



COLLECTING STORIES OF EMPOWERMENT

**A FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT FOR THE DAC POVNET TASK TEAM ON
EMPOWERMENT**

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BACKGROUND

‘At its most fundamental, the value of a story lies in its ability to convey complex and multi-layered ideas in a simple and memorable form to culturally diverse audiences’

D. Snowden ‘The art and science of Story - Part 1’ *Business Information Review* 2000; 17; 148

On 19-20 of November 2008, POVNET Task Team (TT) on Empowerment met for the first time. The aim was to define the main elements, in terms of process and outputs, for the work of the TT over the period 2009-2010. It was agreed that a significant output would be guidance and associated training materials based on stories of donor involvement in promoting and supporting empowerment.

A story is understood to be a chain of events presented in a coherent narrative that makes sense to its audience.¹ A case study is a story used to illuminate particular themes and issues, for example in a training workshop. Why stories? A comprehensive review commissioned by the Australian Department of Defence notes that organisations are making increasing use of stories as sources of knowledge for enhancing practice and changing behaviour.² Stories are good at describing processes involving many actors and multiple sets of relationships. While there already exist many stories and case studies concerning processes of empowerment that have been supported directly or indirectly by DAC members, there is a tendency for these narratives to downplay the role of the donors. Emphasising local ownership and not wishing to be seen to be interfering with local power structures is understandable. However, it has meant that staff has little practical knowledge about optimally supporting the empowerment of people living in poverty. It is this knowledge gap that POVNET wants to fill.

A recently-published SDC guide to storytelling in development contexts starts with a warning that as a knowledge management and learning tool, working with stories in organisational settings is more complicated than just asking someone to ‘tell a story’.³ Hence the present document has been drafted to guide the scouting, investigation and writing up of stories collected by the TT. The document’s aim is to improve methodological rigour and overall coherence. Part One provides a working definition of empowerment and an **analytical framework** containing the elements the Task Team would expect to see included in each story – as well as examples of these from published case studies and stories of empowerment (although such stories have not focused on the donor role). Part Two proposes a **methodology** for collecting stories, from initial identification of possible stories to production of the final output.

¹ S. Colton and V. Ward 2006 *Building Bridges. Using Narrative Techniques* Berne: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

² M. Mitchell and M. Egudo 2003 ‘A Review of Narrative Methodology’ Department of Defence <http://www.cnr.uidaho.edu>

³ S. Colton and V. Ward op.cit.

FRAMEWORK

A working definition of empowerment

For the purpose of this exercise, *empowerment happens when individuals and organised groups are able to imagine their world differently and to realise that vision by changing the relations and structures of power that have been keeping them in poverty.*⁴ The implications of this understanding can be explored through the different facets of ‘social’, ‘economic’ and ‘political’ empowerment. However, these are conceptual categories should not blind us from appreciating the complex and inter-related processes of the economic, social and political - processes in which donors can play a supportive and facilitating role or unintentionally block. Learning about both the positive and the negative is equally important for identifying good donor practice.

Understanding people’s lived reality in Nigeria

A case study of Yoruba women traders’ success or otherwise as entrepreneurs, demonstrates that this is not just a question of their making informed choices as rational economic actors but is an outcome of what happens to them in the other relational domains of their lives. Consequently, the availability of options or opportunities for choice in economic decision making may be severely limited and while micro-credit may prove useful, by itself it is not an automatic route to wealth generation. What the author describes as ‘affective relations’ – with husbands, siblings, children, fellow traders – play an enormously significant part in what people do and how these shape any individual’s autonomy. The implication of such a relational analysis is that women’s economic empowerment, requires imaginative policies which may not focus uniquely on economic activities.

A. Cornwall, 2007 ‘Of choice, chance and contingency: Career strategies and tactics for survival among Yoruba women traders’ *Social Anthropology* 15, 1: 27-46

Story elements

A story should include the following:

- A description of the **context** at the start of the story;
- A description of **what happened** which should include:
 - A relational map of those involved, including donors, and how these relations changed over time;
 - An analysis of the motivation for involvement and how this was understood and expressed;

⁴ This is the definition proposed in R. Eyben, N. Kabeer and A. Cornwall 2008 ‘Conceptualising empowerment and the implications for pro poor growth’ A paper for the DAC Poverty Network

- The arenas/spaces of action. The positive and/or negative ‘real world’ **effects** in terms of social, economic and political empowerment of people living in poverty, and also the effects on others involved in the story;
- A **conclusion** concerning the (a) the links between poverty reduction, empowerment and pro-poor growth, as understood from the (possibly different) perspectives of those who have been involved in telling the story; and (b) donor behaviour and the lessons for future good practice.

The context

Our interest in context is to identify how certain events may have created an enabling environment for empowerment. Likely elements in such a description of context might include *enabling changes* in government policy; *crises in the sector*, for example, the decline in sugar cane yields of smallholder farmers in Kenya; or the *history* of the principal protagonists, for example a women’s movement. The context should always also include a brief history of international co-operation policy in relation to the country and sector.

Empowering citizens in Rajasthan

A case study of how NGOs worked with citizens’ organisations and local government to improve the delivery of services identified three important pieces of legislation as creating the enabling environment for action:

- Local government reform
- Right to information
- Employment guarantee legislation

‘Each of these ... gives new rights for citizen participation, as well as new duties and responsibilities for local governments. But both groups lack certain skills, awareness and capacity for how to use the new laws. This is where large numbers of local and national NGOs have stepped in, providing an impressive range of awareness-building, monitoring, advocacy and mobilising activities’.

From *Champions of Participation: Engaging Citizens in Local Government*
<http://www2.ids.ac.uk/logolink/resources/downloads/Champions%20Report.pdf>

A description of key events

Because the POVNET stories are centrally concerned with the role of donors, the logical starting point for a narrative account is the moment one or more donors became involved, the preceding context section having provided the relevant historical background. Most stories of empowerment never come to an end and thus, for the purpose of this collection, the story unfolds up to the moment of its telling.

The narrative should identify the key turning points in the story that supported processes of empowerment. It can include the reflections of those involved concerning what they

believe would have happened if different choices and actions – particularly by donors - had occurred at those significant moments. In constructing the narrative, the following elements should be included:

A relational map of those involved

Who was involved and the quality of their relations with the others is a key element in understanding what happened and why. In making sense of the story, a decision will have to be made as to where to draw the boundaries in terms of which relations were important. These boundaries should not be automatically defined by national borders but may be expanded to include actors – organisations, networks or individuals - who played an influential role from a location many thousands of miles distant.

Tackling poverty in Brazil

‘The story of how in this setting, Action Aid is able to make a difference is ... one in which partnerships and alliances at the local, regional, national and international levels play a fundamental and formative part. Behind the kinds of changes that Tamiris and her friends and family are experiencing on the ground in Barbalho....are relationships that are infused with values, visions and ways of working together. The story of these changes... that Action Aid helps to bring about through its engagement with many partners, is as much about these relationships as of everyday practice at the grassroots.

From A. Cornwall 2005 ‘Love of the heart’ An Action Aid Critical Story of Change p. 4

The story also needs to identify and comment on who each of the story tellers judge to have played a more ambiguous or negative role. In all cases, the nature of donor relations with the others involved should be clearly specified.

Motivation and discourses

The story should include an account of why different parties became involved, their reasons for this, the choice of words they used to express their motives and represent their actions and the extent to which these shifted in time and in relation to whom they are explaining their motives.

Winning women’s rights in Morocco

In their campaign, activists framed their arguments in relation to both local/cultural religious values and universal human rights ... The movement successfully adapted its messages to a range of different audiences and contexts.

IDS research summary Citizens Building Responsive States, Oct.2008

At the same time, the story should include an analysis of the motives and discourses of those identified as resisting the process of empowerment.

Farmers' campaigning in Kenya

A campaign 'to ensure that sugar cane farmers in Kenya enjoy a life that is just, fair and free of poverty' was resisted by many, including 'Mill owners who saw their patronage and chronically poor management exposed and challenged, as was equally challenged the multitude of civil servants and officials who worked in, or governed, the industry so ineffectively. Private companies– brought in to contract-manage some mills – found their contracts and their performance around those contracts questioned. And many politicians had their fingers in the sugar pie – both as part of the patronage system in the domestic sugar industry, and as members of lucrative cartels importing cheap sugar into Kenya.'

D. Harding 2005 'The sugar campaign for change'
Critical Stories of Change Action Aid p. 10

The spaces of empowerment

Relational power operates in the spaces where people meet each other – parliaments, mass demonstrations, office meetings and so forth. In understanding how empowerment happens, it is important to identify the spaces in which 'power within' and 'power with' are developed and translated into action – and conversely to understand how spaces can be disempowering. When donors organise consultation meetings and conferences 'power in the room' is often over-looked as a matter that needs addressing.⁵

A safe space for women's empowerment in India

Being marginalized and isolated means being cut off from networks and spaces of information and communication. The challenge for us was to break through this reality as a process of empowerment in and of itself. Being able to understand what knowledge these women had, how it could connect to the knowledge they needed for change, and how to use that knowledge, was a process they had to experience. We became the 'Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers' because of our belief in the need for a physical space where this process could happen.

S. Patel 'Reflections on innovation, assessment and social change processes: a SPARC case study,' in I, Guijt *Critical Readings on Assessing and Learning for Social Change* www.ids.ac.uk: page 3

⁵ R.Eyben 2008 'Power, Mutual Accountability and Responsibility in the Practice of International Aid:A Relational Approach' *IDS Working Paper 305* Brighton :Institute of Development Studies

The effects

‘We used to be afraid to walk along the same path as a jotdar (landowner). Now we walk down the centre of the road’. Social movement activist in Bangladesh ⁶

What is judged to be an indicator of significant change in the economic circumstances of people living in poverty will depend on who is making the judgement and on their motive and goal in becoming involved in the relationships and activities that have contributed to a process of empowerment. There are various participatory methods available for helping different stakeholders to reflect upon and reach conclusions about their involvement in the process and the eventual outcomes as they perceive them. ⁷

For donors, the key question is whether they are looking for a positive effect in relation to *their* aims or in relation to the aspirations of those they are seeking to help. A draft report for Sida in Bangladesh argues that, by systematically asking the people who are the focus of the programme to describe the process of empowerment, good indicators can be obtained which others – such as donors - can empathise with. ⁸ If the latter identify a positive change in their lives, is that sufficient for donors, or do they want to see changes in relation to what they or their government partners have defined as a result? This issue relates to how one understands poverty and the direct and indirect steps to its reduction. It is one that Task Team members could explore while collecting the stories.

Thus the narrative needs to capture these different perspectives on change, particularly including those of staff in POVNET members’ country offices. Like the other parties involved, they should tell their story, from their own reality. Thus staff in country offices, as with their boundary partners should be asked what they believe is important about the story, why and how things happened (or not) and what are the lessons they draw. Similarly, they should be encouraged to identify constraints or problems that they believe may have had an unhelpful influence on the eventual outcome.

Conclusions

The complexity of stories of change of the kind the Task Team is looking for means that while the details in the stories are important as case studies for staff learning programmes others who will hear or read the stories will subsequently recollect only a few key messages. Therefore such messages need to be clearly identified, and these should principally relate to potential or actual poverty reducing and growth effects and the role of donors in the process. The final version of the story should be written so that the messages emerge clearly throughout the narrative as well as being summarised at the end. ⁹

⁶ Quoted in *Impact assessment of social mobilisation for economic empowerment*, by Steve Jones et al, 2007 and cited by Dee Jupp on the frontispiece of her draft report for Sida ‘Measuring Empowerment? Ask them!’

⁷ See I. Guijt 2006 *Critical Readings on Assessing and Learning for Social Change* www.ids.ac.uk

⁸ Dee Jupp 2008 ‘Measuring Empowerment? Ask them’ Draft report to Sida

⁹ See also D. Snowden: ‘A fable is structured so as to be told by a storyteller in such a manner, and with sufficient complexity, that the audience is unable to repeat the story but remembers the message’, in ‘The art and science of Story, part 2’ *Business Information Review* 2000; 18, page 219

METHODOLOGY

This section of the guidance concerns who should be involved in the task of identifying, selecting, telling and writing up the stories and options concerning how to go about it.

Three principles inform the methodology. The first is that the process – and the specific methods used - should be **empowering for all those involved** in telling the story, in the sense that it enables them to imagine new possibilities for action. This requires participatory methods that allow for different perspectives and voices and make room for eventual disagreement and alternative versions of the story. Such methods can be both qualitative and quantitative, as discussed in more detail below.

The second principle relates more specifically to the Task Team members and concerns their direct involvement in collecting and analysing the stories. By **learning experientially** – as distinct from just reading a consultant’s report – they would be better equipped to influence their organisation’s understanding of and approaches to empowerment. This emphasis on learning for improved donor behaviour is the specific added value POVNET can bring to strengthening DAC members’ capacity to support the empowerment of those living in poverty. While time and resource constraints may prevent some Task Team members from being able to be involved in this recommended manner, nevertheless, even should they have to delegate fully to others – country office staff and/or consultants – they are encouraged to stay in touch and engage with the process.

Thirdly we are **not** looking for stories of best practice, but rather stories – including those of disempowerment - that can illuminate what donors can usefully do and not do in different contexts and sectors. Conclusions and key messages can be then be drawn.

In terms of **communicating** the stories, the Task Team needs to decide in advance the various products to be developed from these stories. Clearly, such a decision depends on the budget available but, in addition to written materials, effective communications include face to face interaction such as through staff workshops and international conferences, as well as mass media methods such as audio recordings and films, including these made through participatory methods.

Scouting for stories

Pathways of empowerment are multiple and often are not the outcome of intentional effort by a facilitating organisation or policy intervention. Those instances of empowerment in which international aid has played some role, either positive or negative are inevitably likely to be even fewer in number. Nevertheless, the aim should be to **identify stories that include donors**, rather than any story of empowerment. This is because the primary purpose of the DAC in collecting these stories – rather than for example the purpose of an academic research programme such as Pathways of Women’s Empowerment¹⁰ - is to enable its own members to learn how to be better at supporting local processes of empowerment. A story in which no donor is involved will not help a

¹⁰ The author of this framework document is a member of the international Research Programme Consortium, Pathways of Women’s Empowerment www.pathwaysofempowerment.org

donor learn how to do this. On the other hand, this does not mean limiting the selection of stories to those cases where donor agency employees are directly involved with the primary beneficiaries (such instances are in any case increasingly rare other than in humanitarian aid). But it does mean identifying stories in which decisions taken by the donor will have had an influence on the boundary partners whom the donor has been funding, such as a government ministry or an international NGO and who have in turn been interacting with the intended primary beneficiaries.

Who does the scouting?

The scouting should be undertaken by TT members through emails to colleagues in country offices and embassies. These emails should provide some background, including the working definition of empowerment, and request the addressees to identify an example of a project or programme which they have been involved in and that they consider would offer important learning about how donors can support the empowerment of people living in poverty. TT members can also take the opportunity to scout for stories while making routine visits to country programmes.

The story outlines should be brief – not more than a page – and should cover the points itemised in the box below.

Scouting for stories of empowerment: checklist of points to be covered in brief submissions

- Context (including sector and any prior history of donor involvement);
- Three principal players/organisations considered to have played a positive role and with whom the donor has a direct relationship ('boundary partners');
- Purpose and nature of donor support;
- Brief account of what happened
- Known effects/ eventual possible outcomes
- Why this story might be of interest to POVNET in relation to poverty reduction/growth goals
- Availability of existing documentation such as an evaluation report.

Country offices and embassies get very tired of such requests from their head office and thus a clear message should be sent that this is not an extractive process but a valuable opportunity for practical learning by the country offices and their partners as well as contributing to a POVNET product.

The Task Team (or a sub-group within the team) should then review all the stories received and choose a limited number for analysis while ensuring that a range of sectors, country contexts and aid instruments are included. Ideally, there should be at least one case selected from each agency represented on the task team. One could therefore envision about a dozen stories for detailed analysis depending on material available, time, interest and budget.

Researching and narrating the selected stories

There are several options. At its simplest, the research and subsequent construction of the narrative could be undertaken as a desk task in head office, making use of existing documentation and following this up through telephone interviews with country office staff and their relevant partners, including providing guidance as to ensure effective facilitation in stage two of the process, detailed below. Another option is for the country office to undertake the necessary research with long distance support and quality assurance from head office (TT member and/or consultant). A third is for the TT member to identify an international consultant who would work in the field with the country office and a local consultant.

Whichever option is chosen, researching and narrating the stories should not be extractive. The process should be designed to be of value to country office staff and their partners, as well as to POVNET in terms of critical reflection and learning to all those involved. When well facilitated, the process can also strengthen partnerships and potentially stimulate new shared initiatives.

The value of story telling

‘Story telling helps individuals and groups to connect with each other, share their experiences and reflect on practice in a way that energizes and creates lasting bonds. Simple stories can illuminate complex patterns and deeper truths – one should never underestimate the power of the particular. The process of telling your story – and seeing it touch other people – can be empowering.’

From S.Colton and V.Ward op.cit., p.6

Viewers of Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* will recollect that the story is told from four points of view and that ‘each account is clearly self-serving, intended to enhance the nobility of the teller’.¹¹ While we do not anticipate that those involved in a development endeavour would behave like the characters in the film, at the same time we would expect that no one story would tell the complete truth, but that each story would represent a partial truth. This means that available documentation needs to be used with a critical eye, bearing in mind that it might be only reflecting one perspective and that many existing case studies, of the kind cited in earlier sections of this document, often keep the donor relatively invisible in terms of how partners perceive the donor role.

Thus for **stage one** of the study, we propose a modified Rashomon approach to collecting the stories of empowerment, while maintaining the principle of just four initial versions (more than that makes it very complicated to narrate). Three of the versions would be those from among the donor’s ‘boundary partners’, i.e. those organisations and

¹¹ Karl G. Heider ‘The Rashomon Effect: When Ethnographers Disagree’ *American Anthropologist*, 90, 1 (Mar., 1988), p. 74

individuals with whom donor staff has had a direct connection in relation to this story.¹² These three boundary partners plus the country office/embassy that proposed the story would each be invited to tell their story separately, covering all the elements in the analytical framework outlined in section one. While this could be done through telephone interviews, the quality of the information is likely to be less than through face to face conversations where it is easier to tackle the issues of power that constrain frankness.

In the spirit of promoting empowerment, as far as possible, the methodology should be participatory, using both quantitative and qualitative methods as appropriate and feasible, making use of recent innovations in approaches to measuring empowerment.¹³

At issue is at what stage to hear the story from the **perspective of the primary stakeholders** in the story – those living in poverty and who have experienced empowerment (or disempowerment) as an effect of donor action. One possibility would be for someone skilled in participatory methods to do this as part of stage one. It goes without saying that such a consultant would be expected to elucidate the story as it would be told from many different perspectives among those that the programme was ultimately trying to benefit, with particular attention paid to those who for structural reasons such as those related to gender, location, social status etc may be most at risk of having been excluded from the process and potentially even disempowered. This stage one activity with primary stakeholders could ideally be followed up by a facilitated immersion undertaken jointly by the donor representative and boundary partners as part of stage two.

Stage two involves bringing together each of these narratives into a draft report to be shared with all four parties involved, as well as with the Task Team member who had scouted the story. The favoured option would be for all concerned to meet in a facilitated event to discuss and comment on their different versions of the stories, to explore areas of commonality and disagreement, and to consider the implications for understanding the story in terms of their own relations with each other. This would include identifying turning points in the story and imagining what would have happened if those involved had taken alternative action at those moments.

Turning points

‘Turning points are those pivotal moments in everyday life when we are faced with a difficult choice, when there is crisis or conflict, or when something changes, for the better or for the worse. These are often the points at which deep learning and insight occurs. Sharing turning point stories is one way to find rich lessons’.

From S.Colton and V.Ward op.cit, p.12

¹² This is a term used for in relation to an evaluation methodology known as ‘Outcome Mapping’, developed by the IDRC http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-26586-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

¹³ R. Chambers 2007 ‘Who counts? The Quiet Revolution of Participation and Numbers’ *IDS Working Paper* no. 296 www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/wp/wp296.pdf

The **final part of the exercise** would require boundary partners to reach a conclusion concerning how donor involvement had enabled processes of empowerment to occur and to what observable or possible future effects. Equally, significantly boundary partners should be encouraged to identify, whether and when there were moments when donor action was disempowering and why. Stories of what went wrong provide important opportunities for learning.

Roles and responsibilities

Who does what depends on time and budget. What follows is proposed as the preferred option, resources permitting.

For each selected story, the relevant TT member coordinates with their country office/embassy to recruit a consultant to undertake the initial set of interviews bringing these together in a draft report, while ensuring that the different perspectives of those interviewed are maintained.¹⁴ Stage two would ideally involve the TT member travelling to the country concerned, participating in a facilitated meeting with the stakeholders, undertaking a field visit with them and working with the consultant in finalising the story, to be written with a donor audience in mind but also so as to be of interest and use to the other parties involved in telling the story. *Another option* for stage two would be for the country office to work with a local consultant for both stages with oversight for quality assurance purposes provided by some other means, for example guidance by telephone/email communications, either by the TT member or by a head office consultant.

Resources

The Task Team would have collective responsibility in ensuring that adequate resources are available for ensuring the delivery of a quality product that is of genuine utility in terms of revealing lessons learnt of interest to others. This requires consistency in approach between the stories collected from different countries and sectors. The TT would also be responsible for producing a synthesis document that identifies principles of good donor practice, as well as for commissioning other learning materials, such as a video, or converting the stories into case studies for training workshops.

¹⁴ This was a method used for a four-country study R. Eyben et al 2007 'Gender equality and aid effectiveness. Challenges and opportunities for international practice: experiences from South East Asia' http://www.oecd.org/document/57/0,3343,en_2649_3236398_38283065_1_1_1_1,00.html