



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
4 December 2013

Original: English

Commission for Social Development

Fifty-second session

11-21 February 2014

Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly

Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report has been prepared in response to Economic and Social Council resolution 2012/7, in which the Council decided that the priority theme for the 2013-2014 review and policy cycle of the Commission for Social Development would be “Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all”.

In the present report, the policies, strategies and programmes that have demonstrated effectiveness in enabling the empowerment of people and social groups are reviewed. It highlights the importance of building open and inclusive institutions and of promoting participation through strengthening people’s capacities to participate and eliminating discrimination. The report concludes with policy recommendations.



I. Introduction

1. Empowerment, that is, the process towards the effective participation of all members of society in decisions about their lives, is a key objective of a people-centred social development process. In the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development, Governments affirmed that all members of society should have the opportunity and be able to exercise the right and responsibility to take active part in the affairs of the community in which they live and committed to ensuring substantial public and private investment in human resource development and in capacity-building in health and education, as well as in empowerment and participation, especially for people living in poverty or suffering from social exclusion.¹ Governments also agreed to a series of actions to empower people living in poverty and their organizations.

2. In addition to its intrinsic value, empowerment is also a potent engine of social development. Actions that seek to give people power, the means to strengthen their own capacities and opportunities to use such capacities — including through education and health care; political representation; access to justice; property rights and control over productive assets; information and communications technologies or financial services — contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty and exclusion. Institutions and norms that promote open and inclusive processes create the conditions needed for the reduction of poverty and inequality, as do accountable and responsive Governments that encourage the participation of individuals and communities in social, economic and political life. Participatory processes also build trust and solidarity and therefore support the creation of inclusive, cohesive and stable societies.

3. The importance of empowering people, both as a means to achieve the internationally agreed development goals and as an end in itself, has been highlighted in recent intergovernmental processes. For instance, at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in June 2012, Governments reaffirmed the importance of supporting developing countries in their efforts to eradicate poverty and promote empowerment of the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including removing barriers to opportunity, enhancing productive capacity, developing sustainable agriculture and promoting full and productive employment and decent work for all, complemented by effective social policies, including social protection floors (see General Assembly resolution [66/288](#), annex, para. 23). At its sixty-seventh session, the General Assembly adopted resolution [67/107](#) on people's empowerment and development, in which it expressed concern about the crippling effects of poverty, inequality and disparity all over the globe and recognized that people should be the key focus of all plans, policies and programmes at all levels and that the empowerment of people is essential to achieving development.

4. The present report includes reviews of policies, strategies and programmes that enable the empowerment of people as a means to achieve poverty eradication, social integration and productive and decent work for all. It also includes concrete recommendations to promote empowerment. The report brings concrete evidence of the role played by strategies that give voice to people and enable them to exercise

¹ *Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.8), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II, paras. 8 and 12 (g).

their agency — their capacity to act individually or collectively to further their own interests — in advancing sustainable development in order to inform national and international policy debates, including the ongoing debates on the international post-2015 development agenda and the future sustainable development goals.

II. Promoting the empowerment of people

5. Fundamental trends, such as the vast expansion of literacy and education, improvements in information and communications technologies and the spread of formal democracy and decentralization processes, have enabled people to make informed choices and exercise power, including through broader opportunities to engage in decision-making processes. Although these advances have also raised people's aspirations, they have not consistently resulted in increased participation or in improvements in social or economic well-being for all. Social and economic inequalities remain very high and are rising in many countries. Some social groups, including indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, youth and migrants, continue to suffer disproportionately from poverty and exclusion, and measurable gaps between these groups and the rest of the population have generally increased over time. Exclusion not only affects the abilities of individuals in these groups and the opportunities available to them, but it also undermines their dignity and the welfare of society at large.

6. While the concept of empowerment is often used to refer to the promotion of the rights and capabilities of disadvantaged social groups, there is growing recognition that action to promote people's empowerment must go beyond group-specific approaches. That is, breaking the cycle of inequality and powerlessness not only requires policies and strategies that actively seek and facilitate the participation of those individuals and social groups that face the greatest challenges in overcoming poverty and exclusion, but also calls for inclusive economic, social and political institutions that create a level playing field for all. Policies aimed at equalizing opportunities and eliminating the barriers to participation have driven success in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and will contribute to the realization of a post-2015 development agenda.

7. Institutions and norms that promote inclusion and empowerment are influenced by actions taken by many stakeholders, including States as well as members of civil society, social movements, trade unions and associations of self-employed workers, the private sector, the media and, most importantly, individuals and groups who live in poverty or are otherwise socially excluded. In practice, it is often the formation of broad coalitions of various stakeholders, rather than action by the State or civil society alone that leads to the formation of pluralistic, inclusive institutions and therefore paves the way for empowering processes.²

² For concrete case studies on the role of the State and other stakeholders in empowerment, see Duncan Green, "The role of the State in empowering poor and excluded groups and individuals", background paper prepared for the Expert Group Meeting on Policies and Strategies to Promote Empowerment of People in Achieving Poverty Eradication, Social Integration and Full Employment and Decent Work for All, New York, 10 and 11 September 2013 (available from <http://undesadspd.org/CommissionforSocialDevelopment/Sessions/2014/EGMonEmpowermentPolicies.aspx>).

A. Role of Governments in promoting empowerment

8. The role of Governments remains essential to creating the conditions under which individuals and communities can empower themselves to escape poverty, attain productive employment and decent work and achieve social integration. Governments are best positioned to remove the formal and informal institutional barriers that prevent some individuals and groups from taking action to improve their well-being and expand their choices. Only Governments can establish inclusive and secure legal, administrative and regulatory environments and possess the mandate and resources to provide services and infrastructure on the scale needed. Action by Governments is also crucial in curtailing the excessive concentration of power and influence that ultimately undermines empowerment and results in exclusion. Doing so requires, among other things, tackling corruption. It also means removing barriers to economic empowerment, including through macroeconomic and other policies that should promote the creation of productive employment and decent jobs for all.

9. It should be noted, however, that empowerment is a long-term process affected by national and local circumstances, from economic, social and political institutions to norms, behaviours and social relations. The perceptions of individuals about whether or not they are themselves empowered vary across time and spheres of economic, social, cultural or political life. Therefore, no single set of empowering policies or strategies is applicable across all countries and in all contexts. That is, there is no single blueprint for promoting empowerment. Instead, successful examples of empowerment point to the need for Governments to adopt an empowering approach to policymaking and policy implementation in order to enable the effective participation of all members of society in decision-making.³

B. Key elements of an empowering approach to policy

10. While concrete strategies to promote empowerment are context-specific, certain elements are often present when countries are successful in creating the enabling conditions for empowerment. Specifically, Governments that have adopted an empowering approach have promoted strategies to build the capacities and abilities of individuals and groups and give them a voice; they have taken action to ensure that social, economic, political and legal institutions are open and inclusive; and they have actively promoted participation by, for example, addressing discrimination.

11. In order to strengthen skills and capacities and improve access to information and productive assets, it is essential to give agency and voice to individuals and communities, that is, to empower them, and to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and exclusion. It is also important to build organizational capacity so that people can collectively voice their concerns.

12. Supportive institutional structures are necessary to enable empowerment. Building open and inclusive institutions requires, first of all, creating partnerships between State institutions and other stakeholders as well as spaces for consultation. Collective problem-solving through participatory mechanisms is often a slow process

³ For a detailed analysis of empowering approaches to policymaking, see D. Narayan, ed., *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction. A Sourcebook* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2002).

and may require changing long-standing institutional cultures and the mindsets and behaviour of those involved, but it is a necessary precondition for solutions to be legitimate, relevant and sustainable. Second, an empowering approach requires responsive decision makers that citizens can hold to account. Thus, initiatives to advance good governance must actively promote transparency and accountability. Third, the way in which institutions function is strongly influenced by prevailing social and cultural norms. Such norms and values evolve slowly and are affected by context, culture and history, but, as the examples presented in the next sections indicate, Governments can influence and help to transform them.

13. Even strategies aimed at building supportive institutions and strengthening people's capabilities or improving access to information will be insufficient to promote meaningful participation if there are social and cultural norms that underpin or perpetuate unequal power relations and the disadvantage experienced by some social groups. Discrimination remains a central obstacle to the participation of excluded groups in economic, social and political life. Governments must not only ensure that policies and legislation do not discriminate against some individuals or groups, but must also explicitly address the norms and behaviours that create asymmetries of power and result in discrimination, including through legal and judicial systems. Yet strategies to address discrimination, even when effective, may not always ensure effective participation by all members of society or the equitable distribution of public goods and services. Even under policy frameworks grounded in universalism and respect for human rights, targeted measures, including affirmative action, may be needed to make universalism more effective in reaching those who are excluded or in need of special support and in inducing the types of participation that will allow them to empower themselves.

14. Adopting and implementing an empowering approach to policymaking is a long-term process and requires an integrated policy framework. Removing the obstacles that hinder effective participation often requires reforming institutions, investing in human capital and influencing norms and behaviours that have historical and cultural roots. Governments and other stakeholders must be open to testing different options and seeking collective solutions. Once inclusive and participatory political institutions are in place, they create checks and balances that prevent the abuse of power and tend to support the creation of inclusive economic and social institutions.

15. Failure to create the conditions for empowerment has a high cost. The denial of voice or influence for those who are socially, economically or politically excluded is a key driver of social tensions, political instability and conflict. The political upheavals in the Middle East are, in large part, the most recent reaction to the exclusion of youth from the labour market and from decision-making. Loss of human and productive potential brought about by powerlessness and exclusion has a negative effect on economic growth and stability. Indeed, highly unequal societies tend to grow more slowly than those with low levels of inequality, are less successful in sustaining growth over long periods of time and recover more slowly from economic downturns.^{4,5} An empowering approach is both an end in itself and a means towards sustainable development and poverty eradication.

⁴ A. G. Berg and J. D. Ostry, "Inequality and unsustainable growth: two sides of the same coin?", IMF Staff Discussion Note, No. SDN/11/08 (International Monetary Fund, 8 April 2011).

⁵ S. Chaudhuri and M. Ravallion, "Partially awakened giants: uneven growth in China and India", World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, No. 4069 (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2006).

III. Strengthening people's capacity to participate

16. The capacity of individuals to reach their potential and transform their choices into desired outcomes is strongly influenced by their education, good health and productive skills. Policies that promote human capital and productive skills are a precondition for empowerment.

A. Investments in social services and social protection

17. Education, as a purveyor of values and attitudes, can play a particularly important role in promoting empowerment. Globally, while there has been success in increasing school enrolment, particularly in primary education, significant disparities in access to quality education remain within and across countries. The provision of education and other basic services remains fragmented and exclusionary in a large number of countries. Strategies used to improve access to education by people living in poverty and other marginalized groups include the reduction or elimination of school fees and related costs, the implementation of culturally sensitive bilingual educational programmes, the improvement of physical accessibility to school facilities, publicity campaigns to promote enrolment and the expansion of vocational education and technical training.

18. In addition to expanding access, educational systems must improve the quality of learning in order to achieve their empowering role. Countries that have made the most progress in improving learning outcomes for all have invested in teacher quality, increased teachers' salaries and made efforts to deploy teachers equitably across regions. Among them are countries in developed regions, including Australia, Finland, Japan and Sweden, as well as countries in developing regions, such as Brazil, China and the Republic of Korea.⁶ Many countries have also developed innovative approaches that maintain the quality of formal and informal education at affordable costs, including distance learning. Equally important for empowerment are curriculum reforms aimed at giving young people better skills to participate in economic and political life and be active agents of sustainable development. Such reforms should also aim at transforming social norms and behaviours that create unequal relations and challenge the social sustainability of development.

19. Civic education can play an important transformative role. In addition to providing awareness of rights and self-identity, it can also educate citizens about a Government's policy priorities as well as budgetary planning processes and thereby enhance civic engagement and promote empowerment. It has been shown, for example, that programmes aimed at empowering indigenous peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean with awareness and tools for effective and meaningful political and electoral participation have contributed to strengthening their organizations and networks. Governments should consider providing civic education, including through formal and informal education systems, and in partnership with civil society organizations.

⁶ See R. C. Wei, A. Andree and L. Darling-Hammond, "How nations invest in teachers", *Educational Leadership*, vol. 66, No. 5 (2009); Global Campaign for Education and Education International, *Closing the Trained Teacher Gap* (Global Campaign for Education, 2012).

20. Empowered individuals and communities can hold the State and service providers accountable for the delivery of quality education and other basic services. The right to basic entitlements in countries that have enacted such legally binding rights, for example, India, has been taken up actively by citizens and has led to increases in public budgets allocated to social services.⁷ Participatory performance monitoring has also allowed individuals and communities to influence the quantity and quality of services provided, although the existing evidence indicates that participation is no guarantee to ensure improved service delivery. Governance reforms and administrative changes, including changes in the incentives given to service providers to deliver better quality, are also necessary. Some countries are strengthening “cultural competencies” among service providers. Holding providers accountable not merely for their presence or their technical skill but for their ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures, ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds as a performance indicator is an effective way of ensuring that excluded individuals and social groups feel comfortable in accessing services.

21. At the household level, investments in education, health and other human capabilities are at risk when economic or other shocks affect household income. Unsurprisingly, social protection programmes that help households to weather economic downturns also keep children healthy and in school. By enhancing the capacity of individuals and families to manage and overcome situations that affect their well-being, social protection programmes directly contribute to their empowerment. Whether such programmes address the structural causes of exclusion and powerlessness depends on the concrete schemes in place and on how they are implemented. In countries where social protection consists mainly of social assistance schemes, there is evidence that cash transfers conditional on school attendance or regular health check-ups have helped to improve educational and health outcomes. Yet the success of these schemes in breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and promoting empowerment depends significantly on the availability of quality social services and on their capacity to cope with increasing demand.

B. Improving access to decent work and other productive assets

22. Productive and other material assets, including land, housing and savings, also enable people to withstand shocks and expand their options and therefore help them to empower themselves. For people living in poverty, who often lack material possessions, their main asset is their labour. When engaged in productive employment and decent work, people living in poverty can improve their living standards and often escape poverty. Workers holding a decent job are not only empowered personally but also socially, since their jobs give them social recognition. Where it promotes social dialogue, employment gives workers a voice and allows them to play an active role in decisions that affect their well-being. However, although a majority of people living in poverty and those belonging to other excluded groups are economically active, work is not often a way out of poverty because of low pay, job insecurity and poor working conditions.

⁷ A. B. Deolalikar and S. Jha, “Empowerment and the delivery of public services”, paper prepared for the Expert Group Meeting on Policies and Strategies to Promote Empowerment of People in Achieving Poverty Eradication, Social Integration and Full Employment and Decent Work for All, New York, 10 and 11 September 2013 (available from <http://undesadspd.org/CommissionforSocialDevelopment/Sessions/2014/EGMonEmpowermentPolicies.aspx>).

23. Labour market policies and institutions are effective in empowering workers and improving employment opportunities, but often leave workers in the informal sector largely unprotected. In addition, unions organized around the traditional employer-employee relationship are not well suited to give voice to those who work outside the formal sector or in non-conventional contractual status, such as part-time or temporary employment. The growing incidence of non-standard forms of employment has created momentum for innovative institutions such as associations of self-employed workers. Economic institutions based on full member participation, such as cooperatives, also play an important role in empowering workers. Some countries have taken steps to legally support the collective-bargaining rights of workers in the informal sector and have provided direct support to member-based organizations, but additional funding and capacity-building efforts are needed for such organizations to have a significant impact.

24. However, the main obstacles to the creation of decent work and the reduction of labour market inequalities often lie outside the labour market. Social policy and labour market institutions alone will not bring about the structural transformations that are necessary to create decent work and economically empower all members of society. A policy environment conducive to the creation of more and better jobs requires macroeconomic policies oriented towards such a goal. Complementary policies aimed at promoting industrial development and economic diversification as well as investments in infrastructure are also necessary.

25. In rural areas, land ownership has traditionally been a driver of exclusion and disempowerment. Policies and strategies that enhance secure access and tenure over land and related resources, particularly for smallholder farmers and indigenous peoples, open opportunities for empowerment. Recent initiatives for inclusive governance of land and other natural resources in several developing countries have adhered to participatory processes and have recognized the right of people living in poverty to be part of such processes. However, even with participatory mechanisms in place, the poorest rural workers are often not involved because they are not fully informed or lack the ability to negotiate effectively. In this context, support to rural organizations, access to information and affirmative action measures for excluded groups are critical.

26. Access to labour markets, land and other productive resources is influenced by the availability of financial services. Currently, the formal banking system is still out of reach for a majority of the world's poor; close to 60 per cent of adults in developing countries, including 77 per cent of adults living on less than \$2 a day, are unbanked.⁸ In the absence of formal banking, microfinance initiatives have sought to address the credit and other financial needs of people living in poverty or in remote areas. When microfinance institutions adhere to responsible lending practices, microfinance fulfils an important safety-net function, but it also has wider social impacts as it helps people to empower themselves by supporting productive enterprises or saving for schooling. In certain contexts, microfinance programmes have helped reduce poverty, even though, in many cases, they have done so on a temporary basis only, but their global reach and impact are limited. Empowering people to use microfinance effectively is necessary to increase its impact.

⁸ World Bank, Global Financial Inclusion (Global Findex) Database. Available from <http://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/global-findex> (accessed 31 October 2013).

27. Governments can do more to improve access to a broad range of financial services and foster their empowering potential by supporting financial literacy programmes, by offering training designed to build the management and entrepreneurial skills needed to use credit productively and by helping reduce the cost, documentation requirements and travel distance needed to access a bank account, including through the promotion of mobile banking. More must be done also to promote responsible and sustainable lending practices among a range of financial services providers, including commercial banks, financial cooperatives, microfinance institutions and community-based organizations.

C. Harnessing the contribution of social movements

28. Along with their basic capabilities, people's agency depends on their ability to organize around common causes and voice their concerns. Social movements and local associations have traditionally given people, particularly people living in poverty and those who belong to other excluded groups, a voice and greater agency to articulate their interests. Often informal and uncoordinated, these forms of collective action are an essential countervailing force to the excessive concentration and use of power. Social mobilization efforts have helped to discourage people from joining violent conflicts and have opened space for the exercise of civic and political rights. They have challenged stereotypes of poverty or those based on group identity. They have also played a role in building self-esteem and shared identities among, for instance, workers in the informal sector, and have brought recognition to their work. Historically, they have raised and advanced issues, from environmental degradation to women's rights, that have subsequently become important priorities for the State.

29. Governments can create an enabling environment for such grass-roots movements by opening spaces for inclusive consultation and building alliances between social movements and political institutions, including parliamentary committees and political parties. Changes in legislation may also be necessary to legitimize such movements and strengthen them. Often, social movements are disconnected from one another and their influence remains limited. Improving access to information, including through information and communications technology, can help these movements build networks and coalitions that may be necessary to drive change. Affirmative action measures may also be needed to ensure that they represent the views and interests of the poorest and most excluded members of society.

30. Ultimately, social capital — the gains that come from cooperation between individuals and groups and the creation of social networks — is as important to empowerment as human capital. By investing in social capital through supporting social mobilization, helping to build collective associations and strengthening community action, Governments are enabling individuals and groups to be agents of change and development. They are also responding to the growing call for active participation in shaping national and international policy agendas, including the post-2015 development agenda.

D. Fostering access to information and communications technology

31. In recent years, rapid technological innovation has led to a significant expansion of broadband connections and growth in the use of mobile communications for business applications and the creation of new livelihoods. Growing access to information and communications technology has been crucial in facilitating participation, giving individuals and groups the ability to voice their opinions and helping them organize around common causes. Such technology has further expanded opportunities for individuals, local communities and civil society organizations to influence the debate on international policy and its formulation. The potential of such technology is particularly broad for young people, who are already using social media to connect, share and inspire others in significant numbers. As a tool, information and communications technology can help improve governance by providing information and helping to coordinate the demands of those vying for more inclusive institutions. Clearly, though, such help translates into meaningful change only if broad segments of society mobilize and organize in order to effect such change.

32. There remains, however, a significant digital divide across countries, between urban and rural areas within countries and across communities and social groups. For instance, the proportion of Internet users is about 30 per cent in developing countries, compared with almost 77 per cent in developed countries.⁹ The proportion of fixed broadband Internet subscribers is 6 per cent in developing countries and 27 per cent in developed countries. As the impact of information and communications technology deepens, persistent disparities in its access and use may create an additional layer of exclusion among individuals and groups who do not use it.

33. Realizing the empowering potential of information and communications technology requires bridging the divide. Doing so involves, first, expanding technology infrastructure, including through public-private partnerships. Public intervention is particularly important in improving access to underserved populations and in rural or remote areas where the private sector is less likely to invest. Second, it calls for facilitating the use of such technology by expanding education and training and by understanding and addressing the cultural and social factors that may inhibit its use. This may involve promoting the production of content in indigenous and local languages. Third, technology must meet users' needs, including those of persons with disabilities and those of older persons. In order to meet accessibility requirements for persons with disabilities, Governments that have not done so should adopt existing international technological standards. More can be done also to unlock the potential of such technology to promote entrepreneurship and create productive employment opportunities, especially for youth. Finally, expanding use of information and communications technology requires strategies to encourage its responsible use, ensuring the protection of privacy and the prevention of crime.

34. Governments are increasingly using information and communications technology to engage the public to participate in decision-making. Evidence from both developed and developing countries shows, however, that expanding access to

⁹ International Telecommunication Union, "The world in 2013: ICT facts and figures" (Geneva, 2013) (available from www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2013-e.pdf).

such technology is often not sufficient to ensure e-participation.¹⁰ Strategies must be in place to raise awareness about e-participation and to ensure that the mechanisms used are accessible and easy to understand. In order to create an effective e-participation system for all, it is important for Governments to invest in multi-channel delivery of public services that promotes the accessibility of such technology. Governments are also using it to engage citizens in the design and delivery of public services, including health and education. Information and communications technology also allows Governments to improve service delivery based on users' feedback. Currently, however, only 24 countries provide free access to e-government services through free Wi-Fi or kiosks.¹¹

35. For e-participation efforts to succeed, citizens must see that their engagement in e-participation is effective in influencing decision-making, that is, that Governments are responsive and accountable. In many cases, e-participation has not translated into improved service delivery or desired policy outcomes, resulting in decreased levels of confidence in government.¹² In addition, where access to and use of information and communications technology remain unequal, the role of e-participation in empowering the poorest and most excluded members of society will remain limited. If engagement in e-participation is not broad-based, such participation may in fact strengthen the divide. On the other hand, efforts made to bridge the digital divide can contribute to reducing inequalities in other, economic, social and political dimensions.

IV. Participation in governance processes and inclusive public institutions

36. Citizen engagement enables feedback on the impact of government policies and programmes, including their unintended impacts, and helps to ensure the proper and effective use of public resources. Participation in governance processes thereby contributes to transparency, responsiveness and accountability of public institutions.

37. Putting participatory mechanisms in place often involves making important changes in the way that public institutions work and in the interface between citizens and such institutions. In turn, when institutions are open and inclusive and when Governments actively promote transparency and accountability, participation is most likely to be effective and lead to self-empowerment. In the present section, institutions and norms that facilitate open and inclusive processes are examined.

A. Facilitating participation and civic engagement

38. Participatory governance has gained prominence in recent years amid the growing recognition that social inclusion brings transparency and legitimacy to

¹⁰ See report of the Expert Group Meeting on "E-Participation: Empowering People through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)", Geneva, 24 and 25 July 2013. Available from <http://undesadspd.org/CommissionforSocialDevelopment/Sessions/2014/EGMonICTsandeParticipation.aspx>.

¹¹ *United Nations E-Government Survey 2012: E-Government for the People* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.12.II.H.2).

¹² N. Ahmed, "An overview of e-participation models" (New York, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2006).

governance processes. Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, for example, demonstrates the tangible impact of citizen engagement in the allocation of public funds and in the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of public policy on reducing extreme poverty. Recent analyses have found that citizen participation contributes to visible changes in policy and budget allocation in the short term.¹³ It also strengthens alliances and networks, particularly local associations and social movements. However, research on its long-term impacts is still lacking.

39. Public institutions can take advantage of the Internet, mobile technologies and social media networks to foster public participation and to improve their own effectiveness in service delivery and in gauging public views on development. An increasing number of Governments are using e-governance to effectively disseminate information and interact with their citizens. In countries with relatively limited Internet connectivity and high levels of illiteracy, the dissemination of context-specific information in local languages via traditional methods is important to complement e-governance efforts at the national level. Securing financing for such initiatives is important.

40. Governments can also enact legislation and regulations to guarantee rights to information, and set up relevant institutional frameworks that engage citizens. For example, the Government of India passed the national Right to Information Act in 2005, one of the strongest such laws worldwide. It was the result of a lengthy and widely supported movement initiated by the National Campaign for People's Right to Information, and demonstrated the commitment of the Government to transparency in public expenditure.

41. In addition, in order to enhance the effectiveness of civic participation, State institutional capacity should be developed in such areas as research and analysis, organization and facilitation of broad-based civic consultation, alliance and coalition-building, and information and knowledge-sharing.

B. Building partnerships between public institutions and other stakeholders

42. The creation of partnerships between public institutions and other stakeholders requires aligning the goals and activities of both State and non-State actors, including the private sector, labour unions, non-governmental organizations and civil society, towards the realization of common goals. Governments can enhance the effectiveness of such partnerships by helping to build the capacity of civil society organizations, in particular those at the grass-roots level, with mechanisms to deter dependency and co-optation; creating effective means for collaboration with workers' organizations in both the formal and informal economies; and providing accessible channels for engaging with civil society organizations, including public hearings, town hall meetings and regular consultations.

43. Empirical evidence shows that local associations and networks are very effective in bringing people's needs into the public arena. Governments can build the capacity of local associations and networks (i.e., producer organizations,

¹³ J. Gaventa and G. Barrett, "So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement", IDS Working Paper, No. 347 (Brighton, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Institute of Development Studies, 2010).

cooperatives, self-help groups, savings and credit groups, women's groups and indigenous organizations) to effectively represent their interests within private companies or local governments. In some cases, the participatory effects of local associations and networks have been more effective than participation that is induced through formal governance processes.

44. Numerous historical processes of empowerment took root in local alliances and networks that grew to achieve influence over Governments. In the early 2000s, the "Rights to the City" campaign in Brazil enhanced access to public goods and housing for the urban poor and led the way to the 2001 passage of a federal law, the City Statute, which created a new legal order to provide equity in access to urban land. This process also enhanced urban planning capacity. Similarly, a movement for land reform in the Philippines that originated within a network of peasants' organizations opened up space for dialogue with the Government, which later formed a working committee to implement reform. In South Africa, the Treatment Action Campaign demonstrated the role of citizen engagement in securing public recognition of HIV/AIDS and access to publicly supplied antiretroviral medicines for 60,000 people. The Campaign informs and supports national advocacy efforts aimed at securing comprehensive treatment and prevention services in select districts.

45. Mechanisms that bring the perspectives of civil society into public institutions enable those institutions to be aware of and responsive to people's needs and to effectively devise collective solutions. It is important, however, to ensure that civil society organizations are inclusive and that their perspectives are non-discriminatory. In order to better assist people living in poverty and other excluded groups, funds can be channelled to organizations in poorer regions, and seats in local councils can be reserved for the representation of such groups.

46. The process of building effective partnerships between the State and other stakeholders requires long-term political commitment at the highest level. Where trust between public institutions and civil society is weak, initial efforts should focus on confidence-building activities. These may include inclusive and participatory dialogue between government officials and leaders of civil society organizations, particularly those representing people in poverty and other socially excluded groups, joint workshops on solving common challenges, and the joint implementation of development programmes. Careful consideration should be given to the identification and selection of partnering organizations/networks to ensure legitimacy and broad support and representation from civil society.

C. Building transparent, accountable and inclusive public institutions

47. The effectiveness of increased participation and the engagement of citizens largely depend on the presence of open and inclusive institutions that are transparent, accountable, and responsive to the needs of people, in particular the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. Effective participation requires access to accurate and relevant information about issues that are critical to people's lives, including their basic rights and entitlements, the availability of basic services and work opportunities. Broader knowledge about policies and strategies enables citizens to engage in governance and other decision-making processes in an informed way and allows them to hold Governments to account.

48. Transparency initiatives must be complemented by accountability mechanisms, including clear administrative rules and procedures, oversight institutions, auditing and other checks and balances, to ensure that public institutions are responsive, policies are implemented effectively and resources are available for the adequate provision of quality services. Accountability mechanisms have become increasingly participatory over the past decade and have allowed people to exercise voice beyond elections. They have also helped transform the relationship between citizens and their organizations and public institutions, especially at the local level, as decentralization has allowed grass-roots organizations to build relationships with local governments.

49. Attitudes and norms that affect the way in which institutions function must also be addressed for accountability to have a meaningful impact on empowerment. For instance, corruption, which diverts resources away from those people and sectors that most need them, has become deeply institutionalized in many countries and citizens accept it as incontestable. People who are most vulnerable to corruption, namely, people living in poverty and other excluded groups, lack the economic, social and political power necessary to challenge corrupt practices. Combating corruption requires changing mindsets and fighting the entrenched norms, cynicism and apathy that allow them to endure. The empirical evidence suggests that successful anti-corruption efforts are most often instigated from the bottom up and that, once under way, they succeed in changing the mindsets and behaviour that generate corruption and create an increased sense of responsibility among citizens to further fight it.¹⁴

V. Addressing discrimination

A. Discrimination disempowers

50. Discrimination is a pervasive means of disempowerment. It has been defined as the vast range of inequalities and indignities that are suffered by persons who are seen as less able and less deserving by those wielding power, by reason of their race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.¹⁵ It is both a consequence and a cause of poverty; people living in poverty, who experience discrimination on the basis of poverty, may also be subjected to it through belonging to other disadvantaged groups.

51. Discrimination can be direct or indirect, and can permeate both private and public life. It can hinder or deny access to and enjoyment of goods, services, justice and opportunities, dehumanize individuals and discourage the efforts of social groups to advance their interests. Not only does discrimination harm individuals and social groups, it also has significant costs for society at large. It has been estimated that lost productivity resulting from the exclusion of the ethnic minority Roma in Romania has cost that country €887 million and, similarly, that agricultural

¹⁴ S. Panth, *Changing Norms Is Key to Fighting Everyday Corruption* (World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2011); N. van der Gaag and J. Rowlands, eds., *Speaking Out: Case Studies on How Poor People Influence Decision-Making* (Oxfam, Practical Action Publishing, 2009).

¹⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR Plan of Action: Protection and Empowerment (Geneva, 2005).

productivity in the Plurinational State of Bolivia would be up to 36 per cent higher if not for ethnic exclusion.¹⁶

52. Closely linked with social exclusion and marginalization, discrimination prevents people from claiming their rights and from participating effectively in economic, social and political life. At the same time, opportunities to exercise participation may allow individuals to speak out against the discrimination they face. The empowerment of people cannot be realized where discrimination limits the ability to fulfil one's potential, exercise choice and engage in decision-making.

53. Non-discrimination and equality are fundamental principles of international norms and standards, including human rights law. Non-discrimination denotes the absence of distinction of any kind, exclusion, restriction or preference based on prohibited grounds. In order to end discrimination, it must be addressed both in law and in practice. This entails not only its elimination in the constitutions, laws and policies of States, but also the enactment of measures that prevent, diminish and eliminate conditions, attitudes and behaviours that create or sustain discrimination. This requires attention to and the participation of social groups that have been subject to historical or persistent prejudice. Several international instruments have been adopted in order to end discrimination against and the exclusion of marginalized social groups, including, among others, the World Programme of Action for Youth, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

B. Comprehensive and universal policy framework

54. The elimination of discrimination with the goal of people's empowerment requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach to policy and legislative measures. Such an approach encompasses legal equality and respect for the full spectrum of human rights, universal access to justice, public goods and services, and equitable access to assets and opportunities for all.

55. The principle of non-discrimination as delineated in international human rights laws and other policy instruments must be effectively integrated into national policy and legal frameworks through harmonization with national constitutions, including clauses on rights and enforcement procedures in courts of law or the creation of jurisprudence on the enforceability of rights, such as recognizing the right to education, shelter and food security. Legislative and administrative reforms are also a means of achieving the national integration of human rights norms and standards, for example, through labour laws and policies that mandate equal wages for male and female workers, guarantees of equal land rights and the right of women to inherit property, and the prohibition of violence against women. Institutions such as human rights commissions or offices of ombudspersons have also been created in some States, such as Australia, Costa Rica and South Africa, to strengthen national implementation capacity, including for the benefit of specific excluded groups. It is important to accompany such national instruments and measures with civic

¹⁶ World Bank, *Inclusion Matters: The Foundation for Shared Prosperity* (Washington, D.C., 2013).

education and public information campaigns that raise people's awareness about their rights and challenge discriminatory attitudes and mindsets.

56. Without representation in official statistics or proof of citizenship, marginalized social groups risk invisibility across levels of government. Effective and responsive governance is grounded in sound information, ranging from vital statistics to demographic and socioeconomic data from censuses or surveys, including on language, disability, ethnicity and other characteristics. Specifically, civil registration enables Governments to know their citizens and thereby endeavour to meet their needs and invest in their futures through institutional design and arrangements, resource allocation and the provision of public services. At the same time, basic civil registration, especially of births, establishes legal identity and lays the foundation for people's claim to rights, enabling their empowerment. It is often, therefore, a prerequisite for participation through, for example, claiming property rights and accessing jobs, social services and legal justice. Many developing countries have not yet developed effective registration systems, and it is the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups in society that have the lowest levels of registration. Those groups tend to be prevented from obtaining birth certificates because of cost, distance and bureaucratic barriers. Recently, through a partnership among the African Union, the African Development Bank, the Economic Commission for Africa and United Nations agencies, African Heads of State and Government were called upon to prioritize effective civil registration and vital statistics systems. The Government of India has initiated the implementation of a national biometric identification project.

57. Social exclusion can refer to multiple and intersecting dimensions of human deprivation, including exclusion from and discrimination in access to employment, productive resources and economic opportunities, quality education, health care and housing, and participation, as well as denial of voice. The social protection floor approach to social policy aims to address such types of exclusion through universal and comprehensive social protection systems that provide income security and essential social services for all, such as health care throughout the life cycle, and to thereby promote social equity. Means-based targeted approaches to the delivery of basic services have demonstrated a higher risk of inefficiency in reaching people living in poverty as well as their stigmatization, and also of widening gaps among people living in poverty by gender, location and ethnicity. The social protection floor entails rights-based, systemic insurance against poverty for all, including vulnerable persons and groups who are at risk of poverty and exclusion.

58. To reach disadvantaged individuals and social groups, universal policies should be complemented by policies and programmes that identify, evaluate and address the distinct obstacles to participation that they face.

C. Targeted or special measures for excluded social groups

59. Even where policy frameworks adopt a universal approach, certain social groups face greater challenges than others in empowering themselves to overcome poverty or find a decent job. In order to achieve equality and non-discrimination, attention must be given to power differentials and the barriers to participation of disadvantaged social groups must be identified and addressed. Such barriers may be physical, social or cultural, legal, economic or political. For example, decisions

regarding the provision of education or health care must take into account, inter alia, the availability of adequate infrastructure and accessibility to enable use by persons with disabilities and those living in rural or remote areas. Some historically excluded or disadvantaged groups may be hard to reach through universal measures and in need of support in the form of targeted or special measures to help realize their empowerment.

60. Special measures encompass preferential treatment or quota systems that are designed to moderate or eliminate conditions that perpetuate discrimination and are intended to be temporary. Decision-making processes regarding such measures should seek out and incorporate the active participation of excluded persons and communities. Special measures to promote inclusion range from preferential access to credit for people living in poverty to transport vouchers for persons with disabilities to interpretation services for indigenous language speakers and quotas in political parties or bodies for women and minorities. To reduce high levels of unemployment and discouragement in young people, Finland, Germany, Sweden and some other European countries have implemented youth guarantee programmes that provide some combination of jobs, employment counselling, apprenticeships or traineeships, start-up funding, continuing education and related assistance. Similarly, the Government of Bulgaria, in partnership with non-governmental organizations, has enhanced the inclusion of Roma children in mainstream education through the provision of scholarships, transportation to and from schools, textbooks and school aids, tutoring, desegregated extracurricular activities and engagement with parents and other stakeholders.

61. Legal empowerment of people living in poverty is a critical component of an empowering approach. Not only do people living in poverty experience greater vulnerability to injustice and suffer more severely from it, but judicial systems also play a key role in tackling discrimination and exclusion. Lack of wealth and productive resources as well as discrimination hinder equal access to justice by people living in poverty. The deprivations caused by poverty generally result in limited awareness of rights and legal literacy. Moreover, attempts by people in poverty to pursue justice pose high opportunity costs in terms of lost time and earnings and greater risk of poor outcomes. When poor and excluded individuals and groups become legally empowered, they gain greater voice, protection and opportunities. Strategies to promote legal empowerment include, among other things, programmes and campaigns to enhance legal awareness and literacy, low-cost legal services, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and reform of traditional or customary justice systems that disadvantage certain social groups. Outcomes of legal empowerment interventions include enabling indigenous peoples to enter the fair trade market, securing the rights of rural people living in poverty to land and natural resources and increasing awareness about laws addressing violence against women.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

62. People's empowerment is a key objective of social development and an essential means of eradicating poverty, promoting social integration and contributing to the creation of productive employment and decent work. While concrete policies and strategies to promote empowerment are context-specific, all Governments can adopt an empowering approach to policymaking and policy implementation in order to create an enabling environment for the effective participation of all members of

society in decision-making. An empowering approach entails ensuring that social, economic, political and legal institutions are open and inclusive; developing strategies to build human and social capital and to give a voice to the individuals and the groups to which they belong; and actively promoting participation by, inter alia, addressing discrimination. This approach is critical to accelerating progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals and to the successful implementation of the post-2015 development agenda.

63. In order to promote an enabling environment for empowerment, the Commission for Social Development may wish to consider the recommendations below.

64. Governments should consider giving priority attention to the empowerment of people in the elaboration of the post-2015 global development agenda. Empowered individuals and communities will become agents of change in the implementation of the development agenda, thereby enhancing the prospects of realizing the future we want.

65. Governments should adopt an empowering approach to policymaking so as to ensure that the development process is people-centred and inclusive. An empowering approach calls for comprehensive strategies that go beyond group-specific approaches.

66. In order to ensure that policies aimed at reducing poverty and promoting employment and social integration and those intended to foster the empowerment of people are mutually reinforcing, Governments should:

(a) Allocate adequate funding to ensure universal access to social services, including quality education and health services, and implement social protection floors or extend the scope and effectiveness of social protection programmes;

(b) Strengthen access to productive resources by individuals belonging to socially excluded or marginalized groups, including by securing land-tenure rights and other rights related to the use of natural resources, and by improving access to a broad range of financial services;

(c) Promote the use of information and communications technology and bridge the digital divide by further developing necessary infrastructure, equipping people with knowledge and skills regarding the use of such technology and ensuring that it meets user needs in terms of access, language, simplicity and effectiveness;

(d) Foster broad-based participation in policymaking and governance processes and enhance the capacity of the public administration to be transparent, accountable and responsive to the needs and aspirations of all people;

(e) Take all necessary measures to eliminate discrimination against all persons, including people living in poverty, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, older persons, young persons and women, by providing for equal access to public goods, services and justice and the legal empowerment of people living in poverty, including through effective civil registration systems;

(f) Build inclusive monitoring frameworks and social impact assessments into all relevant policies and use existing monitoring frameworks to measure progress in advancing empowerment. Effective monitoring may call for strengthening national capacities for data collection and reporting, ensuring progress in data disaggregation.