Preface

The enormity of problems like hunger and social injustice can certainly motivate us to act. We can be convinced logically of the need for intervention and change. But it is the story of one individual that ultimately makes the difference—by offering a living proof. — John Capecci and Timothy Cage (http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/advocacy)

In various spoken and unspoken ways, governments and their development partners are gradually losing hope in the welfare approach as a means of improving the lives of the disadvantaged or people at grassroots levels of society. Some observers like Blanchette (2007) and Radu (2012) equate welfare to the promotion of dependency. Blanchette, for example, cites Tocqueville (1988) warning that by receiving food, shelter, and most other necessities, welfare recipients are not faced with the need to provide for themselves. Receiving welfare rather encourages idleness and facilitates ample leisure time at the expense of those who work. Radu (2012) also strongly warns that any administrative system whose main aim is to provide for the needs of the poor breeds more miseries than it can cure. In brief, welfare devoid of intention to empower recipients accomplishes little except to demean them as it undermines capability for self-reliance or self-empowerment. It is, therefore, in the best interest of the grassroots that empowerment has become a cross-cutting agenda in developmental activities for many nations.

THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT

The general understanding of the concept of empowerment in this book borrows much from Strandberg’s (2001), who explains empowerment as all those processes where individuals take control and ownership of their lives by choosing from an array of empowerment opportunities or projects. As a process, it offers abundant
learning opportunities, the outcome of which is a practical life of regaining self-reliance and self-worth (Blanchette, 2007). In a nutshell, empowerment is always associated with a positive change or transformation in one’s life.

The role of an individual in the empowerment activities is critical. Like Strandberg (2001) explains, the desire to be empowered is usually experienced first at an individual level when one becomes aware of forces that subordinate or disadvantage him or her. However, in most cases individuals who take action to challenge oppression, discrimination and exploitation do so with others because what happens at an individual level has an effect on the group and societal levels. While it is acknowledged that everyone can be empowered, there are barriers that can make empowerment difficult or impossible. Barriers, for example, can be experienced when policies sever link with the real needs of the grassroots. Successful empowerment projects are carefully planned to address the felt needs of the target groups.

Several theories of empowerment can be applied when addressing grassroots empowerment. The transformation and liberation theories, for example, challenge community members to move away from the expectation that authorities must change their circumstances to the realization that it is their efforts, commitments and hardworking that can make them escape their undesired situations (Kindervatter, 1979). In short, empowerment cannot be given to someone by somebody else; people should be supported to take responsibility for their own empowerment activities (Strandberg, 2001). Freire’s concept of “conscientization is a reminder that people should be aware of their needy situations and act to address them with the support of governments and other development partners.

One other critical theory that has been explored in this book is the capability approach that makes fundamental distinctions between what a person is currently doing and what a person is able to do or to become (Radu, 2012). Those at the grassroots, for example, who have been dependent on the welfare and no longer want this dependency, should be helped to develop self-confidence; to build the right competences and to take responsibility over their lives. However, by believing that the grassroots can act on their needs does not mean that they should be left on their own; governments and development partners should support them accordingly.

Transformative is another theory that informed arguments in this book. It is believed that people who have achieved this transformative level of empowerment are likely to question the status quo that has given few people power to decide for the ‘powerless’ majority (Bergdal 1993). Community members, for example, can challenge government structures and processes if they feel they are not well tailored to address the real needs of grassroots (Kroeker, 1995). Transformative encourages both the individual and community competence so as to reduce dependence on others.
THE CONCEPT OF GRASSROOTS

Quite often, the concept of grassroots does not only presume that vulnerable groups are without money and other resources for survival but also insinuates that they have no leadership and decision-making skills. This kind of understanding makes it impossible for policies and practices to involve the grassroots in decisions about what can work best for their empowerment. Thus, governments and development partners who try to help without taking into consideration their real needs are bound to fail because they act on situations they do not understand; or they only “half-know”; or they “do not consciously know at all” (Griffins, et al., 1998, p. 333). It is partly for this reason that empowerment of the grassroots in many countries remains a great challenge.

THE MAIN CHALLENGE TO GRASSROOTS EMPOWERMENT

Among the main challenges faced in grassroots empowerment is failure to recognize that the grassroots people such as the poor, people with disabilities can make decisions and act to change their undesired state of life. Those who are unable to empower self are prevented from doing so by different factors including policies and practices that are divorced from their real needs, problems of understanding what it takes to empower them; forces such as bureaucracy; inertia, self-defeating attributes and many more factors.

Like Deneulin and McGregor (2010) say, addressing the well-being of grassroots groups does not mean looking at what they have but rather what they are able to do. Cases in this book illustrate mostly what people at the grassroots have done that resulted in positive transformation of their lives (empowerment). The empowerment process is itself a continuous learning, of re-creating and re-directing efforts to achieve the desired goal of empowerment.

THE USE OF CASES/CASE STUDIES

The use of case structures in sharing real life empowerment stories is central to all disciplines. In studies of business, law, community development, adult education, social work and others, they are ubiquitous. Many authors have defined what a case or case study is and LawNerds.com’s (1999-2003) definition closely resembles the meanings as portrayed by cases in this book. According to LawNerds, cases “are the stuff of real life”. This description is true of the cases in this book. They share real life stories of empowerment in different and specific contexts such as Australia, Botswana, Lesotho, New Zealand, Tanzania and the United States of America.
The basic assumptions for using cases are common across disciplines; to learn from real life experiences. We understand cases to “contain the rules and also illustrate how these rules apply to different sets of facts” (LawNerd.com, 1999-2003). For these teachable moments to be experienced, certain conditions have to be met. Particularly relevant in this book are the following conditions; credibility, practical value and accuracy (LawNerds.com, 1999-2003). The ordinary meaning of ‘credibility’ is whether something or someone is capable of being believed” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013, p. 29). The cases in this book are true empowerment stories whose presentations have realistically and strategically integrated the basic principles or rules that can be emulated in different contexts of grassroots empowerment. The principles of empowerment coming out of the cases can aid the development of the right priorities, standards and policies, especially those aimed to strategically infuse the real needs and voices of the grassroots in their empowerment activities. This book thus offers key factors to consider when strategies for empowering the grassroots are being developed.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book is organized into fifteen (15) chapters, each addressing different sets of grassroots like women, community, the poor, people with disabilities, ex-convicts and the HIV infected.

Chapter I documents empowerment stories of Jitahidi women in Tanzania. In this chapter, Semali paints an impressive picture of women who through the establishment of cooperatives managed to be economically empowered. They became efficient breadwinners of families and active community development agents by using the indigenous means of production like agriculture and sold their products through cooperatives. Empowerment to them means being recognized as active contributors to the economy and wellbeing of their families (Jagire, 2014 cited by Semali). The principles of empowerment illustrated in this chapter include self-confidence, self-mobilization and determination to handle challenges of own lives despite discrimination and oppression resulting from circumstances such as patriarchal practices that recognize and accept male dominance of ownership and control over resources and power.

Chapter 2 acknowledges that women empowerment is a concern across the world (for governments, donors, academics and development practitioners) yet very little is known about relevant empowerment models and practices that can effectively address challenges such as feminization of poverty and gender inequalities. Nthomang and Tlagae present a model currently used in Botswana, the Grass-Root
Building Our Wealth (GROW), implemented by the Project Concern International-Botswana (PCI). The main goal of this model is to build capacity of the poor into competent self-reliant individuals. This chapter demonstrates that indeed this model can help women to realize their potentials and build strong self-confidence to turn their empowerment dreams into reality. Lessons of this case are in the form of effective advocacy strategies as well as illustrating how microfinances can serve as empowerment strategies.

Chapter 3 demonstrates what it takes to empower displaced communities. McIntosh, Chicca and Campays speak from the perspective of the displaced community of the Pacific Island from Tokelau, transplanted to New Zealand. They advise that time is ripe for us to accept that the disadvantaged, displaced and relocated communities are becoming common and as such they cannot be left out when empowerment issues are considered. Such communities are usually characterized by unstable conditions including poverty and possible extinction. This case illustrates that community empowerment is possible when it involves social actors who possess the ability to mobilize resources around their priority goals. In their efforts to retain the Tokelau culture, for example, the Pacific Island community from Tokelau invited the School of Architecture at the University of Wellington to assist them. It was through this partnership that they managed to attract active participation across the spectra of the community; the ordinary citizens, leaders and professionals to develop a centre as a platform for ‘capturing the essence of a Tokelau village’.

Chapter 4 showcases what it takes for women to be empowered in the midst of challenges such as marginalization, poverty and low social status resulting mainly from a culture of male dominance, patriarchy. Despite these challenges, Morolong insists that Basotho women have been always powerful in rural development projects as they are more knowledgeable on community development issues than their male counterparts. A great percentage of men spend their time away from home as migrant workers in the mines of neighbouring South Africa. Women in this case saw opportunities for empowerment through using a natural resource, water, as a source of agricultural produce. They used cooperatives to sell their products and gained economically. It’s a case that indicates the power of women to innovate with the most available natural resources.

Chapter 5 demonstrated how participatory approaches can benefit the marginalized communities. Mosweunyane and Montsho’s case describes the work of the Botswana Christian Council (BBC) aimed to empower the marginalized poor villages of Etsha in Botswana. BBC worked with communities and local leaders to build sustainable solutions to extreme poverty through utilization of natural resources. They engaged in a literacy program, basketry, brick moulding, craft shop, museum and the running of guest houses that provided accommodation for the tourists. These projects were
meant to empower the communities so that they can be self-reliant. Among other things, the chapter demonstrates that having a collective shared vision for the future can help improve decision making and lead to political empowerment.

Chapter 6 explores empowerment of people with disabilities. Croft and Loutzenhiser describe the process of empowerment as complex but achievable. They observe that it is through an in-depth analysis of the circumstances of people with disabilities and the use of the right strategies that empowerment can be effected. They used a case of a middle school boy with autism who was denied to attend his neighbourhood public school because it was meant for students without special needs. Henry launched a social media advocacy, a facebook, entitled “I Stand with Henry” to attract a virtual global group to help fight discrimination of people with disabilities. The facebook was a well-chosen platform in this era of technology especially for the youths like Henry. Indeed, this social media gave voice to the voiceless. Henry won the battle and was encouraged to continue the use of this social media to fight for the rights of other students with disabilities.

Chapter 7 presents barriers in some empowerment projects such as low esteem or fear to explore. Lekoko states that self-empowerment cannot be achieved with strong doubts about self-capability or confidence. Experiences of women who started Elegant Design business illustrate that ruminating painfully on the past can only hold back efforts to empower self. These women were laid off their jobs. With their very low level of education, it was not easy for them to re-enter the job industry. Instead of concentrating on what they have lost, they looked to the future with self-confidence or the ‘Yes-I-can-be-on-my own’ attitude. They eventually started a factory for making variety of bags (luggage, school, hand, purses, etc.). Indeed, self-initiative has proven to be an essential component of successful empowerment activities.

Chapter 8 enlivens one famous quote by Stephen Richards, that, ‘using your mind is a faster method to getting what you want’. In this chapter, Peggy Boswa’s (pseudonym) was focused on one thing, education as a source of living. She dropped out of school at standard 7 (primary schooling) having lost parents and having no one to care for. Peggy never lost hope for being educated. Networking strengthened her positive attitude towards life and further increased her self-confidence. For example, Peggy was encouraged by her ‘master’ (person she worked for) to continue schooling. She further got encouragement from an elderly woman who was her neighbour. All her relations paid; she graduated from sweeping floors (being a house maid) to being a shining star (being a senior lecturer in a university following her completion of a doctoral study). This achievement indicates that ‘where there is will, there is a way.’ The model of empowerment coming out of Mmolai’s chapter presupposes that self-confidence, perseverance and effective support can boast the success of empowerment activities.
Chapter 9 explores some barriers to grassroots empowerment. Lekoko, Chebanne, Bolaane and Matlhongwane opine that the sustainability of an empowerment project becomes a major concern when perseverance and self-confidence wear out; when there is no or limited resources to support the project and when top-down or government prescriptive approaches take precedence over the felt needs of those to be empowered. The Wood Carvers’ case illustrates that empowerment projects initiated by the grassroots using their indigenous knowledge need support from the government and other development agents. That is, knowledge resource alone is not enough to sustain a project. Owners of the Serowe Wood Carvers, for example, possessed indigenous knowledge resource of wood carving (knowledge gained through informal means) but other supports were needed like financial to afford some necessities like rental, marketing their products and purchasing materials. The project eventually closed down due to lack of proper support. The basic lesson of this chapter is that leaving poverty reduction strategies in the hands of the governments encourages the use of one-size-fit-all approaches that cannot work for all.

Chapter 10 illustrates that negative stereotypes can be sources of disempowerment, the signs of which can include emotional stress, keeping aloof and losing confidence to empower self. Through this chapter, Joseph demonstrates that societies can reject, shun or fear ex-convicts. When this happens, negativities build up and ex-convicts need support to cope. Joseph advocates for support through organized advocacy. He presents a case of an NGO, the Botswana Institute of Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Offenders (BIRRO) that was established by a group of rehabilitated ex-convicts to empower other ex-convicts by a way of facilitating their re-integration into society. Organizational commitment and the establishment of social networks are necessary to facilitate ex-convicts acceptance in the wider society. Joseph paints a positive picture of BIRRO’s work in counteracting the disenfranchising criminal identity that members of the public attach to ex-convicts.

Chapter 11 explores some barriers to grassroots empowerment. Through the case of an orphan (pseudo-name Orx), Modise and Lekoko define these barriers as government’s prescriptive procedures (issues of power and bureaucracy) and some self-defeating attitudes, like anger, negativity and closing out other alternatives to empowerment. The orphan in this case had hoped for economic empowerment (income generating) through his old barber shop. His hope was drowned when he got a kiosk shop instead of barber equipment from government poverty reduction scheme. The kiosk stands as a reminder that he has no voice and choice on what can work for him and this has led to the dampening of self-worth and being angry towards the government for providing what he did not ask for. This case clearly indicates that for empowerment strategies to succeed, there should be synergy between beneficiaries’ needs and the outside support.
Chapter 12 gives an account of an HIV infected person who experienced emotional trauma when he suspected that important information about his health is hidden from him. In this case, Magama, Sabone and Macheng-Letshwiti demonstrate that in Botswana disclosing information about HIV infection status is still difficult to do thus a great deal of support is needed to aid adults faced with this challenge. In this case, support came through the works of lay counsellors in an HIV and AIDS intervention program under the Ministry of Health. The main goal of this program is scaling up of HIV and AIDS counselling and testing in the whole country. This Ministry offers platforms for the parents to disclose HIV infected statuses in the family. The greatest lesson coming out of this case is that once this protected or hidden information is disclosed, both the parent and child are empowered. Empowerment here means achieving the freedom to talk about their statuses; being motivated to learn more about their conditions; being open and accepting therapy and even providing advice to those who need it. In short, once people know about their statuses, they develop ability to learn and change negative behaviours that make it impossible for them to take advantage of life opportunities like attending schools. Confidence and self-acceptance are thus great drivers of empowerment activities.

Chapter 13 explores the usefulness of information and communications technologies (ICTs), for example, the Internet and internet based tools for empowerment of the grassroots. Dhakal in this chapter presents empowerment of some grassroots in Perth, Australia, that succeeded because of using the Internet. While he acknowledges that these tools can achieve tremendous impact in driving environmental activism activities ranging from conserving threatened biodiversity to restoring degraded ecosystems, he, however, cautious about barriers that can defeat the effectiveness of these technological tools. Lack of access to adequate funds, for example, can frustrate grassroots actors’ engagement in environmental stewardship initiatives. However, regardless of these setbacks, the Internet has proved effective in facilitating active communication and engagement in environmental protection.

Chapter 14 illustrates that opportunities for empowerment are galore when the right choice and innovation is used. Suping and Garegae, for example, are impressed about women who own White Angels Yoghurt and Dairy business by having managed to make a living out of what ordinarily is taken as a challenge to women, that is, science, a knowledge area dominated by men especially in schools in Botswana. To deliberate on the social contexts of science, authors opine that there are different genres of science and this case relied on indigenous one. This case further illustrates that academic knowledge of science always needs refinement with regard to being applied to the social contexts and as such people who did not study it in school are unlikely to use it as main driver of their businesses. The main lesson from this case
is that empowerment activities should always be anchored on the right knowledge base, that is, doing or using what you know best, rather than choosing abstract knowledge and complex processes.

Chapter 15 illustrates that leadership is an indispensable element of empowerment activities. Importantly, it is not any leadership approach that works for a project; compatibility matters. Pheko, for example, describes a leadership style that worked for a self-initiated women empowerment project, Mabogo Botshelo Bakery in Botswana. She contends that the Triple A management style was the best for this group because of a number of issues. It encouraged them to be ‘accountability’ for their actions. Furthermore, the model emphasizes the importance of the right attitude towards the way things are done, for example, personal awareness of building relation, accepting individual differences and taking responsibility of the success of the project. Pheko’s argument is that self-initiated empowerment activities would not survive with other leadership styles such as dictatorial, authoritative and bureaucratic. Mabogo Botshelo owners opted for using their natural instincts of what can work well for them rather than relying on theoretical models. The Triple A leadership style emerged during observation by the author of this chapter and owners were not even aware of it because they have never been to school to learn about management theories. Pheko’s case illustrates that management and leadership styles should be adapted to the conditions of each empowerment case.

Rebecca Nthogo Lekoko
University of Botswana, Botswana

REFERENCES


