

CONCEPTUALISING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES

Pathways of Women's Empowerment RPC
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Abstract

The Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 marked a coming together of feminists from all over the world, with an end agreement on a transformative and relatively clear text – the Beijing Platform for Action. Over a decade later, words and agendas around women's empowerment have changed as the wider international development agenda has moved away from the notion of people centred development of the 1990's. We trace those changes and tease out the waxing and waning of different associational meanings attached to women's empowerment as used in international development agencies. Our historical analysis suggests a current privileging of meanings of efficiency and growth, broadly crowding out meanings of empowerment associated with solidarity and collective action. Feminist officials in international development organisations juggle clarity with fuzziness to make headway in what is now an unfavourable policy environment for women's rights. In our conclusion, we explore the possibilities of putting power back into empowerment.

Introduction

Twenty five years ago progressive staff in international development institutions argued that women as well as men should be beneficiaries of development. Hard-nosed neo-liberal male economists interpreted this argument as women as consumers rather than as producers of wealth. When thought about at all, they were seen as a category of the population that had specific needs, such as water and firewood (men apparently never going thirsty or needing to eat). Women had babies. They were wealth consumers, not producers.

In 1986 the British aid ministry produced its first policy statement on 'Women in Development' warning that improvements for women could only be achieved if there were greater prosperity for all. In other words, men had to make economic growth happen for consuming women to reap the benefits. Then, later in the decade in what seemed at the time a bold and radical shift in discourse, a new argument was introduced. Women were not only potential beneficiaries; they were also *agents* of development. Thus started the era of instrumentalist advocacy to persuade male decision makers that that they should invest in women to secure faster development.

Accordingly, in 1989, the British aid ministry produced a new policy statement on women. To include women in development projects led to greater efficiency and effectiveness. "If they themselves are healthy and knowledgeable, if they have greater access to knowledge, skills and credit, they will be more economically productive". (Eyben 2006)

Then, in the early 1990's came a further sea change. The United Nations Conference on Human Rights made a breakthrough. It recognised that women's rights are human rights. The instrumentalist/efficiency agenda moved into the shadows as the preparations for the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference developed a vision of global social transformation. Amartya Sen said development was freedom and women were claiming it.

That vision disappeared sometime in the first half of the present decade. Gender equality entered the doldrums. International aid commitments for supporting women's rights declined severely and grass roots organisations all over the world found nobody was interested in supporting them anymore. Multilateral organisations, aid ministries, big International NGOs, all had stopped being enthusiastic about gender equality. It was embarrassing and something needed to be done. Gender specialists in these organisations began to devise strategies for convincing their senior management that gender equality was a central issue for international development policy. And in so doing many of them appear to have decided to quietly forget an idea of gender equality and women's empowerment as social transformation.

Two years ago the World Bank's gender unit coined a catchy slogan - 'Gender equality is smart economics'. One motivation for women's empowerment is basic fairness and decency," said the World Bank's President in April 2008.

Young girls should have the exact same opportunities that boys do to lead full and productive lives. But second, the empowerment of women is smart economics...studies show that investments in women yield large social and economic returns. (1)

It is in these circumstances we have been exploring how and why the concept of empowerment - and women's empowerment especially - is currently being understood in international development agencies.¹ Our paper is a contribution to a wider research initiative in which every member of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment consortium is looking at how empowerment is conceptualised in the policy narratives of their region. Collectively we are pursuing a genealogy of development discourses of empowerment examining the ways in which discourses on empowerment are taken up, shaped and put to use in different contexts.

The research on which this paper is based was carried out in 2007 and consisted of semi-structured interviews and textual analysis of international development agency documentation to examine the shifting meanings of empowerment since the Beijing's Women's Conference.(2) In early 2008 we presented a draft of this paper at a conference organised as part of the research project. A lively mix of participants from development agencies and research institutions were invited to comment on our findings and to identify what might be done to rearticulate missing meanings that are vital to feminist understandings of empowerment, a theme to which we return in our conclusion.

Why undertake such an exercise? Discourses on women's empowerment, as developed and spread around the world by development agencies, are we believe worthy of study because of their potential to influence what is judged as important or negligible in the expenditure of international aid – and significantly worthy of study because of the associated policy dialogue that accompanies such expenditure, a process whereby donors indicate what they think should be recipient government priorities. As a conference participant remarked, because of their resources, these international development organisations have the power to fix meaning. The purpose of our paper is not just to record and analyse these discursive changes. Rather we hope to initiate a process whereby feminists active in international development institutions and associated policy research spaces become more conscious of the meanings in the words they choose to use – and learn to be strategic in using concepts in appropriate contexts as political tools for creating a new discursive environment.

In what follows, we start by discussing the changes to the wider discursive context, that in which those we interviewed are working and in which the texts we examine have been constructed. Then, we commence our detailed analysis by looking at the conceptual relationship between women's empowerment and gender equality and follow this by unpacking the different and shifting meanings of empowerment that identified in the documentation and interviews. Yet, while we can discern some historical trends since Beijing – in line with broader discursive shifts, efficiency and economic instrumentalism have ascended and solidarity and justice descended – yet overall women's empowerment is a fuzzy concept with many over-lapping meanings. This leads us to enquire into the different reasons for such fuzziness, including purposeful strategic ambiguity in an overall unfavourable discursive environment. Another option in such circumstances is to go for instrumentalist clarity – gender equality is smart economics – but we wonder whether this is delivering the hoped for effect of influencing mainstream policy actors. Thus, finally, in our conclusion, we look to the possibilities of putting power back into empowerment. We suggest a transformative social agenda would include a politics of solidarity, in which civil society activists challenge the prevailing instrumentalist

discourse, while staying supportive of feminist officials working within international development organisations who may make other strategic choices in the meanings they choose to give empowerment.

International development discourses since Beijing

The 1990's was a time of prominence for social issues in development. The macro-economics of the Washington Consensus and the associated structural adjustment policies of the 1980s did not disappear, but they shifted from being a unique preoccupation. People – and their participation - also apparently mattered. Beijing had been preceded by Rio (1992 environment), Vienna (1993 human rights) and Cairo (1994 population) – international conferences where 'global civil society' flexed its muscle and influenced emerging discourses. Of the six UK White Papers on development it is the 1997 White Paper that new words appeared or became more frequent, for example rights, partnership, poor, people, sustainability. The paired words women/gender and social/economic all also peaked in 1997 and declined in frequency in the two subsequent White Papers (Chambers and Alfini 2007) - a decline not only reflecting a shift in UK government thinking away from people-centred development but indicating a broader discursive trend in international development.

This trend partially reflects new themes in international relations generated outside the field of international development, such as climate change and global security which have contributed to what Molyneux and Razavi have noted as the 'more sombre and cautious zeitgeist that has come to dominate world affairs in recent times' (2005: 984). But there have also been largely self-generating changes within the field of international development itself, changes that were both a product of what was happening in the 1990's and a reaction to it. It is these latter that are the focus of our interest.

The commitment of the 1990's of putting poor people at the centre of development was accompanied by an international enthusiasm for scaling up aid up away from projects to providing coordinated support to those sectors judged most effective to reducing poverty, such as health and education. There was a re-engagement with the state so that money switched away from the funding of NGOs and the establishment of parallel project management units to 'mainstreaming' aid through recipient governments in the form of programmatic and budget support. This in turn shifted the focus away from looking at the details of project design and asking questions about who benefits to considering whether the government had the necessary financial management systems for handling budgetary contributions. The discourse of economists and public finance specialists became ever more dominant. Increased coordination among donors meant to them spending more time talking with each other – as well as to government officials – and less time going out of the capital city

to visit the projects they were funding, which in any case were decreasing in importance as the aid modalities changed.

Social analysts introduced the notion of 'participatory poverty assessments' to inform the new Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS) while meanwhile 'participation' became no longer something that happened in projects but transmuted into discourses of 'citizenship' and 'deepening democracy'. NGOs became civil society, less thought of as being active at the grass roots with poor people but rather working at the national policy level to hold governments accountable for the poverty reduction strategies that the 1990's had generated. Other than in humanitarian interventions or for success stories for donor publicity, what happens to particular people in specific places has become less and less relevant to concerns of donor agencies whose staff are increasingly out of touch with local realities. Donors fund NGOs as watchdogs of the state, rather than to work on changing inequitable social relations within society. This shift has in turn resulted in a decrease in funding of grassroots women's organisations (AWID 2006) who are also suffering from the fact that aid agencies are unenthusiastic about financing small initiatives of any kind because of what they judge to be 'inefficient' high transaction costs and their linear belief that big money delivers big results.

In a series of agreements, culminating in the Paris Declaration on Effective Aid in 2005, donor governments, and the multilateral organisations such as the UNDP and the World Bank funded by these governments, have committed themselves to greater aid effectiveness through the 'harmonisation' and 'alignment' of aid delivery in support of poverty reduction strategies that the recipient country, rather than they are now understood to be taking the lead in developing. At our conference on conceptualising empowerment, a participant from a bilateral aid agency, pointed that donor behaviour had been so shocking that something had to change in order to let recipient governments take more control and that there need be no contradiction between social justice and efficiency goals.

An element of the Paris Declaration is results based management. This is derived from the new public management discourse, based on principal agent theory in which empowerment is about people and organisations making their own choices about how to reach a goal that has been previously agreed with - or determined by - the funder. In this scenario recipient governments funding conditionality is replaced on delivering results which release more funds. These results are often framed in terms of the internationally agreed targets, the Millennium Development Goals themselves a product of the United Nations conferences of the preceding decade.

As part of this process of change during the last ten years - and one that also contributed to it - were changes occurring in the power, position and relations of international development organisations that led to certain discourses achieving

prominence. The leadership role given to the World Bank in negotiating the content of Poverty Reduction Strategies has led to an increasing interest by bilateral donors in co-financing with grant aid the credit support the World Bank provides to governments once a strategy has been agreed. Bilaterals found they had to influence the World Bank in order to influence the Ministry of Finance that in many recipient countries was growing more powerful vis -a -vis sector ministries as general budget support became the preferred aid modality. At the same time, the Bank strengthened its position as a 'knowledge agency' so that increasingly Bank research and publications reflect and promote the accepted discourse of development. (Broad 2006, Toye and Toye 2005) Many of its knowledge initiatives, including its work on gender equality, are financed by donor governments hoping to change the way the Bank thinks on these issues but perhaps too often finding themselves having been influenced by the Bank. (3) As Bank-led discourses became more prominent so the language of rights common in the 1990s began to disappear from the conferences and documentation of official aid organisations. (4)

The vision of a world free of poverty and campaigns, such as that of the Jubilee debt relief campaign that helped give birth to Poverty Reduction Strategies, encouraged big international NGOs to become increasingly interested in influencing international aid policies. This has led to accusation accused of a discursive convergence with the official multilateral and bilateral aid organisations (Murphy 2005). They are developing similar their managerial approaches and increasingly being a conduit for their money. At the same time, the NGO policy advocacy units focus on those issues to which those they wish to influence give priority, otherwise they fear that their own advocacy risk not being taken seriously.

I would say for women's rights people in big NGOs, the barrier is not just from Ministers or civil servants, it's from our own colleagues, who when we articulate broad, rights based political demands tell us we are being 'fluffy', not specific enough, not coming up with things that DFID can do anything about. Making the moral, social justice argument is not enough (5)

All these inter-linked processes led to a shift away from a concern for a people-centred approach to poverty reduction to a discourse of private sector led growth combined with sound financial public sector management for delivering basic services. It is against this background that we turn to exploring what has happened to women's empowerment in international development since the Beijing conference.

Women's empowerment and/or gender equality?

'Women's empowerment' frames the opening paragraph of the Beijing Platform for Action. Gender is absent from that paragraph. As an aspiration rather than a descriptor, 'equality between women and men' seemed more sensible and down to earth than the more jargon-laden 'gender equality'. (6) Indeed, within the whole text

of the Platform for Action 'gender equality' appears only 12 times compared with 30 appearances of 'empowerment'. Yet since then, the appearance of 'gender equality' in development policy texts has become much more common since then, either twinned with women's empowerment as in the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) or, increasingly, standing alone. DFID twins the terms in its Action Plan, but in its glossy booklet published at the same time (2007b), women's empowerment disappears. Different texts, different audiences. The glossy has a broad domestic audience and is responding to the recent UK 'gender equality duty' legislation. The Action Plan is primarily for DFID staff and uses the MDGs as its justification. There is logic in what appears to be an inconsistency between the two documents.

Very often the phrases 'women's empowerment' and 'gender equality' are twinned together without anyone appearing to bother about how they connect meaningfully with each other. In some interviews, apparently without noticing, people slipped between using one term and then the other. Yet, if one term is thought to be deliberately privileged, objections may arise and the concepts suddenly distinguished. In the OECD DAC Gendernet's proposed workplan for 2009-10, circulated by the secretariat for comment in late 2007, the title of one of the areas of work was phrased as 'Empowering women through development cooperation'. One bilateral agency representative emailed her objections to this title:

While we are fully supportive of women's empowerment and consider it integral to achieving gender equality, we consider that it would be detrimental to lose sight of the end goal we wish to achieve - i.e. gender equality.

Another e-mailed in support of the first objector:

Gender equality and justice should be the goal, and not empowerment of women - the latter is rather a means for gender equality than an objective . 'Empowerment of women' opens a door of ambiguities - what kind of empowerment, whose empowerment? In combination as [the first agency] is suggesting – 'Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment' is fine for us.

That the question of what kind of gender equality and whose gender equality is not as equally pertinent does not appear to have occurred to the second correspondent, although it was on those very grounds, as discussed below, that DFID's Clare Short preferred 'women's empowerment'.

The matter also came up earlier in 2007 at the Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (WAMM) the minutes from which say:

The issue of renaming WAMM by replacing the word Women with the word Gender was mentioned. However, this was not pursued further.

(Commonwealth Secretariat 2007: 2).

Someone at the meeting must have had an opinion about the better qualities of the word 'gender', but perhaps most people thought it did not matter much which term is used.

While some of our interviewees used the two concepts synonymously, others had clear preferences. Short disliked gender equality because it does not of itself tackle the disempowerment of people in poverty. A Sida interviewee agreed. 'A poor woman can have gender equality and still be powerless'. Others preferred any phrase that includes 'women' - because women can get lost in 'gender' - and others preferred women's empowerment because it implies action whereas gender equality is more static. On the other hand, one person saw the utility of gender equality because equality is an outcome, and economists - the most influential people in development policy - prefer outcomes. Because it is a process, women's empowerment is likely to be less attractive to them. Also, said someone, women's empowerment can be frightening with connotations of being feminist and left-wing; it draws attention to power. 'Power is an aggressive word. And women's empowerment is even worse,' creating 'visceral responses'. It can be scary compared with gender which is 'a softer and nicer word'. This was confirmed by another interviewee who disliked women's empowerment because it sounded feminist.

For some interviewees, empowerment may be personally favoured because it resonates with power and transformation, but for strategic reasons they prefer to speak of gender equality. Others disliked empowerment because they conceptualised power as a scarce resource so that if women have more of it, men will have less. Someone else asked: Was empowerment a term invented by women so as not to scare men? Is it why, she continued, that in development practice 'empowerment' has mostly been applied to poor people, women, the disabled 'because we can keep them under control and decide how much empowerment they can get'. Empowerment thus becomes a means of maintaining 'power over'.

For others, empowerment was about 'power to' - as in women's power to make decisions over their own bodies. Some attributed empowerment with the quality of 'power within' and those with this perspective felt that one could not empower someone else - 'women are active agents of their own empowerment'. Only one interviewee, from a global civil society network, expressed empowerment as relational in the sense of 'power with', a relational understanding of empowerment and only one respondent, from a global civil society organisation stressed that empowerment was about the personal capacity to build relationships: 'In each encounter with another person, you can either reaffirm them or reduce them.... For

me, being independent is not empowering. It's the relationship that is empowering'. The almost universal emphasis among the other interviewees on the individual nature of empowerment was exaggerated by some to such an extent that they found it difficult to think about the term other than with reference to their own personal sense of agency or in terms of matters such as gender balances and equal opportunities at their place of work.

How does empowerment happen? Some interviewees spoke of how their agencies were trying to 'empower women' but when we followed up on this by asking if it were possible for one actor to empower another, they shied away. It sounds pompous and self-important to say that you can bestow someone with power. 'It's saying: I'm going to help you... it is self-righteous... There's a relation of power between those using the term and those who are its object,' one person said. Women should take control. They should empower themselves.

A DFID text refers to women 'lifting themselves out of poverty' (2007a: 2). Sida is strong in talking about women empowering themselves: 'Individuals and organisations develop their own capacity to promote gender equality' (2005: 9), and Sida's aim is to 'help create conditions that will enable the poor to improve their lives' (2005: 4). The World Bank mentions doing things *on behalf of* women but also talks about 'the ability of women's organizations to reach a scale and sophistication where they are capable of articulating and advocating policies to promote women's economic empowerment' (2006:6).

Yet, the developmental 'passive evasive' (7) voice is also present. There is no subject (neither women themselves nor a development agent/agency) that does the empowering. 'Women should be empowered' says the DAC (2007), but by whom? '[T]hey may be empowered' says INTRAC (Oakley and Clayton 2000), but by whom? Sometimes the documents attributed empowerment to an enabling environment 'enhance the *enabling environment* for gender equality and women's empowerment' (DFID representative speaking at DAC 2006a meeting; similar wording in Sida 2005, 7). Interviewees also referred to creating this enabling environment: 'You can organize the environment, so that a person is empowered'.

One organisation: diversity of views

In DFID, we explored how six of the gender champions – not necessarily gender specialists – understood empowerment. Gender champions are appointed as part of DFID's new Gender Equality Action Plan. They 'are responsible for ensuring implementation of the actions agreed in their Divisions, making sure that staff get the help they need, promoting lesson learning and identifying what more needs to be done' (DFID 2007a: 5). They saw empowerment as about the removal of constraints, the achievement of autonomy and the ability to make choices. Empowerment as a means to poverty reduction was understood to be the clearest element in DFID's

corporate fuzzy message. It has 'first and second round effects' and contributes to achieving the MDGs.

One champion could not see any difference between women's empowerment and gender equality although when pressed thought the latter might be more about equal opportunities. Views varied among the others. Two interviewees made their preference in relation to context – women's empowerment was more useful in countries where women are *really* disempowered and gender equality more appropriate where the issue is more a question of enforcing legislation. Another preferred gender equality as being less threatening while the fourth preferred empowerment because gender equality 'feels technocratic' - if DFID really believes it is a political issue – as it states in its brochure – then 'we should be upfront about it.' For another, "women's empowerment smacks of special pleading'. She was pragmatic, willing to use whichever term best supports what they wanted to achieve. This was probably 'gender equality' because 'it panders to the beleaguered sensibilities of males'.

Among our interviewees, we found that preference for women's empowerment or gender equality accords with the meaning each term is given, the associational context and the judgements made about the strategic utility of the two concepts. People's views are a complex reflection of feelings and thought – a combination they take with them into committees drafting policy documents. What practical challenges and opportunities does such an organisational diversity present? And what are the strategic implications when meanings of empowerment are not only diverse among individuals but are also subject to organisational shifts over time?

Sifting meanings of women's empowerment

The Achilles heel of empowerment is that it implies that you don't have power. Subordination is built in.

Participant at conference on conceptualising women's empowerment, February 2008

Analysis of our material revealed layers or threads of over-lapping meanings combining and re-combining as elements more or less frequent over time within broader development discourses. Firstly, in this section, we briefly examine how texts and interviewees understand what empowerment is about, and we then look at how empowerment is commonly qualified, as political and economic. We conclude by looking at how empowerment is articulated as a matter of justice and/or efficiency, noting the recent return of the long-standing instrumentalist arguments.

Empowerment is about.....

Most frequently today empowerment is about choice, decision-making, realising opportunities and potential, knowledge and conscientization, participation, and community action.

Choice

Choice evokes agency and individualism, often connected to women's sexual and reproductive lives (Sida 2005, DFID 2007a). 'Free' further qualifies 'choice' as in the World Bank's removing "'unfreedoms" that constrain individual choice' (2006: 4). For Sida, choice is a right (2005: 4). Older Sida and OECD documents talk about 'women and men...shaping the social and economic choices of the future' (Sida 1998: 13) and about 'women and men hav[ing] equal opportunities to make choices about what gender equality means and work in partnership to achieve it' (OECD 1999: 13). This older strain evokes ideas of people collectively shaping structures, whereas more recent versions of choice are more individualistic. One interviewee said, empowerment is 'the ability to get things done without being dependent on others'.

Decision-making

Decision-making is about women making decisions 'that affect their lives' (Sida 1998). UNDP says 'women still lack access to economic and political decision-making power' - in grassroots communities as well as well as in the macroeconomic policy arena (1997). Interviews are especially individualistic when talking about decision-making. One person defined empowerment as the 'ability to live your life as you want it.' Another said it is 'being able to make decisions and being able to act on these.'

Opportunity and Potential

Opportunity is almost always 'equal opportunity' for all people, lending the term to be connected most often to 'gender equality', rather than to 'women's empowerment.' Sida talks about equal opportunity for men and women (1998, 2005). The OECD DAC Guidelines for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment say that 'gender equality' does not mean sameness between men and women but that 'their opportunities and life chances are equal' (1999:13). The World Bank comments in its video that 'restricting *economic opportunity* for women is unfair. Life's chances should not be preordained at birth' (2007a). But the (older) UNDP 1997 and DFID 2000(a) documents argue also for equality of outcomes as well as equality of opportunity. DFID, for instance, gives the following definition: 'Equity of outcomes means that the exercise of these rights and entitlements leads to outcomes which are fair and just, and which enable women to have the same power as men to define the objectives of development' (2000a:12).

Linked to opportunity is the *potential* of women that needs to be 'unleashed', says BMZ, the German Ministry of Development. (INWENT 2007). Quoted on that website, the then World Bank President, Wolfowitz says that countries 'pay a high price for not allowing women to live up to their full economic potential' (INWENT 2007). DFID laments the inefficient 'loss of human potential' (2000a: 8) while

speaking of women 'fulfil[ing] their potential as full and equal members of society' (ibid.: 11).

Knowledge and Conscientization

One interviewee describes a rather individualistic *conscientization*, without calling it by that name. She says the first step to empowerment is exposure to different kinds of people and ideas. 'Exposure is the first step; you need an education to know your choices. [Then] you must be willing to take risks and to challenge the status quo'. Sida's 1998 document asks for awareness-raising through government public-education campaigns on rights. Another interviewee describes 'giving women space to understand the context of their lives.' In a different technocratic vein, the World Bank wants women to have *knowledge* in terms of agricultural information (INWENT 2007) so that markets will work better and so that women can be able to find the best price for their goods. Their earlier document had a section about legal literacy, women knowing their rights, and, from that, women 'us[ing] those rights to mobilize for change' (1995: 46-50). In a different vein again the OECD 1999 Guidelines say women should contribute their *knowledge* to the development process (OECD 1999).

Participation

Participation ranges in meaning from participation 'in political, economic, religious and social life' (Sida 2005: 6) to women being merely consulted (Sida 1998: 48). UNDP tries to expand the MDGs' single-minded education focus, saying that more is needed for women's 'full participation': 'although access to education is a necessary step towards *women's equality*, it is hardly sufficient to ensure the full *participation* of women in the political and economic lives of their countries' (2005: 3). The World Bank's economic focus lends it to talk about 'equal participation in economic processes' (INWENT 2007) and about participation 'in markets' (World Bank 2006). This kind of participation sometimes means participating in the political and economic structures set up by someone else, rather than being able to change the rules of the game entirely (Eyben 2006: 602). An interviewee described empowerment as 'getting women into institutions,' and another said that 'the poor need to be empowered in order to participate in the economy.' Participation can refer to the 'consultation' that Sida mentioned in one part of its document, while other documents' references to 'full participation' might take meanings of 'partnership', delegated power', or '[women's] control' (see Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation 1969). One interviewee called empowerment 'women's ability to participate with equal voice.'

Community

Finally, notions of 'power with', in terms of power through *community*, are present in the DAC 1999 Guidelines. In Sida's 1998 text, community features as 'regional and global networks' and 'increased visibility and of the women's movement' (1998:22). While collective empowerment is still mentioned and fought for at DAC Gendernet

meetings (2006 a, b), Sida's 2005 document has dropped it. DFID follows the same trend. The only community mentioned in 2007 is the international community (DFID 2007a: 1, 2).

However, when other organizations are dropping the idea of the collective, the World Bank seemingly has picked it up referring to strengthening women's groups to facilitate formation of farmers' cooperatives, water user associations, or export business associations' (2006: 13). Whether this has the same discursive meaning as in the earlier Sida document is a matter we return to later. Among interviewees, there are only a few who mention communities, the collective, and women's movements. One person said his agency supported 'the women's movement': 'We're supporting freedom of association, expression and self-determination – as long as you don't get labelled terrorist.'

In sum, meanings of women's empowerment have shifted in the time since Beijing. Meanings of *choice* and *decision-making* have acquired a slightly more individualistic sense. *Opportunity* and *potential* have gained a stronger economic emphasis. *Knowledge*, and *conscientization* remain weak. *Participation* has stayed relatively steady, if somewhat multi-faceted. *Community* has disappeared from most documents, but has recently been picked up by the World Bank.

Forms of empowerment

The most common qualifiers for empowerment are political and economic. *Political empowerment* is largely understood as being active in formal politics. Are there representative numbers of women politicians? (UNDP 2005: 3, 7) And, more, generally do women have a voice? One interviewee said that 'an empowered woman must negotiate on other women's behalf.'

Another person said 'women's empowerment' is 'influencing people... or if you can't influence, you can have an opinion. It is freely giving judgment and having your voice heard.' The World Bank's older 1995 document notes that listening must happen as well. Not only do '[women's] views need to be incorporated into policy formulation', but also '[g]overnments and collaborating institutions must listen carefully to the voices of individual women, to women's groups, and to woman policymakers' (1; 67).

DFID's 2000 target strategy paper - 'Poverty Elimination and the Empowerment of Women' says women should have 'an equal voice in civil and political life' (2000a:12). The picture on the front cover of that document, powerfully, shows two women with their fists raised in the air. One gets the sense of a women's movement. In 2007, the picture on the cover of 'Gender Equality at the Heart of Development' – shows women queuing up to vote. In a shift towards instrumentalism, the later document notes that evidence shows that when women participate in politics, 'their

access to services, jobs and education - and rights more generally - improve' (DFID 2007a: 3). One of the staff members interviewed noted that DFID is less interested in issues of voice than before.

Talking about women and equality in economic terms has however, become increasingly popular. Mention of *economic empowerment* especially related to growth has increased since Beijing. An example of what economist Ben Fine calls 'economic imperialism' (2002), one interviewee said: 'I like the word "equity" ...It has an economic meaning related to stocks and shares.' Another interviewee said, 'Economic discourse is what cuts.' Imperialistically, it occupies the previous spaces of other meanings of empowerment, and it co-opts some terms, using them for economic language (Fine 2002).

While the World Bank's older document had three foci: education, health, and employment; the new document claims that the World Bank has had sufficient success in the first two, that now it needs to focus on the last - economic empowerment of women. The Bank wants to 'recapture the Beijing momentum and reenergize the gender agenda' (2006: 1). The Bank's slogan is catchy and incontestable: Women's Empowerment and/or Gender Equality as Smart Economics. Who wants to be labelled 'stupid' for not supporting it? As one interviewee said, 'Should the Bank *not* have a policy on empowerment?' The word 'smart', especially when attached to economics is a conversation stopper. One person, on hearing the slogan for the first time during our interview, liked it so much that he made a written note of it. The Bank claims it has comparative advantage in gender economics (2006: 2).

The Bank's text notes that women's economic empowerment is advanced through enhancing their ability 'to participate in land, labor, financial, and product markets' (2006: 9). 'It is about making markets work for women (at the policy level) and empowering women to compete in markets (at the agency level).' (2006:4) Of course, the economics and growth language is not new. In its earlier documents as well today, DFID mentions that women can improve growth rates with reference to the effects of education (DFID 2000a, 2007a). The shift may be more apparent in Sida which in its later document emphasises more the need to include women in the economy and make them more productive by removing discriminatory barriers (2005: 9).

At the conference where an earlier version of this paper was discussed, participants noted how development agencies have separated political and economic empowerment into different programmes and budget lines, thus marginalising a political economy approach to the structural changes required for women's empowerment. The split has led to privileging a meaning of empowerment associated with formal institutions and individual autonomy. Even with autonomy,

the emphasis is more on the economic actor contributing to growth and less, for example on decent work and the unpaid care economy – and even less so issues of bodily autonomy and the power within. More broadly, what is being crowded out are meanings of empowerment associated with solidarity and collective action.

As we now go onto discuss, linking economic empowerment to growth reflects a broader discursive shift back to women working for development - rather than development working for women.

The return of instrumentalism

Some texts we examined state that women's empowerment is an end in itself, and others say that, as well as that, it is a means to a complementary end. It is very often a means to achieving (pro-poor) growth, poverty reduction/elimination, democracy, human rights, peace, conflict prevention, HIV/AIDS reduction, the MDGs, and PRSPs. One interviewee explained that 'women's empowerment' was 'functionally necessary for economic development and functionally necessary for fast development.' Clare Short said that instrumentalism is a way to convince men about women in politics and quotas: 'The men who supported this did not do so out of respect for women but because they saw it as very developmental, as a contribution to good governance.'

'Gender equality is a goal in its own right' the recent DFID document says. The document then continues to build instrumentalist chains through the rest of the document (2007a: 2). Missing the MDG target on women, for instance, 'could lower a country's annual per capita growth rates by 0.1 - 0.3 percentage points' (2007a: 3). Not supporting women's empowerment is framed as inefficient. BMZ says, for instance, that (inefficiently) limiting women's economic progress, 'wastes resources and as such undermines development effectiveness' (2007: 1). The recent Bank document says that its 'Results-Based Initiatives (RBIs) are interventions that can increase women's economic empowerment within a reasonable time frame and at relatively low cost' (2006: 13).

Several interviewees were very concerned that more evidence of this kind be available to justify investing in women. One lamented the death of 'Women in Development' because for him it 'had been an evidence-based agenda.' But he also mentioned that 'women's empowerment' could do this as well. 'It is a key driver of development to have the energies of women to construct economy and society. There are multipliers... It is evidence-based.' It is to demonstrate evidence of such multipliers that the World Bank's video to promote its Gender Action Plan, presents a graph showing the positive econometric correlation between increasing mother's incomes and increasing child height (2007a). DFID notes that 'Countries in sub-Saharan Africa that have not sent enough girls to school over the past 30 years now

have GNPs 25% lower than if they had given them a better chance ...' (DFID 2000a: 16).

Not supporting women's development is framed as inefficient. German BMZ says, for instance, that (inefficiently) limiting women's economic progress, 'wastes resources and as such undermines development effectiveness' (BMZ 2007: 1). A meeting of the DAC Gendernet in July 2006 opened with the Netherlands chair reminding everyone of the DAC's mandate 'to increase aid volumes and effectiveness' (DAC 2006a: 3). A search through the history of titles of UNIFEM speeches on their website shows that the 2007 ones had 'effective implementation' and 'accelerating progress' in them. They were previously less technocratic, in title at least. The Paris Declaration is encouraging effectiveness and efficiency of development. One interviewee notes, 'What is required is to present a "gender equality" case that is based on development effectiveness.' Another recent DAC meeting shared with the World Bank, covered many meanings, but the sum-up at the end of the minutes was dominated by these words: 'accountability,' 'mechanisms,' 'examples,' 'tracking budgets,' 'resources,' 'being concrete and specific' (2006b). Clare Short said the reason 'gender equality and/or women's empowerment' has stopped being a concern in policy circles is that there is 'a target culture in which boxes get ticked and there is no space for creativity.'

The Bank document says that its 'Results-Based Initiatives (RBIs) are interventions that can increase women's economic empowerment within a reasonable time frame and at relatively low cost'. (2006: 13) They can do this cheaply and efficiently. The Berlin World Bank 2006 conference website talks about a German minister's critical response that the cheapness implies non-commitment to women's empowerment: 'The BMZ has stated the total cost of the [World Bank] Action Plan to be 24.5 million USD. The German Development Minister pointed out that this is not a large sum, when viewed against the billions being paid out by the World Bank. The World Bank's programmes, which amount to over 20 billion USD annually, need to be more strongly oriented towards women in the future' (INWET 2007). In a DFID-commissioned review of other agencies' gender policies, the following dissonant text appears: '[a] UNDP evaluation notes problems with a simplistic and mechanistic approach, ... [and] gender fatigue, lack of ownership or understanding of how it improves efficiency and effectiveness' (DFID 2006: 24). Therefore, simplistic and mechanistic approaches are bad, but the way to battle gender fatigue is with them, using discourse about efficiency and effectiveness. Women's empowerment, then, improves efficiency and effectiveness. The World Bank's Smart Economics promotion video walks the viewer through the effectiveness of World Bank projects.

Some organisations are in a muddle about whether efficiency and technocracy are a good thing, as UNDP is in the quote above. Others organizations see that these two threads exist, and appear to take sides. At the beginning of the DFID action plan for

instance, women's empowerment is a 'political issue not a technical one' ((2007a: 3). Yet, an interviewee said, 'In DFID, women's empowerment is not understood as changing patriarchal structures, but rather as meeting women's *practical* gender needs.' Another person from DFID said, 'Today aid is managed as a technocratic fix. This is what happens when you take passion and politics out of it... Women's empowerment is about transforming society, and this is not the current development aid agenda.'

Is social justice surviving?

The Beijing Platform for Action says that 'the advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a condition for *social justice*'. The UNIFEM definition of 'women's empowerment' that the older 2000 DFID document quotes talks about social justice in terms of women 'developing the ability to organise and influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order' (DFID 2000a: 13). Justice exists in older documents more than it does in current ones. Sida in 1998 observed that 'One of the difficulties of implementing policies on women and development in the past was the tendency to approach development initiatives in a technical or output-oriented way' (Sida 1998: 42). However, today development agencies appear to be returning to that past way of doing things. Sida, for instance, though not introducing efficiency or effectiveness words, has dropped 'justice' and has more mentions of pro-poor growth and poverty reduction as foci (2005, see especially pp. 4-6).

Yet, just as the World Bank picked up the lost words around collective empowerment, the World Bank picks up a moral argument in a powerful statement in its promotional video. 'Restricting economic opportunity for women is *unfair*'... Women's empowerment is 'not only the *right* thing to do, it is also the smart thing to do' (2007a). We are hooked. A dying flame is brought back to life, in a way that combines economic efficiency with a moral must. Can this work? A conference participant argued in its favour, suggesting there was a false division between economic efficiency and social justice.

However, one interviewee was strong in saying that '[w]e shouldn't emphasize the moral and political crusade in women's equality. We have the Gender Equality police checking documents, and people get put off by this.' Ironically, in a later interview with a colleague from the same organisation, this same person was referred to admiringly as just such a policeman, someone in the organisation who does actively put 'gender' back into documents.

Some interviewees, like the first of the two cited in the previous paragraph, appear to genuinely believe in the efficiency argument whereas others are frank about what they see as its strategic use. A conference participant noted that she had to use

instrumentalist arguments in her development policy work, to get in the door and be taken seriously. An interviewee stressed 'I am willing to go down the instrumentalist road because people understand it.' Another argued that 'What is required is to present a 'gender equality' case that is based on development effectiveness.' And another, 'I compromise to get the word [gender] in, but then I/we need to quickly reinterpret it. There is an old argument about not using 'the master's tools', but I disagree with this – you can use the master's tools for other ends.'

A recent OECD DAC Gendernet document concluded optimistically that more policies have 'equity or equality rationale' rather than 'an efficiency approach' (DAC 2007: 18). However, we are finding the opposite to be the case. Growth, efficiency and effectiveness are getting stronger while moral, justice and political arguments are weakening. Conference participants noted that women need to benefit from both growth and justice. As a Sida document says, gender equality is not instrumental for growth, but rather less utilitarian by being parallel to growth, a project alongside that is '*strongly linked* to sustainable development and pro-poor growth' (2005: 4). This is true. Our concern is that an over-emphasis on growth has led to too much silence on justice. Interestingly, on the back of the earlier 1995 World Bank booklet is the phrase: 'Gender equality is not only a matter of social justice but also good economics.' The more recent document does not contain the word 'justice' at all.

One interviewee said: 'Our dialogue is not values based. It's about systems and effectiveness.' Clare Short remarked that the decade of the 1990s was a window for new historical possibility with its central focus on equity and rights. Women's empowerment is about transforming society, but this is not the current development aid agenda. Aid is no longer about transformation, she said. It has become technocratic.

The seeming triumph of the 1990s was that women's empowerment became a matter of justice rather than something necessary for development. Today, although empowerment, still contains many different meanings, instrumentalism is becoming more prominent as part of a wider shift in development discourse. For those seeking to identify pathways of women's empowerment through international development aid, are there strategic advantages to keeping empowerment as fuzzy as possible so as to ensure that the meanings we favour are not completely buried by the clarity of gender equality is smart economics? A clear turn of phrase shapes how we imagine and seek to realise societal futures. As was the case with the Beijing Platform for Action, a strong, largely coherent text provides language that activists use as a discursive tool for strategy in national as well as global policy spaces. (Moghadam 2005) Yet, the speech and texts examined in this paper are rarely so clear. As we shall now discuss, fuzziness may offer strategic advantages to feminists struggling in an unfavourable global policy environment.

Choosing our words with care

How strategic are we about the words we use and the associations we give to them? When should we be fuzzy and when should we seek clarity? In unfavourable policy environments, can we turn weakness to an advantage and play discursive judo? In this section we explore such questions in the current context of the rise of instrumentalist discourse about empowerment. We argue that whatever choice we make, we should choose our words with care.

Fuzzwords

Most policy texts, not just those from international conferences but also those of a single organisation, are drafted by more than one individual. They are an eclectic mixture of old and new clichés, assembled together through a complex process of political negotiations, compromises and strategising, idiosyncratic whim and an almost unconscious collective response to the zeitgeist. Long-established notions may have to be jealously defended while new ones introduced at the committee stage may sometimes travel unchallenged into the final text, as I recollect was the case of 'transformed partnerships between women and men', a notion in the opening paragraph of the Beijing document introduced by one of the authors of this article. Early one morning in a hotel bedroom in New York in 1994 prior to a meeting of the small informal group drafting the preliminary Beijing document, wide awake from jet lag and thinking contentedly about her own relatively new partnership that was proving so positively different from her first marriage, the phrase popped into her head from she knew not where.

Because policy documents are not sole-authored, oddities, contradictions and ambiguities are common, including the meanings given to the abstract concepts within them such as empowerment. Nevertheless, broad trends in shifts in meaning can be traced. Looking at empowerment as a development fuzzword, Batliwala shows how its meaning in India has shifted from when first employed by feminist activists in the 1980's to transformation in societal relations as the core of empowerment to becoming a technical magic bullet of micro-credit programmes and political quotas for women. As a neo-liberal tool, she argues, empowerment is now conceptualised to subvert the politics that the concept was created to symbolise. (Batliwala 2007)

The shift of the kind traced by Batliwala may however be context specific. Asked by us what women's empowerment in developing countries meant for her, Clare Short, replied micro-credit, political quotas and girls' education, apparently confirming Batliwala's magic bullet argument. Yet, earlier in the interview, when reflecting on what empowerment meant to her personally, Short came closer to Batliwala's meaning of relational transformation as the core of empowerment and talked of the need for a democratic conversation to take further such an understanding.

In the course of a single interview, Short had shifted her meanings of empowerment in relation to context and positionality; it meant one thing in the United Kingdom and something else in developing countries. In the former, she positioned herself in relation to her own direct experience in her family and constituency. In the latter, she is reflecting as an erstwhile development minister, a context in which the urgency of reducing poverty in countries such as India argues for rolling out policy initiatives to affect as many people as possible in as short a time possible; very practically it may have proved to be a useful tool in getting more girls into school and more women into politics. Thus, the meanings we give to a concept do not just shift over time; they can also shift in the context of a single interview or text. This is one aspect of fuzziness, other facets of which we now go on to discuss.

Why fuzziness?

We offer some further explanations for the fuzziness of an abstract value-laden concept such as empowerment. The first is intellectual laziness and time pressure. A muddled text or incoherent speech may be simply due to people paying insufficient attention to their words. Secondly, fuzziness is used to create and sustain a broad-based policy constituency and to manage conflicts therein. An interviewee at the OECD Development Cooperation Department – which has the task of coordinating and seeking consensus among multiple political actors – provided the biggest range of meanings from among all our respondents, having developed the skills of coining language to accommodate a broad range of views. The fuzziness creates a ‘normative resonance’ that makes everyone feel good. (Cornwall 2007: 472) It aims to please as many people as possible without necessarily having any opinion as to which meaning they personally favour.

Fuzziness may be thought to be necessary but is rarely popular. Accordingly, the need for greater clarity gets written into texts. In its Action Plan, DFID asks for ‘A clear [our emphasis] vision on gender equality supported by consistent policy and practice’.((2007a:9) Yet in commenting on their own Action Plan, some DFID interviewees thought that such clarity had not been achieved, believing the fuzziness constrained effective action and made it difficult for DFID to be held to account. Yet, the clarity people wanted could not be realised. Thus our fourth explanation for fuzziness of policy concepts is not due to the conscious choice of any individual or group but is a collective response to organizational tensions. Good intentions are foiled by organizational requirements to keep all parties on board.

Our final explanation for fuzziness is that of ‘strategic ambiguity’. In conditions of recognisable discursive differences, a conscious political choice may be taken to remain vague so as to enrol those who might shy away should the concept be given too much clarity. (Leitch and Davenport 2007) Such ‘strategic ambiguity’ is practised by feminist officials within development agencies, providing the most room for manoeuvre in circumstances where there is little chance of securing collective

agreement to their own desired meaning. It may also help enrol others in supporting policy actions that the feminists hope will lead to broader rights-based outcomes-irrespective of whether those they had enrolled had intended such a result. The alternative of a clear and radical rights based agenda would not only gain less support but risk creating a backlash. However, ambiguity is a defensive mechanism that holds the ground rather than advances the cause. Is this is all that can be done in the present circumstances or has the time come for a new rallying slogan?

Is instrumentalism the least bad choice?

The Paris Declaration on Effective Aid and all the processes accompanying it, is already proving to be successful in its first and most important principle, of recipient country ownership – at least if the principle is determined in terms of *government* ownership. OECD countries are responding to the views of recipient government leaders, particularly those in highly aid dependent sub-Saharan Africa who may be less interested in the MDGs and more in developing economic infrastructure, expanding the private sector and encouraging foreign direct investment. In a recent speech given by the former President of Mozambique Joachim Chissano at a symposium on effective aid (8) his main theme was that donors' principal objective should be the building of growth by boosting the private sector and making a capable state as an effective environment for foreign investment. The words MDGs, climate change, citizens and women did not once appear and civil society and democracy very infrequently. It is not simply that such leaders are dancing to the tune of the international finance institutions, an allegation made by one interviewee at an international conference who said about the Ministry of Finance from her country: 'Our own Ministry of Finance is part of the problem. Unless they get directives from the World Bank and the IMF, nothing will happen.' Equally important is the point made by Solly Gariba speaking to Eyben after conclusion of the same symposium where Chissani spoke is that the switch to the growth agenda is because the creation of wealth is a less demeaning discourse for African governments than poverty reduction.

A strong driver for the revival of the growth agenda is China's arrival in aid dependent countries as a significant donor providing aid for economic investment as part of trade deals without any strings attached relating to equity or human rights issues. Not that all African leaders have stopped talking about women's empowerment or talk about it only with reference to the importance of women for making markets work better. The current Prime Minister of Mozambique, Luisa Diogo, in her key note speech earlier in the year to the Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers' for Women Affairs in Kampala, stressed rights based approaches and how strategies for women's economic empowerment should be part of a wider strategy for social justice. But would she have made the same points in another context?

Ten years ago with a poverty reduction agenda, women were important because 'two thirds of those living in abject poverty' are women (DFID 2000b: foreword by Tony Blair). Today, with a growth agenda, the importance of women is argued by a DFID Minister on the basis that '[in] the state of Karnataka in India small rise in the ratio of female to male workers would increase per capita output by up to 37%'.⁽⁹⁾ It appears that it is not that women that intrinsically matter. The growth focus has rightly in our view been criticised by the Bretton Woods Project in relation to the World Bank's Gender Action Plan: 'GAP aims to increase women's participation in land, labour, product and financial markets - while privatising them as much as possible - which benefits corporations the most...The main beneficiaries of Bank investment in infrastructure have been transnational corporations, not the poor' (Zuckerman 2007)

The World Bank's version of economics is very much about incorporating women in the market, that is making women work for markets. What if the rules of the game need to change, rather than women playing the neo-liberal economic game?

Increasingly, the model of development is one of a neo-liberal free market economy, in which competition is the name of the game. This means that the onus is on the individual to change his or her situation. If she fails to succeed, it is her fault, it is because she is illiterate, she is poor, she is lazy, she is unable to take advantage of the opportunities that are supposedly available to her.

Rosario 2004: 2

This particular discourse, re-energised by the Paris agenda, emphasises the individualistic thread in 'empowerment' that has become more dominant in recent years. Is there an alternative? Or like some of our interviewees are those jumping on the smart economics bandwagon making a sound decision in difficult circumstances, finding room for manoeuvre within it? As one of our conference participants commented, 'We have to use instrumentalist arguments to get in the door and be taken seriously'. Or are they perhaps making a discursive sacrifice, one that crowds out other agendas while failing to deliver in return any benefits in terms of international aid shifting to a stronger focus on women?

So far, there is little evidence that the instrumentalist arguments are making much headway in the wider global policy world. For example, although the World Bank's Gender Action Plan emphasizes the importance of women's access to land, in its latest World Development Report - on agriculture - the Overview contains not the least mention of women's inequitable access to land. (2007b) And in each of her two policy speeches on the centrality of growth for development, the DFID Minister, Vadera gave women/gender just one mention. It is from Sweden that the gender/growth link appears to be gaining most discursive prominence, as one of the five themes in the Finance Minister's speech at the 2007 World Bank annual meeting

– and possibly, as a result of this, mentioned in the communiqué from that meeting. (Bretton Woods 2007) However, a quick web search of recent speeches by other Finance Ministers threw up no other such mentions. There was for example nothing in a long speech by the Finance Minister of Ghana in Frankfurt in December 2007, setting out all the development challenges facing his country nor is there any mention of women or gender in the annual budget 2007/08 budget speech of the Finance Minister for Uganda. Neither was there any reference to gender equality in two speeches one of us heard at different venues in December 2007 when two Presidents of sub-Saharan African countries were setting out their development agenda to audiences in the North. So, are we finding the social transformation agenda being thrown away while the instrumentalist strategy is failing to deliver?

The growth/gender link, that harks back to the 1970s and 80s, may well prove to be a pathway to nowhere. We believe it is political pressure that brings policy change not technical positivist arguments about evidence, even when such arguments are couched as a catchy slogan. That investing in women creates more wealth is hardly a rallying call for civil society action, and even the economists who are meant to take this message on board do not yet appear to have responded. INGOs have been criticised for becoming co-opted into an international aid system through signing up to a Millennium commitment to poverty reduction. As the unifying MDGs fade into the background, so we may find emerging in growth language a sharper discursive distinction between official aid agencies and those non-governmental organisations. Here is a possibility for reviving in international development policy spaces a more transformative agenda.

Any such agenda has to take into account both the relative power and significance of different international development organisations, as well as the extent to which overall such organisations are influential actors in shaping women's empowerment, compared for example with the corporate sector or religious movements. At the same time, as noted by one of our interviewees, a feminist and former Minister in an African country, indisputably these organisations remain extraordinarily influential in many aid dependent countries. And, as a conference participant pointed out while we can hardly imagine their full-hearted adoption of a feminist agenda, their individual and collective heterogeneity offers opportunities and resources for developing transformative agendas that other actors can take hold of, develop, adapt and use as they see fit in their own specific policy environments. The effort is worthwhile.

Conclusion: Putting power back into empowerment

'I have a problem with throwing [empowerment] away even though it has been decaffeinated. The word comes out of the women's movement and has been simplified. We shouldn't throw empowerment away, but I want my meaning to be there'.

Conference participant.

Starting with 'women's empowerment' as it appears in the opening paragraph of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, we have examined the meanings that make up the varied usage of the term women's empowerment, as represented in policy documents and through interviews. We have argued that the fuzziness of the concept of women's empowerment can carry strategic advantages for savvy politically active feminists working in global policy spaces. Yet there are risks. That same fuzziness can permit a more coherent agenda - that of gender equality is smart economics - to capture the discursive heights while feminist international development officials either capitulate or flounder around lamenting the golden days of Beijing.

The historical movement in discursive trends in which some meanings have become more prominent and others less so has led to the ascendance of technocratic efficiency and economic instrumentalism. Solidarity and justice are fading away. Empowerment is also increasingly imbued with an individualistic thread of meaning associated with a theory of development and change based on principal agent theory derived from methodological individualism.

Yet, for many policy activists working within and across state and civil society institutions 'empowerment' and the meanings it is associated with in the opening paragraph of the Beijing document - 'participation', 'power', 'equality', 'social justice' - remain resources to draw upon for making change happen. These meanings remain extant, carrying connotations of 'power within' and 'power with'. Empowerment, as we have seen, however, carries threads not only of personal (individual) empowerment but empowerment in relationships, and empowerment through group action. Let us briefly examine these last two as they belong to two different intellectual traditions.

Empowerment through relationships is based on a premise that persons cannot be separated from the society of which they are part through a simultaneous process of it making them and of them making society through the meanings they give to their action. Empowerment through women organising in associations and groups, as it appears in the World Bank texts, starts from the premise of the individual as distinct and separate from society - or at its crudest - that society is nothing more than the aggregate of individuals. From this position, collective action by pre-constituted individuals is therefore something problematic that has to be worked at and made to happen.

A relational approach to empowerment leads us to the concept of solidarity, absent from the texts we have examined is one based on a relational understanding of empowerment, namely *solidarity*. Writing in the context of CARE's programme in Bangladesh, Rosario focuses not so much:

...on 'empowerment,' a concept now very loosely adopted by everyone for everything they do these days. 'Empowerment' can easily be interpreted as something that can take place at the individual level, without any real changes to the existing oppressive structures (class or patriarchy).

Rosario 2004: 2

She goes on to say that because individual empowerment, typified by microcredit projects in Bangladesh, is not enough to break a system, 'solidarity, or collective empowerment, is important' (ibid.). Rosario reclaims empowerment with the qualifying word 'collective'. Challenging dominant patriarchal attitudes is only possible, she argues through collective action and not with what she describes as competitive, back-biting individualism. Solidarity implies political action. It gives back to 'women's empowerment' the very scariness that frightened some of our interviewees because it implies action for change. It means that women's empowerment *is* about transforming society, and not about making women into more effective wealth producers.

International aid agencies will never formally get rid of the language of gender and women. They will continue to produce new policy statements and glossy booklets that like DFID's latest once again announce 'We must ensure that all our policies and programmes consider the impacts they have on women and girls' (2007b: 24). Yet, as one of our interviewees commented, 'There's no heat out there'. To help create the heat, the time may well be ripe for a diverse coalition to breath new life into 'women's empowerment'. Although one interviewee nostalgically harked back to the 1990s, looking backwards to what now looks like a heroic age is not the pathway forward. Words are construct visions of development or as Cornwall and Brock put it, 'If words make worlds, struggles over meaning are not just about semantics: they gain a very real material dimension' (2005:1056). Our challenge is to construct and communicate new discursive futures rather than just go along with what is on offer. This is the next stage of our task.

An initial step out might be to avoid that kind of fuzziness that comes from intellectual laziness and carelessness with words. One must be carefully deliberate about making words fuzzy. A second step is to study what we might term 'discursive judo', looking for means to use the opposition's strengths for one's own transformative ends. This includes assessing what is on the mainstream policy agenda at the moment. Climate change, for example, presents creative possibilities when couched in terms of climate justice. A third step might be to develop a politics of solidarity. (Rao and Kelleher 2005) This would be one in which feminists inside international development organisations encourage civil society activists to challenge the prevailing instrumentalist discourse while activists become alert to how strategic actors within global policy institutions may well be choosing their words with care, even if what they say appears ambiguous.

Meanwhile the Pathways programme is developing its own alternative manifesto for a people-centred economics. We argue that women's empowerment, including economic empowerment, is about transforming society and achieving social justice and equality for all. The central goal of an economy that supports gender equality is the well-being of people. Gender equality is not smart economics. Rather, a truly smart economics delivers gender equality.

Notes

- (1) World Bank Weekly Update - April 21, 2008
<http://newsletters.worldbank.org/external/default/main>
- (2) This material for this paper is primarily based on research undertaken between June and November 2007 during which time we undertook some two dozen interviews and collected documents in a time range from the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing to late 2007. The texts analysed are publicly available international development policy documents. We compare documents from 5 organisations: the DAC Gendernet, DFID, Sida, UNDP, and the World Bank. The documents are policy papers, action plans or agenda-setting corporate products. On the sidelines, we looked at reports of proceedings from DAC Gendernet, World Bank and Commonwealth meetings; at a few speeches; as well as at texts from UNIFEM, BMZ, and INTRAC (a development NGO training and research centre in the UK).
Interviews followed the same general format of asking people's own personal meaning of empowerment, to be followed by a question as to how they understood *women's* empowerment and then finally how they interpreted their organisation's understanding of the concept and how it connected with gender equality. The biggest set of interviews were conducted with DFID including the former Secretary of State including with a number of the new 'gender champions'. The remaining interviews were opportunistic arising from Rosalind Eyben's participation at gatherings of international development actors during this time. Apart from the politician, Clare Short who was content her remarks could be attributed, the agreed condition for the interview was anonymity. Some of the comments and debates from that workshop are included in the present paper.
The authors are most grateful to Andrea Cornwall for her interest and advice provided during the course of this project, as well as to Maxine Molyneux and Laura Turquet for their constructive feedback on a previous draft of this paper.
- (3) By 2008, one of the most influential of bilateral agencies, DFID, that had set out with such an influencing agenda had its own top management composed of staff recruited from the Bank.
- (4) A striking example of this was told to Eyben when participating in a conference of the OECD DAC governance network in February 2008. Staff members from two of the smaller European bilateral aid agencies, women with a strong background and interest in rights based approaches complained they were being blocked by World Bank participants in their break out groups when they sought to bring rights into the discussion of good governance.
- (5) Comment by an NGO women's rights adviser after reading an earlier draft of this paper
- (6) The Plain English Commission which looked at DFID's most recent White Paper apparently criticised the use of 'gender' which they perceived as jargon. Pers.comm from Laura Turquet
- (7) A term coined by Robert Chambers
- (8) Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development Symposium in Basel 7 December 2007. This part draws on notes taken by Rosalind Eyben at the symposium.

- (9) Speech by a DFID Minister, Shriti Vadera at the Growth Commission's European consultation, December 2007.

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