

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND
EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S
SELF-HELP GROUPS IN INDIA

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this thesis is identify the factors which influence the effectiveness of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in empowering marginalised people in poor communities of developing countries to achieve broader social change for themselves. The thesis identifies what empowerment means to marginalised women in India and the causal factors that lead to successful empowerment outcomes in NGO programs.

There are two key propositions that this thesis tests. The first is that empowerment of the poor can be defined and validly measured by changes in personal agency. Personal agency in this context refers to the range of choices and actions an individual can take in a particular social and political setting (Kabeer 1999a; Kabeer1999b; Hindess 1996). Underlying the notion of agency is that an increased ability of the poor to make choices and act on them implies a change in power relations in their day-to-day relationships, and in the economic, social and political domains that affect their lives (Jandhyala 1998; Vijayalakshmi 2001:13). The converse of this implication is that a lack of capacity to choose, and therefore to be able to influence, is a manifestation of disempowerment (Jandhyala 1998; Kabeer 1999a; Kabeer 1999b; Kumari 1999; and Gujit and Shah 1998).

The second proposition is that a key variable for effective NGO empowerment programs is the accountability relationship that the NGO has with the community

with which it is working, its constituents.¹ This accountability is in part related to the level of influence or control the constituents have, not only in the programs but in the NGO itself. This thesis seeks to establish that the accountability relationship of an NGO to the very poor² is in itself an empowering relationship. The basis for this contention is found in the literature that relates accountability with power (Day and Klein 1987; Mulgan 2001). The development rationale for this hypothesis lies in the notion that if poor women believe they can influence the work or management of an NGO, as a powerful outsider, then this may encourage or develop the women's ability to influence other people and local processes (Jandhyala 1998).³

The focus of the study is on poor women in Southern India. Poor women have been chosen as the focus because, by most measures of poverty and marginalisation, this group is the most disadvantaged. Their disadvantage is as a result of gender biases in most of the domestic, cultural, social, economic and political domains in which they engage. India was chosen for the study as it represents a large developing country with high levels of poverty, but an open political and social system which allows the relatively unfettered intervention of intermediary organisations such as NGOs in poverty alleviation programs.

¹ This thesis uses the term 'constituents' rather than 'beneficiaries' or 'clients' for the people with whom NGOs are working unless referred to differently by other people. This terminology is in line with the topic which focuses on empowerment and the relationship of the NGO with these communities and the say they have in particular programs, and the fact the NGO takes on a representative role in different forums and so has some obligations. Mehta distinguishes clients as having 'knowledge, choice and an overall perspective' and constituents as 'being representative and having an organic relationship' (2002).

² The term the 'very poor' was coined by the World Bank and refers to those who are in the bottom half of those below the poverty line.

³ For example in the domestic domain the patriarchal nature of domestic relations limit women's autonomy and this extends to the economic and social domains in the village.

This chapter introduces the thesis by summarising the theories of empowerment, the important role that empowerment theory is taking in development practice, and how it may be measured. It then introduces the role of NGOs as intermediaries in empowerment processes with an emphasis on Indian NGOs. It outlines the research questions, the scope of the study, and a brief overview of the methodology. It concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and the organisation of the thesis.

Issues for the Study

Empowerment has become an important word in the development lexicon and it has become increasingly used by development practitioners, including bilateral and multilateral agencies.⁴ The rationale for empowerment approaches in development practice is an increasing recognition that for poverty alleviation to be sustained there needs to be a greater role for the poor in the social, economic, and political spheres which shape their lives (Narayan 1999; UNDP 1997; and AusAID 2001). Recent literature on the nature of poverty casts it not only in terms of material deprivation, but also in the language of disempowerment. Amartya Sen (1999) refers to poverty in terms of capability deprivation, and a lack of access to fundamental freedoms. Likewise the World Bank in its 'Voices of the Poor' report, found that the poor saw poverty in terms of a lack of well-being or 'ill-being'. This lack of well-being was related to 'bad feelings' by

⁴ This thesis uses as a starting point a relatively simple definition of empowerment as being: the increased ability of the poor to make political, social, or economic choices (Kabeer 1999a), and to act on those choices (Hindess 1996).

the poor about self, perceptions of powerlessness over one's life, voicelessness, and anxiety and fear for the future (Narayan 1999:33), as well as material and physical deprivation. Aid agencies such as the World Bank and bilateral donors are now equating poverty, at least at a social and political level, to the disempowerment of individuals and groups.

AusAID (2001:17) and the World Bank (Narayan 1999:128) go a step further and argue that lack of accountability of organisations and institutions (NGOs as well as government) to the poor is itself a dimension of poverty. They argue that part of being powerless is in not having a say in the organisations and institutions with which the poor interact. For example, the AusAID Poverty Policy argues that the deprivation that constitutes poverty is not only based on resources for basic necessities, but also in terms of 'accountability *from* state institutions and civil society' [emphasis added] (AusAID 2001:15). It goes on to argue that the poor want '... to be empowered to be able to negotiate their interests with ... NGOs and to have greater ownership of programs' (p. 18). The World Bank argues that '...participatory processes are needed to give voice to the priorities of the poor and to better enable them to hold formal institutions more accountable' (World Bank Institute 2001:1). This approach is in line with empowerment theory that also posits that greater participation in community activities and organisations is associated with empowerment (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988:726).

Empowerment

Any discussion of the nature of empowerment should be related to theories of power. There are three important elements to the discussion of power that are central to this thesis. First, is the notion of power as being multi-directional;

second, is the collective nature of power; and third, is the notion that power includes the capacity to call another to account. This thesis looks at power in terms of an agent's capacity to make choices and act upon them (Hindess 1996:1). This broad definition is useful for the discussion of empowerment as it moves the concept away from relatively simple notions of power as domination (Weber 1954), which imply power as a one-way relationship, in favour of power being seen in terms of complex social relationships. Giddens (1979:6) argues that the exercise of power is more dynamic and multi-directional and lies in social relationships. He argues that first of all the presence of a social relationship implies that the subordinate in that relationship has some power with respect to the other parties in that relationship; and secondly that power has a collective aspect. For Giddens (1979:89) the exercise of power cannot be an individual process and therefore is dependent on the nature of the relationships within a group. This framework for empowerment, which is based around notions of agency and collective processes for individuals to become agents, provides the basis for identifying suitable indicators for both measuring empowerment, and analysing processes that can influence empowerment outcomes. One of these processes that this thesis is concerned with is accountability

The capacity to call somebody to account involves a power relationship (Day and Klein 1987:9), the consequence of which is that if an organisation can be held to account by the people it is serving then they have some power over that organisation. This view of power being related to accountability is important in

the discussion of the role intermediaries⁵ such as NGOs and how they facilitate empowerment among the poor - a central question for this thesis.

Finally, an understanding of the processes by which the poor are denied access to power is important in any analysis of empowerment. Disempowerment is variously described as: the exclusion from any social exchange (Hindess 1996:4); a lack of access to knowledge and control over one's destiny (Campbell and Jovchelovitch 2000:256; Vijalakshmi 2001:13); alienation (Spreitzer *et al.* 1999:512); and a deep-seated constraint on the capacity to choose (Kabeer 1999a:438). These descriptions of disempowerment refer first to the factors that limit the engagement of people in social relationships; and secondly, they seem to imply a view of power more in terms of the capacity to choose and act, than to dominate others. One way to look at empowerment therefore, is as a dynamic process to overcome those factors that are disempowering.

At a practical level, empowerment involves the expansion of the capacity of the poor, through social linkages, to deal with personal and social problems as they arise (Korten 1981:214; Schneider 1999:524; and Zimmerman and Rappaport 1998:726).⁶ Often empowerment is seen in economic terms, such as an increased income at household level so that household needs can be met (Schneider 1999). The thesis argues however, that these practical manifestations of empowerment are related to changes in power relations in a number of domains in which poor women have to relate. These are not only the economic but also the social and

⁵ The intermediary role of the NGO is between the poor (powerless) and the institutions of power (usually the State but can also be powerful individuals and other private bodies).

⁶ The support from the social domain might include short-term assistance from networks for the family in the event of illness or death through emotional support, and cash or kind. In the longer term the networks can assist in working with the community or government to provide support in the form of food, water, space, child-care etc. (Moser 1998:13).

political (Jandhyala 1998:205; Vijayalakshmi 2001:13). This thesis contends that the change in 'agency' that poor women experiences through being empowered is related to power relationships in their lives, goes beyond economic notions of empowerment, and can be the basis for measuring empowerment. The next section looks at some of the factors that can affect the level of disempowerment or how empowerment can occur. It then looks at the role of intermediaries in empowerment such as NGOs.

Factors that Affect Empowerment

There are a number of factors that can affect how an intermediary (such as an NGO) facilitates empowerment through group processes that involve disempowered individuals. These factors may include the endowments that the members bring to a group, the strength of social capital in a community, factors internal to the group itself such as decision-making, and finally the relationship the group has to the intermediary.

The endowments that an individual is born with or has acquired can include gender, social divisions such as class or (in the case of India) caste, education, and assets such as land. They can also include the social domain in which the person lives.⁷ In the area of research focus, Southern and Western India, caste and gender are arguably the strongest exclusionary factors. Women's roles in Indian society are very limited by tradition and patriarchy. Their choices are limited by the demands of family and they are excluded, particularly in rural areas, from the

⁷ Social capital theory, for example, posits that it is the network of formal and informal relationships in a community that provide the environment for social exchange (Woolcock 1998). It is the strength or weakness of these relationships that determines to some extent whether individuals or groups can expand their choices and act upon them, that is be empowered.

domains of power such as the economic and political, and are restricted in their interactions in the social domain (Janardhan 1995:39). Caste, likewise, is also a limiting factor, which has been an instrument of social order since ancient times (Rath *et al.* 1993:96).⁸ Those from the scheduled castes (*dalits*) and scheduled tribes (*adivasis*) have been traditionally excluded from all but the most menial of occupations, have been segregated from mainstream village life, and like women in India are excluded from the domains of power. For *dalit* women the exclusion is two-fold, first by virtue of their gender, and second by their caste.

Gender and caste not only limit access to the domains of power but also to other endowments that may have some bearing on access to power such as education and assets. Education provides access to knowledge and the skills to engage in the various domains of power, while assets such as land provide a tangible measure of a person's status in a community as well as a source of income, which provides bargaining power in social interactions. It is a lack of some or all of these endowments that leads to disempowerment.

Another factor that can be hypothesised to have an effect on empowerment is the social capital of the community. Social capital refers to the norms and networks that exist to enable social exchange, and to enable people to engage in community activities (Woolcock 1998). It can be argued that communities with high levels of

⁸ There are four main *varna* (often mistakenly referred to as castes) in India: - Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (farmers), and Shudras (artisans) which are each broken down into literally hundreds of jati or castes. In addition to the four main *Varna* there are the *Dalits* (formerly referred to as the 'untouchables') who are responsible for the most menial and degrading work. Rath *et al.* (1993:96) discuss these caste structures in terms of the development of elites in Indian society and in organisations. There remains a high level of discrimination according to caste. Dalits are formally included in the 'scheduled castes' which takes its name from a specific *schedule* in the Indian constitution that guarantees affirmative action and reserved positions in a number of areas such as education, employment, and government. There are also 'backward castes' which also have affirmative action programs through various statutes which vary from time-to-time.

social capital may use it as a resource to facilitate empowerment.⁹ This is in line with Giddens' (1979:6) view that power has a collective dimension. At the centre of the discussion of empowerment and its causal factors is the role of intermediaries such as NGOs, which can act as catalysts or facilitators of this process.

Intermediaries in Empowerment

There are a number of ways an individual or group can be empowered, including through the role they play in the traditions and social norms in communities (which likewise can be disempowering), or through government, other external processes, and intermediaries (Sen, G. 1997:2). The role of intermediaries such as NGOs is important in empowerment as they are, in many cases, the first line of institutions to which the poor have access in meeting their needs. NGOs in developing countries are important intermediaries as they are seen to be closer to the poor communities than other intermediary agencies such as government bodies, or other bilateral or multilateral institutions. It is this perceived closeness which is seen as making NGOs more effective in facilitating empowerment (Tandon 2001:45; Korten 1981:184; Carrol *et al.* 1996:9; Quinn 1997:25; Najam 1999:416; and Sen, G. 1997:3). This thesis contends that the extent or degree of empowerment facilitated by NGOs is to a large part related to the nature and character of the NGO interventions, and the accountability relationship they have with the groups with whom they are working, rather than proximity *per se*. That is, the perceived 'closeness' referred to above, is a function of the relationship between the NGO and its constituents.

⁹ On the other hand, it can be argued that collective empowerment processes can themselves facilitate the formation of social capital.

The role of an intermediary such as an NGO is two-fold. First of all, an intermediary can increase the knowledge that individuals have regarding their rights; or it can help in providing specific skills, such as literacy. Such knowledge or skills then becomes an asset that can be used in widening the choices available to those individuals, and also in their bargaining for greater autonomy and control over aspects of their lives. The second way empowerment can be facilitated is that an NGO can assist in the formation of groups in which individuals can gain support and solidarity, and through these groups enhance the self-esteem and self-confidence of individuals to increase their bargaining power. In short the NGOs provide some of the resources which women can use to expand their individual choices and agency¹⁰, which in turn strengthens the group for broader social action of political change. This thesis however argues that for effective empowerment to occur the NGO needs to be more than a mere resource provider, but rather there has to be an accountability relationship to the people being empowered. This is in line with Day and Klein's (1987) view of power being the capacity to call someone to account - that is, power is gained by the disempowered when they call an intermediary (such as an NGO) to account.

Non-Governmental Organisations

This section examines the characteristics of NGOs, the main intermediaries involved in empowerment programs with the poor in India, and identifies the key issues that this thesis examines in relation to NGOs as facilitators of

¹⁰ These resources can include services such as health or education programs or, more commonly in recent years, micro-finance.

empowerment. The first problem is that there is not a single typology for NGOs, and the notion of what is an NGO is a contested arena, with a range of different institutional forms claiming the mantle of being an NGO. These include industry associations, co-operatives, peoples-based organisations in developing countries, and agencies that channel funds for development purposes (Vakil 1997:2058; Fisher 1997:447). NGOs that are involved in development work are seen variously as public service contractors or social change agents, which have a key role in the interface between the citizen and the state (Salamon and Anheier 1999:84).¹¹ This thesis examines those NGOs that work with poor communities in developing countries, and either act as intermediaries to local representative groups, or work directly with poor individuals or informal groups.¹² While these NGOs generally perform a service delivery¹³ or advocacy role, they also see the goal of their work as one of empowering the communities either for social political reasons or as a means of sustaining a particular intervention (Diaz-Albertini 1993:317; Uphoff 1993; Turner and Hulme 1997; and Rajasekhar 2000:3).

¹¹ In their role in civil society, NGOs are seen to be part of the process of holding the state accountable and responsive to democratic principles of equity and justice, particularly for the poor and marginalised sectors of society (Amalric 1996:7; Fox and Brown 1998).

¹² Informal groups are a very common medium for the development work of NGOs. In India these are most commonly referred to as self-help groups, but the terms *sangha* and *bakcha* are also used. The typically have around 15-20 members with no formal registration or recognition.

¹³ In this role they can effectively deliver services such as health and education to the poor and marginalised on behalf of governments (Sen, S. 1999).

This discussion of the perceived nature and role of these NGOs raises two important issues that affect their role as empowerment agents. The first is that NGOs do not have a formal representative relationship to the people with whom they are working. The second is that the particular service delivery or advocacy roles NGOs undertake may not be conducive for empowerment, as a 'dependency' relationship may develop between the people or groups and the intermediary that can limit the autonomy of the groups, and accountability of the NGO to the groups.

The governance structure of the NGOs involved in this work in developing countries is generally non-representative¹⁴; that is, their governing boards are not determined by their constituency, but are usually appointed by the staff or by the boards themselves. They fall into the category of NGOs that are *public benefit organisations* with a broad, open constituency rather than a constituency limited by membership (International Center for Non-profit Law 1997:22; Salamon and Anheier 1999:69). These NGOs see their mandate as being derived from a set of values (rather than members) and their service being available to all those in need, and who seek them, within a particular target population which the NGO defines (Salamon *et al.* 2000:4). These NGOs see governance by a membership as an inherently limiting factor in the work they are trying to do. The argument is that the formal members of any organisation will seek to maximise the benefits to themselves, and they are likely to resist expansion to new members where the organisation's purpose involves dispensing

¹⁴ All of the NGOs surveyed in this study were public benefit organisations and were not representative bodies.

limited resources.¹⁵ The advantage to NGOs of being non-membership based is that they are able to direct resources to those in most need rather than to only their membership.¹⁶ Likewise the poor, by the fact they are disempowered by their social and economic circumstance (and they have limited time available), are less likely to join a membership organisation even if there is a benefit from being member (Howes 1997).

While a non-membership structure is important in addressing social problems across a greater section of society, it does present some risks and limitations for empowerment. The lack of formal accountability mechanisms to constituents limits information flows on needs and priorities (Carrol *et al.* 1996:7). The accountability obligations to the constituents are set out in either contracts or constitutions, but are seen as a *moral* obligation (Salamon *et al.* 2000:9).

In addition, the lack of formal processes can lead to dependency-based power relationships developing between the constituency and the NGO. These dependent relationships can both disempower the constituency (Salamon *et al.* 2000:9; Fisher 1994:137; and Joshi and Moore 2000:28), and lead to oligarchic behaviours within the NGO (Fisher 1994; Edwards and Hulme 1996:968; and Zaidi 1999:266).

¹⁵ In some cases national charities legislation limits the extent to which the formal members can obtain material benefit, which also limits the role of the beneficiaries in the organisation's governance.

¹⁶ In practice however many NGOs facilitate the formation of membership organisations through which they work whilst managing the flexibility to expand to new constituents and constituencies (Howes 1997).

Scope of the Research

This thesis explores the role and the range of informal and semi-formal constituency accountability mechanisms that NGOs employ in their work, given that they are non-representative organisations. It then relates these accountability mechanisms to empowerment - given that an accountability relationship involves power. That is, if the NGO is accountable to the constituency then the constituents have some power over the NGO (Day and Klein 1987). There are few studies that have looked at the relationship between NGOs and their constituencies in detail in respect of empowerment. Much of the existing research on NGOs looks at issues of legitimacy as civil society actors, or NGO relationships with governments or donors, and how this affects their legitimacy, effectiveness, or efficiency (Edwards and Hulme 1997; Fisher 1997; Fowler 2000a; Hudock 1995; Charlton 1995; and Zaidi 1999). The few studies that look at accountability tend to support the view that accountability to the constituency is an important factor in the effectiveness of NGO work (Smith-Sreen 1995; Bava 1997; Carrol 1992; and Sekher 2000).

This research is important because it comes at a time when there is substantial support for NGOs, both as part of civil society¹⁷, and also for their social change strategies for poverty reduction with poor and marginalised communities. This support often comes however with competing and contradictory objectives, and few clear ideas of how they might be achieved. By focussing on those NGOs that seek to empower the poor as part of their work, and by using empowerment and

¹⁷ Keane (1998:6) describes civil society as 'a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected non-governmental institutions that tend to be non-violent, self-organising, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions that frame, constrict and enable their activities'.

accountability theories, some parameters may be determined for NGO effectiveness in achieving these objectives.

Research Questions

The following questions are posed:

- What are the key indicators of empowerment for women in poor communities as a result of NGO programs?
- What are the key variables that affect empowerment outcomes?
- How does the level of accountability an NGO has to its constituents affect empowerment outcomes?
- How does the range of accountability relationships NGOs have to their various other stakeholders¹⁸ affect NGOs' relationships to their constituents, and therefore affect empowerment outcomes?

Methodology

The methodology adopted is a comparative analysis of 15 NGOs operating primarily across two states in Southern and Western India. The data was collected through case studies from Maharashtra and Karnataka. India was chosen as it has a long history of voluntary action in general, and NGO work in particular. The history of NGOs in India is rich in its diversity with the full gamut of NGOs represented - ranging from those primarily involved in service delivery, to NGOs whose primary aims are concerned with social action/social change. Another reason for choosing India is that it is a modern, liberal democratic state, with

¹⁸ These stakeholders include *inter alia* donors, other NGOs, and government.

federal structures and a commitment to decentralisation/devolution of local level decision-making to local government structures. In many ways this represents an 'ideal' for participation of NGOs in development work. The districts chosen have a relatively high density of NGOs working with poor and marginalised communities, and the NGOs used in the case studies were chosen on the basis of their commitment to empowerment as a means to addressing community issues around poverty and marginalisation.

Data Collection

The main data sets collected in the study were first; measures of change in the 'agency' the women constituents of the NGOs experienced as a consequence of the NGO intervention, and second, interviews with participating NGOs on their accountability relationships.¹⁹ Data was collected from a sample of the self-help groups the participating NGOs were working with through focus group discussions. The key data obtained focused on empowerment in terms of the changes that women had experienced and how this translates into 'agency' - increased choices and opportunities to act on those choices. A range of open-ended questions were used which related to what the women have learned, how their lives have changed, and what material assets they have obtained since joining the groups. The answers were categorised into broad groups of changes which the women themselves see as being important, and were ranked and scored using existing frameworks of empowerment centring on changes to their agency, that is their role, influence or power in different domains in the community in which they live.

The data collected were analysed using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods (Sandelowski 2000; Hines 1993). First was a statistical analysis in which the data were tested to identify those statistically significant variables that affect changes in individual agency, the key to empowerment for the purpose of this thesis. This methodology was derived from Hines (1993) and involved categorising the answers to the open-ended questions into specific 'taxonomies' within broad 'domains'. From these taxonomies numeric rankings were derived and statistically analysed. The independent variables are: accountability of the NGO to its constituency (the focus of the research); endowments in terms of caste, education and land; village social capital; decision-making within the group; and the number of years the groups had been meeting. From this data conclusions are drawn as to the effectiveness of the NGO in empowering poor and marginalised women in poor communities and whether the institutional factors of the NGO have an effect in this.

The accountability of the NGO to the group was assessed by the group's knowledge of the NGO in terms of its work, aims, and objectives, and the group's role in decision-making within the NGO. These questions were designed to obtain information on the formal and informal processes the NGOs had in place for consulting the groups (Appendices 5 and 6).

¹⁹ Typically, the NGOs surveyed in this thesis work through self-help groups comprising around twenty women, who meet regularly for the purpose of savings and credit programs, but also training and other social mobilisation.

The second part of the research was a follow up survey of the NGOs to look at how they saw accountability, and the other factors that were found to be statistically significant. This survey provided further insights into these explanatory variables. In the specific area of accountability the NGOs' governance structures, and other factors that affected their accountability relationship with the communities with whom they were working, are examined.

Limitations of the Study

The main limitations of the study arise from the normative nature of the research and methodological issues that arise mainly from the size of the sample. The study of empowerment, particularly changes in individual agency, involves collecting data on people's perceptions and making, to some extent, normative judgements about those perceptions. These limitations were dealt with to some extent by the interview method chosen (which was largely personal narrative-based), and the mixed method methodology.

The second limitation is that a sample size of 77 self-help groups is small for such an exercise in terms of analysing causal factors for empowerment, or being able to break down the group into sub-categories for further analysis. At a methodological level the analysis can only look at broad factors across a number of NGOs or areas, rather than the specifics of a particular NGO or area, or sub-group of people. However, it is valid in a comparative analysis among the NGOs surveyed in identifying those variables that may be significant, and in providing the focus for further qualitative analysis.

Organisation of the Thesis

This chapter has identified the issues of empowerment which are emerging in development, how they are framed, and the research questions that arise. Chapter Two looks at the theoretical basis which informs empowerment and the factors which affect it. This theoretical basis is derived from notions of power and the collective aspects of power. Chapter Two also examines the psychological, communal, and political notions of empowerment, and the tension which exists between the notions of empowerment in terms of an individual's self esteem and efficacy, and a communal notion which deals with issues related to the common good. The link with accountability is introduced through the notion that the relationship inherent in being able to hold a body to account is one of power, and therefore is arguably an important factor in empowerment. Chapters Three and Four set the scene in terms of NGOs. Chapter Three examines the characteristics of NGOs, in terms of their typology, theories of NGOs, accountability for NGOs, and the range of stakeholders to whom they perceive themselves as being accountable. Chapter Four looks at Indian NGOs specifically, including their history and how that history has shaped their character, the complex relationship Indian NGOs have with the state, and how that relationship has evolved over the past one hundred years. Finally, Chapter Four examines the modern Indian NGO, and its role in empowerment and social change.

Chapter Five presents the research design and methodology, including a description of the study area in India, to establish some indication of the socio-political context in which the study was made. Chapter Six presents the results of the survey, identifying the key elements of empowerment and the important variables that have an effect on empowerment outcomes.

Chapters Seven and Eight discuss the findings of the study including their importance in empowerment theory and development policy. Chapter Seven focuses on empowerment, particularly how the poor and marginalised see empowerment, how this relates to other studies on empowerment, and finally the implications for theories of empowerment. Chapter Eight looks at the institutional features of NGOs that may affect their approach to programming, and in particular, how the interaction of accountability pressures to various stakeholders affects NGOs' accountability to their constituency - the focus of the thesis. Some conclusions are drawn on the relationship between NGOs' accountability arrangements and their effectiveness as empowerment agents. Chapter Nine summarises the research findings, and their importance in the light of existing research. The chapter also highlights the policy implications for those involved in development programs, and points to areas for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

EMPOWERMENT

...when existing power is unequally distributed the pay-offs from coercion and deception of the powerless by the powerful may be high and the likelihood of political change small
(Raiser 1997:52)

Introduction

The language of empowerment is being used more commonly across the different fields of social science. It can be found in the literature on management, sociology, health services, politics, as well as international development (Page and Czuba 1999:2). In the field of international development, most of the key actors, including government, non-government, and multilateral organisations, have adopted the language of empowerment in their policy and practice (World Bank 2002, World Bank Institute 2001¹; ADB 2001a; ADB 2001b; AusAID 2001; and DFID 2000). This chapter examines various theories empowerment, and how it may be measured. In particular the chapter focuses on the notions of personal and collective empowerment, how they interrelate, and their relevance to development practice.

¹ The World Bank's World Development Report 2000/2001, *Attacking Poverty*, outlines a plan for attacking poverty based on three areas: opportunity, empowerment and security, and has developed a Community Empowerment Social Inclusion Program to undertake empowerment research and activities.

The growing popularity of the term 'empowerment' has led to a broadening of the definition to the extent that the concept is becoming less clear, and is shifting away from the central notion of power, from which it derives. Some authors argue that the use of the term has become ubiquitous to the point that it seems to have become another buzzword in development practice, merely to repackage old aid programs for the purpose of obtaining funding (Moore 2001; Page and Czuba 1999:1; and Cheater 1999:1). They go on to argue that development agencies are using the term empowerment to refer to a range of activities, many of which have little to do with addressing the power relations among the various actors or groups in society (James 1999: 25; Cheater 1999:7). Cheater argues that, paradoxically, the use of the term empowerment is used to:

screen off power relations from the public discourse and obscure hegemonic relations... This conception of power as post-modern warm fuzzy expansible, not only conceals its hard edge; this cloak of opacity also discourages nasty questions of who benefits and how, and runs the danger of collapsing objectives, processes and outcomes alike into undifferentiated rhetorical empowerment (1999:7).

In order to avoid generalised usage of the term empowerment this thesis goes back to the roots of the notion of empowerment and how it directly relates to power relations. As a starting point this thesis uses a narrow definition of empowerment: as being related to 'agency', that is the expansion of individuals' choices and actions, primarily in relation to others. This definition of empowerment is important to this thesis as it provides a basis for the measurement of empowerment. It is also a foundation for broader social change, which entails in part access to power by those who are disempowered.

One of the reasons for the popularity of the notion of empowerment in the field of development is that it can be seen as both a 'means' and an 'end' in the development process (Ackerson and Harrison 2000:240). As a 'means', the empowerment of beneficiaries in a development program can lead to particular outcomes such as the improved management of community resources like schools and irrigation facilities to ensure their sustainability. Empowerment can also be an 'end' in a development intervention. The purpose of a program may be the empowerment of a particular group of people who would otherwise remain disempowered. Such activities are seen as important in that empowered people are able to participate in development programs², assert their rights, and be in a better position to demand services from government and other service providers. In this way the social relations between the beneficiaries of a development program and the authorities have changed. That is an accountability relationship is established so that not only is a particular activity sustainable and there may be an ongoing flow of benefits to a particular group. Chapter 3 looks at accountability in more detail.

² This thesis has generally not used the term 'participation' to discuss changes in the relations of groups and individuals with each other and external agents in either the discussion of theory and or data analysis. The thesis uses the terms 'empowerment' to look at participation in terms of expanded choices and action in community life, and the term 'downward accountability' to describe the participatory relationship an intermediary such as an NGO has with its constituency. These two terms generally provide a sharper point for analysis. The notion of participation is very broad (see Arnstein 1969 for seminal work on this) and encompasses actions ranging from the mere provision of information, consultation, through to local control and partnerships. By focusing on empowerment and accountability this thesis is implicitly looking at the notion of participation more in terms of local control and the processes required to achieve it rather than processes of information sharing or consultation with external agents. For a detailed examination of the relationship of empowerment with participation see Speer (2000), and for accountability with participation Day and Klein (1987).

The next section looks at the literature on empowerment and identifies the key elements of empowerment that are relevant to this thesis. The chapter then looks at how development interventions can lead to empowerment outcomes, the role of accountability in these interventions, and finally how empowerment might be measured.

Theories of Empowerment

The debate around the notion of empowerment in social relations can be divided into two broad views. The first is that empowerment is primarily about the individual and changes in their cognitive processes; and the second, is that empowerment is more about changes in social relations. The supporters of individually-based notions of empowerment argue that it is only indirectly related to the direct exercise of power, but rather it is more about personal cognition and awareness from which other changes follow (Schneider 1999:524; Korten 1981:214; and Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988:726). These views of empowerment eschew notions of domination, consent and resistance in terms of personal changes. For example Zimmerman and Rappaport (p. 726) argue that:

[Empowerment]... is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviours to matters of social policy and social change.

Similarly Korten (1981:214) sees empowerment as '... the means by which the [NGO] beneficiaries' needs can be articulated'. Critics such as Riger (1993:281) however argue that those views of empowerment that eschew notions of control in favour of non-adversarial and relatively benign changes merely promote a '*sense*

of empowerment' [emphasis added], that is cognitively-based.³ It does not reflect an increase in actual power but rather is a 'false consciousness' (Riger:281).

The second view of empowerment is that it is inextricably linked to political issues and rights, whether they are in the realm of patriarchy and the family, or community power structures (Kabeer 1999a:436; Kumari 1999:100; Crawley 1998:26; Sen, G. 1997:2; and Riger 1993:283). These writers argue that, by definition, empowerment entails a process of change for the powerless or disempowered, whereby these disempowering institutional structures are challenged. In this framework empowerment is not a passive process.

These two views of empowerment, while being placed at different ends of a spectrum, may not be mutually exclusive. Goetz (2001:35) for example speaks of a 'performative aspect and a substantive aspect of *voice*' [original emphasis]. For Goetz, empowerment has both cognitive *and* political components. That is, it is not only a sense of having expanded choice but also of being able to act on those choices.⁴ In essence empowerment has both cognitive and political dimensions.

One cannot act without awareness and similarly awareness without corresponding action is meaningless. Jandhyala (1998) defines (women's) empowerment as:

... a process whose outcomes would lead to renegotiations of gender relations, enhance women's access and control over human, material, financial and intellectual resources, legitimise women's entry into non-traditional spaces, creates new spaces, and support systems to sustain the process of empowerment (p.205).

³ Riger argues that the different views on empowerment as being cognitive i.e. a sense of personal control, and actual control reflect psychology's two views of human nature: cognition in which 'the person creates reality'; and behaviourism, which posits that 'reality creates the person', i.e. people are influenced by their environment (p. 281).

⁴ The social movement literature uses similar language to that of empowerment, *vis* new kinds of social identity, consciousness and cognition in human action (Puroshothaman 1998:28).

In order to tease out the debate on empowerment, a useful starting point is to examine the notion of empowerment at an individual level, and then look at the implications and tensions that arise for the broader collective and political dimensions.

Individual Dimensions of Empowerment

Community psychology literature views empowerment in part as the building of self-knowledge and self-esteem of the individual to reduce 'feelings of alienation and enhance feelings of solidarity and legitimacy' (Asthana 1996:2).⁵ Individual empowerment is '... the reciprocal influences and confluence of macro and micro level forces that impact the emotional cognitive and behavioural aspects of individuals' (Speer 2000:52).⁶ The literature identifies five dimensions of individual empowerment. These are changes in:

- meaning which revolves around beliefs, values and behaviours;
- competence or self-efficacy, that is the belief of being able to carry out particular tasks or roles;
- self-determination or the choices individuals have in initiating or regulating their actions;
- impact or the degree to which one influences the outcomes of others.

(Spreitzer *et al.* 1999:512); and

⁵ This view of empowerment is founded on research on the psychology of alienation, but similar findings occur in the field of human resource management (Spreitzer *et al.* 1999:512).

⁶ The literature tends to use the terms individual and psychological empowerment interchangeably to refer to similar phenomena.

- how people understand and relate to their social environment and the role of collectives in community life (Zimmerman quoted in Speer 2000:52).

This process of empowerment can be further elaborated by examining the process of *disempowerment*. Disempowerment has been variously described as a '... lack of control over destiny' (Campbell and Jovchelovitch 2000:261). 'polluting' events which are 'not fair' and an 'affront to dignity' (Kane and Montgomery 1998:266)⁷, and isolation in decision-making (Puroshothaman 1998:50). What these views of empowerment have in common is a strong individual dimension. The broader social dimension comes from the argument that these disempowering factors affect group dynamics, and so can lead to 'collective dysempowerment [*sic*]' (Kane and Montgomery 1998:268).⁸

Making a judgement on what is disempowering, however, can raise its own set of problems. Kabeer (1999:438) points out that features of disempowerment such as a 'lack of control over destiny' may be due to other factors such as laziness, incompetence, individual preference, or different priorities rather than the action of others or institutional norms. For Kabeer disempowerment occurs only when there is a 'deep-seated constraint on the ability to choose' (p. 438).⁹

⁷ This analysis from management theory is important, as trust and a perception of fairness is related to the effectiveness of an individual in their work (Kane and Montgomery 1998:268).

⁸ While Kane and Montgomery are specifically referring to disempowerment in human resource management the point they are making is arguably true of all human interaction.

⁹ The other issue Kabeer (p. 439) raises is the importance of being clear about the difference between the inequalities in people's capacity to make choices, that is different levels of disempowerment and the differences in choices people make. People may 'choose not to choose'. An example she gives is that a woman might be living in *purdah* (seclusion) because she is pressured by patriarchal or other forms of social power, or because she chooses to do so. *Purdah per se* is not an indicator, but rather it is the socio-political context in which it is placed, that determines how free a woman is to exercise choice.

One way of understanding the complex relationships between empowerment and disempowerment, and the role of the individual and the group in these processes is to examine these processes through the lens of related theories of power.

Bachrach and Barantz (1970:18) and Lukes (1974:17) see the exercise of power in part as a constraint on decision-making. They argue that power is exercised by confining an individual's decision-making spaces – what Bachrach and Barantz refer to as the 'mobilisation of bias' (p. 18). Similarly, Lukes (1974) argues that power may be exercised subtly through manipulation rather than domination, and it involves confining the scope of decision-making to 'relatively safe' issues, and may involve 'non decision-making' as much as decision-making. For Lukes, power is less about conflict and more about influencing, shaping, and even determining the wants of another (p.17). These nuanced approaches to the notions of power give some insight as to why disempowerment is experienced, and the characteristics of individual empowerment outlined above. In other words people's lack of control over their destiny or inability to choose can be explained in part by the constraints on their decision-making space, and it is the overcoming of these constraints that is empowering.

Speer (2000) adds a contextual dimension when he argues that individual empowerment takes different forms with different people.

Depending on the context, empowering behaviours might range from individuals adjusting to adverse conditions that are not malleable to change, to working with others in a voluntary organisation to alter the distribution of community resources (Speer 2000:52).

In summary these views of empowerment are related to the individual, and their relations with others is expressed in terms of cognitive changes that in turn may lead to further action in their relationships.

Riger (1993:281) raises two fundamental issues with this general view of individual empowerment. The first is that it understates the political dimension of power and the power relationships that exist in human relations, in particular notions of domination. She argues that an individual approach to empowerment is reductionist and focuses too much on the *sense* of empowerment rather than on what she calls *actual* empowerment. For Riger the focus on the personal (in terms of how individuals feel or perceive the world) disconnects human behaviour from the larger socio-political context, and therefore serves to maintain the *status quo* rather than lead to substantial change. It fails to take into account the larger systemic issues that create powerlessness and negative life outcomes for individuals.

The second problem that Riger raises is that an emphasis on personal empowerment gives insufficient weight to the importance of co-operation among individuals and community processes. She argues that individual empowerment is more concerned with control than co-operation, while community empowerment is to some extent about subverting the notion of individual control to the community good (Riger 1993:285). In this schema it is possible to have an empowering collectivity that disempowers individuals and *vice versa* (Kane and Montgomery 1998:269; Leach *et al.* 1997:90). Speer (2000:53) on the other hand argues that empowerment is not about simple trade-offs between the individual and the group, but rather how the group can reinforce individual agency and vice

versa. Individual empowerment can only occur in a social context and so must involve co-operation.

Giddens (1979) provides a useful theoretical framework of power relations to underpin an understanding the relationship of the collective to individual empowerment. Firstly, he argues that power is less about domination and more about a capacity to act, which may or may not be related to influencing or dominating others. Secondly, Giddens argues that power by its nature is transformative. It is an 'agent's capabilities to reaching outcomes' (1979:88). In other words, while power is usually directed at others, that is not the primary reason for the exercise of power. Rather, power is exercised to give a particular benefit to those who exercise it.

Because Giddens' framework encompasses the idea of power as being dynamic, multi-directional, and having collective aspects¹⁰ he argues that all power relations are two-way:

... however subordinate an actor may be in social relationships the very fact of their involvement in that relationship gives him or her a certain amount of power over the other (1979:6).

In other words subordinates in any power relationship are adept at converting the resources they have in terms of knowledge or social relations (or even physical assets) into a source of control, and therefore they gain some power. The third point that Giddens makes in his discussion of power that is relevant is that power has a collective character; it is a 'network of decision-making and an institutional phenomena' (p. 89.) He argues that it is very hard for a person to act unilaterally,

¹⁰ McLelland (1970) makes a distinction between socialised power, that is exercising power for the benefit of others (which can be empowering), and personal power which he relates to domination). McLelland goes on to warn however that there is '... a knife edge between personalised domination and socialised leadership' (1970:42).

but rather requires a collectivity of support, and an institutional framework in which to act. The exercise of power therefore is a social phenomenon.

Power within social systems, which enjoy some continuity over time and space, presumes regularised relations of autonomy and dependence between actors and collectivities in contexts of social interaction (Giddens 1984:16).

Finally, Giddens introduces the idea of a duality of structure in his discussion of power. For him, power is both the capacity of one or more agents to make a difference and influence change in others, and at the same time it is a structural resource of a community. This framework that Giddens provides represents a way through the tension that Riger (1993) raises. Giddens argues that power is something which individuals can draw on 'in the course of their interaction with others' (see Hindess 1996:9) and is inherent in all social systems. It is not only a social phenomenon but it is also the property of a social community (Giddens 1979:89), and involves reproducing relations of both autonomy and dependency in social interactions (p. 93). This notion of power as a social resource with collective aspects, and being dynamic and multi-directional, is related to the notion of agency that underpins the research for this thesis.¹¹

Agency and Empowerment

Agency has two features: first, it is the range of choices that an individual might have (Kabeer 1999a:436); and second, it is the capacity to exercise those choices, or to act on them (Hindess 1996:1; Giddens 1984:9). Giddens (1984) argues that agency is a defining feature of being human: '... to be a human being is to be a

¹¹ There is also the notion of power as a right of individuals or groups. John Locke for example in the 18th century saw power as not only the capacity to act but also a right of individuals (Hindess:51). The idea of power as a right highlights the notion of political empowerment which is discussed in the next section.

purposive agent which both has reason for actions and can elaborate on them' (p. 3).¹² However both Giddens and Kabeer make the point that agency is more than simple choice and action:

Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity ... it can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. It can be exercised by individuals as well as by collectives (Kabeer 1999a:438).

Similarly, Giddens argues that agency is a 'continuous flow of conduct' and so by its nature, is an intervention (1979:55). He calls this 'active structuration' - the 'continuous process by which action transforms both structures and individuals' (Giddens 1984:14). It has a feedback loop such that the more one exercises choice the greater the expansion of opportunities. The concept of agency and action is therefore tied to that of power which is transformative; that is, it enables a capability to reach outcomes (Giddens 1979: 92) and is a process of change (Kabeer 1999a:437).

The extent to which outcomes are reached, and so how much power is exercised, lies along a continuum of conduct that can be divided into categories or typologies of power. Hollander and Offerman (1990:179) for example refer to three categories of power: *power over* which is about control and domination; *power to* which is about the opportunity to act more freely within some realms; and *power*

¹² The Oxford English Dictionary (Second Edition - online) defines an agent as 'one who (or that which) acts or exerts power'.

from, which is about the ability to resist the power of others.¹³ In addition the exercise of power also occurs within specific contexts.

Vijayalakshmi (2001:4) argues that how power is exercised is also related to the arenas in which it is exercised. Power is not only related to a capability to reach certain outcomes, but more importantly it is related access to certain domains, and the ability to mobilise resources in those domains - 'domains of power' (p.4).

These domains include: the household; the local institutional structures; the political community; the broader economy; and civil society (Vijayalakshmi 2001:4).¹⁴ Jandhyala (1998:205) posits a similar notion when she refers to power as being related to access to 'new spaces'. The point being made of access to domains or spaces of power links to the arguments of Lukes (1974) and Bachrach and Barantz (1970) who argue that the exercise of power is to confine (and therefore exclude) people's decision-making spaces. The view of power being access to decision-making spaces in the forms of various socio-political domains is important for this thesis as it is relevant to how empowerment programs may be focussed and conducted.

From the discussion of power a number of elements emerge that are important for defining empowerment and developing valid indicators for measuring it. The first is that power is more about the capability and means to achieve certain outcomes and can lie within what Giddens (1979:55) refers to as a 'continuum of conduct' that transforms both individuals and structures. Empowerment also has a strong

¹³ In empowerment programs there is often a blurring of the understanding of the notion *power over* and *power to* in what is being sought in empowerment. Riger argues that many interventions can increase people's power to act (their agency), by enhancing self-esteem, but do little to affect their power over resources or policies (1993:282).

¹⁴ This idea of exclusion from certain domains is closely related to Giddens' (1984) notion of 'signification' or power being able to block out the views of others.

personal or self-awareness component, and is also about access or exclusion from certain social domains.

The discussion also identifies the tensions that exist when empowerment is looked at as both a social and an individual process. While there are both clear individual and social dimensions, there may be trade-offs between them. Finally, an understanding of empowerment processes is also important in development practice for delineating the role that intermediaries such as NGOs might have in empowerment processes. It can be argued that it is an understanding of the nature of empowerment and the inherent tensions touched on above that drive effective empowerment programs. How these tensions are understood can affect the approach taken to developing programs that are aimed at empowerment, and the indicators used to determine positive empowerment outcomes. The next section examines these tensions further through a discussion on the collective dimensions and processes of empowerment.

Collective Dimensions of Empowerment

The previous section examined empowerment theory including its individual dimensions. This section will focus in more detail how individual empowerment can affect collective processes in what has become known as collective empowerment (Pilsuk *et al.* 1996). Collective empowerment can be seen as a summation of individual empowerment which leads to the self-efficacy of a group, that is it is a collective phenomenon derived from the psychological empowerment of individuals (Rissel 1994:39; Pilsuk *et al.* 1996:18; and Campbell and Jovchelovitch 2000:261). Pilsuk *et al.* (1996), like Giddens argue that in addition there is also strength derived from the 'web of continuing relationship ...

[and] mutual support' (p. 17),¹⁵ resulting in enhanced access by individuals to resources in the arenas of economic, political, and social decision-making. The group in a sense gives voice, value, and support to the individual, and a sense of power develops in the course of collective action (Goetz 2001:288; Drury and Reicher 1999:383; Kroeker 1996:124; and Murthy 2001:27), which 'validates the primacy of ... agency and renders it more visible' (Puroshothaman 1998:155). There is thus a feedback loop or virtuous circle: of personal power producing a collective sense of legitimacy, and an awareness of a collective sense of rights (leading to collective action), which in turn leads to enhanced personal power (Drury and Reicher 1999:383,398). In summary the outcomes of community empowerment are a raised level of psychological empowerment, political action, and a redistribution of resources and/or decision-making (Rissel 1994:41; Calman 1992:192).

Riger (1993), as touched on in the previous section, does not support the notion of a virtuous circle. She argues that the virtuous circle may in fact be a vicious circle by which individual or psychological empowerment can undermine or weaken community empowerment as people begin to act more autonomously:

The image of the empowered person ... reflects the belief in separation, individuation, and individual mastery ... [contrasts] with an alternate vision that emphasises relatedness and interdependence as central values of human experience (Riger 1993:285).

Riger sees those situations which foster communal or collective values as being opposite to those that foster agency or control. For her they are a dichotomy - 'control rather than communion' (p. 285). This notion is supported, to some

¹⁵ This idea is also reflected in social capital theory (see Woolcock 1998).

extent, from research by Speer (2000:59) who found that individuals' understanding of power, and social change at a group level, differ from their own sense of control and efficacy.¹⁶ That is, there is a tension between how individuals deal with on the one hand personal dimensions of empowerment, and on the other hand, communal notions of empowerment. Riger (1993:289) relates this tension to the natural tensions within individuals' psyches between what she refers to as instrumental values, which are attempts to control, and expressive values, which are about interpersonal relationships.¹⁷ 'Finding one's voice, controlling one's resources, becoming empowered may reduce the interdependence that produces a strong sense of community' (p. 289). Riger goes on to argue that for the powerless, those not in a position to exercise autonomy and choice, '... [they] must focus on connection and communal goals to survive' (p. 288). This last point of Riger's seems to indicate that the tension between individual and collective empowerment may be of less importance for empowerment of very poor and marginalised groups – the focus of this thesis. Even in the context of poor groups Riger however still poses the question:

Does empowerment of disenfranchised people and groups simultaneously bring about a greater sense of community and strengthen the ties that hold our society together, or does it promote certain individuals or groups at the expense of others, increasing competitiveness and lack of cohesion? (1993:291).

¹⁶ Both Speer and Riger indicate that further research is required to determine how these two tensions are managed in effective programs.

¹⁷ Riger argues that expressive values are associated with interrelationships and dependency, and so are valued less in society than instrumental values, which are about control and achievements (1993:286).

Related to this question is the question of whether the group is the means by which the individual is empowered, or is an empowered individual a way for a group to more ably assert its rights and needs? At a practical level these two questions raises the important issue of what is an appropriate balance between the personal and the collective in empowering processes, and how agencies that seek to facilitate the empowerment of the poor can find this balance in terms of the approach they take.

The next section reviews the literature of empowerment of marginalised groups in development practice. This literature tends to take the view that the dilemma outlined above between a focus on the individual or the group does not present the level of danger to collective processes that Riger points to. Rather the development literature tends to support the Drury and Reicher (1999:383) view that collective and individual empowerment are mutually reinforcing (Goetz 2001:288; Kroeker 1996:124; Murthy 2001:27; and Puroshothaman 1998:155),.

Empowerment and Development

The literature on empowerment and development argues that empowerment is about both groups and individuals. It is '... group processes that lead to change in the lives of individuals' (Sen, G. 1997:4).

In order to be truly empowered, poor people must be able to go beyond their consciousness of themselves as eternal victims, to transcend their self-perception towards greater control over their lives and environment. This internal change in awareness, while catalysed by group processes, is profoundly and intensely personal and individual (p. 5).

Gita Sen (1997:5) goes on to argue that not only do the group or collective processes provide a support or catalyst role for individual empowerment, these

processes also provide a context through which individuals can become aware of the local realities. This awareness occurs through the social cohesion the group brings and the local networks to which the group exposes its members (Campbell and Jovchelovitch 2000:258). Gita Sen (1997:2) argues that for this process to occur, both individual and collective notions of empowerment must co-exist and focus on the importance of control over resources. On the one hand, control over external resources can give capacity for self-expression, while on the other hand a process of 'inner transformation of one's consciousness' can overcome barriers to accessing resources (Sen, G. 1997:2). For Gita Sen empowerment occurs in the balance between individuals accessing resources, and their inner transformation.¹⁸ This view of empowerment is in line with the notion of the 'virtuous circle' outlined above (Drury and Reicher 1999:383; Kroeker 1996:124; and Puroshothaman 1998:117).

The other dimension of empowerment relates directly to notions of power. This approach argues that empowerment is rarely confined to personal transformation and access to resources. It also involves changes in power relations, which in turn can lead to some degree of social upheaval. At times, empowerment is a zero-sum game, with those in power relinquishing some in order for others to gain power, and so it has a political dimension (Rappaport 1987:121; Kroeker 1996:124; and Sen G. 1997:4). Gorain (1993) relates this process of empowerment directly to notions of development referring to it as '... a process of change in social dynamics [which] alters the social economic and political power base [and is] a process of confrontation' (p. 381). While changes in power

¹⁸ Gita Sen (1997:2) argues that a lack of understanding of this complex process results in problems in empowerment programs. She argues that in practice many government programs

in power relations between societal actors may not always be a consequence of empowerment, a central tenet of empowerment is the potential and opportunity for these changes to occur.

Empowerment therefore goes beyond the individual and the group into the realm of political change and social justice. Rappaport argues that empowerment is more than merely choices but a '... sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights' (1987:121). Likewise, Kroeker sees empowerment in terms of social movement and the group as being the locus of power (1996:124,130). Similar points are made by Belchar and Hegar (1991:40) who argue that empowerment has to occur in a climate of equity and justice if it is to produce a sense of efficacy and personal worth. Sorrenson (1997) even goes as far as saying that empowerment is a process that transforms individuals into citizens (quoted in Peters and Pierre 2000:11).

The common feature of these normative analyses is that they gloss over the tensions between personal and collective empowerment outlined above. The normative views of empowerment have their own dangers by romanticising it, and not taking into account the realities of power relations within groups and communities. The next section will examine these power relationships further by looking at community-based interventions by intermediaries such as NGOs.

Development Interventions and Empowerment

The discussion set out above on the nature of empowerment provides a framework for an analysis of how people who have little power are empowered. This section looks at the rationale of development interventions for empowerment and how

they relate to theories of power. The particular focus is on women's empowerment in a developing country context.¹⁹ Mayoux (1999:959) has identified three paradigms that broadly describe the rationale of development interventions aimed at the empowerment of women.

- i. *An economic* paradigm that promotes development interventions to improve women's capacity for increasing their income either through employment or micro-enterprises. This paradigm assumes 'reinforcing spirals' which occur as a result of increased income and economic independence, which in turn lead to social and political change and greater personal empowerment;
- ii. *A poverty alleviation* paradigm which focuses on decreased vulnerability and looks at 'mutually synergistic interests' at the household level. It takes the view that addressing practical needs, such as health or education, is the best way of addressing gender inequality and as a consequence women are empowered; and
- iii. *A feminist* paradigm, which sees empowerment as an 'end'. It addresses gender subordination at the individual, organisational, and macro levels.²⁰ Economic programs are seen only as an entry point for wider social, political and legal empowerment.

because they focus predominantly on inner transformations.

¹⁹ The reason for a specific focus on women is that women are arguably among the most marginalised within any part of society (Narayan 1999b; Jandhyala 1998).

²⁰ Gender relations here refer to: 'any power relations wherein the social construction of gender seems to make a difference and so may include relations between mothers, daughters, mothers-in-law etc. In this context empowerment may include strengthening relations between women and not just between men and women' (Murthy 2001:351).

Mayoux (1999:960) argues however that these three paradigms are not mutually exclusive but uneasily co-exist to varying extents in development programs, with women's empowerment as an assumed outcome in all three.

The economic and poverty alleviation paradigms of empowerment rest on two assumptions. First, that there is an economic priority in people's lives; and secondly, that economic and physical well-being results in socio-political benefits through the increased choices that these benefits can bring (Schneider 1999:524).

Mayoux (1999), using the example of micro-finance, argues that these assumptions are flawed.

In the absence of specific support and organisations to address gender inequality, bringing women together for savings and credit does not necessarily develop a sense of solidarity or joint exploration of ways in which women's problems can be overcome (p. 976).

Other micro-finance studies that focussed on poverty as being related to a lack of entitlements found that micro-finance did not expand women's choices but in fact increased women's burdens (Rahman 1999; Goetz and Gupta 1996:61; Mayoux 1995; and Mayoux 2001:435).²¹ The outcomes of these types of programs is to have a paradoxical effect of reducing the choices available to women by adding to their burdens, and creating dependency relationships with the micro-finance provider (Weissberg 2000:21).

Furthermore it is argued that economic programs (and possibly some social programs) do not accord directly with women's immediate priorities. When women were asked to rank their own indicators of empowerment according to their importance in their lives, economic change was rated lower than say

²¹ These authors all found that women often do not control the loans, but are held responsible for them, their workloads increase from increased pressure on them from within the families and from MFI staff.

education and children (Markhan and Bonjean 1995:1559). Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000:263) put it simply when they argue that ‘... economic generation *must* be accompanied by social regeneration [emphasis added]’. The weakness of the economic and poverty paradigms is that they rest on general assumptions about the most appropriate path to empowerment. These two paradigms assume that physical or economic resource constraints are the reason for disempowerment, and they do not recognise that power relations have to change in order to bring about changes in economic relations. Wright (1994:161) argues that the economic paradigm is dependent on a rather narrow social construct that describes women as being economic beings, rather than social and political beings. Hirschman (1998) argues that

The view that poor women only organise around economic issues in a passive and defensive way denies them agency and consciousness and misunderstands that the struggle itself can be a politically transformative process (p. 231).

The feminist critique of the economic and poverty alleviation paradigms centres on the argument that empowerment is more than people gaining the ability to undertake activities. This critique argues that people must be able to go a step further and set their own agendas and change events (Crawley 1998:26; Gujit and Shah 1998:7; Goetz 2001:22; and Murthy 2001). Empowerment involves people in an active role, not only in decision-making, but also an understanding of the factors that shape a situation, and the nature of oppression itself. That, in turn, includes recognising internalised oppression, the ability to take steps to change it, and for people to ‘perceive themselves as able to occupy decision-making space’ (Crawley 1998:26).

Jandhyala (1998) and Kumari (1999) take this argument a step further when they refer to empowerment entailing a transformation of social relations, particularly gender relations. Jandhyala suggests that empowering processes can operate to 'legitimise women's entry into non-traditional spaces and creating new spaces' (p. 205). Kumari argues that this happens by action on the 'systemic forces' which marginalise women in communities within a given context (p. 100). This feminist interpretation of notions of empowerment is based on understanding of oppression and power, and Mullander and Ward argue '...draws empowerment away from the meaninglessness which otherwise afflicts and devalues the term' (quoted in Crawley 1998:29).²² The feminist views of empowerment hark back to the notions of power and disempowerment discussed earlier in this chapter. These views of empowerment go beyond choices, and speak about access to new spaces and social transformations. These views also point to a notion of empowerment that is 'iterative, non-linear and perhaps never complete' (Murthy 2001:351).

The view of empowerment as being transformative and involving access to new spaces links to the question that this thesis is concerned with, and that is the role of agencies such as NGOs in the empowerment process. It can be argued that one of the new spaces that Jandhyala refers to is in the disempowered person's relationship with the patron NGO which may be facilitating empowerment.²³ This thesis contends that this accountability relationship is important for empowerment

²² Murthy argues that most NGOs have difficulty in grappling with the power relations underlying the construction of difference between men and women (2001:22). She also argues for a broader gender construction based on 'any power relations wherein the social construction of gender seems to make a difference' (p. 351), and so includes mothers, daughters, mothers-in-law etc. and so empowerment may include strengthening gender based relations among women.

²³ The term 'facilitating empowerment' rather than 'empowering the poor/women' is used in this thesis as empowerment, by its nature, is a process from within an individual and cannot be provided by an outsider (Weissberg 2000:20). This important aspect of empowerment is examined in relation to NGOs in Chapter Four.

processes. Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988:727) argue that '...greater participation in community activities *and* organisations is associated with empowerment'. Likewise Couto (1998:578) argues that the accountability structures [to the people it is working with] of an organisation directly affects the people's capacity for empowerment. The further away the institutional structure is from a direct representation by its constituency the poorer the outcome is in terms of empowerment. This view of Couto is in line with Day and Klein's (1987:9) notion that an accountability relationship is one of power. The issue of the broader accountabilities that NGOs face is discussed in detail in Chapter Three. The linkage of empowerment and accountability is also important in looking at suitable indicators and measures for empowerment.

In general these differing views of empowerment outlined above (its manifestations, causes and effects) make measuring empowerment problematic. The next section looks at some frameworks for measuring empowerment, and their strengths and weaknesses and the assumptions that underlie their use.

Measuring Empowerment

Measuring empowerment is vexed in that it requires making judgements about what are appropriate indicators for measuring changes in people's capacity for choice or action in their lives. Secondly, if we use indicators that look at how people may or may not exercise choices in terms of action, the question then arises - is this because of a lack of power, or are there other factors that influence choice? (Kabeer 1999a:440). The question then is how are valid proxy indicators for empowerment identified?

Some measures of empowerment look at access to services or entitlements (Hishigsuren 2000:20), participation in development projects (Manikutty 1998:401), or income levels (Basu and Basu 2001:8; Hashemi *et al.* 1996:636). Others take a stronger sociological approach and look at access to local political processes (Fernandez 2001:86), social interactions and relationships (Berg *et al.* 1998; Davies 2000:3), and personal self-esteem and self-worth (AIMS n.d.; Itzhaky and York 2000:408; Speer 2000).

Kabeer (1999:439) argues that those measures of empowerment that look at access to services or universally valued entitlements such as shelter, nutrition etc. tend to apply only in situations of scarcity and not everyday living. Other measures that relate to tangible outcomes such as income levels, access to education and the like, have problems of causality and time lags (Sen, G. 1997:17). Access to these services may be readily available across a community yet individual members of a community may still be disempowered in the level of choice and decision-making they have in their lives. A person's access to services does not necessarily provide evidence of differences in a capacity for choice or action for a particular individual or group in society (Kabeer 1999a:449). Gita Sen (1997:17) argues that as these measures indicate quantitative proxies for a qualitative process, they should be treated with some caution because of problems with causal relationships, and time lags between the process of empowerment and the tangible results. Sen goes on to argue that qualitative measures must be used, as what is being measured is qualitative by its very nature. Quantitative proxies tell us little about the qualitative processes involved (p. 17).

On the other hand, there may be problems with using qualitative measures such as socially-based functionings, like political representation or social interactions.

Kabeer (1999:440) argues that these indicators may reflect the values of the people doing the measuring rather than real changes in the lives of those being measured. For example, the nature or structure of political representation is a normative measure and may relate to values that are external to the particular community (Booth and Richard 1998:40).²⁴ Secondly, these indicators may be to some extent culturally determined, and understood and practiced quite differently in different cultural settings (Speer 2000).

Another way might be to measure the end results of empowerment, that is the changes that have occurred, or alternatively to look at the processes involved, and in some way infer the changes that will occur. In either case there are methodological problems. Outcomes may give a false indication of the changes in choices that have occurred, and in the case of processes they may not lead to the outcomes expected. Likewise, what is relevant in one community may not be relevant in another (Hashemi *et al.* 1996:637).

A key issue that is emerging in establishing criteria for measuring empowerment is the perspective from which these criteria or indicators emerge. In other words, if empowerment is about enhanced choices and action, then criteria that are derived from outside the reality of those being empowered suffer some logical flaws. A view of empowerment that has already defined the range of choices and

²⁴ For example, it is conceivable that people have a wide range of choices and options in a socialist system, which may not have open political representative mechanisms, while an ostensibly open political system may not be trusted by the people because it is perceived as corrupt or irrelevant, and so they may not participate in it. This what Booth and Richard (1998) found in Central America.

actions, which are deemed to be empowering, is a contradiction. Kabeer (1999) has recognised this flaw in measuring empowerment and draws on a range of measures that overcome this weakness. She argues that empowerment is a function of three factors. The first is the preconditions that exist prior to change in choices and actions, that is the *resources* for empowerment. They are not only material resources but also include human and social capital. The second factor is *agency*, that is the increased range of choices people gain, which the theories of power suggest is the key to empowerment. Finally, Kabeer (1999:435) argues that the *achievement* or the actual manifestations of the changes in people's lives are important.²⁵ She argues that effective measures of empowerment are based on measures of the interrelationship between these three factors. The two problems with this methodology, is first how to give an appropriate weighting to each of these measures, and second is understanding the nature of their interrelationship.

Resources for Empowerment

The resources available to women, and their access, may be a useful proxy for empowerment. Some commentators focus (at least in part) on tangible resources such as land, or other income generating assets (UNICEF 1996; Hashemi *et al.* 1996). It is also possible to look at resources in a broader sense and focus on community based social resources or social capital. The UNICEF women's Equality and Empowerment Framework (1996) put access to resources as the objective from which women's empowerment would follow. Hashemi *et al.* (1996:639) used access to economic resources (to varying degrees) as three of

²⁵ Kabeer (1999:438) argues that resources and agency together constitute what Amartya Sen refers to as 'capabilities' (1999:18).

their eight empowerment indicators.²⁶ The argument is that if women have certain resources such as land or other endowments, it is believed that they gain a bargaining position and so have greater choices, which is empowering.

Kabeer (1999:444) argues that there are fundamental methodological problems in looking at the resources (such as land) that are available to women as being an indicator of empowerment. There are very big differences between *de facto* and *de jure* land ownership for women, and it is very hard to determine where control lies in any particular situation.²⁷ Likewise, if access to credit or income generation capacity is seen as a resource then similar problems of distinguishing between access and control emerge. Micro-finance studies have found that rather than credit being a resource for women, the control of the credit is often by men despite women being holders of the loans (Goetz and Gupta 1996:57). The control of resources is very complex and case-specific, and arguably is not easily measurable in any meaningful sense as it necessarily involves making generalisations about social relations in communities and households.

Social Capital as a Resource

Rather than focussing on tangible resources such as land, another way of looking at the issue of the resources available to poor and marginalised communities is to

²⁶ These were: economic security (in terms of assets); ability to make small purchases; and ability to make large purchases. The other indicators were: mobility; decision making; freedom from domination; political and legal awareness; and participation in public protests. If a woman scored a positive to 5 of these she was deemed to be empowered.

²⁷ Gender relations and cultural practices mean that women can seldom establish their rights to land under law. However in many cases by abrogating their rights under law, they gain considerable moral leverage within the family on access and some level of control over land (Kabeer 1999a: 444). Land ownership *per se* gives no indication of who is really in control of the land and so how it is used as leverage.

look at less tangible resources which may be available. One of these is the solidarity and support that belonging to a group brings, that is the 'social capital' within a group. Social capital theory is useful in describing the community or solidarity-based resources available that may be a catalyst for empowerment, whether at a collective or an individual level (Spreitzer 1996:488; Couto 1998:576).

While the literature on social capital describes it in a number of ways, a relatively straightforward and simple definition of social capital is '[the] ... norms and networks [within society] that facilitate collective action' (Woolcock 1998:155).²⁸ Collective action by a group is based on interpersonal trust, and arguably can lead to some form of civic participation.²⁹ Civic participation, the theory goes, should in turn lead to greater trust and thereby strengthen social capital (Putnam 1993:90; Brehm and Rahn 1997:1000; and Booth and Richard 1998:33). Social capital is related to empowerment in that trust and collective action can lead to increased competence and self-efficacy at an individual level (Spreitzer *et al.* 1999:520; Speer 2000:53), and to community empowerment through political action and a

²⁸ This is a reworking of Putnam's original formulation of social capital being the '... norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagements' (Putnam *et al.* 1993:171). Woolcock (1998:160) places the origins of the notions around social capital in enlightenment philosophy and economic theory in the work of Hume, Burke, and Adam Smith in the 18th century, who not only looked at the institutional basis of the social contract – civil society – but also at some of the characteristics of networks of reciprocity and mutual obligation as 'intangible assets' (Veblen 1908:162). Woolcock goes on to argue that it is the work of a small group of 19th century philosophers from whose views the modern concepts of social capital have been built. Marx and Engels proposed the concept of 'bounded solidarity' to describe the relationships developed and co-operative action which arises when groups are in oppressive or hardship situations; Simmel described reciprocal transactions; Durkheim and Parsons developed the concept of 'values introjection' whereby values, moral imperatives and commitment precede contractual relations; and finally Max Weber developed the concept of enforceable trust (Woolcock 1998:160). All of these concepts are central to the notion of social capital. Sociologists have described in some detail how these norms and networks arise. Randall Collins (1981) examined what he calls the micro-phenomenon of these social interactions – the 'norms and networks' – to show how they are central to all social organisations. Likewise Granovetter (1973) looked at what he referred to as the strength and importance of 'weak links' in social relationships.

redistribution of resources (Rissel 1994:40; Calman 1992:167).³⁰ Cuoto (1998:576) however raises the question of causality, that is whether individual empowerment leads to social capital formation or whether the presence of social capital leads to greater empowerment, or whether there is a virtuous circle at work in which one feeds off the other.

One of the key strengths of social capital analysis is that it is about more than participation in group activities, it is also about how non-monetary forms of capital are not only a source of material or financial gain but also a source of power (Portes 1998:2). That is, mutual reciprocity and co-operative action can lead to positive social outcomes at both an individual and a collective level, and as a consequence are empowering. For poor and marginalised women it can be argued that, in the absence of other resources under their direct control, it is the opportunities for individual autonomy and choice provided by the exposure to group activities, and the solidarity of the group³¹, which are a resource for empowerment.³²

²⁹ In the context of poor village communities in developing countries 'civic participation' should include *inter alia* any community based action to resolve community problems.

³⁰ Pantoja (1999:58), however, argues that social capital does not have an absolute value but rather it has a relative value, and so is normative. The ascribed beneficial or detrimental nature of a particular manifestation of social capital will vary depending on the perspective from which it is being considered and in whose interests the particular manifestation serves.

³¹ Kabeer (1999:458) reminds us however that notions of autonomy and solidarity are normative and may reflect the values of the measurer rather than the priorities of the measured.

³² Social capital acts as a resource as first the 'inward bonds' within the groups lead to trust and mutual obligation, and secondly, the 'outward linkages' of the group and its members to external ideas provide an input of new resources (Granovetter 1985:482; Woolcock 1998:163).

Social capital may be a useful measure of empowerment as it is linked to the notions of communion (Riger 1993:285), and that power has a collective character (Giddens 1979:98; Giddens 1984:16). The difficulty in using social capital as a measure of empowerment is whether empowerment *causes* the formation of social capital and therefore is an outcome, or does social capital *cause* empowerment, and so acts as a resource for empowerment (Drury and Reicher 1999:383; Couto 1998:576). Similarly another difficulty is that social capital can have both formal and informal manifestations as groups (Heller 1996:1063). For poor communities the group formations are more likely to be informal and therefore difficult to measure (Morris 1998:6). The next section examines notions of personal agency as an alternative measure of empowerment and relates it back to the collective notions of empowerment.

Agency in Empowerment

This Chapter argues that a defining aspect of empowerment is 'agency', that is the role the individual plays in decision-making (leading to expanded choice and action) both in their personal life and broader social interactions. However, identifying specific measures of agency can run into the problems of first, developing common indicators across different social situations, and secondly, the need to avoid basing these indicators on normative judgements. A number of researchers have specifically looked at this issue. Zimmerman and Zahniser (1991:191) have developed the notion of 'socio-political control' by an individual. Their framework of socio-political control has five components: policy control (a sense of competence at influencing policy

decisions); leadership; a sense of community belonging; a sense of well-being; and, participation and decision-making.

The breakdown of the notion of agency into a number of components may lend itself more easily to measurement. Naved (1994:155) has looked at self-defined indicators of agency in her Bangladesh study. Her study focused on the changes that had occurred to women in their lives, which were then used as indicators of expanded choice and action. These indicators were broadly; increased mobility, the use of resources, and participation in public life.³³ Even though the Bangladesh context is very different to that of University students in the United States (where Zimmerman and Zahniser did their study), Naved's findings were not far removed from Zimmerman and Zahniser's (1991) notion of socio-political control. The characteristics of agency identified by Naved (with only little adjustment) can be put into Zimmerman and Zahniser's framework.

Murthi *et al.* (1996:393) argue that these approaches to measuring empowerment in terms of 'agency' or policy control are important as they lead directly to tangible outcomes such as reduced mortality, fertility and gender equality. That is, the greater control people have over broader social 'policy' then this is reflected positively in outcomes such as life expectancy, and mortality rates.

Kabeer (1999:439) argues, however, that while this connection to outcomes may be there, it does not follow that by merely measuring the outcomes a causal relationship with agency can be made. The specific indicators, broadly outlined

³³ Naved (1994) found that women report the capacity to come out of the house and have some control over resources as being very important to them. They also report that they are more valued in their families and men care for them more (p. 164); there is some change in decision-making; and they do not have to ask permission of the mother-in-law. Finally, there is also increased: participation in elections; in access to public space; a greater sense of solidarity with others; and positive perceptions of self (p. 170).

above, vary considerably from culture to culture and while respondents may give similar or different answers, there is little basis on which to make comparisons across cultures (Kabeer:446). For example, Naved's (1994) finding from her Bangladesh study that the capacity of women to freely come out of the house was probably an appropriate indicator in that context. This same indicator however may not be useful in another context (say where *purdah* is practised), or on the other hand it may be an everyday necessity such as an urban context. The two points that Kabeer (1999) makes are that firstly, the key indicators of agency or 'socio-political control' are context specific; and secondly, they lie in those decisions around strategic life choices which have been denied in the past (p. 448).

Kabeer (1999) also notes that some of these changes are subtle and can occur in the informal rather than the formal domain. She argues that empirical studies can fail to capture this subtlety in which women are:

...opting for private forms of empowerment, which retain intact the public image, and honour, of the traditional decision-maker but which nevertheless increase women's 'backstage influence' in decision-making processes (p. 448).

The challenge in the methodological approach for this thesis is to identify those indicators which reflect the subtlety Kabeer refers to. One approach is to use self-identified indicators that look at changes over time, similar to Naved's (1994) approach in Bangladesh. The problem with this approach, which was touched on above, is that while it can look at changes in a specific context it is more difficult to make comparisons across different contexts. This problem may not be so critical if changes in agency over time are being looked at. While the actual changes in agency may be different and specific to certain contexts, it may be

possible to look at the changes over time that have occurred, and from that derive measures for the change in agency in that context. This approach however, does not lend itself to simple measures and as Kabeer (1999) argues, cross-regional or cross-cultural comparisons are difficult.

Achievement or Outcomes of Empowerment

The third approach identified in the literature for measuring empowerment is to look at the achievements or outcomes for individuals or groups as a result of a development intervention. The argument to support this approach is that following an intervention, which seeks to achieve greater autonomy, choices, and agency in people's lives, then tangible outcomes will follow. Examples of these outcomes may be improved health, higher infant survival, greater immunisation rates, better education outcomes, increased incomes, and the like (Kabeer 1999a:448; UNICEF 1996; and Schneider 1999:524). Like the other approaches of measuring agency and resources, this measuring of outcomes also suffers the problem of being highly context specific, and it only relates to what are seen as tangible changes that have occurred in people's lives (Kabeer 1999a:448)

Besides the specificity of socio-cultural factors making cross-comparisons very difficult³⁴, the second problem is that there is assumed to be a causal relationship between improved outcomes and empowerment. Establishing the direction of causality will often be difficult and at best the relationship is tenuous.³⁵ Kabeer

³⁴ For example certain health, employment or education outcomes may be due to factors unrelated to individual choices, or that individual choice is constrained by these factors.

³⁵ Kishor's study in Egypt found that of a range of health indicators only child immunisation was proved significant in terms of ideas of equality in marriage (quoted in Kabeer 1999a:449). In this case it was factors which improved women's agency as *mothers* rather than as *wives* which affected the outcomes for children.

(1999a:439) argues that a so-called basic needs approach to empowerment can mask gender inequalities in that it privileges the family's priorities over the woman's own priorities.

The other major outcome posited as an indicator of empowerment is increased incomes for women. There is however a number of studies in the area of micro-finance which suggest that targeting women with micro-finance programs to raise incomes produces outcomes do not necessarily benefit women, as the men of the household generally control the loans. While the household may benefit from increased income, changes in choices available for women do not necessarily follow (Goetz and Gupta 1996; Mayoux 1999).

On the other hand there is evidence that women's access to loans enhanced self-worth and respect in the family, and while the gender asymmetries in family decision-making had not been removed they had been ameliorated (Kabeer 2001:71). Kabeer (2001) found however that this was related to access to the loan rather than the productivity or outcome of it:

... a growth of women's self-confidence, in their knowledge of their rights, their willingness to participate in public action and even reduction in domestic violence may have occurred as a result of women's participation in the new forms of social relationships embodied in credit organisations; they bore little relationship to the productivity of their loans (p. 81)

Kabeer argues that outcomes merely reflect a particular set of choices and so may be quite different for different women (p. 81), and therefore provide a poor measure of empowerment. For achievements to be useful as an indicator of empowerment, these measures of achievement have to be linked back to the resources available (in this case social capital), the agency or choices that emerge for the individual woman, and finally a causal relationship established.

Kabeer (1999a) and Murthy (2001) argue that any indicator of empowerment has to be sensitive to the way in which context shapes empowerment. For example, access to resources may open up new possibilities, but how these possibilities are realised is very individualised, and related to social relations at a family, village, and more broadly, a societal level. 'Unless indicators are sensitive to these contextual possibilities, they are likely to miss the significance of those [empowering] transformations which do occur' (Kabeer 1999a:460). In this light Murthy (2001:350) argues that the starting point for measuring empowerment should be defined by the women themselves. This is in line with Naved's (1994) approach in her study in Bangladesh.

Identifying Suitable Measures

What is emerging from the discussion is a deficiency in proxy indicators for empowerment. Some studies have used open-ended questions with women identifying the important changes that have occurred in their lives as a result of what may be seen as an intervention which may lead to empowerment (Naved 1994; Goetz 2001). In this way the opportunity is there for respondents to make their own judgement relating to the relative weighting and interaction between resources, agency, and outcomes. An issue is that the responses then still have to be assessed according to a normative judgement and a set of values, other than the respondent's own, for assessing the marginal change in empowerment of a particular set of choices (Kabeer 1999a:458). For example, an assessment might place participating in village life and politics as indicating a higher level of empowerment than say leaving the house. Any such measures have the same problem of normative judgements. One way to overcome this problem is to look

at the how the respondents develop a hierarchy of choices. This can be done by noting direct statements of importance, as well as other techniques such as noting the order in which certain responses are made, and the frequency of those responses. From this an estimation for the hierarchy of importance of the different changes can be developed. Such as assessment while not perfect, goes some way to unpacking the issue of how people make choices and assess the choices that they have made. It also overcomes problems in dealing with different contexts at least across communities, if not within communities. That is, while there may be different indicators across cultures and communities of expanded choice, it is the change within particular hierarchies of choice rather than the indicators themselves that is important. Kabeer (1999a:461) argues that the transformatory significance (empowerment) lies in the conditions of choice and the consequences of the choice, something which is hard to assess with external measures.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the literature on the notion of empowerment, which is central to this thesis. The theoretical basis of empowerment that informs this is Giddens (1979) view of power as a continuum of choice and action. The view of power as a continuum also recognises that power is related to achieving personal outcomes, and the inclusion in, and access to, various domains of life previously denied. Importantly, power also has a collective dimension and is arguably a community resource which can be called upon. Importantly however it cannot be bestowed by an external agent, and so to this extent it can be described as a commodity which can be tapped, increased, decreased, concentrated or dispersed

by community or individual action. The chapter also touches on the point that accountability is an expression of power, and that to hold a body to account is to have some power over that body. This point of accountability being an expression of power relates to the question that this thesis is concerned with, and that is the accountability relationship of an NGO to the people with whom it is working a part of empowerment, and is that relationship in itself an empowering one?

Empowerment primarily focuses on the individual. It involves expanding a person's capacity for making choices and acting on them, which in turn can lead to higher self-esteem and self efficacy, and from that greater participation in community action. The weakness of focussing too much on self-esteem is that it may be a 'false consciousness' and be perception-based rather than reality-based. The second point to emerge is that empowerment has both a collective and a political dimension, as well as a personal dimension of self-efficacy.

Empowerment is as much about achieving change at a community or collective level as it does at a personal level. There is a natural tension between empowerment as being about personal autonomy and achievements, and the communal goals of solidarity and mutual support, which to some extent involve self-sacrifice. The debate then is about how this tension is managed. There is a strong argument that individual empowerment is not only a threat to community processes, but it is also a resource of the community that can be tapped for community processes.

The chapter has looked at how indicators for measuring empowerment may be developed, and the inherent problems that proxy indicators such as resources or tangible outcomes have in measuring something that is quite context specific and may manifest itself quite differently in different contexts. One approach to

measuring empowerment might be to have women respondents identify the features and changes in their lives directly, and from this make some sense of these changes in a relative sense. This is examined in more detail in Chapter Six dealing with the study methodology. The next two chapters look at NGOs in more detail, and in particular at Indian NGOs and how they see the role empowerment in their historical development, and in their work.

CHAPTER THREE

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and their role in empowerment as a part of development practice, and it assesses their strengths and weaknesses as empowerment agents. It focuses on those NGOs that see their role in part as facilitating 'empowerment', and on their accountability relationships to various stakeholders. The basis for focussing on the accountability of NGOs lies in the proposition that for an NGO to be effective at empowerment, it should be accountable to those it wishes to see empowered - its constituents. This thesis will also argue however that the accountability the NGO has to other stakeholders can affect the accountability relationship it has with its constituents.

A recurring theme in modern development discourse is the role of NGOs in providing mechanisms for strengthening civil society for poor and marginalised communities (World Bank 1996:243; White 1999:308; Jorgensen 1996:51; Nelson 1995:45; and Krut 1997). This process includes organising and 'empowering' marginalised communities, and as such is seen more than merely a way of alleviating material poverty but also as an integral part of overcoming disadvantage and marginalisation. This is achieved through empowerment, which results in the greater participation of the poor and marginalised in the economic,

social, and civic domains within their communities (AusAID 2001:17; Narayan 1999:128). Through this process the poor and marginalised hope to gain improved access to government and community resources to which they previously had limited access.

A key issue for this thesis is that while most NGOs working in development will argue that they are part of civil society¹ and can play both an empowering and representative role (Abramson 1999:244; Nelson 1995:41; and Gaventa 1999:25), they generally are not membership based, governed, and financed (Fowler 2000a:637).² NGOs see their role as promoting certain values and advancing broader community interests. In this respect these NGOs are *public benefit organisations* rather than *mutual benefit organisations*.³ For development NGOs these broader community aspirations include *inter alia* alleviating poverty, addressing marginalisation, achieving social justice, and advancing human rights, all of which are of concern to a broader community of interests than a particular membership. In brief, a public benefit organisation is able to serve a wider group

¹ While there is a wide theoretical literature on the nature of civil society, a relatively straightforward definition which captures most of the debate is '... that segment of society that interacts with the state, influences the state and yet is distinct from the state' (Chazan 1992:281).

² NGO boards tend to be self-appointed, usually from local elites, rather than having external appointment mechanisms. In some cases national government statutes have prerequisites for both tax deductibility and some grant programs that prevent board or committee members being recipients of services of the NGO. This prevents the direct representation of constituents on boards. As a consequence, Trivedy and Acharya (1996:58) argue that despite NGOs' own claims to the contrary they play only a limited role in civil society.

³ Mutual benefit organisations such as trade unions, business associations, and co-operatives, are established to promote the interests of their membership. Public benefit organisations' interests go beyond that of a defined membership but represent broader community aspirations in a particular sphere (International Center for Not-for-profit Law 1997). Examples of public benefit organisations are NGOs, and other welfare, service delivery and advocacy organisations, such as some churches and religious organisations.

of people in society than a mutual benefit organisation, which represents the interests of its members.

A consequence of NGOs' public benefit role is that they lack a defined accountability path to their constituency that a representative structure would provide. This leads to what Salamon *et al.* refer to as an 'accountability gap' (2000:9). While NGOs purport to represent the interests of their constituency, at a broader level there is no defined path by which they can be held to account by that constituency. For example, while NGOs might be advancing the cause of the poor and oppressed, in practice they cannot be held to account by that group in how they advance that cause, and so the constituency has little power in the relationship.⁴ This is a defining feature of NGOs as public benefit organisations and has implications for empowerment work, a major focus of this thesis.

While this thesis uses as case studies NGOs that are relatively small and locally based in India, specific distinctions are not drawn between the character of NGOs in developed and developing countries in how they face issues of accountability. Rather this thesis argues that there is a high level of commonality in the accountability pressures NGOs in developing (Southern) and developed Northern)

⁴ The notion of accountability as an expression of power (Day and Klein 1987) is discussed in Chapter Two and is returned to later in this chapter.

countries have to deal with.⁵ The thesis uses the literature and the research findings to identify the issues and constraints that affect NGO capacity for empowerment, how they may apply in different national and cultural contexts, and then draws broad lessons for NGO work in empowerment. The next section examines the various typologies of NGOs, and focuses on those development NGOs that see themselves as facilitating empowerment processes among the poor in developing countries.

Typologies of NGOs

The term NGO is generally used to refer to those organisations that provide some form of community service and are not in the government or commercial sphere (Vakil 1997:2059; Fisher 1997).⁶ NGOs can be defined in a number of ways, with the key defining character being their governance (Salamon and Anheier 1999:69; Salamon *et al.* 2000:4). They are self-governing independent bodies, voluntary in

⁵ There is some basis for this approach. Lewis argues that the language, structures, culture, tensions and challenges between Northern and Southern NGOs are different only in that they exhibit themselves in a more vivid, more urgent, more complex and starker way in many developing countries (1999:2) with their work being more defined by their projects (Charlton and May 1995:238; Elliott 1987). Couto's discussion (1998) on the issues facing community organisations in New York city for example serves to highlight the similarities between Northern and Southern NGOs. On the other hand, despite similarities in terms of the pressures facing Northern and Southern NGOs the relationship is often fraught, with Southern NGOs feeling they have to suit the agendas of Northern NGOs, what Fox and Brown refer to as an 'emerging colonialism' (1998:440).

⁶ The term non-governmental organisation was officially brought into being in 1950 by a resolution of the United Nations Economic and Social Council and referred to 'those organisations with no governmental affiliation that had consultative status with the UN' (Vakil 1997:2068). The use of the term voluntary organisation is preferred by some commentators and organisations because it gives an idea that they are value-based institutions, and are different in some way to the market or government in how they are run. Within this broad definition it should be noted that boundaries between government, the commercial sphere and NGOs are not clear-cut, with a degree of overlap between the NGOs, government and business evident in most contexts (Cameron 2000:632; Vakil 1997:2059). Examples might include NGOs that have government representatives on their boards but to all other intents and purposes are independent; others may depend to a large extent on government funding, or they may be involved in commercial operations for a majority of their income.

nature, and tend to engage their supporters or the people with whom they work on the basis of values or some shared interest or concern; and finally, they have a public benefit purpose (Salamon and Anheier 1999:69).⁷ They are in some way formally registered by the state as either private not-for-profit organisations or associations.

The World Bank Handbook on NGO Laws defines an NGO as:

... an association, society, foundation, charitable trust, nonprofit corporation, or other juridical person that is not regarded under the particular legal system as part of the governmental sector and that is not operated for profit -- viz., if any profits are earned, they are not and cannot be distributed as such. It does not include trade unions, political parties, profit-distributing cooperatives, or churches. (International Center for Not-for-profit Law 1997:19).

From this broader typology of NGOs, this thesis focuses on NGOs based in developing countries (and involved in development work) that see themselves involved, at least in part, in the 'empowerment' of the poor. This group of NGOs works directly with the poorer or marginalised communities to advance their social, political and/or economic needs⁸ (Vakil 1997:2060), and regards empowerment as a key strategy in advancing those needs (Rajasekhar 2000:251; Elliot 1987:58). This is not a small subset of development NGOs, but rather it is

⁷ There is considerable debate as to a workable NGO definition and whether a full range of non-profit organisations, advocacy organisations and people's movements should be part of the definition and which are increasingly placed under a collective banner of the 'third sector' or 'third sector organisations' (Lewis 1999:268). This thesis uses the term NGO to refer to those NGOs who see themselves involved in empowerment as a strategy for achieving their broader social objectives or as an end in itself.

⁸ Within this group they can be categorised further as: *Welfare* NGOs which provide charity and welfare to the poor; *Development* NGOs which focus on the implementation of concrete development activities; *Social action* groups which focus on mobilisation around specific issues; and *Empowerment* NGOs who combine development activities with addressing specific issues around power relations in society (Rajasekhar 2000:251). Anna Vakil (1999) provides a full discussion of debate on the taxonomy of NGOs.

an increasing number of NGOs in developing countries that see the empowerment of the marginalised as part of a poverty alleviation strategy (see Chapter 1).⁹

Related to empowerment is accountability, a concern of this thesis. The accountability of the NGO to their constituencies has been used as a criterion for categorising NGOs (Carroll *et al.* 1996:7; Couto 1998:570). Couto has developed his classification according to the ‘... related concepts of participation, representation, community change and empowerment...’ (p. 580). From his broad analysis three categories emerge which are relevant to development work.¹⁰

- *grassroots groups*; that is, small community-based, self-help groups which can act for themselves as direct ‘socio-political representatives’.
- *community agencies* which have ‘decision-making structures with no or little direct representation or full participation of the people served’ (p. 582),
- *voluntary organisations* which have fewer feedback mechanisms from the people being served.

This thesis is concerned with those NGOs that Couto refers to as community organisations and voluntary organisations. They are typical of the majority of development NGOs in developing countries (Baig 1999:117; Kaushik 1997:76; and Jain 1997:142). They are public benefit organisations and act generally as

⁹ The question of the role of NGOs in empowerment is important. By addressing power relations within poor and marginalised groups, NGOs can overcome some of the limitations of service delivery which Korten identifies as limited reach, sustainability, dependency and adaptability (1981:181). If empowerment processes are built in, the communities themselves are able to cover many of their own needs by accessing a greater range of social, economic, and political resources. The World Bank sees this empowerment role as ‘social intermediation’ by which the poor’s lack of access to institutions, cohesiveness, and skills can be overcome (Carroll *et al.* 1996:9).

¹⁰ Couto has a total of nine typologies which are most relevant to US community welfare work. The author has chosen to focus on the three most relevant to developing country NGOs.

intermediaries between resource providers such as government or other (usually foreign) donors, and small community-based organisations or 'grassroots' self-help groups, which while being notionally representative may not have a formal structure or recognition (Charlton 1995:571; Carroll *et al.* 1996:2,7).

Couto argues that the accountability structures of an organisation directly affect their capacity for empowerment. His central contention is that the further away the institutional structure is from direct representation in its work, the poorer the outcome is in terms of empowerment (1998:578). The approach that Couto takes to the taxonomy of NGOs is important for this thesis as it brings together the principle of empowerment - as expansion of choice and action - to the relationship of the NGO to the community with which it is working. The next section looks at these groups in more detail in the discussion of public benefit organisations, and the structure of representation that exists among them.

Public Benefit Organisations and Mutual Benefit Organisations.

The public benefit purpose of development NGOs has distinct advantages to aid donors and governments seeking to provide services to the most marginalised groups in society.¹¹ *Public benefit organisations* are generally preferred by aid donors for undertaking broader development work as they are able to reach a wider, and possibly more diverse constituency, than a mutual benefit organisation

¹¹ From 1970 to 1985 total development aid disbursed by international NGOs increased ten-fold. In 1992 international NGOs channelled over \$7.6 billion of aid to developing countries. It is now estimated that over 15 percent of total overseas development aid is channelled through NGOs (World Bank 2002a).

can.¹² Public benefit organisations are also seen to be inclusive rather than exclusive in their approach to constituency, which gives them some legitimacy with donors (Scurrah 1996:169; International Center for Non-profit Law 1997:22).¹³ On the other hand *mutual benefit organisations* only work with a particular membership and the benefits may be only distributed to that membership (International Center for Non-profit Law 1997:20).¹⁴

The disadvantage of using public benefit organisations for certain types of development work, such as empowerment and social change, is that they have, at best, limited requirements for formal accountability mechanisms to the local constituency (Carroll *et al.* 1996:7).¹⁵ As a consequence there is limited formal say by the constituency in the work of the NGO. This limitation on feedback mechanisms can have an impact on the effectiveness of the work (Couto 1998:579). Many NGOs are aware of the limitations in their accountability structure, and actively promote membership organisations as part of their interventions with a view to the membership organisations taking over the

¹² Seibel challenges the established orthodoxy on why government donors use NGOs and argues that '... the lack of organisational responsiveness and legitimacy [of NGOs] is not only more tolerable than it is in the public sector, but is also a structural prerequisite for coping with the contradictory societal and political demands which, by itself, government cannot resolve' (1990:114). That is it enables governments to 'keep their hands clean'.

¹³ Other advantages given for using NGOs more broadly than those related to their public benefit purpose, is that NGOs are seen to be closer to the communities they are supporting, and there are also cost advantages over other delivery mechanisms.

¹⁴ Membership organisations are by and large dependent on membership subscriptions for their work and therefore concentrate on those groups which can afford those subscriptions. In some countries different forms of registration, particularly as a charity, prohibit members receiving a benefit, as it can affect tax deductibility and some donor requirements. Vakil argues that mutual-based organisations, which are excluded from this categorisation of NGOs, such as savings clubs, funeral societies, cultural groups and co-operatives (which abound in developing countries) all play an important and particular role in development practice (1997:2059). However as they are not the direct participants in most aid programs, they are not included in the definition of NGOs for the purposes of this thesis.

¹⁵ The formal members of NGOs are few (often less than 20 members) and are often senior figures in society such as retired government officials, or academics (Fowler 2000b:36, Uvin *et al.* 2000:1415).

programs and their ongoing management (Howes 1997; Fernandez 1998).¹⁶ The board members of NGOs see themselves taking on a trusteeship role for the NGO constituency, usually a group from the poor and marginalised (Kaushik 1997:72). This raises a problem in that because the NGO management and board are often from a different class in society to their constituents, they may not share the same perspective on social change and empowerment as the constituents (Carrol *et al.* 1996:2).

The perspective of the board and management of NGOs is often derived from a values-set that has its genesis in a welfare ethic of providing a service. This trusteeship role of NGO boards raises the issue of how well the formal board members of an NGO can adequately reflect the interests of the constituency (Couto 1998). This thesis argues that the issue of NGO governance has implications for both the advancement of NGO work around empowerment, and the perceived role of NGOs in representing their constituency. The next section explores the various theories on the motivations and origins of NGOs and how these can influence NGO approaches to empowerment.

¹⁶ While empirical research in this area is limited, Howes' study of six NGOs in four countries found that none were entirely successful moving the development program to a mutual organisation which the NGO had helped establish. Howes argued that there were a number of reasons for this but one of the most important ones was a lack of appreciation by the NGO of the contexts in which the processes of forming the membership organisations were taking place (1997:603).

NGOs as Organisations

As public benefit organisations NGOs do not easily fit into the categories of market, state or civil society (Fisher 1997). NGOs are not formal organs of the state, nor are they active players in the market place. Likewise they are not formal representatives of social movements, or societal sectors in the ideal civil society typology, yet they are large and numerous enough and sufficiently well-resourced to command special attention (Hailey 1999:467; White 1999:312; and Nelson 1995). While there are a number of theoretical frameworks in respect to the nature of NGOs as organisations¹⁷: this thesis will focus on those theories that directly relate to NGOs as Public Benefit Organisations and the accountability relationships they face. Political science and related theories provide a useful account that is relevant for this thesis.

*Political Science Theory*¹⁸

Political science theory argues that NGOs are quite distinct from the market and the state, and are driven by certain values or ways of perceiving the world. The literature has identified three interrelated views of NGOs that derive from political science theory. The first is that NGOs are relatively small organisations in terms of staff and formal members but they purport to represent the greater number of people they work with (Lissner 1977). Lissner argues that NGOs are most similar

¹⁷ For a full discussion of the various theories used to account for NGOs and their behaviour see Anheier and Seibel (1990).

¹⁸ A political science theory for NGOs was developed by Lissner (1977), and Anheier and Seibel (1990) who refer to a 'political science approach' to understanding the Third sector.

to political parties in that they each have a small formal membership but they serve a wider public interest (p. 70).¹⁹ For both political parties and NGOs there is a tension between 'ends' and 'means'. The tension for political parties is to achieve their ideological aspirations while preserving and increasing their political support. For NGOs the tension lies in the ideals of a 'good' society, that is in promoting their values while maximising income and influence (Lissner 1977:71). Lissner argues that dealing with both of these objectives together requires a delicate balancing act in which the 'end' is often lost in the immediate focus on the 'means', the resources needed to carry out that work (p. 78).

The second view is that NGOs are fundamentally embedded in the social context in which they exist and in some ways are a response to that context (Salamon and Anheier 1999):

... non-profit type institutions exist in widely divergent cultural and social settings in virtually every part of the world ... they are not recent creations imported into these societies from the outside; indeed they have deep indigenous histories and roots (p. 83).

The argument is that NGOs emerge from particular social milieus and respond to needs in a particular context. This view of NGOs also aligns with theories of civil society and the role of NGOs in it (van Rooy 1998; Edwards and Foley 1998; Phongpaichat 1999; and Robinson 1995b). That is NGOs perform a role in mediating between the citizen and the state in different contexts. This thesis examines this role in the context of the empowerment of marginalised groups that

¹⁹ The points of similarity are that both NGOs and political parties are: organisationally separate from the state and the market; they are formally accountable to a limited constituency (that is, have a relatively limited membership), while representing the desires and aspirations of a much broader part of society; they depend on the voluntary resources of the community; their presence generally presupposes a pluralist society; and they are administrators of power - parliamentary power for political parties, and financial power to enable moral suasion by NGOs (Lissner 1977:71). In addition, both have oligarchic governance structures.

may enable them to participate more effectively as citizens (see discussion on empowerment in Chapter Two).

The conundrum that emerges from these different theories is how NGOs, which are driven by altruistic ends, derive their support from a community base to advance those values. Couto (1998:579) argues that it is the representative relationship with the community that determines the effectiveness of the NGO at empowerment or social change. Couto goes on to argue that non-representative NGOs (the concern of this thesis) are at best 'technical representatives': they have a special knowledge of a group, are not members of it, but speak on their behalf (p. 570).²⁰ There is a sense of distance between the NGO and its constituency that limits the NGO's legitimacy in speaking on behalf of that constituency.

The political science theory of NGOs is important because it identifies some of the dilemmas that NGOs face as non-representative organisations. They derive a set of values from a certain socio-political milieu that drives their approach to their work. However, for NGOs it is the very basis of the values (i.e. to work for a larger group in society; and their non-representative nature) that raises questions as to the effectiveness of their work. On the other hand Elsenhans (1997:28) moves away from the issue of representation, and the accountability implications, when he identifies both an economic and political character of NGOs. He argues that NGOs are part of the non-market economy in that their work with the poor serves to increase the poor's bargaining power over economic rents – that is, the

²⁰ Couto analysed NGOs in New York in terms of technical, modal, and socio-political representation (Couto 1999:571). Technical representatives have special knowledge of a group, are not members of it, but speak on their behalf; modal representatives have some demographic characteristic with the groups which gives them some right to speak, for example gender or indigenous; and finally, socio-political representation is when organisations act as delegates for a group to whom they are accountable.

poor are empowered. This increase in bargaining power serves to increase the entitlements of the poor without them having a direct economic base for these entitlements. For Elsenhans the role of NGOs therefore is political in character but economic in impact (p. 43), and it is the increase in bargaining power that is key. This thesis will argue that for this to be most effective the increase in the bargaining power of the poor should be with the NGO as well as with other societal actors, such as family, Government, business, and the like.

Implications for Accountability

Other theories of NGOs place them either in the realm of state influence and control to the extent that they behave as proxies for the state (Sen S. 1999:327; Fowler 2000b:33), or as market players (Uphoff 1993; Davies 1998). Both these types of relationships can affect the NGO accountability relationship with their constituency - a central concern of this thesis. When NGOs act as proxies for the state there is an informal partnership between the state and NGOs of a mutual interest from which emerges a mutual relationship. Salamon and Anheier (1999:84) argue that NGOs take on a mediation role between the communities with which they are working and the state. Through this mediation role the NGOs gain legitimacy and, at the same time, provide the state with legitimacy. The role of NGOs can be in the form of either service delivery, policy advice, or both. Some authors argue that as this role expands NGOs start to perform a 'shadow state' function (Sen S. 1999:329) or become smaller versions of government (Williamson 1991:18).²¹ However this interpretation raises the idea of NGOs acting like mini states without the accountability of a state to its citizens (Zaidi

²¹ This kind of behaviour can become more apparent as governments increasingly outsource to NGOs what were previously government-supplied services.

1999:268). In either case their accountability will be mainly towards the state rather than the constituency.

Another implication for accountability to constituents lies in the different financial relationships that NGOs have to their donors and their clients (Davies 1998).

Davies argues that the points of accountability for NGOs are split between the purchasers of the service, the donors, and the users of the service - the clients. As a consequence there are weak incentives for efficiency in service delivery, and few natural feedback mechanisms for providing accurate and sufficient information on the work of the NGO either to the donor or the client (Davies 1998). These accountability problems parallel the issue raised by Couto (1998) at a political level, that is NGOs do not have a formal accountability relationship to their constituency.

Each of these theories is useful in explaining NGOs as organisations, and the different accountability relationships they have to their values, constituency, donors and governments. This study focuses on the broader political theories of NGOs to explore the nature of NGOs, as political theories are arguably most relevant to NGOs involved in social change and empowerment. Of particular importance in these theories are the divergent points of accountability, the nature of representation their organisational structure provides for, and how these factors inform NGOs' work with poor and marginalised communities.

It is the political science theories of NGOs, Couto (1999) and Lissner (1977), in particular, which highlight the values-base and working for a broader public benefit, that are most useful for this thesis. These theories all point to the issue of multiple accountabilities of NGOs, which is relevant in the discussion of NGOs as empowerment agents. Secondly, these theories highlight the fundamental issues

for NGOs - which in some ways is their strength - of being driven by values and a relatively broad constituency; but at the same time it is a weakness in that the relationship with the constituency is informal and relatively weak. The next section examines in more detail the ideas touched on in the discussion of political science theories of NGOs as values-based organisations, which also relates to the discussion of public benefit organisations.

Values Base of NGOs

The driving force for NGOs as public benefit organisations is that they are essentially driven by their values which generally are about what NGOs might broadly refer to as a desire for a 'better world' (Gerard 1983:34; Lissner 1977:74; Fowler 1996:15; and, Edwards and G. Sen 2000). It is the values-base that enables NGOs to pursue public benefit objectives rather than for a profit, or a social or political benefit for a narrow membership. A question that relates to NGO 'downward' accountability that this thesis is concerned with is - does the values-base of an NGO affects its perceptions of what an effective empowerment program might be, and how that may affect NGO accountability to its constituency?

The language of values is strong in some of the NGO literature. Paton argues that NGOs are '... the heartland of the social economy. Since they are marked by distinctive value systems ...' (1993:6). Nelson argues that 'NGOs are values-based participants representing the concrete interests of marginalised groups' (1995:41). Salamon and Anheier describe values as areas of 'common interest or concern' (1999:69). Edwards and Gita Sen recognise the importance of values

for NGOs, describing them in normative terms as providing an opportunity for 'expanding moral space' (2000:614).²²

If values are important to NGOs as public benefit organisations, the question arises as to what is meant by 'values' in this context. The Oxford English Dictionary (Second Edition, *online*) describes values as 'the principles or standards of a person or society, the personal or societal judgement of what is valuable and important in life'. Specifically referring to NGOs, Lissner (1977) describes values as:

...the basis on which agency policy makers interpret trends and events. It emanates from religious beliefs, historical traditions, prevailing social norms, personal experiences, and similar basic sources if human attitudes ... [they] cannot be directly translated into concrete action because of their degree of abstraction ... yet they are still sufficiently clear for the policy makers to take their bearings from them when deciding on the fundamental direction of their agency (p. 74).

The discussion of NGOs as values-based organisations is important because it raises a number of issues around NGOs' accountability processes, the role of the constituency in their work, and ultimately their autonomy as non-governmental agents. Fowler argues that regardless of the source of the values, whether they emerge from religious traditions, paternal leadership, or other traditions, it is the values which 'condition the rules of the game' (1996:17). This approach to values is important in accountability terms as Fowler seems to be implying that the accountability (or being true to) to values is a primary concern for NGOs.

²² Edwards and Gita Sen (2000:615) go on however to bemoan the fact that most NGOs see their values as an 'article of faith', more in the articulation than in the practice. This is a theme which is touched on in the discussion of NGOs' accountability relationships with their constituencies, the government, and their donors.

Values and Empowerment

There are three issues that emerge in the discussion of values and NGOs relationship with their constituency. The first is that the values of the NGO may not accord with the values of the constituency in what they aspire to as 'the good life'. Many values are not universally held, they are normative, and people and organisations can promote or exhibit values which are inimical to others in society, and can lead to tensions or conflict (Fowler 1996:17). Promoting the interests of the marginalised, such as women, can be seen a threat to an existing social order. While Edwards and Sen describe the role of NGOs in normative terms as providing an opportunity for 'expanding moral space' (2000:614), some would argue that the same NGOs are concerned with narrowing a moral space to a particular religious or social ethic or values systems.

... when the values of communities or organisations become the basis for separateness, exclusivity and righteousness they can become internally oppressive as well as externally xenophobic (Paton 1999:138).²³

The second problem of an NGO focus on values is that of moral hazard. Joshi and Moore (2000:29) argue that a moral hazard occurs when an NGO, because of its values base, articulates its values and priorities as representing the values and priorities of its constituency, when speaking on their behalf.²⁴

²³ Rose (1980:8) warns that 'non-bargainable values conflict' can reduce the consent for and effectiveness of any institution or organisation.

²⁴ The moral hazard arises in that the NGO can gain a material (in terms of resources) or other advantage (such as legitimacy) by promoting those values as being that of the people they are working with.

Judgements must be made by constituents as to whether they agree with or support the values of the NGO they are receiving support from, or allow the NGO to speak on their behalf. This is very difficult for the poor and marginalised as they often have few alternative sources for the services being provided, or the skills to argue different priorities or values to the NGO. In order to receive a service there may be a tacit or explicit requirement for the constituency to adopt those values. This felt need by the constituency to adopt or accept the NGO values can negate whatever strength the NGO believes it may have in empowerment (Paton 1999:138), which Couto argues that by definition should be constituent-defined (1998:578).

Finally, Riddell (1999:223) has found that many NGOs believe that highly prescriptive accountability and systems requirements can undermine trust which is the basis of most NGOs' values, and their relations with other groups they may be supporting).²⁵ Therefore to ask about impact of the work betrays the trust which relates to their capacity for supporting empowering relationships:

evaluation may have a light touch because ... heavy handedness could undermine the very taken for granted trust which [empowerment] programmes may be established to capitalise on in the first place' (Kenall and Knapp 1999:214).

Funding as a Threat to NGO Values

Not only do NGO values present dilemmas in their relationship with the

²⁵ Riddell goes on to argue that there is a real belief among supporters and management of NGOs that the provision of aid or advocacy - that is the *response* to a need in the form of 'there is an injustice it must be addressed' - is the sole base for legitimising development activities (1999:224).

constituency, but the source of funding also creates dilemmas for NGOs as values-based organisations, which affect their relationship with their constituency. While private funding is usually from people who share similar values, the basis of government and other institutional funding may not represent similar values. The participation of NGOs in government-funded programs poses some dilemmas. The resources are available but the source of funding will seek to influence priorities, and as a consequence can dilute the values being expressed (Edwards and Hulme 1996:967; Lissner 1977:75; and White 1999:321)²⁶, and lead to a trade off between the values of the donor and that of the NGO. One of the trade-offs between donors and NGOs is between efficiency and effectiveness. The donor seeks an efficient use of its funds, while the values of the NGO may give a priority to effective outcomes, such as empowerment, that may take time. To the donor this may seem to be an inefficient use of its resources for what they see as an uncertain outcome, and so they may press for shorter time-frames for project implementation (Lukes 1992).

Two key reasons emerge for donor influence in the erosion of NGO values in their work. The first is ideological: ‘...no matter how ideologically sound one may be, accepting support from a different ideological group threatens to influence the recipient’ (Williamson 1991:36). The second is more practical in that ‘... [the] limitations of contractual relationships make it very difficult to expand into real values-based action’ (Edwards and Sen 2000:615).

²⁶ This problem has arguably been with NGOs since their inception. What Edwards and Sen have touched on in 2000 when they referred the values as being an article of faith was also identified as a problem in the 1970s (Lissner 1977:75) when government funding of NGOs was much lower than it is in the early 2000s, and in India in the 1950s (Sen, S.:1999).

This tension with donors regarding the conditions for donor-supported NGO expansion can lead to vacillation between the NGO ideals of being small committed supporter-based organisations undertaking 'values-based action' to being 'broad-based organisations with shallow support' (Williamson 1991:67). That is, the pressure and related funding from donors may lead to a broader program direction for the NGO that is related more to the priorities of the donor rather than the values of the NGO and its public supporters..

This discussion of NGO values brings us back to the question of how NGO values affect their perceptions of what an effective empowerment program might be? On the one hand strongly held values can impede empowerment by imposing a values-set which may not be shared by the constituents, while on the other hand donor priorities (which may be more instrumental e.g. funding conditions) can erode the values of the NGO. The idea of the erosion of NGO values is important for this thesis when those NGO values support empowerment processes. The next section looks at the implications for NGOs as values-based public benefit organisations in empowerment programs.

NGOs as Agents for Empowerment

As detailed in Chapter Two, there are a number of ways an individual or group can be empowered, including through the traditions and social norms in communities (which likewise can be disempowering), or through governmental and other external processes. This thesis is concerned with the role of NGOs in facilitating empowerment, and with what structures and processes an NGO must have in place for it to maximise empowerment outcomes. The connection of empowerment and participation both in community activities and in organisations

is discussed in the literature (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988:727; Couto 1998:579). It is not only the relationship of the community to the activity, but also to the organisation facilitating that activity, which is important in empowerment.

While empowerment is from within the individual or group and cannot, by definition, be imposed or dispensed (Asthana 1996:2; Karl 1995:14; Weissberg 2000:20; and Couto 1998), NGO literature emphasises the role that NGOs can have in facilitating empowerment processes (Korten 1981:214; Tandon 1995b:33; Calman 1992:177; Purushothaman 1998:82; and Page and Szuba 1999:2).²⁷ The danger that NGOs face in facilitating empowerment, however, is in exerting their power and influence to prescribe what is empowering.

To attempt at the outset of an intervention to precisely determine how it will change women's lives, without some knowledge of ways of 'being and doing' which are realisable and valued by women in that context, runs the danger of prescribing the process of empowerment, and thereby violating its essence which is to enhance women's capacity for self-determination (Kabeer 1999a:462).

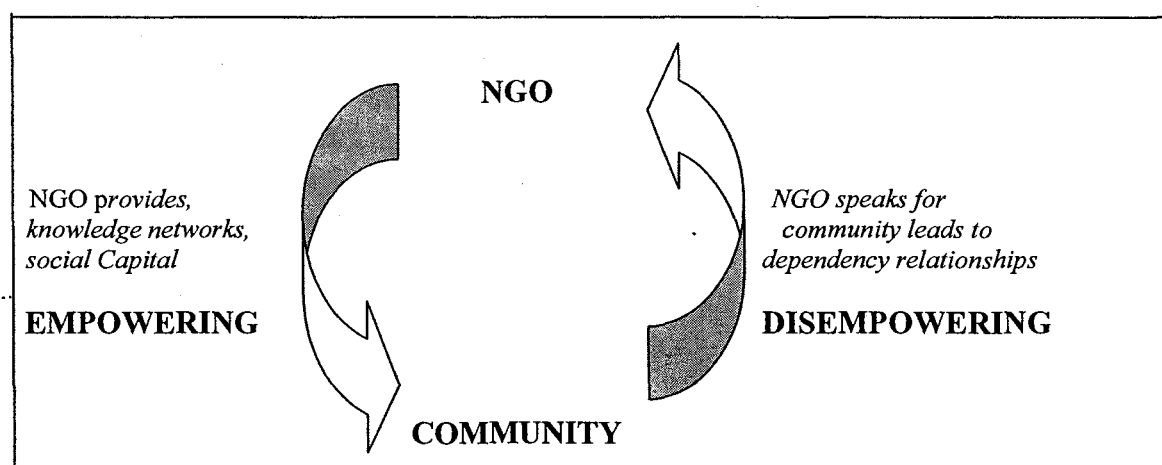
The role of NGOs in prescribing the outcomes of empowerment raises a dilemma in their role as agents for empowerment.²⁸ The notions of power, and power relations between agents, as central to ideas of empowerment (see Chapter Two), raises the question what role external agencies such as NGOs can have in the empowerment process? Does the inherent power relationship which exists

²⁷ This empowerment process can occur in three ways. First, an NGO intervention can increase the resources and knowledge that individuals have regarding their rights, or in specific skills, such as literacy etc. The increased knowledge becomes an asset that the individuals can use in widening the choices available to them and in bargaining for greater autonomy and control over aspects of their lives (Spreitzer 1996:488, Puroshothaman 1998:82). Sobhan (1998:24) refers to this process as loosening the ties of vertical dependency. In turn the group's capacity for broader social action or political change – forming social capital is enhanced (Puroshothaman 1998:65; Hunter 1993:134; Drury and Reicher 1999:383; and Kroeker 1996:124).

²⁸ This goes back to the 'moral hazard' referred to by Joshi and Moore (2000:29).

between the NGO as the patron, and the community with which it is working as the client, affect the NGO's capacity for facilitating empowerment? Mohan and Stokke (2000) see the role of NGOs and other civil society institutions as being vehicles for empowerment in that they can facilitate '... the collective mobilisation of the marginalised groups against the disempowering activities of both the state and the market' (p. 248). Paradoxically however, in taking a leadership role in this process the NGO can in fact disempower the community, as the NGO is embedded in a power relationship with that community. Figure 1 illustrates shows this paradox as a two-way flow of power between NGOs and their constituency.

Figure 1. NGOs as Empowerment Agents



Much of the NGO rhetoric on empowerment seems to imply actions of an external agency with a 'top down' approach in which the NGO is either creating an 'enabling environment' or providing 'leadership' (McLelland 1970:42; Calman 1992:177; and Tandon 1995b:33). The relationship between an NGO and its constituency in those transactions (power being 'bestowed to those without power') is argued to be a fundamental paradox and a display of power itself

(Rissell 1994:40; Tandon 1995b:33). Tandon argues that the view of NGO empowerment has an implicit assumption that the NGOs 'own the resource of empowerment, which can be made available to the powerless' (p. 33). He goes on to ask whether a powerful intermediary such as an NGO would ever cede power: '...[the] powerful never cede power voluntarily, they are forced through moral force ... empowerment [therefore] is a contradiction in terms' (p. 33). At a practical level, it is very hard for the survival of an NGO in its intended form, as a public benefit organisation, if it were to cede too much power to its constituency. Joshi and Moore argue that it is asking too much of NGOs to cede power. [They are]:

... 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 (2000:49).

The reality is that there is a power relationship between the NGO and its constituency that cannot be simply wished away. Weissberg (2000) and Lingam (1998) warn of the danger of understating the power relations between the agency involved in empowerment and those being empowered. For NGOs, empowerment can be '...remanufactured into the pursuit of permanent dependency' (Weissberg 2000:21) 'with shades of patriarchy and bourgeois domination' (Lingam 1998:172). Riger poses the same question when she raises the paradox of 'institutional structures which put one group (staff) in a position to empower others also works to subvert the process of empowerment' (1993:284). This does not mean that NGOs cannot be involved in empowerment programs, but it does point to the dangers and limitations that exist in empowerment work. NGOs can become 'particularist' and 'exclusive' in their approaches (Taylor 1999:196) which can defeat the purpose of empowerment programs.

Gita Sen attempts to put this debate in perspective when she refers to external agents having a catalytic role. While referring to government programs she could well have been talking about NGOs.

External change agents may be needed as the essential catalysts who start [empowerment] off, but the momentum of the empowerment process is set by the extent and the rapidity with which people change themselves. What this means is that governments [NGOs] do not empower people; people empower themselves. What governments' [NGOs] policies and actions can do is to create a supportive environment or act as a barrier to the empowerment process (Gita Sen 1997:3).²⁹

This discussion highlights a paradox that NGOs face in their work; their interaction with the community is both empowering at a certain level but also leads to a dependency, which at another level is disempowering (see Figure 1). The critics of NGOs and empowerment tend to see empowerment in an absolute sense, rather than as a process or a continuum of people's agency, that is choice, and action. Gita Sen recognises both the limitations and the opportunities for empowerment to occur. This thesis argues that there are steps that NGOs can take that go some way to meet many of the ideals of empowerment, both at an individual level and a collective level, in marginalised communities. These steps can mitigate some of the disempowering processes that the relationships between NGOs and their constituency can foster. The next section examines in more detail the relationships between NGOs and the people they seek to serve.

²⁹ There is a dilemma for intermediaries like NGOs who use foreign aid in that they feel they cannot hand over control of decision-making to those they are seeking to empower (Calman 1992:168).

NGOs and Community

The previous section outlined how NGOs may be empowerment agents with the communities they are serving, and some of the dilemmas that emerge in this role. Generally, NGOs are regarded as being closer to the communities they are serving than other development agencies, such as government instrumentalities, multilateral organisations, and consulting companies (Tandon 2001; Korten 1981; Carrol *et al.* 1992; Quinn 1997; and Najam 1999). This section looks at the literature on NGOs, and draws out the implications for the role of NGOs in facilitating empowerment processes.

Tandon (2001:45) and Korten (1981:184) describe the strength of NGOs in terms of an alternative development paradigm arising from the 1970s, which supports local development with the individual village or slum as a space for improving people's socio-economic situation. Tandon (2001:46) and Strange (1996:94) go on to note that participation of these local communities is critical to this paradigm, and more importantly that these local communities must be 'the interface through which NGOs define their accountability' (Tandon 2001:57).³⁰ The World Bank sees the advantages of NGOs as being their close proximity to the community, which means they can reach the poorest and most socially vulnerable groups (Carrol *et al.* 1996:9). NGOs can achieve 'better demand orientation, client ownership and sustainability' and the capacity to harness community capacity for self-management, equitable resource flows, 'voice', and social intermediation. That is, NGOs have the capacity to make links between the poor and government institutions charged with service delivery. As a consequence of the perceived

³⁰ Schaar (1984:110) refers to similar processes being required in his discussion of the legitimacy of organisations when he refers to 'followers belief on faith in an institution.'

closer proximity, NGOs are seen to understand social relations and be able to produce and reproduce social meaning from everyday politics (Quinn 1997:25).

Najam sees this relationship in terms of social visions:

The voluntary, associational, or citizens sector is concerned with the articulation and actualisation of particular social visions; does so through the shared normative values of its patrons, members, and clients; represents those who consider their interests marginalised and operates in the realm of civil society (1999:416)

The problem with this analysis, which goes to the core of NGO practice, is two-fold. First, it assumes that NGOs are equipped to represent community interests, and secondly, it assumes a community as a homogenous entity (Markham and Bonjean 1995:1556). The reality is not as clear-cut because the social visions that Najam refers to are not shared within a village or particular group of people to the extent assumed. Not only this, Hossain (1999:6) argues that the framing of the problem in terms of the notion of 'community' can exclude the alternative analyses of issues of politics and conflict. For example, the members of a poor community, whether it is a village or a particular group within society, do not necessarily have common views of the issues they face, or live in harmony with each other. In reality, poor communities (however defined) in developing countries and elsewhere, invariably experience conflict, marginalisation, and arenas of domination; what Clayton refers to as a 'cacophony of contending forces' (1996:18).

Bevan goes further and argues that development practice, which builds on the notion of homogenous community, de-politicises notions of poverty and development. Bevan (2000) goes on to argue that this view of community rarely provides a: '... picture of social inequality, social exclusion, adverse

incorporation, factionalism and violence ... and never acknowledge that the poor sustain some of these' (p. 757). Homogenising the poor through the notion of community can lead to what Goetz and O'Brien (1995) call the 'self-encapsulation of the poor [which expects them] to look after themselves on the basis of community values, itself a marginalising act' (p. 24). In this construction of community the poor are treated separately from both the rest of society and the marginalising forces that society places on them.

The other implication arising from the notion of community as being homogenous is that this notion not only fails to recognise political divisions within a group but also often ignores fundamental differences in social relations among different groups in a particular village or location.

Inequalities, oppressive social hierarchies and discrimination are often overlooked, and instead enthusiasm is generated for the co-operative and harmonious ideal promised by the imagery of community (Gujit and Shah 1998:7).

The dilemma that NGOs face is that on the one hand they have to work within a paradigm of community which is to some extent homogenous in order to gain access to a village or group to deliver the services they have on offer.³¹ On the other hand, if the societal divisions that occur within communities are not recognised, resources can be diverted to the more powerful and well-off within that community. One of the important sources of tension and difference within the notion of community is that of gender.

³¹ The consent of village leaders is required for NGO access, and if the NGO highlights community differences this access can be denied.

Gender and Community

The assumptions regarding community as being homogenous apply in particular to gender relations. This is important for this thesis as it examines NGOs that are seeking to empower women. There is often a failure by NGOs and others to recognise that women are, to a large degree, invisible in the village political and social processes, and sometimes are even excluded from these processes by active discrimination. Women usually represent the largest group of those excluded, but exclusion can also apply to groups on the basis of caste, class and ethnicity.³²

Pantoja (1999:36) argues that development activities, with community-based notions such as social capital, aimed at women but mediated through men, can actually harm women. Men control the process and establish limits on the choices and actions that women can take. The micro-finance literature is replete with cases of how targeting women with micro-finance can be counterproductive and disempowering for a number of reasons, but principle among them is the control that men still have in the process. The literature argues that a closer look at gender relations within the development intervention is also required (Kabeer 2001; Rahman 1999; Goetz and Gupta 1996; Mayoux 1999; and Mayoux 2001).

For NGOs to understand the gender and other social dynamics, Gujit and Shah (1998) argue that their proximity to the community - not only in terms of physical space, but also in terms of social and political analysis - is critical if they are to be effective as empowerment agents.

Assumptions about homogeneity or harmony need to be replaced with greater recognition of conflicting interests within communities and the methodological

³² Pantoja, in his discussion of social capital in Orissa in India, notes that women's access to social capital in the community is mediated by men and so women are, to some extent, disempowered (1999:36). At best, in Pantoja's example, women can build networks with other women in their own caste but are limited in establishing bridges to diversity.

implications of such differences. Professionals [NGOs] must be astute and self-critical enough to recognise when community intervention ... further entrenches community-level inequality and powerlessness (p. 8)

What emerges from the discussion of the notion of community is that the proximity of the NGO to the people it is working with is important, but not sufficient, if NGOs are to be effective in their empowerment work. In looking at empowerment as an organisational goal of many NGOs, this thesis examines the other factors that must also be in play for NGO work to be effective. While there is a strong argument that NGOs are closer to the community than government services, the literature warns of making broad assumptions of what the community is. One of the issues that this thesis looks at, in this context, is the direct relationship the NGO has with the people with whom it is working, 'the community'. This accountability to the people may be a way of overcoming the weaknesses outlined above when homogeneity within a community is assumed. Of particular importance are the gender dimensions of diversity and power relationships within a community.

The next section explores the role of NGOs in empowerment in terms of their accountability processes and how these can affect NGO programming work with poor and marginalised women. In particular it examines accountability in terms of the power relations that are inherent in accountability processes and how these may play a part in empowerment.

Accountability

The definition of accountability for this thesis refers to the conduct and performance of an individual, a group or an organisation, and the criteria used for

assessing these (Day and Klein 1987:3; Jenkins and Goetz 1999:607).

Accountability in this framework is not a simple matter of reports and accounts, but rather it is as much about perception and power (Day and Klein 1987; Conger and Kanungo 1988:473; and Gray *et al.* 1997:328). Accountability generally:

- identifies shared expectations;
- provides a common currency for justification;
- puts agreements into context (Day and Klein 1987:5) and,
- provides a sense of obligation; or a right to be called to account (Gray *et al.* 1997:329).³³

More specifically to the notions of empowerment, Day and Klein argue that accountability defines the relationship between actors through identifying who can call who to account, and who owes a duty of explanation (1987:5). In this respect accountability establishes a power relationship. The roles, forms, and direction of accountability define the distribution and locus of authority.

...the notion of authority as the right to call people to account needs to be complemented by the notion of power as the ability to call people to account ... effective power whether legitimate or not in turn requires effective control for accountability. (p. 9)

In a practical sense, defining the lines and directions of accountability defines the distribution of power. Day and Klein argue on the one hand that a lack of access to accountability from others is synonymous with a lack of power, and on the other hand that being unaccountable to others is to be all-powerful (p. 21). In this

³³ Day and Klein argue that if it does not achieve these criteria what is left becomes merely 'excuses, apologies and pretexts' (1997:5).

respect, being accountable is more than providing access to information, it also implies a capacity of those to whom one is accountable to be able to 'actualise the information'; that is, to be able to do something about it. This is an area in which the very poor often lack capacity (Jenkins and Goetz 1999:608). This thesis argues that the nature of the accountability of an NGO (as an organisation) to its constituency is central to the empowerment process as it determines the distribution of power between the NGO and its constituency.

NGOs and Accountability

Organisational accountability is empowering when organisations are opened up to their members (Peters and Pierre 2000:9; Murthy 2001:29; and Conger and Kanungo 1988:473). Titi and Singh relate empowerment to '...inclusiveness, transparency, accountability and ... legitimacy [through] collective decision-making, collective action and popular participation' (1995:13). The accountabilities that NGOs have to respond to are complex, diffuse, and multiple to the extent that to some they may seem to be non-existent (McDonald 1999:12), and the tools of enforcement limited (Ferejohn 1999:133).³⁴ Tandon (1995:48) identifies three broad accountabilities that NGOs have to meet: to their values and mission; to their performance in relation to the mission; and to their role as a civil society actor.³⁵ Edwards and Hulme (1995:9) put this in terms of a functional accountability, which is to do with probity, and can be in multiple directions; and

³⁴ Ferejohn's point is specifically about public officials, but the same point arguably applies to NGO staff.

³⁵ Bovens relates accountability directly to maintaining social order: 'giving account of one's self is therefore one of the most important means by which we can maintain the fragile public space' (1998:39).

secondly, a strategic accountability, which is related to its performance, and likewise this can be in several directions. These accountabilities are generally to their constituents (the people they are serving), donors, and the state (Edwards and Hulme 1995:9; Tandon 1995:42). In addition, it can be argued that NGOs with a strong values-base have an accountability to these values (Tandon 1995:42; Edwards 1999a:258; and McDonald 1999:12). The problem for NGOs is how to privilege accountability to their constituents in this complex accountability environment.

If, as discussed above, empowerment is related to the accountability to the constituency, then the accountability to donors and the state (through the required practice or regulation) can play a part in supporting or undermining this accountability (Edwards and Hulme 1995:13). Desai and Howes (1995:89) argue on the other hand that strong 'downward' accountability³⁶ pressures can hinder NGO expansion and other strategic initiatives, as the people with whom they are working like to keep the NGO programs to themselves rather than promote an expansion to a broader constituency.

The question this thesis is concerned with, is whether at a local level an NGO can be effective in empowerment if it does not have internal mechanisms promoting accountability to their constituents? Smith-Sreen argues that if empowerment is the objective then the accountability structure *has* to be towards the community with which the NGO is working, and the social change objectives have to remain foremost (1995:21). Slim (1997:345) makes a similar argument in the context of humanitarian relief programs. The question that Edwards and Hulme (1995:13)

³⁶ The term 'downward' accountability will be used in this thesis as a short-hand term for the accountability of the NGO to its constituency or groups with which it is working.

raise is how should an NGO prioritise accountability to the constituency, as there is no simple model and there are competing accountability forces which it faces³⁷:

... although they usually lack formal institutional accountability mechanisms their [NGOs] dependence on maintaining at least the appearance of consistency between theory and practice creates informal, inconsistent, but often powerful accountability pressures (Fox and Brown 1998a:21).

There is not a single rule for accountability of NGOs. However, there are some guides in the form of codes of conduct and donor contracts that usually prescribe the accountability processes in the direction of either the private or public donor, or the government as regulator.³⁸ It is rare however that there are requirements for accountability to constituencies. The literature on this conundrum of NGO accountability is equivocal. Edwards sees legitimacy and the direction of accountability for NGOs as 'involving judgement and choices, struggles and negotiations' (1997:260).

This struggle within NGOs reflects the natural tension of: adherence to values; the desire to survive and expand; avoiding 'biting the hand that feeds' (often the state); and maximising income (Edwards 1997:250; Lissner 1977:13). What emerges is that the ideal notion of accountability of NGOs to their constituents is continually under pressure from donors, the state, and the organisation's own leadership structures and values.³⁹ From the discussion above, a framework of

³⁷ Wils identifies the development of representative Apex organisations of constituents who relate to the NGO, and/or contractual agreements between the NGO and its constituents, as being one way of developing the 'downward' accountability (1995:61). Rajasekhar argues that both of these are limited when it comes to formulating, implementing and monitoring development activities (1998:314).

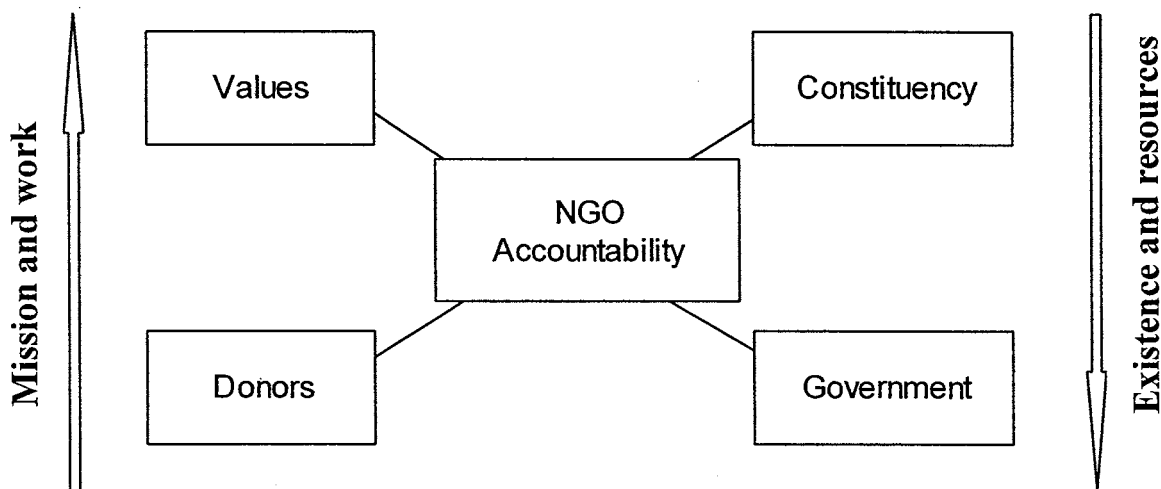
³⁸ For an example of this see AusAID NGO Package of Information <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/ngos/>.

³⁹ This process however is not as recent as some writers such as Edwards and Hulme would argue. The discussion of Indian NGOs in Chapter Four, and the work by Lissner nearly 30 years ago, indicate that it is dynamic process which is ongoing and to some extent the process and direction of NGOs' accountability varies over time and as a result of external pressures.

NGO accountability can be developed (Figure 2) which shows four accountabilities that an NGO manages: that is to its values, constituency, donors, and government.⁴⁰

The top half of the table (especially when referring to empowerment NGOs) concerns the mission of the NGO and its work, while the

Figure 2: NGO Accountabilities.



bottom half is more instrumental, concerned with the continued existence of and flow of resources to the NGO. The conclusion from the literature suggests is that there is a tension between the 'top half' - values and constituency - and the 'bottom half' - resources and regulation. This thesis argues that the way NGOs manage this tension affects the effectiveness of NGOs in their work on empowerment. The next section looks at the accountability to state and donors,

⁴⁰ The thesis recognises that there are other accountabilities such as to staff, and staff to each other but it will confine itself to those that are external to the management of organisation itself.

and how it affects the accountability to the constituency.

Accountability to the State and Donors

The accountability of NGOs is constantly tested by the state, a source of NGO legitimacy, both via formal legal sanction and through registration processes; and the state as a donor, through its provision of resources either as direct grants or tax concessions. The effect of these pressures is to move the locus of accountability away from the constituency to the state (Edwards and Hulme 1996:967; Foley and Edwards 1998:17). From the state's point of view, social mobilisation is at best a lesser priority, with NGO performance increasingly measured according to the managerial and market values of efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery (Sen, S. 1999:330). This emphasis has implications for how power and authority are exercised inside organisations (Edwards 1999a:260) and with the communities they serve (Goetz 1996:15). The possibility is that the NGO's sense of accountability to its values and constituency becomes less important (Edwards 1999a:260), with the primary locus of accountability being to the resource providers, which are increasingly becoming state instrumentalities that also have a regulatory role (Baig 1999:117).⁴¹ The tensions between the accountability requirements to resource providers/regulators and the constituency will intensify as state and other donor funding increases and influences NGO practice.

⁴¹ According to Syed and Hassan (1999) writing about Bangladesh note that this process of shifting accountability has seen the role of NGOs move from: '... promoting rights through class struggle to class harmony, privileged the sustainability of the institution over sustainability of the work on the ground or the local groups, and moved to a more elite leadership of civil society groups to produce a more assimilationist model which appeases donors and doesn't threaten the state' (p. 127).

What emerges from the literature is that the NGOs' perceived dependency on donors manifests itself in various power relationships. These are between themselves and their constituency on the one hand, and their source of financial support on the other (Edwards and Hulme 1996:967; Fisher 1994:137; Fox and Brown 1998a; and Zaidi 1999:263).⁴² The requirements of the donors and the state imply certain types of accountability, which are not only privileged over accountability to the constituency, but in some cases mitigates against it (Elliot 1987:60; Robinson 1995b:76). Charlton and May on the other hand argue that the direction of accountability for the NGO is defined by the demands of project related work (1995:238), regardless of the donor relationship.⁴³ These demands need not be direct and donor or power-related, and can be quite subtle. Elliot argues that the demands of project-related work leads to development being defined by NGOs as a series of projects.

The reality is that they [NGOs] are in the grip of a neo-modernisation algorithm that assumes projects *are* development. As their budgets rise ...so they demand more and more projects on which to spend their money ...' (1987:60).

The demands of donors, and possibly even the idea of the project, effectively compromise the accountability of the NGO to the constituency, and possibly to those values that emphasise flexibility and choice (Edwards and Sen 2000:615; Fowler 1996:27).

⁴² Charlton argues that as a consequence of government funding large Southern NGOs have structured themselves like the state, or have been sucked into the vacuum left by the state and become dependent on state patronage in terms of political and financial support (1995:571). Edwards and Hulme (1997) make a similar case for Northern NGOs, and Fowler (1996:27) warns of the threat to NGO identity that this brings.

⁴³ The notion of the project is time bound predictive, in that certain outcomes are expected that lead to an impact in a logical progression. As discussed above empowerment may not easily lend itself to these logical processes. A practical example of the pressure of the project occurs when an NGO is given the freedom to choose the program but the donor insists on specific time-based expenditure targets and predicted outcomes, which if not met the NGO is penalised.

Donors seek certainty in programs, while the constituents to some extent are more uncertain as to the future and so seek flexibility. The effect of the demand for more certainty from donors is that the source of funds can influence the direction and focus of NGO accountability away from their values and constituents to the donor, that is an upward shift of accountability (Zaidi 1999:265). This perceived shift in power is seen by some to affect the legitimacy of NGOs, and their effectiveness in their programs. Zaidi refers to this process as the 'puppetization of NGOs' (1999:264), while Siddhartha Sen sees the NGO sector becoming a 'shadow state' (1999:329), which results in the 'weakening of the NGOs' very core' (Nelson 1995:49). Similarly, Fisher (1994:137) argues that the same process can occur with an intermediary NGO in a developing country and the local level groups or 'grassroots organisations' with which they are working. A dependency-based, patron-client relationship can emerge as a consequence of donor pressures. In this case the intermediary NGO is effectively the donor in that it controls resources necessary for the 'grassroots organisations'. This development in the power relationships from the resource holders, either as donors or intermediary NGOs, has implications for the management of empowerment programs.

A danger that emerges due to the accountability pressures from donors and the state, and the lack of a formal representative framework, is the rise of oligarchic governance structures within NGOs and in relationship with their constituency.⁴⁴

Davis supports the argument that NGOs tend towards oligarchy:

⁴⁴ Michel's 'iron law of oligarchy' (Michel, 1915 quoted in Fisher 1994:129) – which states that if unchecked, membership organisations will shift from democratic to oligarchic control - may be very apt for NGOs being non-membership organisations).

...they are frequently undemocratic in their internal structure and workings; often dominated – much like one party states – by an individual or oligarchy, and hence in a poor position to advocate more representative and accountable political processes (Davis 1995:294).

The weakness inherent in the governance structure of NGOs and their accountability pressures to donors and the state gives little support for the idea of them being natural empowerment agents. Fox and Brown (1998a) argue however, that there has to be some linkage with their constituency for the NGO to be credible in its work:

...but most [NGO] leaders do depend on their claim of representation to sustain their organisational power over time so they have to represent some of the members to some degree some of the time (p. 22)

The next section examines the impact of size of the NGOs on how they respond to their accountability pressures and as a consequence how size may affect their role as empowerment agents.

Accountability and the Size of the NGO

So far the discussion has focussed on power relations and the source of resources as pressure on the direction of accountability. To some extent these pressures are related to the scale or size (in terms of budget, staff, or level of outreach) of the intermediary institution, the NGO. According to Uvin *et al.*, larger NGOs see themselves as having to be accountable in several directions, the most important ones being to donors and the state and to a lesser extent to their employees, and arguably less so to the people with whom they are working (2000:1413). They see themselves as more of a service provider to the people they are working with as clients rather than constituents, and the services they provide are on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. This attitude however is not universal and many of the larger NGOs look to mechanisms for maintaining links with communities and

‘acting small’, as the Edwards study from India found (1999b). The advantage of becoming bigger, it is argued, is to gain greater leverage with government and influence policy at a higher level. The evidence however is that many NGOs, which do become larger, do not take advantage of the potentially greater leverage (Bratton 1990:95; Uvin *et al.* 2000:1414), but rather are less autonomous and more dependent on donors and government (Hudock 1995:656).

Smaller NGOs on the other hand are seen to have much closer contact with, and accountability to, the communities with whom they work, by virtue of the proximity of the leadership (Quinn 1997:25). However, this strength of locally-based NGOs must be weighed against fragmentation, their relative powerlessness, and what Seth and Sethi (1991:58) call a ‘fundamental incapacity to act institutionally over a long time’, which is critical for institutions dealing with structural change.⁴⁵ The changes the smaller NGOs foster are often perceived to be transient because it is difficult to institutionalise these changes. Small-scale social interventions can, at best, lead to marginal social change and scaling-up is more difficult. On the other hand they might be ‘backyard glories’ (Seth and Sethi 1991:59), or ‘islands of excellence’ (Uvin *et al.* 2000:1409). Seth and Sethi go on to argue that small NGOs are often more successful in non-economic activities such as human rights work at a local level (p. 59). Charlton and May (1995:239) on the other hand argue that the influence of smaller NGOs may be much greater in that local NGOs can produce a more positive attitude within the community towards local political processes, such as service delivery by government bodies. Charlton and May (1995) see the work of

⁴⁵ By acting institutionally it means *inter alia* acting on lessons learnt, focussed programming, staff development, evaluation capacity, and networking.

local NGOs in project delivery as a cumulative process, rather than a series of individual impacts (backyard glories), and as such it is a 'political phenomenon' (p. 240).⁴⁶

In summary the literature indicates that the debate about the scale of NGOs and their work is largely one of reach and relevance (larger NGOs), versus depth and representativeness (smaller NGOs). While smaller NGOs are localised in their reach and work, in terms of empowerment, their closer links and more flexible operational styles may mean that empowerment outcomes are likely to be stronger, even if the number reached is fewer. The range of forces outlined above (the direction of accountability and scale) which affect NGOs, will by necessity influence how they approach their work with communities. At a practical level this discussion gives a lead on the issues to be tested in field-work, on organisational structure, the importance and nature of the community consent and trust of the NGO, and its effectiveness in achieving empowerment.

Conclusion

This chapter has raised a number of issues that relate to NGOs as public benefit organisations and how effective they may be in empowerment work. The first is the accountability mechanisms that NGOs, being non-membership organisations, have in relation to the constituency with whom they work. Secondly, the notion of community is important in defining NGO constituencies, and how the notion of community can mask the competing interests among power groups in any community with whom an NGO is working. This particularly applies to gender

⁴⁶ Charlton and May argue for example that in the 1970s both the economic and political poor

when NGOs are working with women in their empowerment programs. The third important point, raised in the chapter, is that governments and donors, through the accountability they demand from NGOs, can weaken NGO accountability to their own values and constituencies.

This thesis has chosen the socio-political theory of NGOs as performing a broader public benefit function based on a particular values set, rather than economic theories which tend to see NGOs as providing services in a market place. This theory is chosen as the group of NGOs this thesis is concerned with see their important function as beyond service delivery but one of being involved in empowerment to deal with the broader social justice and political issues which arise from the disempowerment of the poor and marginalised.

The notion of empowerment as individual and collective agency and choice (developed in Chapter Two) has led to the important question for this thesis which is, how should organisations, that are involved in empowerment programs, be accountable to the groups and individuals they are wishing to see empowered? A consistent theme in the review of the literature on NGOs is that while they may be close to the communities in terms of proximity, the lack of any formal accountability process may lead to a distance in terms of relevance and responsiveness. The other issue is that the government, as both funder and regulator, is perceived as having considerable power over NGOs. This has resulted in a shift from a 'downward' accountability to the constituency to an 'upward' accountability to the state thus diminishing the role of NGOs as representing community interests to the state, and fostering community autonomy,

were left out of the development process. This has changed significantly in the last twenty years and is a consequence of local level action (p. 245).

and arguably empowerment. A similar change in accountability has also occurred with some private donors. One of the questions that this thesis aims to examine is the effect that multiple accountabilities has on the success of NGOs in empowerment work. The next chapter examines these themes further in relation to Indian NGOs.

CHAPTER FOUR

POVERTY AND NGOs IN INDIA

Introduction

Non-governmental organisations in India have a rich and vibrant history characterised by a fluid relationship with the state and state instrumentalities. Over the past 150 years the Indian governments, both colonial and post-colonial, have played a key role in the shaping Indian NGOs in terms of how they function in society. This role of the state *vis a vis* NGOs is in terms of both the scope and nature of the work NGOs undertake - particularly in targeting the poor and marginalised in Indian society - and to some extent the structural forms that NGOs take. In many ways it can be argued that the relationship with the state is a defining feature of Indian NGOs.¹ This chapter examines that history, particularly as it applies to those organisations that work with poor and marginalised communities. First of all the chapter gives an overview of poverty in India, which serves to frame the later discussion of the development of Indian NGOs which are working on empowerment and the alleviation of poverty. This exposition is important for the thesis as it provides the context for the development of the modern NGO in India – a sample of which provide case studies for this thesis.

¹ Indian NGOs have been defined by Nandedkar as those organisations that have some form of institutional base, are private, non-profit, self-governing, voluntary in nature, and registered with the government (1987:475). The notion of voluntarism can be either that the workers or staff are volunteers, there is voluntary participation of beneficiaries and members, and/or voluntary membership of boards. State recognition of an NGO is through the process of registration and receipt of subsidies and grants from government or abroad, both of which require processes of government accreditation.

Poverty In India

India is a country of just over one billion people, of which nearly 400 hundred million live in poverty (ACTIONAID INDIA 1998:12; Murthy and Rao 1997:v).² It also has a low level of urbanisation, with 60 per cent of the population still living in villages of less than 5,000 people, and only 25 per cent of the population are urbanised (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2000:13). It is in the rural areas where most of the poor live.

The aggregate poverty figures, however, hide important institutional features of Indian poverty. There are very large regional differences in the incidence of poverty, mainly between the south and the north of India with higher concentrations of poverty in the north (Murthi *et al.* 1996:361). The other key feature of poverty in India is that the problem is seemingly intractable. There has been only a relatively small change in its incidence of poverty over the last 40 years.³ In 1961 the figure for income poverty was 45 per cent⁴, and while there was a sharp rise through the 1960s and 1970s (where it went as high as 64 per cent); since the mid 1980s the level of poverty has been fluctuating between 35 and 40 per cent (Cox *et al.* 2001:18). If the World Bank's benchmark of poverty

² The poverty line in India was set by a Minimum Needs Task Force in 1979 and is determined by a minimum calorie intake of 2400 calories per person in rural areas and 2100 in urban areas. The proportion of the population below this level of food intake is estimated annually. In 1994 the value of this consumption was equivalent of a wage of Rs229 (\$A10-00) per month in rural areas and Rs264 in urban areas. Note that this poverty level is much lower than the World Bank standard of US\$1-00 per day.

³ This may be even longer as in the period 1918 to 1948 the estimate of the average level of poverty was forty per cent (Nayak 1994).

⁴ This is measured through the head count index, which is the proportion of a population below the set poverty line, based on a per capita expenditure level (Ninan 2000:8).

as an income level of one (US) dollar per day is used then in 1992 the level of poverty was 47.9 per cent (Dagdeviran *et al* 2002:406). Similarly the Gini Coefficient, which measures the extent of income inequality, has changed very little over that time hovering around 0.33 (Parikh 1999:289; Ninan 2000:23). If poverty is looked at in terms of a broader set of indicators than just income (e.g. deprivation in health, knowledge and provisioning), such as the UNDP Human Poverty Index, the poverty level in 1991-93 was estimated to be 41 per cent (UNDP 2001:1).

Some evidence, however, is starting to emerge that there has been a sharp fall in poverty in the latter half of the 1990s with levels of poverty, based on household expenditure data, falling sharply from 36 per cent to 28 per cent in the period 1993-94 to 1999-2000 (Deaton 2002:5). Deaton however notes that these figures are to some extent speculative as there was a major change to the design of the questionnaire of the National Statistical Survey prior to the 1999 survey. Nevertheless Deaton argues that after adjustments taking into account changes in the questionnaire, the figures are robust. Deaton also points out however, that the level of inequality has grown at the same time (2002:6).

Gender and Poverty

Murthy and Rao argue however, that even with some improvement in the level of income poverty in the past two decades, there are ingrained institutional barriers

that prevent marginalised groups such as dalits, tribals, and women⁵ from converting any increased income, (due to economic growth) to access basic needs (1997:14). Janardhan describes the institutional barriers that poor Indian women face in very stark terms:

In large areas of India women live with many burdens and fears. They carry the burden of neglect and discrimination, household work, looking after siblings and of work outside the home. As girls they live with fear of not getting adequate attention, care, nourishment, medical attention and education. With adolescence comes the fear of being sold, sometimes sold in the name of marriage, sometimes sold into child labour and prostitution. After marriage a girl's status descends to an even lower level and her subservience becomes institutionalised. There is also fear of loneliness maladjustments, not being allowed a personhood, mental torture and harassment, and occasionally even death – murder by her own people (Janardhan 1995:39)

This phenomenon is what the UNDP Human Development Report refers to as a 'poverty of choices and opportunities' (1997:16), and what Amartya Sen refers to as 'capability deprivation' (1999:87). Discussion of the institutional barriers to effective poverty reduction is important for this thesis as it argues that

⁵ A measure of the institutional disadvantage of women is the sex ratio of females to males which in 2001 was 933 females per 1000 males. In most countries the ratio is higher than 1000 women per 1000 men, due to a general higher life expectancy for women. The main reason for the lower sex ratio for women than for men is generally due to higher mortality rates for females than males at various stages of the life cycle (Census of India 2001). The exception is at a local level when employment-based migration patterns may have an influence e.g. in urban or peri-urban areas. The sex ratio for India is the lowest for all major countries and it is getting worse (the figure for India at the beginning of the 20th century [1901] was 972 females per 1000 males) while for all other countries it has improved over the last one hundred years (Census of India 2001:3). These statistics represent a powerful argument for the institutional bias against women.

empowerment is an essential part of addressing the issue of the lack of choices and opportunities for the very poor (Cagatay 1998:8).⁶

The key institutional barriers that Murthy and Rao refer to are intra-household inequalities, and gender biases in commodity services markets (1997:16). These factors effectively mean that while there may be sufficient food and income for a household, the woman does not have access to it, resulting in poorer life outcomes for women. This is demonstrated by the low sex ratios for India (Census of India 2001). Murthy and Rao (1997) go on to argue that these gender biases go well beyond the household, with women having a lower level of both legal and normative entitlements to ownership and exchange of both land and produce (p. 19). The lack of entitlements leads to exchange failures for women in terms of: the prices they receive for their produce; the wages they receive; their social relations within the household and the village; and finally, in terms of the claims that women can make on the state. There is also a large difference in endowments between men and women in terms of assets, control over labour, status, skills and access to inputs (Murthy and Rao 1997:19). The effect of these institutional or social barriers is to mask the high levels of poverty that the more marginalised groups in Indian society experience.

Some commentators argue that these institutional barriers are the result of social relations inherent in the Indian social systems (Murthy and Rao 1997; Sen, A. 1996; and Sharma 1978:61). These social relations are to do with the exercise of power in a number of domains including class, caste, gender, ethnicity, and religion. While at times these power relations exhibit themselves in conflict,

⁶ In fact UNDP (1990) defined poverty alleviation as expansion of people's choices, which is part of the definition of empowerment this thesis is using.

generally they are dealt with through what Murthy and Rao (1997:21) describe as a 'bargaining model', the outcome of which is that those in less powerful positions are at a permanent disadvantage. These struggles are generally over economic power, the division of labour, political power, and social norms (p. 22). Amartya Sen (1996:15) and Sharma (1978:62) argue that the social divisions described above, while all or some are present in all societies, are particularly pronounced in India.⁷

These persisting social barriers have been exacerbated in the 1990s by a trend to greater fragmentation in Indian society. According to Murthy and Rao (1997:49), being Indian, to many, is increasingly being equated with being Hindu, which has led to the rise of a Hindu nationalist movement - *Hindutva*. This development has further exacerbated caste, ethnic and religious conflict and a level of disenfranchisement of minorities such as Muslims, tribals and dalits. Even prior to this rise in nationalism there were disturbing social trends emerging. In the 1980s, for example, there was a thirty per cent rise in reported cases of violence against women, a doubling of dowry deaths, and a fall in the sex ratio of women to men (Murthy and Rao 1997:50). Cox *et al.* (2001:25) argue that as a consequence of these endemic institutional factors, poverty alleviation programs have not been able to achieve their aims.

The other important factor affecting poverty levels recently has been the economic and political reforms of the early 1990s. The economic reforms, which were

⁷ Amartya Sen goes on to argue that they are due to an elitist religious heritage in Hinduism which was promoted further through the British colonial administration (p. 15). Within India, Murthy *et al.* found that in the Southern and Western States, at least for women, the level of disadvantage was lower, due mainly to the presence of a more pluralist society (1996:367).

effectively forced on the government by the mounting debt of the 1980s⁸, had the effect of removing a number of controls in place in terms of investment, ownership of assets, land, exchange controls and some privatisation of public assets and functions. Some commentators attribute the sharp rise in the official statistics on rural poverty in the first two of years following the reforms to the negative consequence of these institutional changes (Murthy and Rao 1997; Parikh 1999; and Ninan 2000).⁹ The reforms of 1992 also had the effect of reducing per capita government expenditure in rural areas including infrastructure, energy programs, rural employment and poverty alleviation programs; as well as reduced transfers to the states (Narsalay and Pimple 2001:8).¹⁰

The socio-economic context in which Indian development NGOs working with the poor are finding themselves, in the early part of the twenty-first century, is one of uncertainty and challenge due to the nature of poverty in India, and the changes in the structure of poverty that economic reforms have brought. The opportunity for NGOs lies in addressing the structural inhibitors to poverty alleviation, particularly those that deal with powerlessness. The next section reviews the history of the development of NGOs in India from their origins in the mid-nineteenth century to show where they are located in the socio-political

⁸ The foreign debt for India rose from 11.9 per cent of GNP to an unsustainable 28.1 per cent in 1990 (Narsalay and Pimple 2001:7)

⁹ The level of poverty rose from 35 per cent to 44 per cent and then fell back to 37.5 per cent with landless, casual labour and women headed households hardest hit. The proportion of women in paid employment fell from 28 per cent to 23 per cent (Murthy and Rao 1997:57). Food price inflation reached 20 per cent (Parikh 1999:5; Ninan 2000).

¹⁰ Development expenditure fell from around 70 per cent of total expenditure in the 1980s to 63 per cent in 1998-99 (Narsalay and Pimple 2001:8), and average debt of the individual Indian states has risen to around 20 per cent of state GDP. Dreze (2001:8) argues that a consequence of these changes is an increase of starvation deaths in some states. He attributes them to the combined affects of a 'crisis of livelihoods', and government food hoarding when grain prices were low, all of which are related to political marginalisation as a consequence of the institutional barriers discussed above.

environment in the early 2000s.

Development NGOs in India

The discussion of development NGOs in India, which are currently working with the poor, has to be put into the context of the overall NGO movement in India, its long history, and particularly its relationship with the state. Estimates of the total number of voluntary organisations that are in some way or other recognised by the state range from one to two million (Salamon and Anheier 1999:70; Van Rooy 1998:17). The sheer number of voluntary organisations (NGOs) working in India is testament to the importance that voluntary work is given in Indian society and serves to frame the discussion of NGOs in development work.¹¹ These NGOs range from small associations such as a funeral society operating in a village, to very large organisations that provide services to large numbers of people across several States. Development NGOs that work with poor and marginalised communities are estimated to be around eight per cent (or 80,000) of the total number of NGOs (Salamon and Anheier 1999:70).¹²

Indian development NGOs are largely dependent on foreign sources for their funding. In 2001 just over 20,000 of those NGOs involved in development work were registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs under the Foreign Contributions Regulations Act 1976 (FCRA) to receive funding from abroad (Ministry of Home Affairs 2002). In 2000-2001 they received Rs4,535 crore

¹¹ Blamey and Pasha (1993:14) refers to the established groups in civil society in India as a '... a timeless sphere conterminous with Indian civilisation itself ...'

¹² These numbers are estimates with associations being registered under state legislation. The only national registration is through the FCRA. State registration of NGOs is a prerequisite for FCRA approval. Foreign funds can also be channelled by those organisations with FCRA approval to other NGOs.

(~\$US1b) from foreign sources (Ministry of Home Affairs 2002)¹³. This level of funding represents a sharp increase from the Rs500 crore of foreign funds received by NGOs in the mid-1990s, reported by Murthy and Rao (1997:62). In addition, NGOs also received around \$US172.6m in Indian national government grants in the period 1990-95 (Sen, S. 1999:344). Foreign sources account for over 90 per cent of the total funding of Indian NGOs involved in development work. This high level is due to the popularity of NGOs as a conduit for foreign aid (both private and official) for poverty alleviation programs (Murthy and Rao 1997:99; Rajasekhar 1998:307). This chapter discusses some of the implications for NGO practice of the large level of foreign funding to Indian NGOs.

Key Features of Indian NGOs

Siddhartha Sen (1999) has identified two key features of those Indian NGOs involved in development work. The first is that they play an intermediation role; that is, they work for the poor rather than being grassroots groups of the poor themselves. The second is that they are non-representative organisations.¹⁴ They are mainly public benefit organisations rather than mutual benefit organisations, and they are driven by altruistic motives for a broader public benefit rather than

¹³ One crore is 10 million rupees.

¹⁴ This is in line with the general discussion of NGOs outlined in Chapter Three, particularly Couto's definition of NGOs based on their representative roles (1997). The number of formal members is very small (usually from the professional elite), but NGOs serve a relatively large number of people in any particular area.

the collective self-interest of a relatively small group.

In India, [development] NGOs can be defined as organisations that are generally formed by professionals or quasi-professionals from the middle or lower middle classes, either to serve or work with the poor, or to channel financial support to community-based or grassroots organisations of the poor. The NGOs are generally non-membership organisations and have salaried employees (Sen, S. 1999:332).

Viswanath (1993:37) and Baxi (1997:56) both argue that Indian NGOs have a deep-seated ethical basis for altruism. Viswanath (1993:37) goes on to argue that, because of the altruistic motivation, Indian NGOs have the following features: they tend to be relatively conservative and service-oriented; are incrementalist (that is, they seek small improvements in people's lives); promote non-violence; and avoid party political processes, and discourage party affiliations. Baxi (1997) describes them as being about the 'existential amelioration of victim groups ... [and] the creation of community solidarity [rather than the] achievement of political emancipation' (p. 56). However, despite a tradition of being service-oriented, Indian development NGOs in the late 1980s were moving away from directly implementing programs, towards more self-help approaches to development that see a greater level of direct community participation in development activities (Viswanath 1993:37). It can be argued that this change was in part recognition of the efficacy of the participatory approach, but also in response to donor pressure for greater participation of beneficiaries in programs. The move to self-help approaches also represented a recognition of the structural causes of poverty and powerlessness, and that these approaches are a useful way of addressing the issues of powerlessness (Rajasekhar 1998:310; Joseph 1997:204).

The move to self-help participatory approaches in dealing with poverty and social exclusion was taken up in women's programs in recognition of the specific disadvantage that women, particularly rural women, faced. Women's NGOs such as SEWA and Annapurna Mahila Mandal have existed since the 1970s, and the Indian government had established *mahila mandals* (women's groups), in most villages, in the 1950s and 1960s. However, Phadnis (1989:165) argues that the development NGOs only really began targeting women in a systematic way after the publication in 1987 of the Report of the National Commission on Women 'Sharma Shakti', which focussed on the disadvantage that women faced.

Most development NGOs in India now have a much stronger focus on self-help approaches and the specific targeting of women as their primary constituency.

The next section examines the development of these approaches in terms of how history and the relationship with the Indian state have shaped Indian development NGOs. This discussion goes some way to informing how the modern Indian development NGO of the twenty-first century addresses the high levels of poverty in the current development context.

History of Indian NGOs

NGOs in India have their origins in ancient times¹⁵ when the society promoted the values of: *dharma* (personal obligations); *jeev daya* (humanitarian concern and a concern for all living things) through the Hindu tradition; and, voluntarism and

¹⁵ The notion of voluntarism can be dated back to 1,500BC where it is mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, the ancient Aryan Scriptures (Sen, S. 1997:402).

philanthropy (Iyengar 2000:3229; Sen, S. 1997:402; and Kaushik 1997:72).

During this earlier period the provision of education, health services, cultural promotion and dealing with natural and other types of emergencies was based on voluntarism rather than being an obligation of the state (Sen, S. 1999:321; Imandar 1987:422).¹⁶ This high level of voluntarism was maintained through various Indian empires right up until British colonisation in the late eighteenth century.

It was out of this history and the impact of the British colonial administration that the modern NGO movement was born. The history of modern NGOs in India can be broken down into two broad periods, the pre-independence and post-independence. The pre-independence period, of around one and a half centuries, saw the development of a strong NGO sector. In the latter part of the colonial period the NGO sector took on a political dimension, as it played an important part in India's independence struggle (Iyengar 2000; Sen S. 1999). Post-independence, the development of the NGO sector was marked by a change in the NGOs' relationship with the state.

Pre-Independence

In India the voluntary nature of NGOs emerged from Hindu traditions deeply steeped in voluntarism and personal service (Iyengar 2000:3229; Sen, S. 1997:402). In the early nineteenth century, under British rule, these traditions of

¹⁶ The role of the state in medieval times, described in the Arthashastra (Kautilya *trans.* Rangarajan 1992:129), in providing for the population was an exception in the Muarya empire (Imandar 1987).

voluntarism received a boost from the newly introduced religious, cultural and social surroundings, which paradoxically, was at the expense of the very traditional Hindu sources from which they emerged (Imandar 1987:423). This boost for voluntarism started with both the work of Christian missionaries around 1810, and elements of the Indian bourgeoisie in the 1820s. Both groups had as their primary purpose the provision of welfare, but it was also at that time the idea of promoting political empowerment and individual autonomy emerged. This idea was in part as a result of the mission school systems (Sen, S. 1992:178). A nascent social reform movement emerged with individuals such as Raj Ram Mohan Roy, Brahma Samaj, and Arya Samaj protesting against those religious 'evils' that promoted women's subjugation, such as child marriage, dowry, and *sati* (ceremonial widow burning). By the 1840s this social reform movement, which started in Bengal, had extended across the sub-continent to Western India (Seth and Sethi 1991:51; Sen, S. 1992:178).

The 1860s saw the emergence of the first rural self-help groups, and co-operative and credit societies (Sen, S. 1992:178), which were to become the precursors of the modern micro-finance groups. Through this early period the colonial government had little direct interaction with these nascent NGOs. However the rapid growth and visibility of NGOs was instrumental in the colonial government introducing the first NGO regulation, in the form of the Public Trust Act and the Societies Registration Act of 1860, which gave the emerging NGOs a legal base (Seth and Sethi 1991:50; Iyengar 2000:3229).

The next stage in the development of NGOs was the progression from organisations concerned with credit and rural self-help groups to a movement that also addressed political rights. For example, the Indian National Congress (later

to become the Congress Party) was started in 1885 as an NGO (Sen, S. 1999: 332; Makeshwari 1987:560). The movement for political rights and the work of Mahatma Gandhi, from the turn of the century, resulted in a much stronger political focus for voluntarism which, according to Seth and Sethi (1991:52), effectively planted the notion of the liberal tradition of politics more broadly in society.

It was Gandhi, through the promotion of his ashrams, who gave an impetus to the development of the modern NGO in India. This impetus was not so much in terms of its organisational form, but rather in its strong focus on social and political change, and its focus in rural India, an area that the British administration had largely ignored (Iyengar 2000:3230). The Gandhian movement not only had the political purpose of getting the British out of India (the Quit India Movement of the 1920s), but it also had a strong village-based social reform agenda. The movement was based on the notion of *swadeshi* or village self-government and self-sufficiency, which had a strong non-sectarian spiritual base (Imandar 1987:424). This Gandhian movement of the time, was funded mainly by urban-based entrepreneurs (Iyengar 2000:3230), and involved large numbers of urban volunteers going out to villages to initiate social reconstruction programs (Bhattacharya 1987:384). In essence, this movement and the numerous Gandhian ashrams that sprung up throughout India at this time, were the precursors to the modern NGO. The two main weaknesses of Gandhi's model were first, that it was reluctant to network outside its own base to non-Gandhian groups; and second, as a model it was relatively weak institutionally in that it lacked processes for renewal and ongoing institutional support. These two factors ultimately

adversely affected the Gandhian movement's later development, and left it vulnerable to state intervention and stagnation (Sen, S. 1992:179).

At the same time as the rise of the Gandhian movement, another source of activism was the many Marxist groups which were part of the process of building trade unions or *kisan-sabhas* at grassroots level (Dhanagare 1990:27). Despite strong political differences between the Gandhian groups and the Marxist groups, they remained broadly united, and so were not able to be isolated by the colonial state. The strong support by the Gandhian and the Marxist NGOs in the independence movement was to become the basis for over a decade of close collaboration between the post-colonial Indian government and the NGOs following independence.

Finally, there was a third group of NGOs that did not challenge the legitimacy of the colonial state preferring social rather than political reform. This group of NGOs (in the 1920s) saw themselves primarily as welfare or service based. They received grants-in-aid from the colonial state on condition they did not support the Quit India Movement (Dhanagare 1990:27).¹⁷

These three groups of NGOs were the antecedents of the modern Indian NGO movement. The next section examines how the NGOs movement developed in an independent India.

¹⁷ This represented the first record of government funding of NGOs in India.

Post-independence

In the post-independence period, Siddhartha Sen has identified three broad eras in the relationship between NGOs and the state: an era of co-operation from independence until the late 1950s; an era of antagonism from the early 1960s until the late 1970s; and finally, an era of relatively strong state control from the mid-1980s to the present day (Sen, S. 1999:333).¹⁸

Era of Co-operation: 1947- 1960

The NGO work in the immediate post-independence period was characterised by close co-operation with the state. This cooperation arose firstly from the euphoria brought about by independence, and the role that NGOs, particularly the Gandhian organisations, had in achieving it; and secondly, from the Gandhian development paradigm built around village development that was adopted, to some extent, by the state (Sen, S. 1999:335; Jain 1997:116). Because of the pivotal role of NGOs in the independence movement, the Indian state recognised a strong role for NGOs in governance, at least in the areas of community mobilisation and service delivery at village level, and began funding NGOs from the first five-year plan (Sen, S. 1999:334).

At the same time there was little or no opposition to state development policies from the NGOs. During the post independence period the Indian government tried to establish what Siddhartha Sen (1999:336) describes as a 'shadow state', in which NGOs would play a central role in a wide range of service delivery activities to substitute or supplant government efforts. The main actors in this

¹⁸ While this categorisation reflects the dominant trends, in reality the elements of co-operation, antagonism, and state control have been present to varying degrees throughout the history of development NGOs in India.

period were the Gandhian organisations, which played such an important role in the independence struggle and, as a consequence, were close to government.¹⁹ They were involved mainly in training government officials and in promoting village based industry (Sen, S. 1992:180).

During the 1950s the voluntary financial support from the business sector which sustained NGOs prior to independence fell off markedly, being replaced by an increase in state funding (Iyengar 2000:3230). The state support for NGOs resulted in rapid growth in the number of NGOs through the 1950s and into the 1960s.²⁰ The range of NGOs also broadened to include: welfare groups; NGOs formed by international counterparts; non-party political action groups; and those helped by local government and other local NGOs (Sen, S. 1992:181; Iyengar 2000:3230).

The rapid growth in NGOs set the scene for disillusionment by both government and the NGOs in how each saw the other's role in society. On the one hand, the NGOs saw the state funding of programs only as a process of fostering co-option and dependency, leading to resentment of the strong statist agenda being set. On the other hand the state saw the NGOs as both inefficient and to a certain extent non-compliant in implementing the government's agenda (Sen, S. 1992:182).

This disillusionment by the NGOs led to increasing resistance to broader state

¹⁹ One example of the Gandhian demands for village autonomy and development (*swadeshi*) was the establishment of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) and the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB). Both of these government organisations aimed at developing village-level social infrastructure by facilitating the further development of community-based NGOs through the development of village associations (Chowdry 1987:499; Nanavatty 1987:503).

²⁰ Over 35 years the CSWB set up 10,000 organisations but only provided funding for programs, not infrastructure, so there was permanent dependency on CSWB programs for survival (Nanavatty 1987:503.).

policies, especially those promoting rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, and an increase in antagonism between the state and NGOs.

Era of Antagonism: 1960s and 1970s

The outcome of the growing antagonism between the state and NGOs through the 1950s was three-fold. First, there was a movement towards developing alternative NGO formations. This arose from dissatisfaction by middle class youth with the model of development being adopted by the state, and the resulting increase in the gap between rich and poor. Secondly, there was encouragement by some of the NGO donors for their Indian counterparts to adopt alternative development models based on village level formations. Finally, there was the growth of the *sarvodaya* movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan and Vinoba Bhave, which called for a radical revolution involving the voluntary redistribution of land based on principles of Gandhian socialism (Sen, S. 1999:336; and 1992:184).

By the early 1970s some NGOs actively entered the political arena by rallying around Jayaprakash and the *sarvodaya* movement and campaigning against the government of Indira Gandhi. This political campaign peaked during the 'emergency' of 1975-77 when there was a tense struggle between the NGOs and the government, which saw many NGO leaders imprisoned. The elections of 1977 saw the defeat of the Indira Gandhi government and the new Janata government - made up in part by Gandhians (Sen, S. 1992:183) - saw a growth of activist NGOs (Baxi 1997:58), and an increase in government support for NGOs (Sen, S. 1992:183). The Janata government, however, was short-lived, being defeated in 1980 by a vengeful Congress Party that brought in the era of state control to NGOs.

Era of State Control: 1980s to 2000s

The two decades following the 1980 elections saw a re-evaluation of the relationship between the state and NGOs. The romanticism of the 1950s and 1960s long gone, and the perceived threat to the state that NGOs posed in the 1970s, resulted in the second Indira Gandhi government formally recognising NGOs as development actors (and a threat) (Jain 1997:128). As a consequence it put in train a number of laws and procedures to regulate NGOs, the effect of which was that the reformist activism of the 1960s was branded as 'revolutionary politics' and proscribed (Baxi 1997:60).

The first major legal change to the regulation of NGOs by the central government was the implementation of the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA)²¹, and the enactment of the Finance Act of 1983. The upshot of these legislative changes was that neither corporate donations, nor the income from any business activities of NGOs, were tax deductible. In addition the FCRA required annual reporting on the purposes for which the funds were used, and also that NGOs submit to an annual inspection and interview by the Central Bureau of Intelligence - a federal police function (Chowdry 1987:488; Sen, S. 1992:186; and Purushothaman 1998:205).

At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, the state continued to recognise the important role that NGOs could play in service delivery at village level. This was in part to ameliorate the perceived failings of the central government at village level. The state benefited because it quarantined the NGOs' work to the village level, it limited their voice on national-level issues, while the NGOs dealt

with local level issues around services etc. which the centralised state was unable to deal with effectively (Kothari 1987:451). The Government of India funding to NGOs for this work was strictly for service programs.²² Little funding was available for capacity building, institutional development, or rights and empowerment type activities, as they were seen to be political in nature. By the late 1990s there were not only considerable delays in obtaining FCRA approval, but according to Ullatil (interview 2001) a number of NGOs had their FCRA permission threatened on the grounds of their work.²³

The other major action of the government towards NGOs in the early 1980s was what appeared to be a campaign of official harassment. This was mainly in the form of the Kudal Commission, a Presidential Commission to investigate the activities of the Gandhi Peace Foundation, an umbrella organisation for 945 Gandhian NGOs.²⁴ The constant scrutiny, hearings and accusations throughout the period of the Commission resulted in what Chaturvedi (1987:542) describes as the NGOs becoming 'distracted and confused' and much less inclined to be involved in national-level advocacy work. The Kudal Commission only came to

²¹ The FCRA was first enacted in 1976 during the first Indira Gandhi government and amended in 1985 under the Rajiv Gandhi government.

²² In 1980, however, with the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-1985), the government identified new areas in which NGOs as new actors could participate in development. These areas included: 1. Optimal utilisation and development of renewable sources of energy, including forestry, through the formation of renewable energy associations at the block level; 2. Family welfare, health and nutrition, education and relevant community programs in the field; 3. Health for all programs; 4. Water management and soil conservation; 5. Social welfare programs for weaker sections; 6. Implementation of minimum needs program; 7. Disaster preparedness and management (i.e. for floods, cyclones, etc); 8. Promotion of ecology and tribal development, and; 9. Environmental protection and education.

²³ The criteria for withdrawal of FCRA include supporting activities which are 'bad for the sovereignty and integrity of India; or the public interest; or, freedom or fairness of elections; or friendly relations with a friendly country; or, harmony, social or religious' (NGOIndia 2001).

²⁴ At the end of five years of investigation the Kudal Commission found nothing untoward in the work of the Gandhi Peace Foundation and no charges were laid.

an end when a new generation of younger NGO leaders pressured the government to have it closed down (Sen, S. 1992:186).

Through the period of the Kudal Commission, which was used as a 'stick' against NGOs, the state offered the carrot of substantially increased funding to NGOs for specific programs. At the same time the central government offered a very narrow definition of NGOs as '... politically neutral development organisations which would help the government and its rural development programs' (from the GOI 7th Five Year Plan, quoted in Sen, S. 1999:342). There seemed little space for social movements or advocacy. In the period 1985-90 government funding was increased to \$US172m (Sen, S. 1999:344) the scale of which, together with reporting regulations and other controls on foreign funding, effectively meant the government had 'coopted, controlled, and curbed voluntary organisations' (Chaturvedi 1987:543).²⁵ The Indian government had used coercion to achieve compliance through the threat of alienation; while at the same time using remuneration to achieve a more 'calculative compliance' (Bhattacharya 1987:383; Baxi 1997:63). This process throughout the 1980s resembled a state version of the 'good cop - bad cop' routine.

The curbing of NGOs at the national level resulted in a relatively disunited and disempowered NGO movement by the end of the 1980s. The federal Indian structure has enabled the central government to fragment the NGO movement by quarantining NGOs within the state level political systems, the effect of which

²⁵ Most recently, for example, in 2001 the Law Commission of India has prepared a series of amendments to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) of 1976 on the instructions of the government. The Central government already has amended certain provisions of the FCRA and stipulated that all organisations that receive funds from foreign agencies should get an affidavit from the district administrator explaining the nature of their past and current activities. It is also considering further changes that may even see funding channelled through the District Administrator (Interview Pimple 2001).

was that NGO advocacy work was directed at the state and local government level rather than the national government (Jenkins 1998:205). Jenkins argues that this was of immense advantage to the economic reformers in the Central government because it diverted the targets of dissent to state and local level political processes (p. 205). The NGOs, for their part, began to lose their radical edge and became less inclined to enter the national political processes as directly as they had in the 1960s and 1970s. This was not only due to the regulatory controls and the pressure by the government. The disintegration of the more radical groups and the left agenda on the one hand, and the emergence of the NGO sector as a viable area for employment for young professionals on the other, were also instrumental in the shift of NGOs from radical politics (Sen, S. 1992:185).²⁶

These joint processes of state scrutiny and increased funding saw NGOs divide into two broad types: those that were action-oriented; and those that were welfare oriented (Kaushik 1997:69). The latter group were those who saw themselves as intermediaries between donors and the poor as 'aid managers', or what Siddhartha Sen describes as the 'technical branch of the poor' (1992:184). They were involved in providing services such as health and education to the poor and tended to eschew political processes of any sort. The action-oriented groups were involved in empowerment and networking at a local level (Sen, S. 1992:184; Murthy and Rao 1997:73). While there was political dimension in dealing with

²⁶ Not only this but also the much greater intrusion into the life of the NGO that the state brought there led to a change in the basis of the values. Both the Gandhian and radical politics based values of the 1950s and 1960s are fading quickly and the emergent NGOs have a basis more in the field of social work. While the entry of social work into the field of social action and social change has its origins in the 1960s, when the debate within social work looked at group work and social change, it was not until the 1980s that social change and social mobilisation were widely accepted as part of social work teaching, albeit still on the periphery (Siddiqui, 1997:219). This has resulted in many NGO staff and NGO leaders at this stage having emerged from social work backgrounds and so led to a reflection of social justice values in NGO work, rather than either the radical political or Gandhian values of the past.

issues around empowerment, people's rights, and related issues, there was also a clear move away from national-level activism to a more local and community-based level of political activity. At a practical level these NGOs now have to tread the fine line of not antagonising local-level political figures to the extent that they would take their concerns to the Ministry of Home Affairs (national government) and as a consequence have their NGO accreditation threatened.

At the level of co-operation with the state, the 1990s were seen to herald in a new era. In the mid-1990s the Planning Commission held a meeting with 100 NGOs that was addressed by the Prime Minister. The agreement from the meeting was that NGOs would have two main roles – the delivery of services (rather than supplementing existing services) and the empowerment of marginalised groups (Murthy and Rao 1997:63). This new *rapprochement* was short-lived when the NGOs had their credibility dented by a number of financial scandals. These scandals led to further distrust of NGOs, not only on political grounds but also on ethical grounds, bringing into question their role as advocates.²⁷ The chequered history of NGOs sets the scene for the contemporary NGO movement and how it responds in its work to multiple pressures of accountability while at the same time having a role in the empowerment of the poor and marginalised.

²⁷ For example, in 1996 the Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART) audited 2,000 of the 7,500 NGOs which it supports only to find fraud to the value of Rs50 crore (\$US10m), three hundred non-existent or phantom NGOs (Murthy and Rao 1997:66), and 26 other NGOs engaging in criminal conspiracy to defraud (Bava 1997:271).

NGOs in the late 1990s

The vibrant history of Indian NGOs in the 50 years since independence has resulted in a broad-based sector, but one that still has to contend with problems of autonomy and independence. As the discussion above has demonstrated, while the Indian state does not exert absolute control over the NGO sector, it is able to keep the sector largely in check and away from the national-level political processes, and it sets limits on NGOs' role as empowerment agents.

Chandhoke (1995:30) has identified two major trends in Indian civil society that have had some influence on the development of NGOs in relation to social change in the 1990s. The first is that there is an abandonment, to some extent, of formal processes and institutional structures by many political activist groups in favour of networks that are completely separate from the state. These groups take the view that all states are inherently oppressive, coercive and destructive, and therefore cannot be trusted. These social action groups are reluctant to come with organisational banners since they may attract hostile attention, but they pay the price of very restricted access to resources and therefore remain very small-scale (Murthy and Rao 1997:73; Seth and Sethi 1991:64). The second major influence that Chandhoke (1995:241) identifies is the emergence of fundamentalist movements such as the *Hindutva* (Hindu nationalist movement) which she sees not as a part of civil society but rather as a direct threat to it.²⁸ Both of these pressures affect NGOs in that they are becoming more hesitant to engage with the

²⁸ Her argument is that these movements are fundamentally undemocratic because they rule out rational discourse on the basis of freedom and equality. It can be argued that both of these outcomes represent a weakening of civil society. The total disengagement from the state can weaken processes for holding the state accountable and, in the second case, a move to intolerance of diversity of discourse, likewise narrows the parameters in which the state can be held accountable.

state through advocacy, as they feel this would draw attention from both social action groups and the fundamentalists.

As a consequence, NGOs are moving to help the marginalised groups advance their interests and assert their rights more directly with the state, with the NGO now taking more of 'back seat' role.²⁹ Murthy and Rao (1997:73) also point to a growing vulnerability of NGOs - particularly larger ones that are dependent on foreign funding - to state scrutiny and the state's capacity to cut off NGO resources. Murthy and Rao argue that this dependent relationship between NGOs and the established structures of power, the state, has limited the level of networking among NGOs due to competition for resources from the state and foreign sources.³⁰ This vulnerability of NGOs has also led to a number of what Kaur (1997:95) refers to as, 'ailments afflicting NGOs', the most striking being a lack of flexibility, feudal management³¹, and the influence of foreign and government funds.

²⁹ Chandhoke and Ghosh (1995) argue that this has some implications for NGOs: '... that the core of civil society is the stabilisation of a system of rights and their codification in a legal and institutional order ... rights trump considerations of utility or benefits, they define the fundamental inviolability of persons and rights language challenges the existing norms and institutions' moral validity' (p. ii).

³⁰ It can be argued however that the increasing scale of foreign funding relative to local funding, together with deregulated international financial flows, will make Indian government regulation of NGOs more difficult at least in terms of their access to foreign funding. In this climate it may be possible for NGOs to gain greater autonomy from the state with respect to the direction of their work. This is true for NGOs whether they be strict service providers or alternatively social change agents with broader empowerment objectives.

³¹ This view that NGOs tend to be dominated by powerful individuals is supported by Muttahls (1987:416) and Reddy (1987) who observe that Indian NGOs have little devolution of power; being 'one-man shows' with recruitment very much caste or personally based (p. 556).

NGOs and Empowerment

These features of the Indian NGO sector in the early 2000s present both challenges and opportunities for more effective community development programming and empowerment. For example, the policy of the national government for greater decentralisation to local-level government, together with closer controls of NGOs at national level, has resulted in growth in the number of local-level NGOs.³² These NGOs are not only service providers, but also are facilitators of local-level activism and local-level power politics, which point to a role as empowerment agents (Sen, S. 1999:350; Kothari 1987:450). The constraints that exist on national NGOs described above will affect the approach and style of work of local NGOs. Because they may be less visible than their national-level counterparts, they are able to take on some of the more sensitive advocacy roles, albeit at a local level. The dilemmas that the new local-level NGOs are facing, is how to manage the balance between being efficient and effective service providers supporting the local-level state, and supporting issues of empowerment, which (as discussed in Chapter Two) requires flexibility and time.

Siddhartha Sen (1999:350) argues that what has emerged is a large area of overlap, in which NGOs see themselves as being able to meet social change objectives such as empowerment *through* service delivery. This approach leads to

³² The main changes which occurred to the local government Act in 1992 the Panchayat Raj Act is that population for each village Panchayat was reduced from 10,000 persons to 5,000 and the Gram Panchayat was responsible for a larger budget and a broader range of activities including water supply, village roads, community amenities, and broader development activities. Their main source of revenue is from a house tax and a water tax, which is collected by the District officials, and national and state government grants.

a relatively simplistic interpretation of the term 'empowerment', which avoids an analysis of power relations inherent in the term (Lingam 1998:176; and discussed in Chapter Two). This approach is, in part, driven by the pragmatics of working with poor people who often require tangible benefits. The approach is also driven by a suspicious state that prefers to see the NGOs being quarantined to service delivery roles rather than empowerment - something that is generally not welcomed by the state (Sen, S. 1999: 330).

Against this suspicion by the state of empowerment programs, there is an increasing official donor awareness that effective poverty alleviation requires, at the bare minimum, the participation of beneficiaries in development activities rather than being passive recipients. Donors are also becoming aware that effective poverty alleviation requires that empowerment itself is a key component (AusAID 2001; Narayan 1999). While the Indian state has effectively kept NGOs out of many broader political debates, at the local level there are greater opportunities for NGOs to use modes of intervention that enable both service delivery and empowerment, largely free of state scrutiny. The other important point to emerge from the pressures on NGOs through the 1980s, is that a hostile state can in fact have the effect of forcing NGOs to be less spokespeople for the poor, and more mediators or facilitators to enable the poor and marginalised to

speak for themselves.³³ This is an important outcome for the empowerment of the poor, as NGOs can deflect state scrutiny away from themselves to the small informal locally-based representative organisations they may be working with (Rajasekhar 1998:307). Kothari (1987:450) argues however, that the move to more local level NGOs still leads to a danger of co-option, especially when local level NGOs engage with the state at any level.³⁴

The move to local-level NGOs has the added problem that as local-level development agents, the overall NGO reach is very small and fragmented (Murthy and Rao 1997:94). Likewise, the assumed comparative advantage of smaller NGOs being closer to the poor is compromised by more local-level scrutiny and funding, as NGOs are subject to more local level political interference. In this climate, Murthy and Rao argue that the notions of equality, mutuality and trust are difficult to maintain (p. 78). At the local level, the choices facing NGOs in terms of more directly pursuing empowerment objectives or focussing on service delivery is also in part related to issues of scaling-up to address issues in a wider context. While larger NGOs can gain greater leverage and reach in terms of meeting their objectives through a larger focus, it may be at the price of sharper scrutiny, management moving closer to the ruling elites, and increasing

³³ Robinson argues however that left alone NGOs are generally not good at this mediation process (1995a:163). They can exacerbate rather than mitigate the exclusion of the poor from the political processes by fostering a level of dependency on them to carry out this role. The NGO takes on the representative role in speaking for the community, rather than a mediatory and arguably more empowering role of facilitating the community to speak for itself. Kaushik speaks of the small localised groups becoming 'cannon fodder' for training workshops etc. and he asks to what extent these small local groups can be empowered if they cannot pose a threat to the larger NGO (1997:76).

³⁴ Kothari goes on to ask whether NGOs should be a link between the citizen and the state, or whether their role is to mediate conflicts between those with vested interests and the poor, and so be forced to take positions. That is, should political rights be on their agenda? Finally, he poses the question of how NGOs can unite through networking in a competitive environment for resources; a point that Murthy and Rao also raise (1997:73).

bureaucracy (Kothari 1987:440). These factors can all contribute to some alienation from the NGOs' constituency and their capacity for empowerment. On the other hand, smaller local NGOs may be able to more directly address issues of rights and political empowerment, but only on a small-scale to become what Seth and Sethi describe as 'backyard glories' (1991:59), or 'islands of excellence' (Uvin *et al.* 2000:1409).

The discussion of the pressures that Indian NGOs have been under over the past 20 years highlights the point that for many the values-base of social change for NGOs has been threatened by the imperative for survival and income. This account from India is reflected in the broader discussion of NGOs outlined in Chapter Three. However, unlike NGOs in the developed countries, this threat is more direct in that NGO behaviour is being determined as much by the threat to the loss of income that government scrutiny and control brings, as the actual desire to increase income to expand activities.³⁵ The discussion of Indian NGOs in the early 2000s and the dilemmas they face is important for this thesis as the range of pressures on NGOs in their roles of advocates or service delivery all have an impact on their effectiveness as empowerment agents, and their accountability to their constituents. On the one hand the move to smaller local-level NGOs provides an opportunity for the flexibility for effective empowerment program and stronger accountability links to their constituents, but on the other hand the pressures from local level governments and donors can place limits on this

³⁵ Gailbraith refers to this process as 'condign power', the power to 'coerce and disincline against suspected threats to self-interest and [the] present prerogatives of authority' (quoted in Mehta 1987: 526).

process. This is an area the thesis examines in the field-work.

Models of NGO Intervention

The emerging model of intervention for the majority of Indian NGOs working in rural areas (at least in Southern India), is the self-help group model of micro-finance pioneered by Myrada in the late 1970s³⁶ (Fernandez 1998; Nath 1999), and currently followed by most rural NGOs. It is now the preferred model for government and multilateral supported programs in Southern India.³⁷

Fernandez goes on to argue that this model of micro-finance programming leads to empowerment outcomes (1998:39). The model meets the demand of poor women for access to affordable credit, and it enables a broader social intermediation function by the NGO³⁸; it fosters the notion of self-help, and self-reliance; and in theory, it leads to sustainability. The critics of this approach, on the other hand, argue that when credit is promoted (which the self-help group model often does) the financial accountability requirements and the resources required mean that the social change objectives are given a lower priority.³⁹ They:

³⁶ Small scale credit co-operatives in India facilitated by external development agents can be traced back 150 years. However, the MYRADA model is quite specific in terms of the size of the group, the structure of the savings and loans program, and the institutional support provided to the group.

³⁷ This model is essentially a mutual-based micro-finance program aimed primarily at women, in which around 20 women are facilitated to form a thrift and credit group. Each saves a small amount each week into a common fund, and after a period of usually six to twelve months loans are made to members, on the basis of savings and need. The fund can be supplemented by additional resources from the NGO, either as a loan or grant, or by loans from commercial or state financial institutions. For a full discussion of self-help groups in Southern India see Nath (1999).

³⁸ The self-help group meetings (usually weekly), which ostensibly discuss credit matters, also provide an opportunity for other support activities and training to occur (the nature of which varies from NGO to NGO).

³⁹ Not only this, but micro-finance programs tend to favour those people with some assets usually land, or are for land-based activities in rural areas. Murthy and Rao argue that the focus of programs to these types of activities is discriminatory against the landless (1997:128).

... tend to instrumentalise women either to improve their income or assets without necessarily having the effect of improving their status or access to resources/income. Women take up economic programs such as micro-enterprise and increase their economic contribution to the household, without actually experiencing a corresponding increase in their social status or decision-making power at home (Abbi 1999:30).

At a practical level, micro-finance based programs are important as very poor women do not usually have the time to come together at the behest of an NGO unless there is a clear tangible benefit to them and their families. Micro-finance does provide a benefit in terms of a reduced cost of credit. Part of this study tests these views of micro-finance and identifies the characteristics of those NGOs in which the self-help group approach goes beyond the instrumental and leads to some level of increased agency in women's lives and empowerment. The next section looks at the effectiveness of NGOs in achieving their empowerment objectives.

Effectiveness of Indian NGOs in Empowerment

The key issue in NGO effectiveness for this thesis is empowerment - the expansion of choice and autonomous action - particularly for women, the major constituent group for NGO work in India. Murthy and Rao (1997:115) found that the main limitation to the effectiveness of NGOs lies in the institutional capacity of the very poor to manage certain (mainly administrative) processes. They argue that a level of dependency can develop in which the very poor will tend to use the NGO for institutional support (which the government will not or cannot provide). This can make the NGO seem indispensable in the community, and lead to possible disempowering relationships.

The other key question that Murthy and Rao raise (1997:99) is whether NGOs are reaching the very poor. They found that only one-third of NGO programs reach the very poor and most marginalised groups.⁴⁰ When they reviewed a number of NGO studies they found that the level of targeting of landless, dalits, poor women and poor Muslims was in fact less than their proportion in the total population.⁴¹ Nevertheless NGOs rate highly among the people themselves. Women in particular, saw NGOs as important institutions in their lives, and effective '... in addressing local needs and problems' (Praxis 1999:31).

Gender and NGO Effectiveness

One of the paradoxes facing 'empowerment' NGOs in India is that the one area where government scrutiny and threat is less, but where NGOs are still slow to react, is gender. In particular, there is a poor response by NGOs to the difficulties faced by women in rural India in disempowerment, and the concomitant lack of access to both resources and decision-making. While government programs have been targeting disadvantaged women since the 1970s⁴², at that time there were very few NGO targeting programs for women in general, or rural women in

⁴⁰ Even with these figures Murthy and Rao argue that any evidence of poverty reduction is generally overstated and is class-differentiated. (p. 103); it is the higher classes and castes that show the greater poverty response in terms of increased incomes.

⁴¹ This effectively means that the programs are inequitable and discriminate (unintentionally) against the very poor who are meant to be the target group. On the other hand they show that at least NGOs are better at targeting the poor than the government. They estimate that NGOs' work is targeting 80-100 per cent of the poor, while for government programs the figure is 60-80 per cent.

⁴² The Status of Women Committee report became a benchmark document in the 1970s and again in 1992. The Respective Plan for women led to a Statutory Commission for women (Seth 1997:81).

particular.⁴³ It was not until the late 1980s that rural NGOs with a majority constituency of women emerged (Viswanath 1993:38).

In the late 1980s, Viswanath identified two general types of NGOs that dealt with women's issues: institutions in the form of service/welfare oriented hostels for working women and homes for disturbed or destitute women; and those NGO programs that were 'struggle-oriented' - helping women assert their rights. In both cases they were urban-based NGOs and few in number. At the time of the field-work for this thesis (early 2000s), most NGOs in India targeted women at a practical level such as micro-finance or income generation (in part because that it is where the donor resources are)⁴⁴. Fewer NGOs directly addressed the strategic gender issues that women face, such as gender violence and family alcoholism⁴⁵; and even fewer address opportunities for broader political participation or women (Murthy and Rao 1997:121). When the factors of both a poor poverty focus and inadequate gender approaches are taken together, it is the most marginalised women, *dalits*, and tribals who are worse off (p. 121).

For this thesis the targeting of poor and marginalised women in empowerment programs is important due to the high levels of disadvantage and social exclusion they face, as identified by Janardhan (1995) and others. As discussed earlier, empowerment programs have to deal with disempowerment and power relations, both at a personal level and more broadly in terms of the level of social

⁴³ The exception of a few notable women's NGOs such as the Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Annapurna Mahila Mandal (both urban based),

⁴⁴ Despite the perceived donor focus on women's programs Murthy and Rao argue that the quantum of resources provided to women's programs by NGOs is still much less than to programs with men as the primary focus (1997:127).

⁴⁵ While there are movements around these issues, these are led by powerful individuals or political groups, rather than NGOs *per se*.

marginalisation that women face. If empowerment is being able to have extended choices, and to be able to act on those choices in a number of domains, then how the NGOs work with the most disadvantaged groups, and support them to deal with their own issues, is a key element of any intervention. An important factor that emerged from the discussion of NGOs and empowerment in Chapter Three, was the accountability of the NGOs to the constituencies they are serving. The next section examines this issue in relation to Indian NGOs.

Accountability and Indian NGOs

The issue of the accountability of Indian NGOs is usually discussed in terms of their accountability to donors or the state. Baxi argues however that the compliance of NGOs to state pressure and the consequent accountability has left them out of touch with their constituencies. Baxi goes on to warn that:

... when the activist [NGO] is not regarded as worthy of state repression, but when the people alongside her are repressed and brutally so the problems of accountability [to the constituency] assumes terrifying dimensions (1997:63).

Smith-Sreen (1995) looked at the effectiveness of four Indian service delivery NGOs, and related it to their management structures including their mechanisms for accountability to their 'members'.⁴⁶ She found that devolved management structures gave greater opportunity for participation of membership and

⁴⁶ Smith-Sreen uses the term 'members' in terms of the constituency or the people with whom the NGO was working rather than in terms of formal members with voting rights etc.

responsiveness of the organisations (1995:21).⁴⁷ She found five factors that had an effect on the accountability of NGOs to their members:

- socio-cultural environment, that is the history and goals of the organisation concerned;
- NGO's resources in terms of staff, membership, and funds;
- the organisational structure of the NGO including the board, its activities and external influences such as donors;
- the organisational strategy, that is the norms and values, and leadership style, and
- the organisational processes such as the group formation and co-ordinating mechanisms (p. 92).

Bava (1997:269) also found a positive correlation between NGO accountability to members and efficient performance, which he attributed to the NGO constituents being empowered. Likewise, Carroll's study in Latin America found a positive correlation between participation and both poverty reach and service delivery, and also between capacity building and poverty reach and (Carroll 1992:134). Also Sekher found that

... [the] more accountable leadership is to the user community more user friendly management conditions evolved, and consequently the more supportive the public is to the organisation (2000:11).

⁴⁷ Smith-Sreen developed an index of member accountability which covered three broad areas including: if the NGO listens to its members; whether it shares power; and whether it provides timely support. These were then correlated against economic benefits, social benefits and social vulnerability (pp. 73-83). In summary, high levels of accountability were correlated with higher economic benefits and medium social benefits, while low levels of member accountability were associated with both low economic and social benefits (p. 233).

What these studies did not look at was the detailed empowerment implications of the accountability relationship. Edwards' (1999b:371) study of the NGO PREM in Orissa found that when the NGO reduced its role as intermediary and handed over control to smaller representative organisations, this was an empowering process. Pantoja, on the other hand, found (also in Orissa) that while external agents such as NGOs were important in developing an associational life among poor communities, this associational life '... becomes heavily dependent on the intermediations of these agents, [NGOs] and the sustainability [of the intervention] may be low' (Pantoja 1999:64). In effect Pantoja is saying that the NGOs he looked at were weak in empowerment (in the collective sense) by not creating autonomous self-sustaining local formations among the poor to represent their own interests, but rather the NGOs took on the representative role themselves.⁴⁸ This conclusion tends to support Edwards' findings based on the case study of PREM. The issue of the complex relationship NGOs have with their constituency is important for the thesis as the notion of accountability of NGOs to constituencies (a 'downward accountability'), and how NGOs foster autonomy of the constituencies in a range of areas, is central to the idea of empowerment.

Conclusion

The long history of NGOs in India together with the on-going tension between the state and NGOs over the past 50 years, provides the context for the current role of NGOs in Indian development. The tensions between the state and the NGOs provide a number of important challenges for NGOs if they are to have an impact

⁴⁸ This behaviour can lead to what Sheth refers to as 'oligarchic tendencies' (1996:133).

on the levels of poverty that exist in India and particularly among marginalised women in rural India. The Indian experience, particularly the dilemmas outlined above, is important for the study as it highlights the organisational issues that NGOs face if they are to be effective.

The key questions that have emerged of Indian NGOs are those of identity and focus. Should the focus of NGO work should be around service delivery, which is the model favoured by the state as it winds back its services in responses to its own economic pressures? Or should NGOs be involved in empowerment programs that focus on the poor and marginalised claiming their rights from the state? If the focus is on empowerment then NGOs face issues around scale and internal management structures, particularly their accountability mechanisms.

These questions relate directly to the research questions for this thesis on the role of accountability in empowerment; and secondly, the effect of the range of accountability relationships that NGOs have, and how these relationships affect their accountability to their constituency. The field-work of the thesis examines the characteristics of NGOs in particular localities in India and the data analysis makes some comparisons to identify the key elements of an effective empowerment program. Chapter Five details the methodology and the study area for the research.

Rajasekhar argues that without constant pressure from below NGOs can assume a paternalistic role and a shift in priorities (2000:12).