

## Reconstructing Governance Towards an Equality of the Highest Standards

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### *Accounting for our Powers*

Let me begin with a quotation from Prof. Peter Evans who wrote on the role of institutions in development. He said that,

“The better part of human needs and desires are culturally constructed. Enabling people to construct and reconstruct their aims is as basic a task of institutions as enabling people to satisfy the needs and desires that have been constructed<sup>2</sup>.”

This last phrase of enabling people to satisfy their needs and desires is at the core of the Millenium Development Goals. The outcome document that is currently being negotiated devotes several paragraphs on ways of improving our abilities to achieve the MDGs.

On the other hand, the idea of “[e]nabling people to construct and re-construct their aims” receives much less attention. And, by this neglect, we accept the perpetuation of a type of disempowerment. There will be people who are unable to construct and re-construct their aims. When this neglect occurs in the presence of social hierarchies, be they based on gender, caste, ethnicity, then there will be difficulties in overcoming these inequalities and exclusions.

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<sup>2</sup> Evans, Peter B. (2007), “Extending the ‘institutional’ turn: property, politics, and development trajectories,” in Chang, Ha-Joon, ed., *Institutional Change and Economic Development*, Helsinki, United Nations University Press, page 49.

I raise these issues because our subject is accountability. It is difficult to discuss accountability without discussing issues of power and empowerment<sup>3</sup>. So that today, as we account for our performance we must also account for our powers.

### *Accountability among Unequally Powerful States*

Let's take MDG 8, a global partnership for development. Progress with this goal, and more broadly, in the area of financing for development is important for gender equality and women's empowerment because of its potential for expanding fiscal space. In order for gender-related indicators to catch up with the progress of others, more resources are needed. The additional resources for MDG 3 and MDG 5 will not come from a re-allocation of existing budgets because the overall shortfall for the rest of the MDGs is still very large. In addition, a re-allocation of resources places gender equality goals in competition with other MDGs. That's a losing proposition. The expectation here is that the global partnership for development will create an enabling environment for the expansion of fiscal space.

An accountability question arises. What happens if MDG 8 falls short of these expectations? One response in a state-centered multilateral system is to change the configuration of political alignments as way of shifting the balance of power and influence. In between, for example, G-20 and the UN, the Global Governance Group or the 3Gs came together seeking consultation, inclusion and transparency.

It is an imperfect response because it is never clear how the attempted shift in balance of power translates into a new policy directions. A heavy burden is on the presumably sovereign but very likely weak state. A partnership on MDG 3 and MDG 5 needs to be based on new policy directions. Some of these are: a sovereign debt workout mechanism and exit strategies from aid can help to lower dependence on unpredictable, volatile, and politically-weighted external financing sources. Ensuring that public financial management reforms integrate gender-responsive budgeting recognizes the value of efficiency and accountability while seeking to improve the balance of outcomes among beneficiaries of public finances. Putting in place a system of automatic macroeconomic stabilizers along with flexible use of counter-cyclical policies and capital controls recognize that macroeconomic conditions are subjected to external events that are beyond the control of many governments, particularly those who are not systemically-significant.

### *Contested Powers of the Nation-State*

The expansion of fiscal space and policy space does not bring guarantees of success as the experience of Nigeria suggests. Nigeria is one of the biggest beneficiaries of debt relief arrangements. It is also receiving additional aid for the MDGs. Nigeria

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<sup>3</sup> Keohane, Robert O. (2003), "Global Governance and Democratic Accountability", in David Held and Matthias Koenig-Archibugi, eds., *Taming Globalization: Frontiers of Governance*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

established an Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on the MDGs, which manages funds for various MDG-related projects. In addition an institutional infrastructure is present, including the involvement of state governments and two Millennium Villages. Despite the high-level attention, the extensive infrastructure, debt relief, new aid, and economic growth, progress in poverty reduction remains slow.

From an accountability perspective, there might still be some appeal to this top-down approach because within state structures and in a constitutional democracy, there are internal accountability mechanisms that are fairly straightforward and established. In addition to the usual checks and balances across branches of government, there might be, for example, possibilities of using litigation as a way of securing rights. Women's organizations in India have used this approach to improve service provision in some states.

But there is more. Accountability mechanisms exist within political processes. These mechanisms mediate political relations among diverse social groups being served by state structures. A challenge in this setting of competing demands on state structures is that promoting gender equality and women's empowerment is not a universally-accepted value, even when it is enshrined in formal laws, rules and structures.

It is easy to think of equal and inclusive partnerships for MDG 3 and MDG 5 as increasing the participation of women's organizations and networks in planning and programming and delivery of interventions. Certainly, among the Mexican states, even with differential trends in health provision due to decentralization, there are notable gains where there is high civil society engagement with the state and with the health system. But part of the political work happens to be about defending the gains from being eroded by groups that do not subscribe to gender equality.

At other times, the political work is about stopping social programs<sup>4</sup> from making things worse. Take conditional cash transfer programs. These have been criticized for adding burdens on poor women's time because it relies on her volunteerism to deliver the milk to her neighbors<sup>5</sup> or to bring her children to school. We need to be more conscious of women's responsibilities for care. These impinge upon the time available

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<sup>4</sup> There are several interactions that programs need to take into consideration as Sen (2010) says, "Understanding how gender relations work to define the experience of programmes requires focusing on who gets, or has access to, resources; how roles and relationships of work, responsibilities, cooperation, sharing or conflict define both women's and men's living and working conditions within households; how structures and programmes of the state and other actors (private sector, civil society) reinforce or transform those roles and relationships, and how normative frameworks affecting differential entitlements and responsibilities are challenged or reinforced by policies and programmes." In Sen, Gita (2010), "Poor households or poor women: Is there a difference?," in Sylvia Chant, ed., *International Handbook of Gender and Poverty*, Edward Elgar.

<sup>5</sup> See Box 4 in Razavi, Shahra (2007), "The political and social economy of care in a development context: conceptual issues, research questions, and policy options," UNRISD Gender and Development Paper No. 3, Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

for her to participate in social programs, in labour markets, or engage in production using household resources. The time burden is heavier when social policies use this gendered division of work as the instrument and channel for delivering services. A tax is placed on women's time perpetuating her disempowerment. Limits are placed on a woman's ability to "construct and re-construct her aims" and we need to account for that.

### *Our Task of Empowerment*

Our task of empowerment is a crucial element in the building of institutions for development. Where else will we derive the information that we need to improve upon our efforts? Only from the voices of those we claim to serve. Institutions of governance and accountability thrive on empowered peoples. I am tempted to look to the Nordic model of the welfare state for inspiration, which was described by Jon Magnussen, Karsten Vrangbaek and Richard Saltman in this way: "At the core of this welfare model lies the principle of universalism and broad public participation in various areas of economic and social life, which is intended to promote an equality of the highest standards rather than an equality of minimal needs<sup>6</sup>." September is our opportunity to create an enabling environment to construct and reconstruct our aims towards an equality of the highest standards.

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<sup>6</sup> Magnussen, Jon, Karsten Vrangbaek, and Richard B. Saltman, eds. (2009), *Nordic Health Care Systems: Recent Reforms and Current Policy Challenges*, Berkshire, Open University Press, page 4.