (ibid.:6). This underlines an important point for the discussion of the study programs: the difference between the benefits of empowerment and the organizational structure supposed to produce them after graduation.

It was mentioned earlier that LWF Cambodia has gathered experience with graduated communities within the empowerment program, and that the continuous strong performance of local communities in a drought rehabilitation project has an important place in the sustainability narratives of TCRS. Before we further detail findings of the study on the graduated communities in Cambodia, a common achievement needs to be emphasized that augurs well for persistent organizational bases of empowerment.

More and more specific leadership roles

In both Tanzania and Cambodia, the empowerment programs have succeeded in re-specifying village leadership roles. In Tanzania, TCRS trainings and TCRS-supported projects revived village council sub-committees, imbuing them with real life. In Cambodia, village development committees are supported (and, one may think, occasionally challenged) by a considerable variety of community-based and civil society organizations: village banks, water point, school, forest, disaster management committees; health and advocacy networks; farmer field schools. The re-specification of an initially undifferentiated councilor or civic participant role into a diversity of technically defined specific roles cannot be taken for granted (its smooth functioning in closely knit village societies is rather improbable in evolutionary perspective); it was made possible by resource flows during the empowerment program and will depend on such flows later. But the fact that relatively complex responsibilities can be assigned to a differentiated set of committees and roles points to a social ecology in which persistent empowerment arrangements and their effects can be expected with a degree of optimism.

[Sidebar:] The vision of our village in ten years, and working for it now

“The capacity to aspire” is a crucial motivational basis of sustainable empowerment. Tanzanian village councilors, when asked what kind of village community they anticipated to be part of ten years later, would initially offer “more of the same kind” answers. Most believed that their village by then would enjoy additional or improved infrastructure and higher education levels. Many thought that within these ten years the quality of community services would also go up. The small dispensary would be upgraded to a health center, and one well supplied with drugs. Good roads and connections to the electric grid were very important.

Most of the envisioned changes were formulated in project terms although a few councilors referred to more universal standards of a good life, such as food security and education for all. Visions of the community becoming attractive for the young generation to stay or even for migrants to return were not spontaneously offered. When asked what it would take to convince the young that they had a future in their villages, employment creation was seen as the primary means. For this purpose, electricity was vital; it would favor local agro-based processing industries. Remarkably, councilors in one village (Runyaga Village Council 2007) did not see outmigration of the young as a problem: *“If our children leave, this is not*

necessarily a loss. New immigrants can come; they will benefit the community as well". These councilors placed a high value on education; they wanted not only a secondary school, but also a high school, to be added over the next ten years. One may assume that the strong demand for secondary education is motivated in part by the desire to see one's children succeed in urban labor markets. In other words, here and everywhere, community empowerment is propelled also by individual mobility aspirations.

Regardless of the detail and plausibility of such visions, in the here-and-now village councils have to manage projects. The ability to invent projects, mobilize around them and see them through, increasingly without help from TCRS, is a sure measure of empowerment. Thus, when the chairman of Chanika, a 5,000-population village in Karagwe, declared that he was negotiating with the World Bank, we turned hot-red curious to hear his story (Chanika village council chairman and SACCOS officers 2007).

"In our long-term plan, which we developed in a very participatory manner", explained Mr. Damian Kafanabo, "improving the village water supply was the next priority to be tackled. We submitted a project plan to the district government and initiated a village water fund. We also invited the NGO EAPS [acronym could not be verified] to connect us to potential donors; they brought us in touch with the Japanese embassy. The embassy sent water technicians for a first survey, which was carried out through the district council. The council told us to boost our fund to TSh. 3 million [approx. US\$ 2,300]. The design from the survey was forwarded to the Ministry of Water Development, which in turn contacted the World Bank. So far we have collected TSh. 850,000 [US\$ 660] – slowly because for a long time the project was not approved. Now that it has been approved, the contributions will pick up; I hope to collect the balance by January 2008. We will then need to send the district a bank statement, which will trigger the go-ahead for the first phase of the project. The government is to provide TSh. 58 million [US\$ 45,000] for this. The exact type of structures to build, though, has not yet been determined; we were told that another technical survey was required".

The story is open-ended; we do not know how much time went by since the original plan submission, and how much more it will take until the first drop of drinking water flows out of the new system. But the committee obviously is staying on the ball; there is no lack of self-assurance in the professed link to the World Bank. Moreover, Chanika was not taking charge of its development in isolation from other villages; Kafanabo and other councilors felt that its savings and credit cooperative (SACCOS) would be joined by all households and would eventually serve some of the surrounding villages as well.

The conversation offered also a dramatic retrospective on the empowerment process in Chankika. *"Under our first three-year plan, 2002-2004", Kafanabo pointed out, "the village built its first primary school. And today, as we speak, the first batch of its students are sitting for the national exams"*.

An empirical test of sustainability

The situation of partner communities and households from which LWF Cambodia withdrew in 2002 merits a somewhat detailed summary; the Cossar report (Cossar 2005) is the only documented study of graduated communities within these two country programs. LWF had been working in the two provinces of Takeo and Kandal for a long time (since 1981); the shift from supporting public institutions to a community based program was made following an external evaluation in 1994 (ibid.: 15). The empowerment program evolved over two planning and monitoring document (PMD) periods from 1996 to 2002 and gave way to a three year accompaniment phase during which capacity building measures were to consolidate the prior achievements. It benefited 25 village communities with a combined population of 18,000; they were phased out by the end of 2002. Cossar revisited them two years later.

In terms of the sustained functioning of critical networks and decision making bodies, she found that in all the 25 villages the development committees continued their work. Meetings were held regularly; the committees conducted annual self-assessments and updated their development plans. Several were successful in obtaining external funds. The villages coordinated their plans with the commune council, which has proven to be a powerful player with enough resources to support some of the village projects (ibid.: 8, 10).

Similarly, all village banks kept operating. In fact, they increased business after graduation, and most saw membership growth as well. They faced shortages of capital, however, and were unable to extend the kinds of larger loans that some members wanted. Community facilities such as roads, schools, canals continued to operate and generally were well maintained. There have also been a number of institutional simplifications. Most village libraries were discarded over the inability to procure new books. The work of formerly separate road maintenance groups was folded back into the village development committees (ibid.: 8, 9, 11, 12).

The involvement of the poorest households has a more mixed record. Many are not seen participating in project activities; this is laid down to their being too busy surviving. Some are members in village banks, but are feared as poor loan risks; loans given them have been limited for that reason (ibid.: 12-13). The report does not assess the activism of village development committee members in relating to the poorest household and in initiating, assisting and assessing their household development plan.

Unbroken vigor in village committees and communes

Overall, the dynamism of the communities previously supported in the Takeo – Kandal empowerment program seems to be unbroken, and in fact, has grown at the village committee and commune levels. The findings related to the poorest households are less clear and, from what transpires, appear more subdued. Cossar was careful to point out that between phasing out and her visit village committees had not been reelected. The consequences of succession will be an important aspect of sustainability. A re-study of these communities is foreseen in early 2008 (Mueller 2008) and may shed a fresh light on this question.

An important trend to look into is the growth or decline of relational assets. During the intensive phase in the empowerment program, village communities accumulated relations capital by adding more community based organizations or filling existing ones with new life. These organizations, plus their development committees, work in a network through which they access each others' resources and those of outside agencies. These relational assets are likely to dissipate over time, through member exit, business losses, or decrease in outside funding, unless they can be renewed through new partners and profitable ventures. The ability to do so can be seen as a measure of persistent empowerment.

Moving out or moving up?

The last section dealt with the classic situation of phasing-out and the subsequent test of sustainability. The development agency, after assisting communities during an intensive program phase, withdraws its staff and most or all types of support. The communities are on their own; if they know to continue program benefits and the organizational arrangements that produce them, we call the program sustainable. In

the terms of the LWF Cambodia and TCRS programs, communities are then effectively empowered to take care of their own development.

This appear to be the default expectation towards development programs, and all the more so towards empowerment programs, with their declared intention to transfer power and capacity for groups and individuals to do things on their own. Pressures to phase out and move on to new villages and even entirely new regions are built from outside as well, by donors, hitherto unassisted communities and political entities. TCRS, for example, feels political pressure to start work in villages not so far touched within its empowerment program districts (TCRS senior staff 2007).

Rationales for phasing out and for staying on

Apart from funding pressures, which are all too real, the rationales for phasing out may be less compelling than the naive reading of the empowerment concept implies. Phasing out almost certainly entails a loss of relations capital useful in policy advocacy, and even for issue advocacy in neighboring communities and regions. Also lost is the testing ground for longer-term policy effects if the old units can no longer be observed. For a different example from the LWF ambit, RDRS Bangladesh can be mentioned. One of the great advantages of its compact working area, with its contiguous 260 communes (known as “Unions”), has always been the familiarity with long-term developments despite projects and programs changing in brief rhythms. Some of its landless laborer groups, who in the eighties went through functional literacy courses, are nowadays members of union federations that run their own small training programs with a few computers.

Instead of moving out, should empowerment programs move up? This would mean providing new types of services, possibly to a different set of local actors, but within the same established program areas. In a certain measure, this is what already happened in the transition from integrated rural development to empowerment programs. LWF Cambodia, for example, now focusing on empowerment, would coordinate more strongly with the other, sector-specific NGOs, whose presence slowly increased.

Ideas for moving up

In 2007, during preparations for a new country strategy that involved prospecting for potential new project regions, LWF Cambodia noticed that not as many highly vulnerable communities were left untouched by development as it had expected (Sam 2007b). The rationale for leaving old project areas suddenly appeared weaker. Perhaps for that reason, a stronger readiness could be felt to explore ideas for moving up, not out, in LWF Cambodia than in TCRS. Although at the time of this study, those ideas were vague and far from action plans, they each came with its own mini-rationale drawn from previous empowerment experience:

- From primary to secondary education: Many of the partner villages now have primary schools that serve a large part of the children. Not every village has its own secondary school, and effective arrangements for students to continue education require the development of a system addressing several issues together.

- From small loans that village banks make out to larger ones that so far only financial institutions offer: Village banks are self-controlled institutions, but they are capital-poor and cannot easily cater to the financial needs of borrowers with growing businesses. Moreover, the very poor are considered bad risks. The increasingly diverse needs and capacities of village finance need more work.
- Seeing land titling process through: There are policies and programs in place, but they fall short of the huge needs for secure, undisputed title. Village communities make their own efforts, such as by drafting land distribution plans, but systems are needed to bring those and the concerned state agencies together, navigating a very conflictual field.
- Agricultural marketing: LWF seems potential in fostering alternative marketing channels and has commissioned expertise in this.

Whatever mixes of those and other ideas might eventually be stirred together, the overarching motive for moving up, rather than out, is to capitalize on the existing empowerment momentum. This means innovating procedures and systems in areas not yet covered and having an impact in new areas of policy and issue advocacy. Such potentials are not entirely lacking in TCRS and among its partner communities. There may be a rationale, for example, to further upgrade village council competencies. The need exists in the Tanzanian decentralization and accountability context; it would call for an additional leadership training syllabus in budget tracking, community-based monitoring, fund-raising, saving skills, civic education, networking, coalition building. TCRS feels that the relatively large councilor turnover at elections would make a second-tier governance approach, apart from occasional trainings on new initiatives such as expenditure tracking, inefficient. It was more important to concentrate on new villages and on more of the marginalized people (Shija 2007b: ; TCRS senior staff 2007).

Missing link to the scaling-up debate

The concept of moving up may be foreign to the world of empowerment because customarily few links have been made between it and the concept of scaling up. In a rare exception, Binswanger and Aiyar (2003) describe several community-driven development programs that were scaled up massively. For instance, they qualify as “empowerment” the municipal development fund program extended to 2,300 Mexican municipalities in the 1990s. This was a government program; the same authors plus, with a special turn, Uvin et al. (2000) add successful scaling-up stories from the NGO world. In “Think Large and Act Small”, Uvin et al. make the case that NGOs can and should scale up, less by expanding coverage and size, and more by diversifying activities and broadening indirect influence.

[Sidebar:] What does it cost to empower a village?

In 2007, the Battambang project of the LWF Cambodia was active in 56 villages with an estimated population of 67,834. 13 of these villages had given themselves a “D” grade for “empowered capacity” in more than one of the latest annual self-assessments and thus could be considered to be in the three-year accompaniment phase that follows graduation. The other 43 villages were in the intensive program phase, with grades, A, B, C or even a first-time D. It is estimated that the average village stays in the intensive phase – from A to first-time D – for six years.

LWF allocated to this project total costs of US\$ 900,209 for 2007, slightly less than in the two previous years. This figure includes a \$39,190 charge for country headquarters cost and \$313,120 in mine clearance costs. Mine clearance is essential for these villages to return to normalcy; yet it is not a typical cost in empowerment programs elsewhere.

Assuming that villages in accompaniment receive half the amount of staff time that villages in earlier phases do, and do not receive village infrastructure subsidies, the total cost of supporting one village through a nine-year empowerment career, at 2007 Battambang rates, works out in this estimate:

Table 14: The cost of empowering one village

Total cost of nine-year program stay			
Cost category	Per village		Per resident
Village infrastructure and facilities	\$	7,484	\$ 6.18
Other village subsidies	\$	4,905	\$ 4.05
Personnel and staff training	\$	32,395	\$ 26.74
Project operations	\$	10,556	\$ 8.71
Headquarter allocation	\$	3,923	\$ 3.24
Total (without mine clearance)	\$	59,264	\$ 48.92
Mine clearance	\$	31,700	\$ 26.17

The total cost incurred per resident of a program village, over nine years, thus is close to US\$ 50. About one fifth of this amount passes through the village in subsidized infrastructure, other materials and training. About four fifths are consumed in program operations, including for the intensive field staff cost.

Chapter summary

In considering the achievements of the LWF Cambodia and TCRS programs, it is reasonable to conclude that the community empowerment processes have largely been successful, at least in the mobilization of communities to take their development into their own hands. Skeptics might argue that many of the changes credited to the programs would have occurred regardless, as part of larger-scale transformations that were firmly underway, but at least in Tanzania, where we share this skepticism openly, the bottomline in the partner villages was that the work of TCRS accelerated the changes if it did not directly cause them.

A successful initial mobilization does not imply that the empowerment will be sustainable in the longer term. For this to happen, an appropriate institutional framework needs to be in place (Alberts, Milimo et al. 2006: 331). The LWF's "Guiding Principles for Sustainable Development" recognize institutional sustainability as a precondition (LWF 2002: 14, para 67); if they emphasize it in terms of the LWF's own programs and institutions, the Tanzanian and Cambodian empowerment experience points also to the national environment, particularly the decentralization programs that take resource decisions closer to the communities. Political stability and economic growth in those two contexts manifestly have been strong enablers; whether they are necessary conditions everywhere for empowerment to work is undecided.

Only in a very limited degree did the two countries visited offer experience that one would call a test of sustainability. The study of 25 Cambodian villages phased out in

2002 virtually provides the only somewhat stringent test. It suggests that strong empowerment effects persist in communes and villages. The empowerment of the poorest households seems more muted. TCRS has not yet graduated any of its partner villages in the empowerment program, but the strong mobilization of village councils over more than one plan period makes it seem unlikely that these communities would collapse back into a low-energy state of few projects and no longer-term plans.

Empowerment seems to imply, almost by definition, that the change agent should withdraw once the process becomes self-propelling. However, at closer look, rationales for phasing-out successful partners appear less compelling than naive sustainability concepts would have it. There may be potentials for novel empowering collaborations that advocate “moving up” rather than “moving out”. The logic is similar to that of the NGO “scaling up” debate, emphasizing the value of innovation, diversification and indirect effects. LWF Cambodia has started to deliberate some such ideas. Sustainable empowerment, then, can be reconceptualized, not as diminishing program interventions, but rather as scaling them up, bringing in new groups, and letting old ones play new roles.

Outlook: Does Empowerment Work?

Empowerment works. Such is the impression that the mostly qualitative, but dense and consistent evidence gathered in two LWF-related programs create. That is, it works at least to the extent that the programs carried out, in poor rural communities and among some of their poorest households, an initial mobilization focused on self-assertive and planned improvements. The evidence from both levels concurs to say that the empowerment claims are justified, for villages as much as for households.

These grassroots achievements notwithstanding, one must not take the long-term success of community empowerment approaches for granted. At several levels above the community, a very dynamic mesh of factors is at work that may invigorate or stymie them, in constellations that are barely foreseeable. The dynamics of decentralization policies and of the financial streams that they direct towards local communities cannot be predicted in general patterns. Where they dry up or become politically perverted, important incentives for community mobilization wither.

A more predictable effect is to be expected higher up in the aid chain. Development cooperation is notorious for the instability of its semantics (sometimes called “development fashions”). To the extent that the LWF and other empowerment strategies rely on international support, they will have to constantly compete for the attention and recognition of agencies for whom “empowerment” may be only one among several leading values or policies. It may not be the master frame in which they place their public causes. The robustness of empowerment approaches to the turbulence of development and aid philosophies, therefore, is an important element in answering “*Does it work?*”

This chapter wants to achieve two things. First, although program environments are vastly different between the two study programs, a number of strategies contributed positively in both, so much so that they are worthy of careful consideration in other contexts. We review key points here, reminding the reader that for the evidential base the previous chapters offer much greater detail. Second, up to a point, we branch back to the initial theoretical expositions and offer a small number of considerations, of rather speculative nature, as to the likely robustness of the empowerment approach as a strategic element of an international organization like LWF.

Grassroots strategies that work

Work at several tiers, focus on two

The Cambodia and Tanzania empowerment programs intervene at more than one level. The two tiers at which most of the attention and investments are aimed are the key village decision-making body and the households. Both programs emphasize the possibility that village and household can and must be empowered in parallel although the relative weights differ. LWF Cambodia and TCRS entertain different theories as to how the empowerment of one and the other tier will create its own momentum. While neither theory has yet passed a cogent test, having some theory of community change may be indispensable in order to orient expectations of program success. In fact, Friedman, the seminal author who introduced empowerment to the development

field, implies (op.cit., 1992: chapter 7) that empowerment programs need a theory of *political* change to guide them.

Beyond village development committees and village councils, beyond also the partner households and marginalized, the programs work at higher tiers and with other organizations of the village society. Collaboration with sub-district (commune) and district councils is fruitful where ongoing decentralization programs create opportunities for villages to tap into financial streams and into human resources. In Cambodia, such arrangements have been formalized in the integrated district plans; in Tanzania the emphasis is more on individual village projects and the portions to which communities, districts and TCRS underwrite them.

This points to the need to carefully assess the mechanisms through which village communities and governments interface, and the latitude that they leave for communities to define their problems, make plans to solve them, and control the implementation. Inside the local community, the program must obtain the cooperation of the village elite in ways that secure a space for working with the poorest. In Cambodia and Tanzania, this space was conceded, although one cannot say whether in situations with less widespread income growth or less political stability it would be much narrower³⁹.

Community-based organizations

Part of the manifest success in empowering communities and individuals is due to broadening organizational capacity beyond the one central decision making body in the village. It is not possible to designate any particular sub-type of community-based organizations as the most critical for sustained empowerment, but grassroots – as opposed to commercial – savings and credit associations appear to be in great demand and even capable of building support for the empowerment program with the village middle class. That the poorest are bad risks in their eyes, and that there are good projects that should be expanded at a faster pace than the local savings capacity permits, are two limitations on which more work is needed. The patterns of local capacity and the institutional environments of community finance may defy generalization, but most empowerment programs will work with people who seek better arrangements for safe deposits, reserve-building, emergency aid and debt-financed enterprise growth. To a degree, the Tanzania and Cambodia programs have shown that those needs can be met apace with community mobilization.

It appears that in working with the twins of village and household the programs have found their comfort zone in which they are competent and effective, and above and below which engagements fill auxiliary functions. Within the household, the focus on specific positions is generally a function of institutional requirements, such as the

³⁹ It would be of more than theoretical interest to provide a detailed analysis, at the occasion of next program evaluation in LWF Cambodia and in TCRS, of how subsidies for community-level services and asset-transfers to households participating in the empowerment program compare, and how the poorest households use the community services. When TCRS supports a village with a million TSh., what is the value of the hand tools, small irrigation pumps, seeds etc. that it donates to the 250 standard intake of marginalized persons, and is there a correlation between the investment in facilities and the volume of income-generating activities sponsored among the poorest? Although the evidence suggests that both work hand in hand, one would like to know the relationship in more precise terms, given the length and cost of these programs.

schooling of children (including support for very poor families to keep their children in school), or income-earning programs that small groups of women undertake. On the other hand, the programs in Cambodia and Tanzania clearly do focus on the empowerment of women. This cannot be phrased as a within-household selection issue (even though practically such selections do take place, for example, when women come together for their own adult literacy classes); it is an endeavor that upholds the rights of the oppressed and the gender equity concerns of the global and country strategies.

The community as the congenial field

Above the village, the engagement is more than just opportunistic; the two-way advocacy efforts that these programs support necessarily pass through ward / commune, district and provincial administrations. However, all along the programs remain *community* empowerment programs, not administrative support or reform programs, despite the currently fashionable (and substantively justified) concerns with local-central relations and public expenditure tracking (Richard 2003: ; Kallonga, Connelly et al. 2007). While the double focus on communities and households may hold the key to initial success, later on the dynamics of mobilization may advocate greater engagement at other levels. There may be novel opportunities at the level of individuals (e.g., girls' secondary education) or at the interface between community and district (training in project planning and budgeting). The LWF is a church organization, and as such the interactional field that is the most congenial is the one between the local community and its households. This may not be the golden rule for all empowerment programs. In fact, even certain LWF field programs, notably in Central America, strongly support efforts for organized groups of the poor to federate above the local communities (Moeller 2007).

Stages of empowerment

During the design phase for this study, the LWF strongly expected it to yield standards in the time dimension, particularly with regards to phasing out empowerment programs. In the periodic evaluations of the Tanzania and Cambodia programs, one finds a sprinkling of recommendations about the appropriate length of program involvement – generally between five and ten years for villages. Rationales for any particularly short or long optimal period are not apparent in those reports.

The criteria, and their consistent application, of *deciding* program inclusion and program phases are more important than universal prescriptions. LWF Cambodia and TCRS use a process of multi-level expert judgments to adopt certain local communities, and to delay or exclude the adoption of others. However, such expert processes are not specific of empowerment programs; here as for other types of programs, they call for adequate consultation and diligent background research, hardly anything more. As far as we know, other, non-expert led processes, with less participation (e.g. top-down rapid assessments) or more (e.g. through a political process driven by party rivalry), have not been a topic in community selection in the study programs. But the conflict between outside expertise and local control does show up also in empowerment programs (Walker, Jones et al. 2007).

There are other choices available in the methods of selecting partner households within the village community. We have seen that TCRS uses household survey methods for the purpose while LWF Cambodia engages the community in a wealth

ranking exercise the results of which are then corroborated with interviews by its fieldworkers. There is no intrinsically greater wisdom in either method⁴⁰. However, in comparing the selection effort in TCRS and in LWF Cambodia, the information economics of full household census fares poorly against the nimbleness and selective follow-up of the wealth ranking / candidate interview approach. Most NGOs in poor countries – and one would expect this to be true of LWF programs - do not have the analytic capacity to conduct and use large surveys. Selection methods should remain reasonably fast and nimble.

Self-assessment vs. curricula

Decisions on how to move communities and households along the empowerment road come due repeatedly after the initial selection. How should the participants transition from one stage to the next while in the intensive phase of the program? We saw that the two programs follow contrasting approaches, with LWF Cambodia stimulating an intricate self-assessment process and TCRS applying a curricular framework, although practical necessities make the differences less categorical than those terms suggest. In the perspective of empowerment, naturally, one is tempted to prefer an approach that lets communities and households determine their own speed. But one needs to keep in mind that the Cambodian village self-assessment process, while a considerable intellectual and social achievement, relies on a measure of conceptual complexity *and* field staff intensity that other programs may not be able to afford. The curricular approach of TCRS, while less immediately empowering, has the advantage of stability. It firmly scaffolds the cooperation among community, a host of relatively lowly qualified volunteers (animators) and few field staff. Basic curricula - for village councils, partner households and for special associations such as village banks -, with clearly marked transition points and promotion criteria, may prove more effective in sparse administrative environments.

Phasing-out, but how?

Towards the end of the road, when it comes to phasing out communities and households, the two programs again demonstrate how similar empowerment philosophies can result in different practical approaches. The TCRS approach assumes an external observer (TCRS!) who applies his own measurement (household surveys) and a program standard (60 percent of enrolled households economically self-reliant) to determine the point of village graduation. LWF Cambodia invests the decision in the community itself and lets it use the self-assessment tool with which it is already familiar. Here the discrepancy is between the speed of the village (it tends to reach level “D” sooner) and that of the poor households, which may trail behind.

Phasing out is an imperative of the aid system, sweetened in the image of sustainable development. In the local perspective, this is hardly satisfactory. The very success of empowerment creates new opportunities, and some of these have the potential to move communities and individuals *up*, rather than *out*. Phasing out communities, or even entire clusters such as those in Takeo and Kandal in Cambodia, deprives the country program of considerable human and relations capital. As long as the communities stay in the empowerment program, these assets can be leveraged for new

⁴⁰ The idea that more participatory methods necessarily ensure a greater poverty orientation has not been universally supported. For an example of a bureaucratic alternative producing stronger pro-poor bias, see Savale (2006).

types of activities. Field staff see this clearly although the programs may respond differently. LWF Cambodia is deliberating “moving up” rationales such as in agricultural marketing or land titling support. TCRS' reading by and large is that the needs of other villages are pressing for a replication of the empowerment program to new communities rather than for its upgrading in the current ones. In a more general formulation, the strategic challenge is to identify those achievements that promise to propel the empowerment agenda onto paths of enhancement and scaling up.

This enumeration of success factors, distilled from a tiny number of observed programs, is highly contingent. In Cambodia as well as in Tanzania, the programs have found a political and social space liberal enough to practice an empowerment agenda. Absent such conditions, the same factors and strategies will likely not work, or in small degree only.

The concept in a global perspective

Finally, the interaction that we observed between empowerment and the other two strategic approaches - rights and integration – helps us to build a bridge between the local and the global. In the rights sphere, the most dramatic changes have come from those persons and groups who, as a result of participating in the empowerment programs, came to understand that they have rights. “The right to have rights” has been saluted in almost all communities we visited as the one great discovery that separates a dark past from an enlightened present and even better future.

One can conclude that the creation of a basic awareness of human rights should be mandated for the contents of empowerment programs. Building on that foundation and the dynamic it sets off in historically oppressed groups, specific human rights and their counterpart duties can be pursued through the advocacy practice that empowerment programs create and reinforce.

Companion concepts, but not equals

Just as importantly, we note that the empowerment perspective can be linked to a rights semantic. This is chiefly a human-rights semantic, and as such one that commands a central place in today’s global order (Sjoberg, Gill et al. 2001). Not accidentally, many or most of LWF’s partner agencies have reformulated their development philosophies in terms of human rights.

But the advantages that a close alliance with human rights has for the empowerment approach may depend on a number of external factors. To begin with, there is no guarantee that the two approaches are treated everywhere on the same equal footing as they are in the LWF Global Strategy. Donor agencies, one would assume, may assign human rights a superior place, above empowerment, for a variety of reasons. In terms of the former, they can relate to international law and to governments (some of which are their backdonors) that have signed human rights treaties. They can more comfortably relate to normative documents and, as far as field experience with rights-based program goes, to summaries, without bothering about the kind of micro-level data that remain indispensable for the measurement of empowerment effects.

Empowerment itself has not been developed as an international regime. Therefore, if the programs that they support perform poorly, agencies cannot assign blame to “empowerment violations” by other parties – an incentive for skepticism and lesser

identification. This is speculative – one may claim with equal plausibility that donor agencies are filled with people who have worked in developing nations and thus feel a personal affinity towards empowerment ideas -, but it is one of the risks that may assail the standing of empowerment approaches in the longer run.

Empowerment as a risky commitment

So far, except for organizational risk, these considerations have taught us little new beyond the earlier pages on the connection with rights (pages 49 sqq). For the LWF, the risk appears minor, in the sense that it can, if it so wishes, report the same field activities under any of the strategic headings – empowerment, rights, or integrated approach -, with only minor “cut and paste” effort. That the protean fluidity which allows us to instantly commute an empowered person into a successful rights claimant or fully participating program beneficiary might ultimately inspire boredom or suspicion is part of the risk.

The relationship with the integrated approach too is fraught with risks. We have speculated earlier (page 54) that modern communication technology – mobile phones, the Internet – may facilitate a renaissance of integrated rural development programs, by solving coordination issues on which earlier versions foundered. However, similar developments will expose integrated programs to greater efficiency pressures. It took years of empowerment work by the LWF to produce the first estimate of what it costs to empower one village community (page 145). Compare that to other, more aggressive initiatives, such as in international health: no sooner have mosquito-killing bednets begun mass distribution than return on investment calculations appear (Economist 2007b). In a culture of rapid follow-up to occupy attention space, empowerment programs embedded in complex multi-sectoral programs may face the dilemma of seeing only quantifiable elements taken into account or of appearing slow, opaque and resisting evaluation.

Moreover, just as mobile telephony as a single and singularly successful technology changes the environment of empowerment programs, other technological breakthroughs too might radically affect the relationship with rights and integrated approaches. Microfinance as a social technology illustrates the case. The Cambodia and Tanzania programs have proceeded cautiously in helping communities expand access to loans, for fear of crippling self-help efforts. In the villages of both programs the scale and pace of microfinance were much milder than in, say, Bangladesh, where make-or-break competition among providers forced NGOs to reconfigure their programs for the poorest. The commercial relationship between the NGO as lender and the poor household as borrower is open to efficiency perspectives, but hardly merits the name “empowerment program”. Stipulating a “right to credit” for the poor, as some (including Bangladesh’s Grameen Bank) do, will likely introduce new contradictions in the relationship among the three approaches (Hudon 2007). Who would have the duty and capability to provide credit to all in need, who the responsibility to repair unintended consequences such as debt traps?

Brokers mitigate risks

From the grassroots, these risks are easy to illustrate with examples. We saw, to recall just one, the difficulty of determining the level of technical expertise that empowerment programs need to maintain internally. The right choice is the one that

lets them remain competent for integrated needs delivery and at the same time nimble enough to focus on social mobilization and advocacy, but it is not straightforward.

The point here is that similar risks follow the empowerment approach to the macro level. In the national and international arenas, empowerment is only one of many competing conceptual frames in which actors promote agendas affecting the poor and oppressed. There are many others, some different in words, emphases and tactics, others antithetic to empowerment. What guarantees that empowerment continues to resonate well with important audiences?

In such situations, a resource that we have not yet discussed matters a lot. This is the ability of organizations and movements that subscribe to empowerment to generate effective “ideational brokers”⁴¹. These are people and mechanisms that translate between policy networks, interest communities and even larger publics. The brokers’ effectiveness depends on finding the right ideas, language and rationales to legitimize empowerment programs, actors and outlays – what social movement theorists call “frames”.

For example, the formula that LWF Cambodia coined – “Empower the vulnerable, enlighten the powerful!” – provides a strong, yet flexible *idée directrice*. Under its umbrella empowerment programs can be attractive both to the advocates of the poor and oppressed and to members of the elite who care about the legitimacy of their rule. Since it promises the powerful more wisdom rather than less power, it makes empowerment appear less threatening. It builds bridges to other discourses such as good governance or rule of law.

At an even higher level, the World Bank has elevated empowerment to an equal footing with growth in its poverty reduction strategy (Stern, Dethier et al. 2005: op.cit.). Whether this is ideological masquerading, a genuine reorientation paid for with projects and budgets, or a deadly embrace of critics, is a question, but the Banks’ ideational brokerage has changed the prominence and acceptance of the empowerment discourse.

The expansion of civil society worldwide has multiplied the arenas in which ideational brokers can work, but it also has created many more whose voices tend to drown each other out. In a rich-nation example of empowerment, Archibald (2007) demonstrated how the self-help movement grew from small beginnings into an institutional realm of its own right. Albeit very diverse, its organizations recognized the need for medical, academic, popular and political recognition; and many developed strategies of legitimation with their own sets of ideational brokers.

In empowerment networks that span international centers as well as peripheries of the global society, the social distances between power nodes and the poorest members are necessarily larger. This has consequences for the brokers of empowerment frames. An example is the difficulty to document a multitude of small local successes in a grand global strategy when the standards of “evidence-based” policy-making are led by other institutions and contexts. The challenges of building adequate monitoring systems in LWF Cambodia and in TCRS illustrate it well.

⁴¹ We borrow the term from Campbell (2004: 105), to whom we return on the next page.

Forces pulling on the concept

Yet these brokers operate in a fairly constant basic structure. In an intriguing chapter on “The Problem of Ideas” in globalization, Campbell (op.cit., 94) developed a scheme to differentiate the influence that master concepts such as empowerment wield. He combines the well-known pair “cognitive / normative” with the distinction “foreground concepts / background assumptions”. We use the ensuing four-field table and populate it, *in italics*, with some suppositions on empowerment.

Table 15: Campbell’s typology of ideas and their effects on policy, applied to empowerment

	Concepts and theories in the foreground of the debate	Underlying assumptions in the background of the debate
	Programs	Paradigms
	Ideas as prescriptions that chart a clear course of action	Ideas as assumptions that constrain the range of useful programs
Cognitive (outcome oriented)	<i>Example: Mobilization is decomposable in organizations, budgets, curricula</i>	<i>Example: Sustainability demands phasing out, more important than scaling up</i>
	Frames	Public sentiments
	Ideas as concepts that legitimize programs	Ideas as assumptions that constrain the range of legitimate programs
Normative (non-outcome oriented)	<i>Example: Justice is universal; social exclusion is a long-term security risk</i>	<i>Example: Projects should focus on tangibles, not on organization</i>

Note: Adapted from Campbell (2004: 94)

The examples are just that – examples – and claim no greater importance than other ideas that might find a home in one or the other of the four cells. The table points to a common plight that empowerment shares with others in the market for ideas. Each comes with numerous components and associations; some of these energize, others constrain. Some are easier to adjust when reality disappoints, others have staying power in the face of adversity or better alternatives.

How will empowerment fare in the longer run? We predict that it will always need to travel with companions. Most of these will wear out the friendship and part company, some at unpredictable crossroads. But empowerment will stubbornly return and embark on further journeys, winning new friends, and perhaps using multiple passports with different names.

The sociological intuition behind the group travel analogy is simple, perhaps too simplistic. “Empowerment” is so rich in meanings that it calls for additional selections to break its circular references and to document some in credible practices. Other major frames – “the poor have rights”, “people have multiple needs”, “all can learn”, and possibly others – join empowerment in programs that provide such selections. Some of these become successful, with a different circularity that no longer needs empowerment on its signboards. Microfinance is a classic example. It

began as declared empowerment; now it is run as commercial operations. However, sooner or later, issues of exclusion and powerlessness resurface, some maybe exacerbated by empowerment's former fellow travelers. Issues of distribution and redistribution, including of power, come to the fore. Around cleavages in society, groups will respond; some will make power explicit and put out calls for empowerment. Programmatic ideas will be advanced, funded and translated into practice. A new journey begins.

Empowerment: The poor upholding the rights of the poor

As a conclusion, sociological speculation about the longevity of the empowerment concept would not be satisfactory. That there is a struggle between the forces of empowerment and those that threaten to blot it out is easily understood. The local communities that come together in empowerment programs have their own words for it, as illustrated by a conversation to which we were privy in Tanzania.

It took place in a meeting of representatives from two villages, both assisted by TCRS (Councilors from Kirusha and Murutabu villages 2007). To everyone's surprise, the initial, fairly ritualistic enumeration of local projects sparked a heated debate as to whether poverty in Africa could at best be reduced, or could be eliminated altogether.

This went on for quite a while, and with a speed and animation that defied complete translation. At one point, a councilor commented: "*The marginalized are born every day.*"

We do not know what exactly her position was in the debate, but the idea may have been of an equilibrium that can be shifted, by the efforts of programs like TCRS', in one or the other direction, but can never lead to an entirely dominant position.

Her view was not contested, but some one else pointed out that "*the marginalized are now literate, they can count money, they claim their rights, they even defend others*". This seemed a way of saying that they behave differently, and things will not likely ever be what they were before.

We can reformulate this statement, but cannot surpass in its profundity:

There has been conceptual as well as personal change (the literate poor), participation in economic growth (money in hand, well managed), and an extension of a larger normative sphere (rights actively claimed). Finally, and most rewardingly in all that, poor people have joined the good fight to uphold the rights of other poor.

Appendices

Note on methodology

What is the basis of the findings presented in this study? How did we work, what were our sources? Unlike research that starts with a theoretically derived model, then determines the data needs to test the model, then designs instruments to collect the specific data, this study refined its questions and found persons, documents and databases able to answer many of them as it proceeded.

If a category is needed, then this is a two-case study of a particular type of program – community empowerment – operated by organizations affiliated with an international development NGO. One of the organizations is the country program in Cambodia, directly managed by the LWF. The other, the TCRS in Tanzania, is a legally independent national NGO in an associated-program status with the LWF. Both organizations produced considerable documentation on their empowerment programs. These documents are one of the important sources of information for this study, besides other documents from the LWF head office, notably the Global Strategy 2007-2012, which speak to empowerment issues that concern all its international programs.

Major sources

The focus of the study is on insights and experience that ultimately are to guide standards for empowerment programs. This experience is chiefly the one made by the partners of the empowerment programs, the village communities and poor families mobilized and supported by them. Three sources were extensively used:

- Conversations of variable formality were held with staff members in the Geneva World Service office, the two country head offices, two district offices in Cambodia, four in Tanzania, as well as those working in or near villages.
- With some of them, data produced by the program monitoring system, the procedures used to elicit and process the (mostly non-financial) data needed for donor reporting and program planning, was reviewed and in small part analyzed.
- In village council offices and meeting grounds – and in less frequent events also in homesteads, small-group project sites, in schools and health clinics – community leaders, project group members and participant households were met, most times in group conversations.

A handful of donor agency and NGO workers and, only in Cambodia, local government officers were also met.

In Cambodia, five villages were visited, each time involving a discussion with the village development committee, in most cases followed by calls on one or two partner households. In Tanzania, 16 villages were visited (ten in three western districts, six in Kilwa in Lindi Region). In all but one, conversations took place with village councilors and program animators, and some of them were followed by, or combined with, meetings with savings and loan association (SACCOS) committee members, small project groups and individual program participants.

The places to visit were selected by program staff. Apart from logistical considerations, the Cambodia staff took care to have us meet villages at each of the four self-assessed capacity levels of development committees. TCRS was anxious to demonstrate programmatic commonalities despite important variations in program environments and for this reason arranged visits in three western-border districts as well as one coastal district. District managers showed a wide variety of physical projects and, because their program staffs were small, made sure most workers could be met.

Figure 24: SACCOS committee members, Njinjo village, Tanzania



At first, when the impeccably decked-out gentleman appeared at the brick-molding site of the local savings and credit cooperative, we thought that the town lawyer had taken control of the association. However, the chairman was a farmer, like most of his fellow committee members. He dressed in his Sunday best when our visit was announced and walked through streaming rain to welcome us officially at a time when the committee put in volunteer labor to build its local office (Njinjo Village SACCOS Committee 2007). The eagerness to talk to the foreign visitor was universal, in some places marching him to vegetable gardens that were a fair distance from the village.

Key questions

The initial document study and conversations with senior staff uncovered meanings of empowerment and probed for program theories of “how empowerment works in our communities”. All staff with whom a formal interview was conducted were asked what they meant by empowerment. Most senior staff members as well as those junior staff who volunteered observations regarding the rights-based or integrated approaches were asked in what these were distinct from empowerment. People not comfortable expressing themselves in English were encouraged to speak Khmer or

Swahili; the concepts that they sought to convey were limited by the inevitable abridgements of translation.

The conceptual structuring of village council / committee group conversations evolved over time, but in general this researcher did not control the situation sufficiently to qualify them as anything close to “semi-structured interviews” or any other common methodological adornment. Initially, in Cambodia, Steinberg’s (2007) scheme for causal assessment in small-sample studies, with its ideas of covariance, attribution, and leverage:

- What explains the difference between this village and your neighboring villages?
- Which factors do you believe were chiefly responsible for your success?
- What should others learn from you so that they can reap similar success?

was emulated, with little success. Much time was taken up by relating the factual side of past activity and explaining the latest self-assessment outcomes and rationales. Committees had created (for their own consumption, not for these meetings) a variety of documents and were happy to talk of their work using the poster-size displays. The conversations rarely responded to Steinberg’s three questions.

Empathy and moving beyond project reports

In Tanzania, an effort was necessary to expand conversations from simple “show and tell” expectations to a more profound level. This opened the meanings of empowerment, the changes that the community had seen over the past ten years, and the vision it had for its progress and destiny in another ten from now. In council offices, the venue for most of the meetings, documents, including TCRS-collected village statistics, were on display, but in our encounters councilors used them less actively than the Cambodian committee members did.

A breakthrough to greater openness and exchange happened after this researcher volunteered a piece of his family history. His grandmother, a World War I widow raising six children, went through difficult times, overcoming poverty in decades, not years, and making a living with a Singer sewing machine of the same type as some found in the visited households. The personal timeline and the familiar livelihood tool were appreciated as a sign of empathy, so much so that we used it regularly in the work-up to the “what has changed in the last ten years” tableaux.

Typically, conversations with village councils in Tanzania lasted between one and a half and two hours, with the first hour given to introductions, reading of reports carefully written out for the visitors, and elaborations on particular project activities, often with budget breakdowns. The second phase involved questions on the nature of empowerment, past changes and the elements thereof attributable to the TCRS program, visions of community in the future. As a general experience in both countries, activity descriptions were heterogeneous in style, depth and completeness; they served primarily an emotional purpose, creating the basic acquaintance and atmosphere in which questions could be asked that would supply elements comparable across villages and, in lesser measure, households.

Monitoring data and end-of-visit workshops

As a complement to the conversational insights, monitoring data was expected to supply a representative statistical scaffolding of the momentum of the programs. Despite some useful summary statistics, the data was generally disappointing. The reasons differed between LWF Cambodia and Tanzania. In Cambodia, summary information flowing back from village self-assessments and planning figures is tightly integrated in the monitoring system, but covariation of factors that describe or even try to explain the progress of villages and households remains virtually unexplored and, for lack of common identifiers across tables, unmanageable within the limits of this study. In TCRS, most monitoring data of interest resulted from the initiative of individual district managers. Given the age, complexity and prestige of the programs, data management and analysis skills were lower than expected. This was in stark contrast to the high-caliber qualitative intelligence with which staff of all levels as well as animators, village leaders and village bank committee members explained the dynamics of empowerment. As a result, this report carries few statistics derived from the monitoring data.

After concluding field visits, another round of interviews with senior staff at country head offices was conducted. Data analysis discussions – plus, in Tanzania, some training sessions – and a discussion of preliminary findings filled a day of workshops in both host organizations. After a first evaluation of the entire field material, preliminary findings were presented to the LWF Field Directors' Meeting in Montreux, Switzerland, in November 2007.

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