

Learning to Empowerment: A Roadmap



Presentation Transcript

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The theme of the CHOGM 2105 Women's Forum is the empowerment of women. The President of Malta has rightly said that empowerment of women is critical for the development of an equal and just society throughout the world. Goal 5 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals talks about achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.

The theme of my presentation along with my colleague Ms. Alexis Carr is to find out the role of education and learning in empowerment, particularly empowering women. This presentation is based on studies carried out by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) among poor farming communities in Uganda and Kenya under its Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F) programme.

The role of education in empowerment is still a debated one. The school of Paulo Freire believed that conventional formal education, which believes in building skills and competencies, is incapable of empowering learners. Even the neo-classical and functional schools have agreed that the role of education in influencing empowerment is very limited.

Non-formal learning, which is supposed to reach the poor and marginalised, suffers from similar challenges as formal education. There is very little evidence that non-formal learning, particularly in adult learning, can influence the empowerment process among women and other marginalised groups.

Let us first look at the definition of the term empowerment. Let me not get into the various discourses that are taking place in defining empowerment. We used the definition offered by Naila Kabeer that empowerment is "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" in the context of resources, agency and achievements.

This is a very interesting definition. But how do we measure empowerment? Development agencies are already involved in measuring empowerment through qualitative and quantitative data and techniques. The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index of IFPRI, and the Women Empowerment Index of CARE International are examples.

But COL felt that empowerment is not a uni-linear, homogenous process and there are different dimensions and different levels. Hence COL developed a three-dimensional framework for measuring empowerment through an index. COL's empowerment index is not only for women, but also for men since disempowerment among men is considered to be the root cause for domestic violence and various other development challenges.

The framework looks at empowerment at three levels: household, community and enterprise. The mechanism of choice is captured in the degrees which include: knowledge, resources, desire and action. The third dimension addresses aspects such as psychological/emotional, social/cultural, economic/entrepreneurial and political/legal. Through this three-dimensional framework, COL believes that the resources, agency and achievements for making choices can be captured well.

COL's L3F model believes that learning should take place in the context of social capital and financial capital. In this model, a poor farmer is not merely a passive learner but an active participant in the community's knowledge management, which leads to better management of agricultural enterprises and strengthening of livelihood security. Learning includes learning from experts as well learning from the community and other stakeholders. ICT-based open and distance learning helps to reduce the direct costs as well as the opportunity costs for learning. The semi-literate and illiterate masses use audio-based learning through tools such as mobile phone and radio. Thus, learning in L3F is a community-based activity. Such learning provides a win-win framework for other stakeholders like banks, industries and government and offers a scope for a self-sustaining development process. More than 60 per cent of L3F participants are women.

In the programme areas of L3F in Uganda and Kenya we conducted studies comparing L3F households with other control groups such as non-L3F households, villages and associations. The study was conducted through surveys and, using a seven-point scale, an attitudinal questionnaire was developed. In Uganda, the study compared an L3F village with a non-L3F village and in Kenya a study was conducted among households with backyard poultry. The empowerment scale is measured from 0 to 1 with 0 depicting least empowered or highly disempowered and one reflecting highly empowered.

The studies revealed an interesting pattern. In Uganda, empowerment scores are higher for the L3F village than the non-L3F village. Female empowerment scores are lower than the male scores, although in L3F villages the margin is less.

The most interesting aspect is that women in the L3F village in Uganda have a higher mean empowerment score than men in the non-L3F village. We also found out that the process of empowerment is not uniform at the household, community and enterprise levels. A woman can have a higher empowerment score at the community level and enterprise level but still can be submissive to the dominance of men at the household level. Women's economic opportunities and decision-making

capacities in groups or organisations by themselves will not translate into empowerment at the household level.

Kenya also shows more or less the same results. Empowerment scores are higher for L3F households compared to the other two control groups. Female empowerment scores are almost equivalent to male in L3F. Female empowerment scores in L3F are much higher than male empowerment in other two control groups.

What are the determinants of empowerment? Using regression analysis we found learning in the context of social and financial capital has a large influence on empowerment, particularly female empowerment. However in isolation, they do not contribute much. Interestingly, we found that education, mostly primary and secondary education, has not emerged as significant factor.

Based on our studies and experiences, we arrived at the following conclusions:

- Learning is much more than education.
- Learning cannot be a sectoral activity; it needs a holistic approach.
- Learning linked to social and financial capital offers potential for women empowerment at the community and enterprise levels.
- Men's empowerment may be required for strengthening women's empowerment at the household level.
- Programmes and institutions such as banks, microfinance, and financial literacy need to invest on enabling the community, particularly women, in learning in the context of social and financial capital since it offers a win-win framework.
- Empowerment is not a zero-sum game.