

# **The Voice of Marginalised Women in Managing Small-Scale Development Projects: Some Lessons from India**

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## **Abstract**

There has always been a tendency for the development expert or agency to define what the development problem is and how it should be addressed, particularly when it applies to the most poor and marginalised in a community. This view has changed little in the past fifty years, despite the work done on participation, gender, and most latterly empowerment. This paper explores through a number of case studies from Western and Southern India on how poor women's 'voice' can be heard and allowed some control of development processes. For this to happen it will require a fundamental shift of how development work is undertaken, with a shift in accountability towards those most marginalised rather than upwards to those who control the purse strings. The paper ends with practical examples of how the voices of the most poor and marginalised can be heard in development planning. This may lead to some changes in the role of development agencies such as NGOs.

## **Keywords**

Gender, empowerment, international development, India, aid management

## **Introduction**

International development aid has as a broad goal, overcoming poverty and bringing the living standards in poorer countries to something approaching those in wealthier countries. While this has been successful in some countries, questions are being asked as to why poverty has not been reduced after several decades of assistance in many other countries. Recent studies show that poverty reduction is much slower and less certain than intended, and in some dimensions of poverty, such as inequality, it is getting worse (Ravallion 2003; Wade 2004). There are a number of reasons as to why poverty is not being seriously challenged in many countries, but they generally fall into two broad schools of thought. On the one hand, management specialists blame poor planning for the failure of development programs, and seek to impose stricter management regimes with clearer milestones and outputs and the like (Hailey and Sorgenfrei 2003; Hirschman 1999). On the other hand there are the participatory development practitioners who argue that it is poor stakeholder analysis, a lack of understanding of what is required of a particular development intervention, and low levels of involvement and participation by those affected from development interventions that is the cause of the problem (Earle 2003; Gasper 2000). They argue that straight-jacket approaches to outputs, targets and the like, are counterproductive as the focus should

be on the processes involved to ensure the relevance and ownership of interventions, rather than what may be seen as superficial at best or at worst irrelevant ends.

This paper examines one aspect of participatory development — the empowerment of poor women. Empowerment now has a strong focus in development practice and is used by most development agencies as one of the processes by which poverty can be eradicated (Narayan 2002). Women's empowerment in this context is about the increased range of choices, and the women's capacity to act on these choices in relation to others in their daily lives (Kabeer 1999). In this paper I will discuss the issues around women's empowerment that emerged from the findings of field-work I undertook in India: by using women's own views of what they see as empowering, a case will be built as to how the voice of poor women can be heard and used to develop an alternative paradigm for good development practice, which might see issues around poverty alleviation more effectively addressed.

This alternative paradigm that focuses on women's own views of what is empowering, contrasts with some development theories that presuppose a poor person's priorities are income and the related economic resources available to them. The argument is, that development activities should focus on the delivery of economic outputs and from these outputs empowerment will follow (Schneider 1999; Hishigsuren 2000; Hashemi et al. 1996; Ackerly 1995). In this model of development decision-making remains firmly in the hands of the aid agency, and the term 'economic empowerment' is often used to describe this process. This paper argues that it is more than economic access that is important: from a marginalised woman's point of view, it is the change in agency she experiences, which is the source of empowerment and enables women to access resources (personal and community) and apply them to what they see as their priorities (Kabeer 1999). In practical terms, the woman herself becomes the decision-maker rather than the aid worker or development organisation.

The changes in agency that an 'empowered' woman experiences, can be seen in terms of access to different social domains, and the capacity of individuals, through the increased social relationships they experience, to influence the decisions of others within those domains. According to Giddens (1979) it is access to these social relationships that is a source of power. The converse of these findings posits that it is the denial of access to all or some of these domains and relationships, which is disempowering. This conclusion supports the contention of Narayan (1999), Amartya Sen (1999), and others, that poverty, in terms of deprivation and marginalisation, is intrinsically related to power relations, and the restricted access to different domains within a community — i.e. poverty has a clear political dimension (Vijayalakshmi 2001).

This paper makes the case that a focus on increased women's agency, and the consequent rise in self-esteem and engagement in a greater range of social domains, can lead to social change (Speer

2000; Spreitzer et al. 1999; Asthana 1996). This finding of itself is unremarkable, and is in line with other research that looks at empowerment from different perspectives and in different country contexts (Itzhaky and York 2000; Falk and Kilpatrick 1999; Rubinoff 1999; Roberts-Gray et al. 1999); but nevertheless aid programming seems reluctant to take this approach with its attendant uncertainty and inherent unpredictability of the outcomes. The question that emerges then: is how can development projects be developed that better enable these empowerment processes to occur? The lessons from case studies from India will be used to identify some basic principles for better development programming.

### **Lessons from India**

A comparative analysis of 15 Indian NGOs working with women's groups, in two states in Southern and Western India — Maharashtra and Karnataka — was undertaken by the author. These states were chosen for their supportive institutional environment. The districts in each state chosen had a relatively high density of small and medium size NGOs working with poor and marginalised communities. The NGOs were chosen for the study on the basis of their commitment to empowerment as a means to addressing community issues around poverty and marginalisation, and their representation of the range of NGOs working with poor communities in that district.

Typically, Indian NGOs engage in empowering by facilitating and working with what are referred to as self-help groups (SHGs). The SHG movement, which had its origins in Tibetan refugee camps in the 1970s, has taken off in the past decade and is very popular both with international donors as well as Indian governments, both at federal and state level. A typical SHG comprise around twenty people, usually women, who meet regularly for both the purpose of savings and credit programs, but also may include training and other social mobilisation on issues such as water, health, education, etc. The SHG formation process is generally facilitated by NGOs, and in some areas Government agencies. Data for the study was collected through focus group discussions using a sample of the self-help groups the participating NGOs were working with — in all a total of 77 groups were interviewed.

A range of open-ended questions were asked of the groups: these related to what the women have learned, how their lives have changed, and what material assets they have obtained since joining the groups. Other questions dealt with decision-making processes in the group, the type interactions they had with the sponsoring NGO, participation in village political processes, and the level of trust and co-operation in the village. In addition data was collected from interviews with the sponsoring NGOs on the various accountability relationships, they had with Government, donors, and the SHGs.

Empowerment was analysed in terms of the reported changes that women had experienced and how this translated into 'agency'. The answers they gave were then categorised into five broad areas or taxonomies of change, which the women themselves saw as being important (Hines 1993). While the how

the women articulated the changes they experienced varied, the broad categories that emerged were the ability to:

- go out of the house independently
- meet with officials
- travel independently outside the village
- attend village meetings and the like
- be able to enter political processes.

It was this categorisation that provided a framework for identifying those NGOs that secured good empowerment outcomes — that is those that showed the fullest range of these five responses. The data was then analysed to examine the characteristics of both the programs and the agencies themselves that enabled women to achieve these strong empowerment outcomes. The NGOs reviewed showed a large variation in the range of responses from the women in terms of this framework. The SHGs some NGO were working with, showed change in only the first one or two categories of the framework, while the SHGs other NGOs facilitated showed change across all five categories. The next section will focus on the responses of those NGOs which showed high empowerment results, and look at the reasons for variation in these results. First, however, the cases will be introduced with a basic description of three of these NGOs.

### ***Three Case Study NGOs Showing High Empowerment Results***

#### *India Development Service*

IDS was started by non-resident Indians in 1974 in Chicago USA with an aim of fundraising among mainly non-resident Indians for development work in India (Viswanath 1993). In 1977, two members of IDS visiting India with the aim of making the program operational, settled in Dharwad, Karnataka in 1979 and registered IDS in India in the same year: it had a commitment to the economic and social development of India 'development of people'. IDS works in drought prone areas of Dharwad District in 100 villages and 20 hamlets with around 500 self-help groups, the majority of which are women's groups. IDS has around 50 staff in the field together with a Board that takes a direct interest in beneficiary welfare with Board members regularly meeting the groups thus providing a direct accountability mechanism of the agency through its Board 'down' to the communities.

#### *SNDT Rag-pickers Program*

The rag-pickers program had its genesis in the late 1980s when the Department of Adult and Continuing Education of SNDT Women's University Pune Campus, started a program in the urban slums of Pune working with rag-pickers who were the poorest and most marginalised in the community; and whose daily livelihood centres on collecting recyclable materials from the waste skips and dumps around the city. The

approach taken by SNDT was to advocate for waste-picking to be recognised by local Government as a legitimate occupation. From this the idea of a trade union emerged and in 1993 the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat, the association of rag-pickers, was formally registered. It currently has a membership of 5000 women from 122 slums in and around Pune City.

SNDT provides support to the association through mobilisation and training programs with rag-pickers. In terms of a management model the staff from SNDT are effectively seconded to the association who have large say in SNDT's day-to-day activities in the rag-picker program. This represents a different model to most other NGO programs, with the emphasis more sharply focused not only of the rights of the constituency but their active role in the development process. The rag-pickers are actively involved in the development program priorities, identification, and design, through a formal process of monthly meetings that involve a high level of direct staff accountability to the rag-picker women.

### *Grama Vikas*

Grama Vikas is a medium sized NGO based in Kolar district Karnataka that focuses particularly in scheduled caste women and children. It started in 1980 with an initial emphasis on child development which was expanded into a women empowerment program relatively early on in the organisational life, in the belief that child development is only possible when women have an active role in development activities (Viswanath 1993). The strategy of the Grama Vikas approach is initially through child development through the establishment of pre-schools and after some village acceptance is reached Self-Help Groups are developed with the most marginalised women in the community.

An important feature of the Grama Vikas programs is to expand the program only at the rate of the capacity of the groups to self-manage with Grama Vikas staff moving out of direct group management as soon as possible. Similarly in the overall management of the program there are two separate community organisations that are taking over the responsibility for the management of the technical programs. These two bodies are responsible for the day-to-day running of the programs while Grama Vikas is involved in higher-level advocacy and broader strategic work. This structure provides a high degree of direct accountability of the management of the program to the constituency.

### **How the women saw empowerment**

Overall the research found that from the women's own narratives they saw the improvement in their agency as the change that most readily came to their minds, and that this change then led to increased self-esteem and self-respect. The strength of change in agency they experienced was related to their existing levels of social exclusion and disempowerment — i.e. the greater the original exclusion (disempowerment) the stronger the change they described. For example, the responses of the members of the majority of groups to the changes that the savings and credit programs brought, was a sense that

there were greater choices available in women's social lives that the increase in disposable income gave them. This change was not seen as increased or stable incomes per se but rather the reduced stress, and increased self-esteem, that their participation in these programs brought. These findings are in line with other studies (Zaman 1999; Goetz and Gupta 1996; Kabeer 1999).

The women respondents indicated that the increased capacity for independent action also led to greater respect from within the family and, in many cases, from the broader community, which in turn leads to greater self-respect and heightened self-esteem. Examples from the narratives by the women included 'I gain more respect in the family'. One respondent said 'life used to be drab and all they knew was four walls', while others were more personal 'I am no longer treated like an idiot'; and 'before my husband had no respect — now he has'. Some respondents spoke of being able to 'stand up to their husband', and their men 'now consult with them before making decisions'. The women alluded to two primary factors at play in leading to these changes. The first is the self-confidence that a broader range of social interaction brings, and the second is the reduced stress that comes from a more stable income. The importance of these findings is related to the pre-existing conditions of women's lives in terms of the level of individual empowerment and social exclusion.

The change these women experienced in their capacity to engage occurred in a number of different domains: within their families; with others in positions of power outside the household such as bank managers; and within the SHG itself. These changes did not mean that the women were not susceptible to subsequent shifts in their social environment, which were disempowering; but rather they experienced an increase in the range of choices and opportunities for action that were available to them. Resources and tangible outcomes are not only a result of agency, but they lay down the foundations to maintain the changes in agency.

The change in an individual's agency is important as it facilitates the development of relationships outside the immediate household sphere. The women responded to the question about changes in their lives by speaking of being able to go out and gain access to, and influence in, other relationships that exist in different domains outside the household. These were identified broadly as the economic, social, and political domains within their village communities. This finding supports Vijalakshmi's (2001) view that power is related to access to these different domains. It can be argued that one of these domain should be in the management of the development project that is working with the women — this point will be returned to.

In summary the clearest message that emerged from the full range of interviews across 77 SHGs was that it is from enhanced agency that access to resources and tangible outcomes in people's lives follow; the transformatory or empowering processes, in their day-to-day lives, is in terms of the change in their

personal agency, rather than material change. The majority of the women surveyed referred quite specifically to an increase in their personal capacity to engage with others as the most important change they had experienced.

### *Social exclusion*

While this study did not look specifically at how poor women saw their situation in terms of marginalisation, either as caste or other exclusionary relationships, the interviews did provide an indirect view of how women saw themselves in their communities and their families, and how that could be related to the broader context. A common response to questions about women's lives, before the involvement in the SHGs, was that their lives were 'drab' with little social interaction. Many of the accounts pointed to social exclusion in a real sense being gender based and starting in the home.

But not only was poor women's household life heavily restricted, there was also a broader social exclusion from the political and economic spheres, which was also related to caste and class. For example, the tribal women in Karjat were specifically excluded from the political and broader economic sphere, even when they were involved in SHGs. For *dalit* (formerly referred to as 'untouchables') women, the exclusion from certain spheres extended to relatively mundane areas such as access to water, which in some cases was socialised to the extent that there is no need for overt enforcement processes to exclude them from access to certain wells — because the women *believed* they were excluded from a well, they did not use that well. For these women caste is a powerful excluding and disempowering force by virtue of the fact that it can operate in many areas with no explicit social sanctions. In this, case membership of the SHG did make a difference so that the women eventually did use the well, and there were no repercussions. The women described this relatively simple process as being transformatory, their self-esteem and confidence grew, and they felt part of the broader community. In these cases the process of empowerment had very clear tangible outcomes and the 'sense' of change they experienced was manifest in greater mobility access to resources and therefore productivity at both a social and probably at an economic level.

### *Individual and collective empowerment*

The 'empowerment' that these women described has both individual and collective dimensions (Speer 2000; Goetz 2001; Drury and Reicher 1999; Kroeker 1996; Murthy 2001; Rissel 1994; Pilsuk et al. 1996; Campbell and Jovchelovitch 2000). As discussed above at an individual level the women saw the changes they experienced very personally in terms of their agency. The increase in the range of activities they could engage in ranged from the very basic of being able 'to go out of the house now', through to the Pune rag pickers in SNTD engaging in political negotiations with respect to their work conditions and broader waste management issues in the city.

The changes in the women's agency were directly related to their participation within the SHGs. This ties into the Giddens (1979) view that agency and power has a collective dimension: it was through the women's capacity to make the SHGs more effective that had a strong personal effect on the women — there was a feedback loop operating within the groups. It was the individual woman's engagement with the groups made the groups more effective, which in turn increased the feeling of self-worth of the individual, which fed back into the group and so forth, leading to a 'virtuous' cycle.

This collective process, which Drury and Reicher (1999) argue is intrinsic in the empowerment of individuals, has implications for how the groups are established and the norms under which they operate and the roles they can perform. These factors can be expressed both in terms of the relationship the NGO facilitating the SHGs has with the members, and in the decision-making and other participation processes in the SHGs that the NGO promotes. It is difficult then, in empowerment terms, to conceive of an empowerment program in which those being empowered have little or no say in that program — but nevertheless this is the norm in development practice: thus is a limitation in effective empowerment programs.

### **Causal factors in empowerment**

When the data was statistically tested factors for possible causal factors for empowerment I found that those factors that affected empowerment outcomes were important to consider in managing development activities, namely, 'downward' accountability of the NGO to its constituency (the SHGs), and the time the group had been together (for full details see Kilby 2003, 2004).

#### *Accountability to the constituency*

The level of accountability an NGO has to the SHGs it is working with is important in achieving strong empowerment outcomes. The level of formality of the accountability mechanism was used as a proxy for the degree of accountability, as the more formal systems establish a greater right to information and participation, and so therefore a power relationship develops. Joshi and Moore (2000) argue that the level of formality establishes a *right* to participate in decision-making, while Lee et al. (1999) argue that it is criteria set by those that one is being accountable to that should be the basis for accountable decision-making. This is in line with Day and Klein (1987) who argue from accountability theory that the exercise of power is in part the ability to call people to account, and power is exercised when one party holds another party accountable for their actions — i.e. the process of holding another to account is an empowering one.

The research finding on the importance of 'downward' accountability is supported by research in other fields of social science; that is, greater levels of participation in decision-making processes led to improved social outcomes, which were largely due to shifts in authority and control that the participation

brought. These studies include Blair's (2000) study in the broad area of political participation across six countries, Smith Sreen (1995) who looked at development effectiveness at a local level in India, and Lee et al. (1999) on business management process. The evidence seem to suggest that the accountability processes an NGO employs in its relations with its constituents can lead to positive changes in power relations that generally disempowered individuals experience in their day-to-day lives.

The poor and marginalised women in India generally have no say in calling other people to account, either within their family or outside. They are generally excluded from decision-making at both household and village level, and have few opportunities to engage with other people, let alone be able to hold people to account for their actions (Janardhan 1995). In this context the idea of poor women being able to hold NGOs and their staff to account for their work with them is unique in their experience, and so by its nature is empowering. The research found that this empowering change extended beyond the relations with the NGO to other domains in the respondents' lives.

This was demonstrated by the women's accounts of their increased capacity for expanded choice and action in other spheres of their lives, including their relationships with other authority figures such as Government officials. One explanation is that the staff of NGOs are generally outsiders (in terms of class, caste, and origin), in relation to their constituency, and so the ability to hold outsiders (with a perceived higher status) to account can be a powerful notion to marginalised women. One of the few arenas in which village women can be involved in decision-making processes or exercising agency in a different domain was with the NGO if it had these processes in place.

In practice it is more difficult, or rather that there is less incentive, for NGOs to have formal processes in place for their accountability to the people with whom they are working. As public benefit organisations they do not have statutory or formal mechanisms for accountability to the constituents (International Center for Non-Profit Law 1997). The research found, however, that this structural issue need not be an impediment, as some of the NGOs who participated in the research have established quite clear mechanisms to transfer some control to the people with whom they are working (for example SNTD and IDS discussed above). SNTD effectively contracted itself and its staff out to a membership body (the rag pickers' union). IDS directly involved its board in how it was answerable to the constituents by having Board members meet with SHGs prior to Board meetings.

In summary these findings on accountability point to the desirability of NGOs having direct mechanisms of accountability to the constituency if empowerment is to be maximised. The findings also point to fundamental limitations of NGOs as empowerment agents. If NGOs are not required to be accountable they are less likely to hand over power to their constituency in the way the cases above have indicated. Joshi and Moore put it in terms of being:

“...sceptical of the capacity or willingness of any but the most exceptional organisations to encourage or even tolerate the autonomous and potentially antagonistic mobilisation of their own client groups” (2000, p. 49).

There is a tension that arises between the source of authority and power within an NGO, and the desire for effective empowerment programs. All of the NGOs that participated in the research recognised, to varying degrees, the importance of some level of accountability to their constituency. This was not only for transparency reasons but also recognising that it is part of the empowerment processes. However, of the 15 NGOs surveyed only one handed power over in a direct sense (SNDT), and two others actively promoted a direct role of their constituency in strategic programming (Grama Vikas and IDS).

#### *Age of the group*

In line with expectations those groups that had been meeting and working together for a longer time exhibited better empowerment outcomes. There was a greater difference in outcomes if a group had been only working for a few months compared with groups that may have been working together for many years. It takes time for norms of behaviour and trust etc. within a group to develop. In the research some groups had been meeting for up to ten years and they had established patterns of behaviour so that they worked together extremely well and could speak out with ease, while newly formed groups were shy and tended to be very tentative in their social interactions and the decisions they made

This finding has implications for community development policy and NGO practice. For example, in India for some micro-finance and other group-support programs donors seek a relatively early withdrawal by the NGO from providing support for the groups, usually within three to five years. For example MYRADA, an Indian NGO, has a policy that that calls for the withdrawal of its staff animators within three years after group formation, seemingly regardless of the endowments or capabilities of group members either at the beginning or after three years (Fernandez 1998). The danger of such a prescriptive policy is that staff will tend to target those in the communities who are more likely to be able to ‘go it alone’ after three years rather than the most needy. So while it makes sense in terms of freeing-up resources for NGO expansion into new villages and communities, it runs the risk of jeopardising poverty focus and the sustainability of the groups and the empowerment outcomes. The implication of the research findings is that a balance should to be struck between efficiency in terms of the time spent with groups, and effectiveness — the empowerment outcomes that more time may bring (Hishigsuren 2000; Berg et al. 1998).

The accounts of some of the NGOs surveyed indicate that it is not them but the donors who seek to limit the period of the NGO engagement with the SHGs to only three to five years. The NGOs report that such limits on the engagement they can have with SHGs can affect possible empowerment outcomes, particularly for the most poor and marginalised groups such a *dalits*. The results of the research suggest

that for the most marginal groups such as *dalits* and tribal people a fruitful engagement period for and NGO with a SHG may be more than a decade (Kilby 2003). The implications are that it is a donor or NGO requirement that pressures the time that an NGO can engage with SHGs. This can lead to a false economy in that the efficiency perceived in a three year time-frame for facilitation of an SGH may be traded off for ineffective outcomes.

## **Development fashions**

### *Microfinance*

Fashions have been part of development since time immemorial, whether if be the large scale infrastructure development of the 1960s and 70s to the focus on good governance and democratic outcomes in the 1990s. For example micro-finance since the early 1990s has become a development 'fashion' for multilateral and NGO aid organisations alike. This is not to decry the usefulness of microfinance but rather the overemphasis given to financial performance can diminish the other important aspects of micro-finance programs such as targeting the poor, and empowerment (Kilby 2002). Microfinance is often a necessary entry point for most NGO activities, mainly because most poor and marginalised households do not have secure incomes and so are dependent on high-cost credit for their daily living. By introducing schemes to reduce the cost of credit, NGOs gain access to communities, and from that access NGOs can raise awareness or deliver a range of other services. The access also enables them to engage on the priority strategic issues that affect their constituency's lives, such as alcoholism, gender-violence, and caste discrimination.

A problem with the rapid growth in micro-finance support from donors and government financial institutions is that the micro-finance programs themselves become ends at the expense of other social programs, and can even develop into forms of debt traps. In order to secure donor finance, NGOs may have to develop activities that move them away from their core values and programs, or from their prime constituency. The various micro-finance schemes have both advantages and disadvantages for NGOs and existing self-help groups. They are attractive to NGOs, but as mentioned above can have the effect of diverting NGOs resources from their main activities. On the other hand, some of these schemes with government support can help focus NGO programs onto poor and marginalised groups. For example the *Swashakti* scheme in India targets certain villages according to the sex ratio (i.e. those with a low ratio of women to men — an indicator of systemic gender discrimination); and within villages, targeting below poverty line women, women with low literacy rates, and those from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. These selection criteria will mean that at least those NGOs that take advantage of the program have some clear selection criteria according to indicators of poverty and marginalisation.

These findings have implications for how empowerment and poverty alleviation is prioritised and programmed: it suggests that changes may need to be made in how certain types of programs (such as micro-finance) are managed. For example, the strong move to promoting micro-finance and financial sustainability in micro-finance by NGO funders, both Indian government and foreign, is an issue which can have a negative effect on empowerment. It effectively privileges what can be referred to as instrumental concerns (program efficiency through financial performance) over social effectiveness, that is empowerment. There is a view that the efficient running of a micro-finance program will result in empowerment outcomes (Hishigsuren 2000; Fernandez 1998).

For example ASA, a Tamil Nadu NGO, adopted the Grameen Bank micro-credit model from Bangladesh, which is a highly disciplined, rules based, authoritarian approach, that has little opportunity for group control or flexibility. ASA saw this approach as one that should lead to empowerment outcomes, while at the same time enabling them to expand their operations and be more efficient. The study found that the empowerment outcomes among the ASA groups were not as strong as for those NGOs that had a broader social approach to their work using the SHG savings model. The findings did not support the view that a well-functioning micro-finance program will automatically result in strong empowerment outcomes (Hashemi et al. 1996). The NGOs that tended to have the highest empowerment ranking were those that had a broader socio-political approach to their development work, rather than a strict financial focus.

This discussion on microfinance illustrates a range of issues with regard of accountability of NGOs to donor, or following donor driven priorities. On the one hand, these accountability mechanisms can steer NGO programs away from their target groups, while on the other hand some government anti-poverty programs in particular can have the effect of focusing the NGO onto what they would see as their primary constituency. These results are in line with the literature on donor influence on NGOs (Edwards 1999; Baig 1999; Edwards and Hulme 1996; Fisher 1994; Fox and Brown 1998; Zaidi 1999).

### **The nature of 'projects'**

Related to donor accountability is the nature of funding relationships, and that most donor funding is bounded by the notion of the *project*. Projects are both time-bound and seek to identify (often tangible) outcomes in advance. These two requirements of the project, in the context of empowerment, implies a de facto pre-determination of what is empowerment is and how it may be achieved, which may not accord with what the people being served see as empowering. This brings us back to a paradox identified by Tandon (1995) that by predetermining what is empowering is in itself an act of power over constituents and, therefore, is disempowering.

In effect a *project* approach instrumentalises the notion of empowerment, which has the effect of devaluing it, and perpetuating the disempowerment of those who are meant to be empowered. The implications of the findings of the research described in this paper that empowerment is related to the expansion of an individual's influence and power into new social and political domains, is that these changes cannot be easily predicted, be time-bounded, or articulated in advance as expected outcomes — as projects often demand. As donor funding is often predicated on these 'project' conditions the expectations of the donor are often privileged over needs of the constituency. It is worth noting here that the three agencies that ranked highly on empowerment outcomes all had long-term, open, and flexible funding relationships. The donors in these three cases, while demanding detailed financial accountability, were very open to innovative, long-term processes for which they generally accepted that measurable outcomes would only be realised over time.

The research findings suggest a more flexible approach to funding support should be adopted by both donors and NGOs if the expected empowerment outcomes are to occur. This will mean a greater control of the change processes being put into the hands of those being directly affected the beneficiaries. This change in approach will be difficult at a time when official donors are seeking more certainty in terms of development outcomes and are promoting higher level of donor control in the program management processes (Kilby 2004; Samoff 1996; Earle 2003). Similarly for NGOs there are aspects of their own approach to program management that should be reassessed if empowerment programs are to be transferred to the hands of the beneficiaries. These are: a focus on flexible time-frames in terms of the engagement with the communities; and most importantly a conscious focus on more formal accountability mechanisms of NGOs to their constituents. This flexible approach suggests handing greater control to constituent groups raises the problem of preserving the NGOs' role of being public benefit organisations. Some innovative approaches to overcome some of these problems have been identified. An example is the SNTD Rag Pickers Program in Pune, which effectively contracts the NGOs services to a representative (mutual benefit) organisation of the rag pickers , but at the same time remains free to expand its public benefit work to others it may also see as its constituents.

## **Conclusion**

The approach of the research in eliciting the women's narrative has proven to be very important as it has given a perspective on empowerment outside the NGOs' (and researcher's) expectations and values, and it also provides a common base for making comparisons. One outcome which may be taken up by NGOs is to look at their programs in terms of empowerment, less by way of anecdotal evidence, but more by way of systematic monitoring of the broad-based changes women see in their lives. This may require the development of specific instruments for the NGOs to use. Existing instruments such as the logical framework analysis tend to focus on pre-existing outcomes, which can skew the results, rather than on open-ended approaches that enable the views of the beneficiaries of a program to be heard more directly.

The lesson that emerges from the difference in the women's views of what is empowering and the NGOs' expectations, is that it points to some changes in approaches to group mobilisation and management within NGO programs. If this learning can be developed into practical approaches, NGO work may be made more responsive to the self-defined aspirations of the communities with which they are working, their primary constituents.

The women from the SHGs that the NGOs worked with in this study use the notion of agency in describing the key changes in their lives following an NGO intervention, even though this may not be the main objective of the intervention. The change in agency is in terms of the change in the women's capacity to enter different spheres in a community's social, economic and political life. Before an NGO intervention the women reported that they were restricted to the household sphere, and even there had little power. Empowerment for these women is being able to enter new spheres or domains and exercise some influence over other people's behaviour. The respondents related this change to their interaction with the SHGs with whom they were interacting. A feedback loop occurred in that as the self-confidence of the members fed into the group effectiveness that in turn fed back into personal agency. This finding is in line with the theory of community psychology of Drury and Reicher (1999). It is important because it moves away from the idea of the group being an instrument in providing financial or other 'practical' support to the individual, to the group being an integral part of the process of individual empowerment, and intrinsically tied up with the individual's notion of empowerment.

The second major finding of the research is that the key factors that affect empowerment are the age of the groups, and the accountability of the NGO to the groups. While the findings on the age of the group were to some extent expected, the issues of accountability are important as they provide direction for future approaches to development programs. If staff and management of a development agency such as an NGO are being held to account by the group members, this act of accountability is an empowering process. The group members feel that as they have some power over the NGO (which represents a completely new sphere of influence), they feel they can expand this influence or power to other spheres in their lives.

The broader implications are that if poverty is seen to some extent as social, economic and political marginalisation which Sen (1999), Narayan (1999) and others argue, then these empowerment processes are important in day-to-day development practice. The importance of these findings is that none of the factors, found to be correlated with empowerment, are dealt with in any detail in the NGO discourse on community development, or group formation and group management. This omission in the discourse and learning practice may go some way to explaining why *strong* empowerment results are not as common as they should be in development practice.

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