

## From “Liberal” to “Liberating” Empowerment: The Community Protection Approach as Best Practice to Address NGO-ization

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### Abstract

Several studies highlight the phenomenon of NGO-ization, pointing to the proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGO) guided by a “neoliberal mode of governance” and supplanting “indigenous forms of civil society,” primarily social movements (Dana 2013, 5). This phenomenon has attracted attention in relation to women’s activism, making the case that NGOs cannot promote “sustainable development and democratization” due to their lack of “locally grounded vision and [...] power basis” (Jad 2004, 40). This paper argues that the limitations of incorporating NGO modalities of work in rights activism can be better understood in relation to a hegemonic shift toward a more individualist and apolitical approach to empowerment. An alternative is outlined to address major shortcomings of the current development model, by recourse to an innovative approach to empowerment, the Community Protection Approach (CPA). To support such a position both theoretically and empirically, desk research is combined with individual semi-structured interviews conducted with nine women’s rights activists in Tunisia, Lebanon, and Palestine.

**Keywords:** Women’s empowerment, Civil Society, liberalization, hegemony, community protection

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### Introduction

This article attempts to conceptualize the observations collected throughout an action-research process carried out between 2017 and 2019 to develop the Community Protection Approach (CPA). The CPA is both an approach and a methodology to streamline actions within ongoing humanitarian and development projects in support of the affected population ([www.cpainitiative.org](http://www.cpainitiative.org), 2019). This research draws widely on field evidence of the implementation of the CPA between 2013 and 2019, and analyzes the exchange and feedback processes between affected communities and implementers in a variety of locations.

Drawing upon Sardenberg’s distinction between “liberal” and “liberating” empowerment (Sardenberg 2008, 19), we argue that the continued NGO-ization of women’s rights organizations has resulted in the perpetuation of what Sardenberg calls a “weak” meaning of empowerment, which focuses on

capacities and access, while neglecting the root causes of disempowerment. What seems necessary is to bring power back into the discussion through a “strong” understanding of empowerment to subvert the unequal power relations underlying patriarchal domination (Batliwala 2007, 114). In this view, empowerment is accomplished when the ability of individuals to make decisions and act upon them has been brought to the fore, which is essential to the exercise of agency (Ibrahim & Alkire 2007). Consequently, empowerment can be seen as both a process and an outcome.

The CPA has been designed to bring back the strong understanding of empowerment; through an analysis of unequal power relations, the CPA aims to ensure and support the agency of project beneficiaries – be it communities or individuals – to make safe and informed decisions. It examines generating forms of NGO-driven empowerment processes which, within “neoliberal forms of governance,” reinforce and sustain virtuous “indigenous forms of civil society” (Dana 2013, 5).

This article faces several limitations. Primarily, grey literature on the subject of empowerment stemming from organizations on the ground is limited, and that which is available does not provide enough evidence on empowerment processes from a critical perspective. In and of itself, this limitation reflects how the NGO model of humanitarian and development aid rarely assesses empowerment in NGOs’ day-to-day work, research, and processes, beyond “granting access to resources.” Additionally, this article has been drafted with no dedicated research funding, and thus it is limited in its research and methodological design beyond the evidence collected through the CPA action-research between 2017 and 2019. Even when such direct evidence collected by means of CPA activities is not presented, CPA action-research represents a considerable array of grey literature and primary data.

## Methodology

The article draws on a structured mixed methods approach developed by Gruppo di Volontariato Civile (WeWorld-GVC) in 2013, and used as the foundation for the CPA integrated protection programming. The CPA way of working, together with its ongoing development, is based on a process of action-research involving opinion experts, frontline staff and local populations, and refugees in Palestine and Lebanon, while occasionally including other areas such as Guatemala, Nicaragua, Tunisia, and Libya. This article includes interviews with participants from Tunisia, Lebanon, and Palestine. WeWorld-GVC has been applying the CPA since 2013, which recognizes the beneficiaries of specific humanitarian and development projects as not merely recipients of aid, but as integral components in the development and success of such projects: “involving those affected by the research in the design and implementation of the research – to encourage them to participate as collaborators in the research rather than being subjects of it” (Denscombe 2010, 126). To capture their voices, the CPA collects personal narratives (Bamberg 2011; Van Wessel 2018, 15-16, 23-30), among other qualitative and quantitative methods. These results are then triangulated with peer-reviewers’ and external experts’ opinions on the research design of the CPA. In reality, this process included approximately 55 consultation activities external to the organization, and some 25 internal consultations between 2014 and 2019.

For this article, an initial gender analysis was carried out on the CPA and its instruments, which provided us with some preliminary findings, which were then jointly reviewed by the authors of this article. We subsequently developed a number of research questions that were used to guide key

informant interviews (KII) with selected frontline workers, who were identified by their extensive experience and joint relations with local populations in Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). The research questions were also given to a WeWorld-GVC team, which has been working in parallel to devise a community empowerment manual. This team also participated in a final review of this paper. In addition, we conducted a thorough desk review and a series of semi-structured interviews with women's rights activists and key WeWorld-GVC staff. These KIIs were focused on issues such as NGO-ization, gender, and insofar as the WeWorld-GVC staff is concerned, their familiarity with the CPA.

### **The NGO-ization paradigm**

We start with a brief discussion of NGO-ization. Several studies highlight the phenomenon of NGO-ization as the proliferation of non-government organizations (NGO) in the region guided by a "neoliberal mode of governance," which has become the conventional model for social development. They argue that this modality of NGO-led development and activism is supplanting "indigenous forms of civil society," primarily social movements (Dana 2013, 5).

As Faranak Miraftab (1997, 365) points out in Mexico and Eileen Kuttab (2008, 100-105, 2009, 111-115, 2010, 248-251) in Palestine, the late 1980s and early 1990s brought about a significant change in the landscape of social activism globally, which is particularly pronounced in the context of the Middle East. After almost two decades of decentralized, mass-based organizations leading and promoting social change through grassroots activism, consciousness-raising, and active opposition to the existing structures of domination, the 1990s witnessed a proliferation of NGOs on the national and international scenes (Kuttab 2008, 99). Characterized by increased professionalization, larger operational capacity, greater specialization, and international recognition, NGOs quickly became the new *enfants prodige* of the international development system, with more and more support and funds being channeled through them by bilateral and multilateral agencies.

This is especially evident when it comes to women's activism. Structured organizations were not extraneous to feminist movements: in Latin America, for example, they have long been coexisting with more informal women's associations and movements, with which they shared the main objectives of popular education, political mobilization, and empowerment of poor and marginalized women (Alvarez 2010, 182). However, in the 1990s such organizations underwent a process of restructuring and professionalization, gaining unprecedented public prominence, and becoming the main interlocutors between national authorities and international development actors. Jad (2004, 38-40) describes the NGO-ization process of Arab women's movements, and highlights how these movements have lost their effectiveness as a result of the required professionalization and restructuring to meet the organizational standards expected by international donors and agencies. What made these earlier movements accountable to their constituencies was their broad social base and membership (Jad 2004, 38). Their history of being deeply embedded in the communities they represented stands in sharp contrast to the reality of the transformed landscape of civil society today, where women's rights NGOs are smaller in size and keen on international recognition; whose employees have little say or are unaware of important decision-making processes reserved for upper management; and whose work is project-based, responding to the needs of "target groups" often identified through criteria based on the global agenda for women's rights (Jad 2004, 39). Such developments are not unique to the Middle

East and North Africa (MENA) region, as women's movements and social movements in general appear to be set for a marked decline, with their capacity to mobilize and represent the masses being significantly eroded.

Most of the literature concerned with this issue agrees that NGO-ization represents the outcome of the specific political culture stemming from the neoliberal economic regime (Alvarez 2010; Awashra & Awashreh 2012; Azzam 2014; Batliwala 2007; Dana 2013; Jad 2004; Kamat 2003, 2004; Kuttab 2008, 2009, 2010; Mirafatab 1997; and Sardenberg 2016). Countering the narrative that perceives NGOs and similar organizations to be sincere expressions of international civil society and its ethical imperatives of solidarity, humanity, and inclusion, this line of thought argues that the role of NGOs is "not an innocent one, but one that foretells a reworking of democracy in ways that coalesce with global capitalist interests" (Kuttab 2004, 156). More specifically, NGOs embody a restructuring of public and collective good along neoliberal, individualistic lines. NGOs, critics argue, are unable to foster participatory development and promote sustainable development and democratization due to their lack of locally-grounded vision, legitimacy, and power base (Jad 2004, 38). Following this line of criticism, the next two sections will address the main weaknesses of the NGO model, thus exposing the key issues that any alternative model has to address in order to provide a relevant response to today's lingering development dilemma.

### **Dependence on international funding and agenda**

One of the main issues highlighted by international scholarship on NGO-ization is organizations' reliance on international funding. As mentioned earlier, the 1990s represented a milestone in terms of international support to NGOs: international donors jumped with both feet into the "development market," investing in NGOs as the "vehicle of choice" (Kuttab 2004, 160). Neoliberal political culture inspired a "less self-evidently progressive set of gender-focused policies, centered on incorporating the poorest of poor women into the market and promoting 'self-help,'" for which feminist NGOs were designed to be the standard-bearers, in charge of administering the planned self-help, social services, and training programs (Alvarez 2010, 182).

About thirty years later, NGOs appear to be victims of the generalized curse of foreign aid-dependency. With very few exceptions, NGOs have come to depend on foreign aid to implement their programs. This situation opens the door to a heightened vulnerability of NGOs to any changes in the financial support they receive from external agents. As one interviewee pointed out:

Today, the main issue [for Palestinian NGOs] is the total dependence on the donors and the consequently weak position at the negotiating table. Flexibility can take you to a place where you are completely donor-driven [...]. For example, you can respond to a call for proposals in two ways. You either put what you think is best for the Palestinian society, ignoring the directions of the donor; or you follow these directions religiously – you can either respond to the needs of society or get the funding. (Personal communication, 2019)

What is critical here is that NGOs' funding comes with conditions and instructions. Typically, it provides guidelines on the funder's priorities (e.g. women's economic empowerment) that the organization needs to comply with in order to be eligible for the funds. This inevitably raises concerns about the

autonomy of NGOs. Is it possible, under these conditions, to consider NGOs as primarily guided by the needs and priorities of their social base and, in particular, of the most marginal populations they are expected to serve?

Reviewing the different programs of women's NGOs in South America, South Africa, and the Arab region, Kuttab (2008, 109) highlights the significant degree of similarity between these NGOs' agendas, all the more astonishing if one takes into account the considerably different social and political contexts in which such programs are implemented. UN agencies' women's programs seem to have developed an orthodox feminist discourse, in the form of a standardized agenda that has been embraced by women's rights organizations all over the world as a prerequisite for accessing much-needed funds. As Kuttab notes:

Women's rights as human rights became the slogan of UN organizations, where a consensus platform has been created that sticks only to the lowest common denominator in that it does not relate to any local context and, in this case, the needs of Palestinian women under colonial occupation. (109)

Consequently, NGOs have in most cases severed their ties to their constituencies, reformulating their agendas in line with the dominant global discourse on women's rights, resulting in a disconnect with, and a lack of responsiveness to, women's strategic needs. This entails very practical consequences, as organizations inherit a set of pre-defined actions and implement them as if the demands of the people they are serving are already known – as if these demands could not be anything other than the needs listed in the global agenda, from literacy to birth control and access to microcredit. For their part, the proactive role of the intended beneficiaries within organizations is diminished; instead, they become “target groups” whose limited participation is relegated to identifying specific needs to be prioritized for the (short) duration of the project. Against this background, something seems to be missing – namely, legitimacy.

### **Lack of legitimacy**

As a relational concept, legitimacy bears no meaning outside of the relationship between the specific actors or groups against which it is “measured.” Nothing is legitimate in absolute terms, or in a vacuum: legitimacy is negotiated, awarded, and denied – in all cases, it requires a relation and a context, as well as a set of values or expectations that circumscribe it (Brechenmacher & Carothers 2018, 34).

In the case of civil society, the discourse of legitimacy has been framed in several ways by different actors, all of which represent specific sets of interests. Governments have questioned the legitimacy of organizations as a part of their attempt to shrink the space for civil society, pushing a popular conspiracy theory that frames NGOs as agents furthering a foreign agenda against national interests and security. For their part, international agencies have bestowed or denied legitimacy to different organizations, for example, awarding certain NGOs with funds and a ticket to the international development arena. It thus seems apparent that defining and evaluating the degree of legitimacy enjoyed by NGOs is not free from one's own standpoint, values, and political views. For the purpose of this article, the legitimacy of NGOs will be considered in relation to three main elements: who these organizations are (their identity as societal actors and who they are accountable to); what they do (the



relevance of the issues they address and the impact they achieve); and how they conceptualize the subject on behalf of which their actions for social change are taken.

## 1. Legitimacy

Legitimacy for civil society organizations stems from their identity as societal actors and groups that are constituted and guided by the people whose interests they seek to represent (Brechenmacher & Carothers 2018, 35). As the slogan “nothing about us without us,” adopted by proponents of disability rights activism in the U.S., hints: inclusion and participation represent a strong source of legitimacy for any organization. Such participation takes the form of a constant, honest dialogue with the communities or populations the organization aims to represent, as well as an intimate relationship of mutual trust continuously renegotiated.

Related to this is the issue of accountability. If we treat organizations as living, relational beings, we cannot explore their identity without taking into consideration who they answer to, or who they act on behalf of. If organizations are legitimate according to the definition above, meaning they embody the voice of the communities or groups they seek to represent, then, by default, that very same community should represent the most relevant focus of those organizations. Translating this into development jargon, we could say that downward accountability is another crucial element of legitimacy for local organizations.

How is legitimacy compromised? Several scholars argue that NGOs’ adoption of the diluted, standardized gender discourse stemming from the international agenda and frameworks, often irrelevant to the local context and its authentic culture, has alienated them from the needs and aspirations of their intended beneficiaries.

The people, not the donors, constitute the only source for legitimacy and accountability for the women’s movement, as well as for other social movements. These organizations are faced with a skeptical public who, at this stage, are questioning their transparency, maturity, seriousness and degree of responsibility. (Kuttab 2008, 111)

It seems, therefore, that unless NGOs are able to turn their attention back where it belongs, with the people they seek to represent and redefining their own priorities and vision according to those they represent, they will hardly manage to reverse the current trend of diminishing legitimacy and credibility.

In 2012, Raed Awashra and Majida Awashreh conducted a study on Palestinian NGO governance in the West Bank, with a focus on accountability. They aimed to investigate whom Palestinian NGOs are primarily accountable to – donors or the communities they work with. To measure this, they used information as a key variable: low levels of information sharing would highlight limited accountability, while significant amounts of information sharing would hint to strong accountability practices. In particular, public access to information, according to the authors, is a prerequisite for public accountability and participation, the latter made easier “when information is made available [...] in a timely manner” (Awashra & Awashreh 2012, 68).

The findings of Awashra and Awashreh’s (2012) study point to the fact that Palestinian NGOs are more

accountable to donors than to the communities they are meant to represent:

Accountability to donors is practiced through various tools requiring the dedication of time and effort by [Palestinian NGO] executives and personnel for routine paperwork (e.g. authorization requests, updates, progress reports, audits, payment requests, accounting papers, beneficiary lists, bill of quantities, and success stories to name but a few). This sounds like huge amounts of information are provided to donors. (68)

Conversely:

NGOs produce and share very little information with the public, while their efforts for greater participatory practices are tokenism at best. For example, Palestinian urban-based NGOs run websites, but limit these to basic standard information about NGOs' missions, goals, projects – and only a handful provide information on the organizations' structure. (68)

The linkage between the two dilemmas, namely the “international agenda vs constituency’s priorities,” and the “upwards vs downwards accountability” is manifest in the results of the study, in which the authors conclude that the majority of respondents stressed “two interrelated issues: NGOs function with a donor-driven agenda, and that their accountabilities are directed upwards towards their financiers” (Awashra & Awashreh 2012, 70).

## 2. Agenda and impact

Organizations also derive their legitimacy from the issues they work on, as well as the extent to which their work has an impact on the lives of their beneficiaries (Brechenmacher & Carothers 2018, 35). Fostering a true participatory approach entails developing an in-depth knowledge of the practical and strategic needs of the organization’s membership base, its priorities and wishes, its attitudes, and its norms. Such knowledge should inform an organizational strategy that responds to criteria of local relevance, directly addressing the needs of the population and reflecting their priorities. More than that, local relevance entails that such needs and priorities are not considered in isolation from the whole system of norms and practices in which they are embedded. In other words, local relevance implies that any and all organizational action needs to be political in the broadest sense. Being political does not necessarily refer to the formal or informal structures of public governance – rather, it “involves intimately the mundane practices of everyday life,” which highlights the ways that everyday practices represent the visible manifestation of the underlying dynamics of power and influence, and the patterns of exclusion and privilege they originate (Bayat 2010, 16).

The question of impact, in turn, is related to the extent to which organizational agendas are an expression of a locally-grounded political vision and understanding. Organizational programming or actions based on a time-bound focus on the practical needs of a narrowly-defined target group seem unlikely to hold the potential for meaningful, long-term impact, understood as a significant and sustainable change in one or more dimensions of human life. On the other hand, addressing a group or a community’s strategic needs with the objective to foster meaningful impact cannot prescind from an honest engagement with the structures of power that create such needs.

If we want to examine how NGOs fare in relation to agenda and impact, we need to look at how they conceptualize and address issues of inequality, poverty, and violence. Specifically, we need to identify whether NGOs are addressing these problems through an analysis of power and social relations, or by means of a “functionalist problem-solving approach” that targets the needs of atomized individuals (Kamat 2003, 90).

### 3. Depoliticization of gender

Similar considerations can be made with specific reference to the domain of women’s rights NGOs. Kuttab has frequently stressed that over the past three decades, NGOs have systematically applied a paradigm based on liberal feminism, which “conceives women as the sole agents of their destiny and considers gender as an individual rather than a relational concept” (2008, 112). This tendency has two main implications in relation to the agenda and priorities of civil society organizations and NGOs. First, any individualistic understanding of gender brings with it a necessary underestimation of the wider political, social, and economic context within which gender issues and women’s social rights are embedded. Organizations applying this paradigm tend to neglect the importance of conducting a thorough analysis of factors such as the control of (physical and intangible) resources; the resultant social expectations of gender roles in the productive and reproductive sphere; the intersecting factors determining specific patterns of discrimination such as ability, race, and class; the role that institutions play in perpetuating certain forms of discrimination; and so forth. While understanding and addressing such issues is the very foundation of any action aiming to promote social change, this appears to be sidelined by organizations that focus on problems of access to resources and services as an issue that can be separated from the wider environment.

Second, and relatedly, analyzing gender as the sum of the needs of atomized women effectively removes gender from the public realm, constructing it as a separate, private issue. This has the effect of depoliticizing it, and removing it from the broader political context and discourse that marks the difference between a standardized global agenda for women’s rights, and one that is relevant to the local context. This creates two specific outcomes: on the one hand, women’s programs are decoupled from broader social, political, and economic programs, thus marginalizing other overlapping issues, and creating a standalone “women’s sector.” On the other, this “sector” is internally fragmented into specialized and partial sub-agendas dealing with specific “women’s issues” according to different organizations’ missions and “expertise.” This has the effect of “compartmentaliz[ing] women’s struggle and experience, limiting the ability of organizations to see the big picture [and preventing] a comprehensive understanding of women’s issues, separating practical and strategic gender needs from one another” (Kuttab, 2008, 111).

Consequently, the impact of initiatives launched by women’s NGOs tends to be limited, as their actions and programs do not (nor do they truly aim to) address and transform gendered power relations. These organizations are therefore unable to bring about significant and lasting developments in the daily lives of a substantial number of women. Mainly focusing on providing social and economic services to individuals, NGOs seem to have missed the momentum to promote some form of transformative development that goes beyond narrowly-defined target groups and issues.

This section provided a brief overview of some of the main arguments concerning the NGO-ization



paradigm, with a primary focus on the accountability and legitimacy of NGOs; their decoupling from the constituencies they supposedly represent; and the standardization of organizational programming that fails to address the highly contextualized challenges that women experience worldwide. This literature review highlighted some of the common effects of NGO-ization, including the adoption of a standardized global agenda, increased professionalization and specialization, and the broad depoliticization of human rights and gender issues. Such findings were further substantiated by the respondents to our study, who agreed that NGOs currently find themselves in a position of almost complete dependence upon external sources of funding, and are therefore prone to adopt an exogenous agenda. This entails significant consequences in terms of participation and impact, and undermines the credibility and legitimacy of NGOs in the eyes of the populations they seek to serve:

Nobody likes to be donor-driven. We realize that, and we are not happy. But as NGOs, we need to survive; then we need resources; then we need to be flexible [...]. That's why NGOs now are in the worst situation ever. They are perceived badly by the society [that] would accuse NGOs of just taking the money and not serving the beneficiaries the way they expect them to. (Personal communication, 2019).

The NGO-ization paradigm was born and developed to analyze the features of NGOs in opposition to “indigenous forms of civil society,” notably social movements (Dana 2013, 5-6). Arguably, the NGO-ization paradigm rests on a dichotomy that understands NGOs and social movements as essentially distinct entities. Because dichotomies are conceptualized by a series of antonymic features – illegitimate versus legitimate, elitist versus inclusive, professionalized versus grassroots, and so forth. This has led many scholars to address NGOs as a “corruption” of an original model – the social movement – which is often praised in relation to the disadvantages of adopting an NGO model.

Our paper aims to depart from such a clear-cut distinction, and to go beyond vague calls to return to “idealized forms of mobilized grassroots movements” (Azzam 2014). It would be easy to reiterate the need for greater inclusion of bottom-up social movements into the programmatic work of international development NGOs, but that would neglect the manner by which such movements are co-opted into the larger fold of decontextualized, global agendas for women’s rights, as we have seen with examples from Palestine and Latin America. Instead, we argue that the shortcomings affecting women’s rights activism can be better understood in relation to a systemic shift towards a more individualist and apolitical approach to empowerment, which finds expression in the NGO-ization process, but is not intrinsic to it.

If it is in the context of everyday life that hegemonic relations are consolidated, then that is also where such norms must be challenged. Civil society, in particular, is the primary locus where “the seeds of a new conception of the world are to be found. A narrative of reality with the power to challenge the existing hegemony” (Kabeer 1999, 66). Civil society is thus the ultimate site of empowerment. However, what are the forms that such a process of empowerment takes in practice, and how is it possible to support it without falling back into the arrogance of “gifting” empowerment to a target group of beneficiaries?

## **Empowerment**

Perhaps, the question we should ask at this point is not whether NGOs differ from social movements (they do), or whether they represent the operationalization of a development discourse that is flawed by neoliberal assumptions that limit their impact, legitimacy, and ethical foundation (they do). Nor should we focus too much on proving that social movements themselves do not live up to their idealized image. Perhaps what we should reflect upon is how more than thirty years of neoliberal outlook have influenced our understanding of what empowerment stands for – in effect, launching a process of conscientization about our own assumptions and the limits that we all impose on our imagination as a result of the hegemonic neoliberal system dominating development practice and beyond. If the current development model is not working, if NGOs have walked away from their potential to promote democracy and social movements seem to have lost their capacity for social change in the face of a neoliberal world, perhaps it is time for all of us to start reflecting about what is the point of all this, and where we want to be headed.

### **Liberal empowerment**

Sardenberg (2008, 25) argues that mainstream development agencies and organizations have contributed to developing and perpetuating a notion of empowerment that is an extension of the social and political vision underpinning the neoliberal economy – what she calls a “liberal empowerment approach,” as opposed to a “liberating” kind of empowerment. This approach puts the focus on individuals and resources:

Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives [...]. Poor women and men need a range of assets and capabilities to increase their wellbeing and security, as well as their self-confidence, so they can negotiate with those more powerful. (World Bank 2002, 2)

As this example clearly shows, the focus of this type of empowerment is on individual development and growth based on a notion of rational social actors guided by individual interests. In this sense, empowerment is circumscribed to certain material gains, such as assets, skills, and resources, but also self-awareness and control, stemming from the individual and reflected in the “clout” they gain in terms of influence and negotiating power. Individuals in a neoliberal world are actors who have the potential to provide for their livelihood needs, to make their voices heard, and to demand, obtain, and own their own assets and resources. Thus, the objective of development is to empower beneficiaries to be proper subjects under neoliberalism. “The World Bank helps those who help themselves,” you might say.

Empowerment, therefore, is interpreted as “enabling” individuals, in other words, providing access to resources and opportunities to help them help themselves. The focus is therefore on individual situations, skills, and choices, coupled with a liberal emphasis on individual rights and responsibility (Miraftab 1997, 373). Conceptualizing empowerment in this way, however, shifts the focus away from the fact that it is “awarded” to someone by means of increased access. This obscures the types of negotiation, self-reflection, and group organizing that underlie such processes (Sardenberg 2008, 23-24). By logical consequence, the concept of participation undergoes a similar reconstruction; increased participation in decision-making; and an increase in the number of choices available to individuals, assuming that “gaining access to resources – or even achieving the economic or legal rights and equalities that might facilitate such access – will necessarily translate into greater capacity to

act” (Rowlands 1995, 88). Thus, the means by which empowerment is identified, measured, and valued takes on a quantitative and technical dimension (e.g. quotas) while neglecting processes that draw upon power through collective reflection and exchange (Sardenberg, 2008, 22).

Focusing the attention on the means through which individuals gain access to resources and decision-making processes risks reinforcing unjust structures and situations. This not only delinks them from the social and political environment in which they are embedded, weakening the horizontal linkages of solidarity and social mobilization, but it also takes the social and political causes of poverty, inequality, and violence out of the picture. In this way, “the individual is posited as both the problem and the solution to poverty,” which leaves the unjust structures and uneven relations of power untouched and unquestioned (Kamat 2003, 91). The result is the restriction of the public space to an arena where competing private interests and everyday practices intersect and negotiate, with no understanding of the uneven relations of power operating below the surface (Kamat 2004, 165-166). As Sardenberg (2008) notes:

This notion of “liberal” empowerment actually fosters “empowerment without power” in that it gives no space for changes in the existing power relations, nor in the structures of domination that are responsible for exclusion, poverty and disempowerment in the first place. This results in diluted empowerment (or “decaf” empowerment), as in the World Bank approach, which focuses on access to information, inclusion and participation, accountability and local organisational capacity, but does not discuss why some groups are excluded and do not have access to information, thus ignoring the structures of power that underscore the observed situation of exclusion and “disempowerment” in the first place. (22)

### **Liberating empowerment**

Sardenberg and other feminist scholars identify a second definition of empowerment that carries a radically different meaning – one of political change and transformation. While the “liberal” understanding of empowerment derives its main elements from neoliberalism, specifically its emphasis on ontological individualism and the privatization of the public space, this second meaning of empowerment – known as “liberating” empowerment – draws from theories of social constructivism and Gramscian hegemony, which articulate a radically different discourse of power and transformation. In particular, it gives prominence to the idea that power is embedded in all relations, institutions, and systems of knowledge, and is reproduced through social and cultural norms that “enable and constrain thinking, action, and behavior” (Pettit 2012, 3). Empowerment, according to this line of thought, is about transforming the power relations between groups and individuals in the political, social, and economic domain (Batliwala 2007, 115). In this sense, power includes but goes beyond the structures of formal domination, and encompasses the discourses, norms, and practices that are internalized by both the oppressors and the oppressed through the daily processes of socialization, based on the acceptance and reproduction of a “natural” inequality in roles, including between men and women. Referring to the oppressed as subalterns, a term first coined by Gramsci to encapsulate those social groups oppressed and/or forced to the margins of society, Crehan (2016) describes the hegemonic relation between the oppressors and the oppressed:

Subalterns inhabit a world in which the major conceptual structures available to them are themselves

inextricably bound up with the hegemonic narratives of the dominant classes. This is part of what defines the condition of subalternity. [...] Hegemony does not require that those who are ruled, the subalterns, see their subjugation as justified, only that they see it as a fixed and unchangeable reality it would be futile to oppose. Only to the extent that we accept, whatever our actual social and economic location, the hegemonic narrative portraying the world as seen from the vantage point of those who hold power we might say that we inhabit a common, shared world. (52-60)

This process entails a challenge to the ideologies and social constructions justifying inequality – in other words, “liberating” empowerment challenges hegemonic discourses and power structures. It pushes toward a revolution in the patterns of access and control over physical and intangible resources, and for a transformation in the social institutions that express and underlie the existing power structures (Batliwala 2007, 115).

Such an understanding of empowerment differs from “liberal empowerment” in several ways. First and foremost, it entails a holistic approach to human experience. It does not fragment and compartmentalize issues; rather, it highlights their interconnectedness and the interaction of different dimensions in determining the patterns of social injustice. Thus, “women’s issues” do not exist in a vacuum – gender is considered in relation to other personal and environmental elements that constitutively create exclusion or privilege, such as ability, class, political orientation, and race. Furthermore, such a prism of intersecting characteristics is viewed against the background of a specific context. In this sense, empowerment cannot be limited to the improvement of the specific conditions of a number of individual women; it requires a collective struggle for societal transformation triggering longer-term change within structures of oppression, including patriarchy (Sardenberg 2008, 24). Such collective struggle can be facilitated or supported by external agents, but cannot be bestowed upon beneficiaries. Rather, it is both the process of self-determination by which people can subvert the structures of oppression and an end in itself, being characterized by accrued autonomy, awareness, and agency.

We argue, in line with Paulo Freire's (1987) scholarship, that empowerment relies upon developing a critical consciousness through which the subaltern groups and individuals break the cycle of internalization of the dominant worldview and the assumptions it conveys about social roles and relations. Through conscientization, the socially dispossessed question the grounds of the status quo and their own powerlessness, rejecting the myths and discourses that make them “objects,” rather than “subjects,” of power and development. Such a process of self-awareness differs radically from the concept of “consciousness raising,” a now-popular term within the development industry. Indeed, it detaches itself from the transmission of chosen knowledge in favor of a praxis of active and continuous critique – an open process of construction of the capacity to question assumptions, reflect upon one’s own situation, and use this awareness to act collectively.

This understanding of empowerment brings power back into the equation. Nevertheless, power is a fluid concept, and can be conceptualized in several different ways. Thus, it is important to ask: which interpretation of power is best suited to “liberating” empowerment as outlined above?

In agreement with Naila Kabeer (1999), we argue that power is best understood as the ability to make choices. Empowerment, therefore, refers to the process by which “those who have been denied the

ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability” (435). Such a process of empowerment cannot be restricted solely to the granting of a voice or representation in existing political and economic decision-making structures, nor to access to resources. Rather, this is a long-term, disruptive process, requiring the “oppressed” to first recognize the ideology legitimizing their oppression, and then to understand the mechanisms that perpetuate this status quo, including their own participation within this oppressive system. This, in turn, calls for a “stretched” meaning of agency that extends beyond the basic definition, which implies the ability to make one’s own choices and to participate in decision-making, to encompass more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis (438). Agency, according to this definition, refers to both a person’s capacity to make choices and their ability to identify, question, and address the norms and preconditions limiting the spectrum of choices that they perceive as viable and legitimate. As Rowland (1995) notes:

McWhirter (1991) defines empowerment as: The process by which people, organisations or groups who are powerless (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others and (d) support the empowerment of others in the community. [...] Through all these definitions runs the theme of understanding: if you understand your situation, you are more likely to act to do something about it. (88)

Our suggestion, then, is to bring power back into the discussion, particularly through a “strong” understanding of empowerment that encompasses the subalterns’ ability to question and act upon the unequal power relations underlying domination (Sardenberg 2008, 23). Drawing upon the considerations outlined above, we argue that a concept and practice of alternative development can be built through a new emphasis on a process of collective reflection and conscientization. As Batliwala (2007) and Kuttab (2008) highlight in the Indian and Palestinian contexts, respectively, there are successful examples of new spaces created for women and communities to “collectivize around shared experiences of poverty, exclusion and discrimination, critically analyze the structures and ideologies that sustained and reinforced their oppression, and raise consciousness of their own sense of subordination” (Batliwala 2007, 561). Such reflections can lead oppressed individuals to articulate their own practical and strategic needs, strategize solutions, and recognize their ability to organize themselves to change the structures and norms that subjugate them. As one interviewee noted:

It is the concept of hegemony – to build a power system you need to win people’s minds. Many people think this way, without there being a logical framework behind it, but the more you ask them why, and question them, the less they know how to answer. When you want to empower a community, it’s not enough for us to be familiar with the underlying causes of oppression; it’s even more important for the members of this community to understand why they think the way they think. This is something different, because we usually distinguish between analysis and raising awareness. But in this process, you combine the two approaches and initiate a process of reflection. It’s important to keep asking ourselves why, and to get to understand how society has made us reach this point. (Personal communication, 2019)

The idea is quite simple: if people have space for discussion, they will start exchanging ideas and reflecting upon their shared experience of oppression. However, this contradicts several basic features of the current aid system, from the short-term project time-frame to the focus on targeted actions for



specific groups, which ultimately precludes the possibility to inaugurate a wider-ranging process of reflection and identity (de)construction. It seems necessary, however, to encourage this kind of discussion as a way to rethink dominant practices of development. We already see global attempts to encourage the transferral of decision-making power from the international aid and development sector to their local counterparts, notably within the commitments made as part of the Grand Bargain during the World Humanitarian Summit (IASC 2016, 10). Yet, these grandiose claims have not translated into practice (Metcalf-Hough 2019, 58-60). Moreover, international agencies and NGOs tend to seek organizations or movements that reflect their particular set of priorities for development – priorities that perpetuate the dominant, neoliberal ontologies that strive for individualized and “liberal” empowerment. Though arguably well-intentioned, increased strides for greater localization may inadvertently speed up NGO-ization processes and co-opt women’s movements, replicating patterns of hegemonic relations instead.

## The Community Protection Approach

In this concluding section, we will analyze how innovative approaches to development and aid – specifically, the Community Protection Approach (CPA) – can move this discussion forward, especially as it embodies a “strong” understanding of empowerment. Far from being a complete response to the shortcomings of the NGO model, the CPA experience can contribute to a necessary discussion about development and empowerment.

The Community Protection Approach ([CPA] [www.cpainitiative.org](http://www.cpainitiative.org)) is a community<sup>[1]</sup> engagement and empowerment framework that enables more effective and lasting strategies to reduce aid dependence by placing self-reliance of the affected population at its core. It provides operational tools to facilitate complementarity, coordination, and coherence of the response and assistance provided by national and international actors. The CPA is designed to ensure that people in need can pursue rights-based analysis and humanitarian principles for themselves, while setting the basis for a transitional strategy to reduce the presence of international NGOs and actors in favor of localized strategies to address the coercive structures impacting the lives of community members.

The principle guiding the CPA is that communities are not monolithic entities with homogeneous needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities, exposed to identical protection threats. Rather, communities are composed of individuals who live a unique experience, which shapes their interaction with other individuals and groups. Personal and social characteristics such as gender, age, race, class, ability, gender identity, and sexual orientation intersect and overlap with one another, affecting a person’s identity. Such a process is not neutral, as it is constrained by extant forms of social stratification and systems of power that determine patterns of exclusion and privilege.

The CPA framework reflects one simple idea: everyday problems are rooted in the broader socioeconomic and political context. The roots of different problems may intertwine, as one single underlying cause can be the origin of seemingly unrelated phenomena, as well as intersect with other personal and environmental factors, to produce distinct results for different individuals and groups. In light of this complexity, investigating the elements that lay beyond the surface of what is immediately visible entails a critical examination of a group’s assumptions about a given situation or problem.

While the idea behind the CPA is that the implementing organization or NGO acts primarily as a facilitator of this reflective process, it nonetheless aims to provide structure to this process, to avoid any reiterations of existing lines of inequality. The objective of the CPA is to provide an encompassing methodological approach for local and international actors to be able to respond to administrative and procedural requests of donors, while simultaneously enabling a nurturing environment that can empower local communities. The CPA is, therefore, complementary to projects and program cycles in each given context. The CPA, furthermore, is designed to evolve and be modified according to the results obtained. The CPA is designed to be flexible and adaptable to the conditions of each context, with the understanding that the nature of each actor and situation differs and is complex. It therefore requires a method that reinforces the capacities of everyone involved in the process, and caters to the specific conditions faced by the community the CPA seeks to support.

Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation model, the foundational theoretical framework of the CPA, identifies the level of engagement the community has, in this instance with either international actors or the duty-bearers from which they seek their protection rights, revealing the relations of power between both groups. The form of a ladder makes clear the various stages of engagement, with all the "steps" divided into three categories: nonparticipation; tokenism; and citizen control. After initial contact, the establishment of trust, and regular communication, during which discussions about the communities' rights, responsibilities, and options are held, the process of community empowerment through active participation begins with informing and consulting with community members. This one-sided, information-sharing stage shifts to a more active involvement from both parties as more public meetings and focus group discussions are held; multi-sector questionnaires are answered; contextualization is established through Narrated Community Perspectives (NCP) field sessions that ensure inclusive representation of Age Gender and Diversity (AGD) groups; and an individual protection approach<sup>[2]</sup> is initiated when a person's immediate protection needs have not been met.

First developed for application in the Palestinian context and later improved upon and piloted in other countries, the CPA analysis addresses the assumption that communities and affected populations are not necessarily aware of the causes underlying the problems they face in their everyday life – nor are the organizations that seek to address these problems. Among the factors explaining this potential lack of awareness, the concept of hegemony is key. As one interviewee highlights:

Occupation is the main cause behind disempowerment. However, when you ask people about their problems, you have to ask them a lot of "why's" to get a grasp of the real problems and of how complicated the situation is. Occupation is more than its tangible effects; it is the mindset it perpetuates, as well as the psychological effects that result in every kind of disempowerment you can think of. [...] In Palestine, what the occupation has been so successful in doing is taking away the people's understanding of what they want or what is best for them [...]. They don't have the privilege to find out for themselves the kinds of rights they are entitled to as human beings, and NGOs do not touch on this. (Personal communication, 2019)

Against this background, the CPA framework has proven the importance of triggering and facilitating a dialogic reflection, at the community level, about the main problems identified and their causes, consequences, and the coping strategies adopted to deal with them. This approach distances itself from mainstream NGO praxis in two ways. First, it moves away from the idea of "consciousness-

raising” with a predefined result in mind – rather than aiming at “sensitizing” a specific population or group regarding a given problem, the CPA adopts a probing methodology that facilitates critical reflection, helping this group to question the factors underlying disempowerment, as well as their own assumptions and acceptance of such factors. Second, this process is not aimed at collecting information and performing an analysis; instead, it aims to trigger a process that builds the knowledge and awareness of the community, not only in relation to their problems, but in relation to their lives, the meanings they attribute to it, and their ways of thinking. This results in a strategic partnership between the community and the organizations working with it, with the aim of developing a shared understanding of the internal and external factors that threaten the overall community and its different groups and members.

Nevertheless, this process can only make sense if the different parties involved in it are able to develop an intimate, evolving relationship that makes it possible to surpass the logic of “one-off focus groups” in favor of an open and continuous dialogue based on mutual trust. What matters, in this sense, is the possibility of constantly expanding and elaborating upon this dialogue, enriching the reflection and the knowledge developed by both the organization and the community.

With this in mind, the CPA mainstreams the AGD approach (UNHCR 2004) with the aim of ensuring that all individuals in affected communities are able to fully participate in the decisions that affect their lives. In this sense, the CPA strives to ensure that the process of consultation and reflection outlined above does not reproduce patterns of exclusion, and to make sure it is not limited to engaging only “target vulnerable groups.” Rather, it aims to trigger a process wherein all different voices are heard, both separately – to ensure that underlying power and social dynamics, including gender relations, do not prevent any group from freely expressing and discussing their priorities – and together, to stimulate the collective questioning of assumptions. In conclusion, the CPA facilitates a process of conscientization that has the potential to integrate “women’s issues” within the reflection of the community, thus making them a part of the construction of a comprehensive path of self-awareness.

The culmination of this collaborative analysis, for example, includes Protection Response Plans (PRPs), which are locally-developed strategies that do not only reflect the activities of a single NGO or actor, but outline a set of actions to address the coercive structures affecting the safety and dignity of the community itself. By nature, each strategy differs and does not pre-identify the set of intervening actors, but rather, combines all the elements for the purposeful engagement of those bearing the duty to ensure rights, and those with an influential role within the power, societal, and cultural systems affecting the community in question. This helps to address the coercive environment in a specific community, drawing upon the application of the Protection Egg model, which divides the sequencing of activities along a spectrum that determines their urgency and purpose, in which humanitarian and development activities are planned accordingly (ICRC 2001). The design and application of PRPs are an exception to the norm when compared to standard participatory planning, in that they help guide the continuous process of self-reflection of the program and its operationalization. Within the CPA’s internal logic, these PRPs become an evidence-based instrument that deepens the understanding of the root causes that violate a community’s rights, allowing for different AGD groups to tackle threats, address vulnerabilities, and build upon capacities. They do not only act as a list of activities to be implemented; they also identify the actions required to counteract specific hegemonic relations that oppress the agency of the community.

PRPs challenge the standard “project-cycle,” “sector-based” method of working for NGOs, since they require a “facilitator mindset,” working specifically towards the factors that prevent a community from demanding accountability from those responsible for their safety and dignity. This is oftentimes overlooked or sacrificed in order to prioritize life-saving activities or to apply a conservative approach to Do No Harm in contexts where power relations between citizens and the state (or other actors holding specific duties) are sensitive and not linear. While the need to be cautious and uphold standard humanitarian principles remains tantamount to any operation, it should not be at the expense of “overlooking” a range of doable actions that NGOs should adhere to. If a state, for example, grants limited access for international actors to assist affected populations in crisis, yet remains the main perpetrator for violations committed against such communities, then NGOs must seek not only to provide immediate assistance, but also to meaningfully transform these oppressive relations. To give another example, in the context of a crisis oversaturated with many different international actors, an NGO must critically examine its own added value in assisting communities, and whether its presence further complicates an effective and efficient response.

Regarding the CPA, these and other actions are not mutually exclusive to its application, and draw upon two key lessons. The first is the objective and transparent recognition that a continuous NGO presence stems from a dominant position and precludes the standard identification of an effective exit strategy. NGOs may intend to alleviate suffering or the oppression of communities, but their continued presence may inadvertently reinforce cycles of aid dependency without tackling the root causes of oppression and inequality. With the aim to render their role in assistance redundant, NGOs can accelerate processes that support communities to break from oppressive, hegemonic conditions. This point was reiterated by an interviewee who was commenting on the importance of an exit strategy:

[I]f you talk about empowerment, there is a fine line between being present and making the community understand that we will leave, because the purpose of us [NGOs] being here is that at some point, people will not need us to be around anymore [...]. Therefore, we need to have an exit strategy, and to have people aware of it – but for it to be sustainable, we need to have a good analysis in the first place. You can't have tangible positive change and a sustainable exit strategy if you just build a road and then leave. With communities that have been so systematically, institutionally broken for so long, there needs to be a redefining of what communities are to themselves in the first place. (Personal communication, 2019)

The second is the importance of assuming that an NGO does not lose anything if another actor or even another, better-placed NGO replaces it. The CPA reminds organizations of their responsibilities towards the most vulnerable; if that means that an organization should redirect its efforts elsewhere to allow for better-equipped actors to intervene in its place, then this should be done and not conceptualized as a “loss.” Project activities can be continued or not, but the process of maintaining an ongoing collective self-reflection with a community, with the aim to challenge the factors causing vulnerabilities and oppressions, should be part of the social contract among NGOs, international organizations, and community actors, and must be maintained independently from project cycles.

Challenging such factors requires the attainment of agency, returning to Kabeer's (1999) definition, for a community to actively dismantle and reconstruct oppressive limitations into new and imagined social relations that they themselves have a hand in shaping. To achieve this type of holistic agency, there

must be a continued effort to engage in analytical self-reflection with the population in question, and to be able to provide timely analyses and outcomes that can be used to comply with the relevant technical and programmatic standards adhered to by international actors.

## Conclusion

Applying principles of emancipatory research to recognize and deconstruct power relations, the CPA foregrounds not only the participation of beneficiaries, but also the direct management of research activities by community members. Participation, through an emancipatory approach, enables people to increase the possibilities for strategies that affect their livelihoods, and their capabilities to enact them. Our proposal is based on the necessity to contextualize and reflect on qualitative information and data collected with AGD groups, among other project and aid beneficiaries, specifically the self-reflections of community members on their own experiences, and how these influence their perceptions of dignity, empowerment, and change. Self-reflection represents a way to envision social change and to develop a different and positive narrative about their life (Benequista & Gaventa 2011, 45-47). At the same time, development and aid practitioners should contextualize this information, with the aim to interpret, understand, and translate all underlying meanings. This exercise is crucial in order to empower both the communities' life and NGOs' commitments. The whole analytical process is therefore a conscious process of engagement, where the added value that external, "trained" staff and "experts" within NGOs, is leveraged as per the guidance they can provide to the affected individuals in understanding power and social dynamics.

The CPA, however, is not presented here as the primary solution to the shortcomings of the NGO-ization of women's movements and those of other marginalized groups. Rather, it recognizes the need for organizations to engage directly and proactively with the communities facing oppression in a manner that draws upon their shared injustices, carefully formulating, through continuous self-reflection, pathways for change that confront the status quo. This is not simply a participatory process that factors in the opinions and needs of an affected population into humanitarian and development programming. Instead, communities take on the responsibility of designing and carrying out their contextually-specific plans, backed by evidence-based emancipatory research managed by community members themselves, gradually eliminating the need for international NGOs to conduct any work on their behalf.

In this way, communities can continue to question the underlying structures of power that exclude them from political processes. The CPA does not seek to assist with the formation of new social movements as way to a counter to the proliferation and shortcomings of NGOs in local civil society; rather, it aims to reduce the barriers that limit communities from taking ownership of programming. In other words, the CPA aims to make organizations more accountable to their local community members by building the agency of the community as a whole to make decisions based on their awareness of existing hegemonic relations that need to be overcome. The proximation between the community and the work carried out on their behalf will ultimately strengthen claims of legitimacy, and allow for greater downwards accountability. These efforts will shift humanitarian and development programming away from the domineering and universal neoliberal application of development work that erodes context-specific and bottom-up alternatives.



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<sup>[1]</sup> The definition of community, as defined by the CPA, represents a group of people that may be exposed to similar physical, psychological, and/or social impacts from multiple coercive factors and/or share the same resources, often, but not exclusively, related by place.

<sup>[2]</sup> The Individual Protection Approach (IPA) is a mechanism to identify and assess people whose immediate physiological, dignity and safety needs are not met; it supports, through guidance or mediation, the linking of right-holders to an appropriate service provider through a referral system.