Empowerment as Development: An Outline of an Analytical Concept for the Study of ICTs in the Global South

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Contents

Abstract

This chapter turns to the concept of "empowerment" as a result of disenchantment with the concept of "development" in the study of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social change in the global South. It is a certainty that the proliferation of ICTs (mobile phones in particular) has opened up a range of possibilities and new avenues for individuals, aid agencies, and NGOs. However, overviews of communication supposedly for development reveal a field based on economic understandings of development biased toward techno-determinism. Moreover, these understandings lack sufficient critique and do not take larger contextual factors into account. Therefore, it is argued that empowerment is a better concept to draw upon in the critical study of ICTs and social change. However, empowerment is not an easy concept to define, and no analytical outline of the concept has been found in the existing body of literature. Addressing this lack, this chapter will trace the roots of empowerment in community psychology and in feminist and black power movements as well as explore different understandings of the concept from various disciplines. From

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this overview, the chapter suggests that empowerment should be studied on a) an intersectional level, b) a contextual level, c) an agency level, and d) a technological level. It further argues that these four levels intersect and must be studied in tandem to understand whether processes of empowerment are taking place, and if so, in what ways? The chapter ends by shortly applying these levels to a study involving market women's use of mobile phones in Kampala.

Introduction

Interest in the concept of *empowerment* stems from a general disenchantment with the concept of *development* when studying mobile communication in so-called *developing* regions (see Svensson and Wamala-Larsson 2016; Wamala-Larsson and Svensson 2018). In these publications, the aim was to understand the role mobile phones play for market women in Kampala. These studies were influenced by the development paradigm in general and the burgeoning area of mobile communication for development in particular (see Svensson and Wamala-Larsson 2015 for an overview).

Development has its roots in *modernization* theory, which can be argued to reflect an underlying *West is best* worldview (see Servaes and Lie 2015). The theory assumes that so-called *modern* societies in the industrial globalized North are the model toward which more rural and traditional societies in the global South should develop (Nederveen Pieterse 2010: 21, 23). A similar top-down approach is also present in the theory of *diffusion of innovation* (DoI), in which expert knowledge and innovations (such as information and communication technologies, ICTs) should trickle down to traditional and often economically less wealthy societies (see Tufte 2017: 12). Similarly, the *bottom of the pyramid* theory explains that businesses, governments, and aid agencies should start thinking of poor people as consumers and should start developing regions as a potential market for investors (see Prahalad and Hart 2002). Market competition is expected to drive prices down and allow low-income earners from the bottom of the pyramid to get ahead and stay connected.

When approached in this manner, the critique of development should come as no surprise. Nederveen Pieterse (2010) argues that ICTs for development are primarily driven by market logic, market deepening (p. 166), and technological fetishism (p. 168) and serve as a rationale for trade and investment liberalization (p. 172). Hann and Hart (2011) similarly argue that the ultimate drive for development in postcolonial times is a world in which the rich, developed countries help poorer regions (often former colonies) in order to improve their *economic* prospects. However, while economic aspects are important for development, they are not the only aspects to be considered (see Servaes and Malikhao 2014: 171). Such critique is also reflected in postcolonial perspectives of Western development paradigms (see

Tufte 2017: 1). Here, development is questioned and even considered hypocritical in times when debt repayments drain the income of countries in the global South and undermine these governments' ability to protect their citizens, while, at the same time, aid levels have shrunk to the point of being merely symbolic (Hann and Hart 2011: 116). Furthermore, conceiving of people in so-called developing countries as mere consumers, situated at the bottom of a postcolonial pyramid, and, as such, are only interesting for enterprises that aim to accumulate capital, is not only unattractive but also leads to questionable development interventions (see Dodson et al. 2013). The concept of development has thus been gradually replaced by social change, and the top-down models mentioned above are becoming replaced by more bottom-up approaches that promote participatory communication (see Servaes and Malikhao 2014; Servaes and Lie 2015). More evidence-based learning models have also been called for, such as Oxfam America LEAD's (Learning, Evaluation and Accountability Department) perspective on development as rights (see Van Hemelrijck 2013, who the chapter will return to).

It is apparent that development has not been used as a *critical* concept – understood here as the questioning and challenging of existing power relations. Empowerment, on the contrary, directly concerns unequal power relations (Sadan 2004; Kabeer 1999: 437). Here, power is often linked to Marxist theory and thus located in relations between those who control the means of production and the so-called market (Burton and Kagan 1996). The consequences of the market on the development of individuals, culture, and communication have been developed in critical theory (see Meyer-Emerick 2005: 542). Today, when the market is seen as the harbinger of all good things, there is a risk of identifying empowerment with consumer choice in a commodity market (Burton and Kagan 1996). Thus, to approach empowerment as a critical concept entails both the questioning of the logic of market capitalism and a focus on those without power, with the aim of improving their situation.

However, the concept of empowerment is not easy to draw upon when analyzing communication in the global South, as there is no shared definition of it (Choudhury 2009: 343). It is considered fuzzy (Kabeer 1999: 436) and elusive (Hill Collins 2000: 19). It is both under-defined and overused in academic, policy, and public discourses (Kleine 2013: 31). Moreover, it occurs on many different levels (individual, group, organization, and community [see Sadan 2004]) and covers and materializes through a variety of different processes (Drolet 2011: 633). Empowerment can be understood both as an outcome and a process (Sadan 2004), as a value orientation for implementing change, and as a theoretical model for understanding such implementation (Zimmerman 2000).

Etymologically, the concept comprises the root, *empower*, and the suffix *-ment.* Similarly, *empower* is composed by *em-* and *power*. Here, the prefix *em-* is probably used with the same meaning as *in-.* Thus, "empower" literally means "into/towards power" (Lincoln et al. 2002: 271–272). While it is the powerless who are the objects of empowerment, the agent of such change has varied in the history of the concept. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *empowerment* is defined as the granting/authorizing of power to an individual or group (by someone else), as

oneself becomes stronger and more confident in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights, as well as someone else supporting others to discover and claim power. Today, many emphasize that those who live in poverty should be viewed as empowerment's primary agents (Van Hemelrijck 2013: 29).

In this chapter, empowerment is defined as those without power taking control over their life situation, destiny, and environment. As such, it is a normative concept (see Servaes and Lie 2015: 126). Empowerment is also a deeply political concept (Meyer-Emerick 2005: 543), as it conceptualizes social change in terms of the powerless gaining greater control (Sadan 2004) and challenging existing power relations (see also Kabeer 1999: 437). This resonates in Oxfam America's definition of empowerment as a "significant and sustainable change in power relations that enables excluded and marginalized people to realize their rights to access and manage the resources, services and knowledge they need" (Van Hemelrijck 2013: 31). It is important to point out that power is not a zero-sum game (Lincoln et al. 2002: 275), which means that empowering those without power does not necessarily mean taking power away from those already in charge of their life situation, destiny, and environment. This is nicely illustrated by Hall (1992, in Lincoln et al. 2002: 275) when discussing the empowerment of women: It is not the goal of women to take power away from men, but rather, the goal is to develop their own power.

A look at the history of the concept takes us back to the 17th century, when its use was first recorded. At that time, to empower meant to authorize/license someone to do something (Lincoln et al. 2002: 272). Contemporary academic use of the concept is accredited with having originated in American community psychology. It is claimed that Rappaport introduced the concept into social work and social psychology in the 1980s. He defines empowerment as the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their own lives (Rappaport 1984). Social psychologists identified the need for more interventionist approaches in order to move beyond mere descriptions of powerlessness to identify viable strategies of intervention for change to happen (Burton and Kagan 1996). Thus, empowerment came to underline intentional, ongoing processes in local communities, which involve mutual respect, critical reflection, and group participation through which people in distress, who lack the aptitude and an equal share of resources, can gain greater access to and control over those resources (Zimmerman 2000). Here, empowerment revolves around self-help, meaning the capacity of individuals, groups, and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power, and achieve their self-realized goals (Adams 2008: 6).

This history of empowerment in the field of social work and social psychology has made its mark, especially in the more capability-centered approach to which the chapter will return. For now, it suffices to point out that empowerment is used in many different fields. But as Lincoln and her co-authors (2002) emphasize, empowerment is contested and is used differently when addressing women, minority groups, education, community care, politics, or management theory. This ambiguity is problematic if it is aiming at employing empowerment as an analytical tool for studying and understanding communication and social change. Therefore, the

purposes of this chapter are to develop empowerment as an analytical concept and to suggest a way of studying this.

The chapter will take as its point of departure feminist and black feminist theoretical concepts which have been influential in the development of the concept of empowerment. Indeed, perhaps empowerment is most commonly associated with feminism and gender equality. Feminists have emphasized the importance of an intersectional level of axes of oppression when studying and understanding empowerment. In addition, feminists emphasize that it is not only the intersectional level of larger power structures that is important to consider but also the contextual level, in terms of the particular situations women find themselves in; therefore, opportunity structures and constraints on the contextual level are important to include. However, it is not enough to study and understand empowerment by only attending to axes of oppression; contextual opportunity structures and constraints – the agency of those without power – must also be accounted for in terms of their capabilities and their awareness of the situation they find themselves in. Finally, the communication platforms used and their affordances also need to be attended to when studying communication and social change. These four levels intersect and feed off each other, but for the sake of analytical clarity, they will be individually outlined here. The chapter ends by applying these levels briefly in a study of mobile phones and market women in Kampala.

Intersectional Level: Empowerment and Axes of Oppression

Feminism has been present in development discourses from the 1980s in "women in development" approaches (later replaced by Gender and Development; see Servaes and Lie 2015: 126). From an empowerment perspective, feminists have been successful in connecting empowerment to challenging existing patriarchal power structures and to support women to take charge of – and transform – their life situations (Drolet 2011: 634, 639). Empowerment is often linked to women and girls, especially when connected to development such as in United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that replaced the MDGs in 2016. Here, it is claimed that (women's) empowerment is necessary to overcome obstacles associated with poverty and development. Given that women's empowerment concerns women challenging existing patriarchal norms to improve their own wellbeing (Bali Swain 2012: 59, 63), it directly points to patriarchal power structures as key obstacles (structures that are often entangled with traditional social beliefs and practices; see, e.g., Choudhury 2009: 342). But there are many more structures at play, such as capitalism (as previously discussed), sexism, ageism, and, especially, ethnicity.

The Civil Rights Movement in the USA has been important in the conceptualization of empowerment. One of the first articles written on the topic was titled *Toward Black Political Empowerment* (Conyers 1975), which served as inspiration for more articles that discuss empowering the black community. Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement intersect in black feminist thought (see Hill Collins 2000).

Historically, black feminism grew out of a disenchantment with the sexism of the Civil Rights Movement and racism of the feminist movement and asserts that sexism, gender inequality, class oppression, and racism are bound together. It became apparent that black women were positioned within structures of power fundamentally differently than that of white women. In line with this, Hill Collins (2000: 18) introduced what she calls a *matrix of domination*. Through this concept, she explores how intersecting axes of oppression are organized, for example, through schools, housing, employment, et cetera (see Hill Collins 2000: 228). Along the same line, black feminism (and related concepts of intersectionality) contributes with an understanding that those without power are fundamentally different from each other because of their specific positions in the intersecting axes of oppression. As Hill Collins (2000) states, "Developing a Black feminist politics of empowerment requires specifying the domains of power that constrains Black women" (p. 19), which focuses on how "the matrix of domination is structured along certain axes – race, gender, class, sexuality and nation" (p. 288–289).

When empowering women, women themselves and their experiences should be included (Harding 1991: 152). Women's experiences result in diverse *standpoints*, which should be used as resources that can provide multiple vantage points (ibid.: 119). However, women's experiences are mostly absent because conceptual frameworks generated from within a patriarchal system fail to enable women to make sense of their experiences (Haraway 1991). Therefore, women's experiences from their own particular *standpoints* need to be listened to and considered not only in terms of collecting and sharing knowledge of oppression and domination but also in terms of enabling those without power to define their own realities (Hill Collins 2000: 274; see also Communication for Social Change, Tufte 2017: 13). This is about leaving behind "the status of objects to assume the status of historical subjects" (Freire 1996: 141). Partiality, not universality, is the condition of being heard (Hill Collins 2000: 270; see also Freire 1996: 90). This is not about emphasizing how different groups are affected differently along the different axes of oppression (e.g., white women from black women from black men) but rather about highlighting that black women's experiences serve as specific *standpoints* from which connections to other disempowered groups could be explored (Hill Collins 2000: 270). Each woman speaks from her own standpoint and contributes with her specific *situated knowledge* (a concept the chapter will return to). By acknowledging this, those without power can become better at considering others without power – and their standpoints – without relinquishing the uniqueness of themselves (Hill Collins 2000: 270). It is important to note here that axes of oppression and people's positions within them are not static but constantly changing.

The feminist discussion of axes of oppression – in particular how they intersect and lead to unequal power relations – tends to refer to women as a collective group. However, it is important for the argument in this chapter to move beyond the individual-collective dichotomy, as the individual cannot be fully separated from the collective and vice versa. Individual black women's experiences have fostered group commonalities that encourage the formation of a group-based collective standpoint (Hill Collins 2000: 24). Standpoint feminism helps us understand this,

as it emphasizes the individual (woman) as imperative when understanding (women's) empowerment on a collective level (see Ristock and Pinnell 1996: 1). In other words, although women as a collective can act together to "displace oppressive power relations" (Riordan 2001: 282), change also has to happen at the individual level. The disempowered, who are forced to remain motionless on the outside, "can develop the 'inside' of a changed consciousness" (Hill Collins 2000: 118). What is highlighted here is that any analysis of women's empowerment on a collective level needs to take into account individual women's interpretations and experiences. Without doubt, the female collective is important for such individual experiences. Belonging to a group may lead to the creation of social capital and could provide support structures which are important in empowering the individual (Bali Swain 2012: 60; see also Tufte 2017: 2). After all, *the personal is political*, as the famous feminist slogan goes. Feminist scholars contribute with the idea that the individual and the collective are not in a dichotomized relationship to each other and that processes of empowerment move and morph between individuals, groups, communities, and collectives. Thus, any theory of empowerment needs to convincingly integrate levels of individuals, collectives, and societal structures (Sadan 2004: 137).

Contextual Level: Empowerment, Opportunities, and Constraints in the Situation

Connected to the previous discussion of standpoint feminism and the individual versus the collective is the idea of *situatedness*. Feminists have shown how knowledge and power inequalities are situated in the different contexts women find themselves in (Haraway 1991). As Hill Collins (2000) argues, "Race and gender may be analytically different, but in Black women's life they work together" (p. 269). People are beings in a situation, "rooted in temporal-spatial conditions which mark them and which they also mark" (Freire 1996: 90). But whereas the previous level dealt with larger intersecting axes of oppression on a macro level, situatedness puts an emphasis on the contextual level in which particular situations give rise to particular constraints as well as opportunities. What brings about empowerment among women in the globalized North is not necessarily the same in African countries, to make a crude comparison. For example, Kole (2001) underlines the significance of gender, geographical difference, context, and other micro aspects when examining gender empowerment. Highly aware of the different contexts in Africa, Kole realizes that disparities exist between and within the various women's groups; thus, different needs and problems are seen in different parts of the continent (Kole 2001: 160). Resources and limitations exist in different situations (contexts, cultures, and regions) and need to be taken into consideration, for example, when women without power struggle against patriarchal structures. Social change takes place in specific situations which both constrains and provides opportunities for change to happen. In other words, the specific situations that those without power find themselves in need to be foregrounded when studying

empowerment (as also highlighted in Oxfam America's perspective; see Van Hemelrijck 2013: 29). These contextual levels also concern relational aspects and the social networks one is situated in (Van Hemelrijck 2013: 233; Servaes and Lie 2015: 126).

For an analytical study of the structures at the contextual level, Kitschelt's (1986) article on *opportunity structures* is helpful. In his study of multinational social movements that campaign for an antinuclear world, he identifies *opportunity structures* as comprised of a specific "configuration of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilisation which facilitates the development of protest movement in some instances and constrain them in others" (p. 58). Opportunities do not determine whether social movements are successful or social change is possible, but should be understood as a factor that influences an actor's choice of strategy. While not fully determining, opportunities appear to be an important factor in understanding the actual possibility of those without power to take control over their life situation, destiny, and environment. The concept of opportunity structures underlines contextual factors when studying actors' possibilities for empowerment in a given situation. Here, opportunity structures are proposed as an analytical concept, not a strategic concept for a cost-benefit analysis for making rational choices when evaluating different courses of action (see, e.g., Cammaerts 2012: 118–119; Tufte 2017: 85–86).

Kitschelt claims that although unequal power relations are necessary conditions for social mobilization to arise, they are not enough to bring about social change. Actors also need to discern an opportunity to influence and induce social change in order to mobilize (Kitschelt 1986). Thus, a crucial dimension of opportunity structures is the perceived openness or closeness of institutions for change as well as the institutional capacity to advance change and effectively implement policies once they are decided. Institutions can range from being open and responsive in attempting to assimilate demands from actors seeking change to being closed and repressive. Political/social systems' institutional capacity and willingness to allow actors access to development processes also differ. In addition, Oxfam America highlights the role of institutions in its perspective (Van Hemelrijck 2013: 33). In other words, institutions need to be taken into account when studying and understanding empowerment.

While Kitschelt's main focus concerns the institutions in the context under study, it is important to underline that opportunities, as well as constraints, can be found on many other levels such as the larger sociocultural community and economic levels. Sen (1999: 38–39), for example, outlines what he labels "opportunity aspects" in terms of political freedoms, economic facilities, healthcare, education, trust, and social safety (the chapter will return to this). Furthermore, contextual structures are not the only important aspect for empowerment to happen. Kitschelt (1986) also highlights the actors themselves and their agency. Those without power need not only actual opportunities and institutional openings to become empowered but also the ability to perceive such opportunities in order to act upon them (as actors with agency). This leads to the next section, which turns to agency and the capabilities of those without power.

Agency Level: Empowerment, Capabilities, and Critical Awareness

To understanding empowerment, we also have to consider the agency of individuals and groups. People are the true agents of change (Tufte 2017: foreword viii) and "development is thoroughly dependent on the free agency of people" (Sen 1999: 4). Empowering the powerless to challenge power relations requires those without power having/sensing that they have the capability to do so – that they believe another world is possible and that this world is within reach.

Many scholars' definition of empowerment relates to abilities and capabilities (on the level of the individual as well as the collective). Adams (2008) defines *empowerment* in the field of social work as "the *capacity* of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals" (p. 6, italics added). Bush and Folger (1994) similarly understand empowerment as a process that restores one's sense of self and value, at the same time, intensifying one's *ability* to address social problems. Bali Swain (2012: 60) argues that empowerment is an individual or a group's *capability* to choose and, from this choice, have the ability to alter their situation. Lennie and Tacchi (2013) approach empowerment as "recognizing your power to create/induce change" (p. 108). Van Hemelrijck (2013) understands empowerment as "the expansion of an individual or a group's *ability* to make transformative life choices" (p. 34, italics added). Servaes and Malikhao (2014) define empowerment as the ability of people to influence "the wider system and take control of their lives" (p. 175). Often cited here is Kabeer (1999), who defines empowerment as the process through "which those who have been denied the *ability* to make strategic life choices acquire such an *ability*" (p. 437, italics added).

Thus, it seems that empowerment concerns agencies, abilities, and choices. This focus resonates in Sen's (1999) *capability approach*. This approach has been widely used in studies of development (Nederveen Pieterse 2010) and has challenged the growth-oriented focus of development (Tufte 2017: 27). Sen (1999) theorizes development as a kind of freedom that lends itself toward the capacity of individuals to not only assess their situations but also have the capability to transform them. Within the area of mobile communication and development (M4D), Smith et al. (2011) have applied Sen's theory by emphasizing how mobile phones alter users' capabilities through increased access to timely and relevant information as well as through expanded possibilities for connectedness between people. Furthermore, Smith et al. (2011) argue that Sen's capability approach is useful for looking beyond traditional economic measures of development and, instead, consider empowerment (which coincides with the aim of this chapter). In other words, development and empowerment almost become the same thing when discussed through the lens of Sen's capability approach (see also Van Hemelrijck's 2013 discussion of development as rights and empowerment, p. 30). Nevertheless, Sen does not say much about empowerment in his book, nor does he define it.

While feminist scholarship claims that powerlessness (and thus also empowerment) is different in different intersecting axes of oppression and takes place on different levels (from the individual to the collective), Sen highlights that

empowerment entails possessing certain capabilities in order to induce change, for example, resources, agencies, and skills (see Kabeer 1999). Capabilities can be located both in the individual and in the collective. This is important to underline because Sen has been criticized for placing too much focus on the individual at the expense of a structural understanding and thus reducing empowerment to individual capabilities. Feminist scholars have warned against solely focusing on the individual, arguing that this unwittingly advances a sense of entitlement rather than poses a challenge to patriarchal and capitalist structures (Riordan 2001: 282). Nevertheless, Sen (1999) does make it clear that what people can achieve "is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers (. . .)" (p. 5). He also emphasizes "the role of social values and prevailing mores" (p. 9) and devotes an entire chapter to women's agency and social change (p. 189). Although Sen places agency and capabilities at the center of his analysis, he is not oblivious to the influence of power structures and contextual aspects on capabilities. He connects opportunities that people have to their personal and social circumstances (Sen 1999: 17). In other words, a proper understanding and analysis of empowerment needs to take both the levels of the individual and the collective/structural into account and acknowledge how the power to change one's life situation, environment, and destiny moves and morphs between these different levels.

A similar critique can be directed at Oxfam America's perspective on development as rights (and empowerment), as it tends to be too focused on the individual at the expense of larger structural aspects. Indeed, Oxfam America offers a sophisticated and holistic understanding of empowerment in terms of *agency*, *institutions*, and *societal relationships* (see Van Hemelrijck 2013: 33). Such an understanding is similar to the proposed model of this chapter, as institutions and societal relationships resonate on the contextual level and agency does so on the agency level. However, larger structures are lacking in their understanding and measure of empowerment. This is perhaps not surprising, as this rights-based approach is explicitly proposed as a consequence of a "disillusionment with the welfare state" (Offenheiser and Holcombe 2003: 270) and a desire to move human rights "beyond its state-centric paradigm" (ibid.: 274). In their overview of the rights-based approach, Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi (2004: 1417) discusses this in relation to replacing a needs-based approach with a rights-based approach to development. Such a move places the individual at the center of the analysis. Basing their analysis on Sengupta's argument on the right to development as a human right, Offenheiser and Holcombe (2003) further argue that human rights are granted to the people by themselves (see p. 277), begging the question of who to hold accountable for the failure of delivering such rights and how. The individual is of course important to consider, as this section on the agency level of empowerment highlights. This should however not be done at the expense of a larger macrostructural analysis. It must be possible to both consider larger axes of oppression while, at the same time, acknowledging the role of individuals and their capabilities and right "to access and manage the resources, services and knowledge they need for strengthening their livelihood, improving their well-being" (Van Hemelrijck 2013: 33).

Acquiring capabilities is one thing, but becoming aware of that change is possible is another. Change requires choice – something which suggests that alternatives exist (Kabeer 1999: 437), or, at least, the possibility to imagine alternatives. This can be connected to Gramsci's idea of *hegemony* – the mechanisms through which some can exert domination without crude force and with some level of consent from those being dominated (Burton and Kagan 1996). To acquire the capability to change one's life situation, environment, and destiny, such consent needs to be challenged. The powerless need to understand why they are disempowered. In his well-known writings on pedagogy and emancipation of the poor, Freire (1996) elaborates on this through the concept of *conscientizaçao* – or critical consciousness, for lack of a better translation. He underlines the importance for the oppressed to become aware of their situation and argues that being passive means being complicit in their oppression and indirectly giving consent to the very mechanisms/structures/groups that oppress them. Critical consciousness entails acquiring an understanding of the sociocultural conditions that shape one's life (Sadan 2004: 82–83), which involves a deepening awareness of both power relations and the possibility of their transformation (Burton and Kagan 1996). Indeed, for Freire (1996), empowerment entails "being encouraged and equipped to know and respond" (p.12) to the concrete realities of one's world. Here, emotions are important to account for as well as the need to feel and be emotionally aware (see Tufte 2017: 87–88) – a need that perhaps can be conceptualized as *emotional conscientizaçao*.

It is possible to also relate critical consciousness to standpoint feminism's emphasis on enabling those without power to define their own realities on their own terms (Hill Collins 2000: 274). Black women's literature contains many examples of how individual black women become personally empowered by a change of consciousness (ibid.: 118). Independent self-definitions – defining their own situation and how they want to change it – empower those without power to bring about change (ibid.: 117).

Freire also connects critical consciousness to action. Social change will not happen by the mere understanding of one's oppression – it must be followed by a critical intervention (Freire 1996: 34). Similarly, Hill Collins (2000: 273) explains that the history of black American women's activism shows that becoming empowered requires more than changing the consciousness of individual black women – it requires transforming unjust social institutions. In turn, action needs what Freire (1996: 47) labels "reflective participation". How reflection can lead to action is where Sen and his focus on capabilities provides useful insights. And when Freire (1996) talks about the "awareness of the self" (p. 15), this could be understood as an awareness of one's capabilities. Critical consciousness thus entails conceiving of oneself as a capable actor of change in a particular situation and being aware of this situation's history and its intersecting relations of power on both micro- and macro levels. In other words, it is not enough to acquire the capabilities to change one's life situation, environment, and destiny; one must also recognize that one possesses these capabilities and believe that another world is possible and that this world is in reach. As Sadan (2004: 144) points out, perceived abilities are as important as actual abilities.

Technological Level of Communication Platforms: Empowerment, ICTs, and Affordances

Not only do we need to account for intersecting axes of oppression, the opportunities and constraints in a given situation, and actors' capabilities to change their life situation, destiny, and environment but also we need to recognize that the role of communication is important for social change to happen (Tufte 2017). In media and communication studies, changes in communication are often linked to societal changes at large. For example, it was argued that the advent of the printing press was tied to the rise of mass society and mass culture. Critical scholars (such as Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School) were early to relate communication practices to larger societal structures. Today, media scholars have made a similar argument, claiming that in tandem with the rise of more individualized and reflexive forms of communication – not the least through information and communication technologies (ICTs) – we are leaving mass society behind (see, e.g., Castells 1999). Communication has been linked to development through perspectives of the fields of communication for development and communication and social change (Tufte 2017). Indeed, political scientists, anthropologists, and sociologists increasingly recognize the importance of communication practices in everyday life for social and political change (ibid.: 80).

ICTs involve the electronic means of capturing, processing, storing, and communicating information. As a broad and catchy term, it has been endorsed in multiple positive contexts, including empowering marginalized and minority groups (Masika and Bailur 2015). The United Nations illustrates the potential for social and economic empowerment offered by ICTs and underlines the importance of women to make good use of this potential (UNDAW 2002: 3–4). However, access to ICTs is unequal. The so-called digital divide actually includes several gaps: the technological and content divide as well as the gender divide (UNDAW 2005: 1). People from the same social context may not have equal access to ICTs or similar abilities to deploy ICTs due to certain constraints such as poverty and illiteracy (ibid.).

Overviews of the study of ICTs in the global South reveal a field becoming biased toward techno-determinism and not sufficiently taking larger contextual and societal factors into account (Svensson and Wamala-Larsson 2015). Nevertheless, part of the techno-deterministic endurance could likely be explained by its appeal for funders (such as the World Bank; see Dodson et al. 2013: 19–20). If money is going to be invested in development measures, an optimistic and transformative view of what technology can achieve is important. However, there is the great risk of a backlash when studies show that up to 80 percent of ICT4D interventions fail (see Heeks 2002) – a stark reminder that the poor will not benefit from dumping hardware "and [the] hope [that] magic will happen" (Trucanero, in Dodson et al. 2013: 29).

Indeed, the role of ICTs in empowerment is a contested issue. This chapter started with a critique of development in general and ICT and development in particular. It is easy to fall into utopianism and determinism when talking about change in relation to communication technology. However, a critique of techno-determinism should not lead to an uncritical adoption of a sociocultural deterministic view of technology

and its uses (i.e., that the context and sociocultural practices of technology determine everything). Communication platforms are not neutral technologies for people to use. They bring norms and values with them in the sense that there are certain preferred ways of interacting with the devices inscribed both in their design and how users use them.

Being mindful of the risk of different kinds of determinisms, the chapter turns to affordance theory (Gaver 1991). It is important to account for the properties of the particular communication platform used as well as the perception of these platforms by its users if one aims to understand and study the role of ICTs in empowerment in the global South. ICTs may, for example, afford new voices to be both raised and heard (Tufte 2017: 44), more dialogic and bottom-up communication, new forms of being political at the everyday level (ibid.: 65–66), greater possibilities for networking, and increasingly flat and flexible forms of social organization (ibid.: 83). It can be argued that such affordances exist independently of the users' perception of them, but it is not before communication platforms are perceived as tools that afford action for social change that they will be used as such. Consequently, most communication platforms appear to offer *perceptible affordances*, (i.e., information about the properties of the object which may be acted upon). Hence, communication platforms need to convey information about its affordances in a format that is compatible with the users' perceptual system. The actions communication platforms afford also need to be socioculturally relevant to the user. In line with this, Gibson (1977) argues that people do not interact with an object without first perceiving what it is good for.

Here, affordances can be connected to opportunities, meaning that ICT affordances could be labelled "communication opportunities" in a given situation or as "media opportunities" (see Tufte 2017: 136). As Cammaerts (2012) notes, some opportunities and constraints "are inherent to media itself" (p. 119). One can also argue that technology constraints change in terms of lack of access, know-how, and its affordance of surveillance (see Svensson and Wamala-Larsson 2016). This can, in turn, be connected to Sen's capability approach – having the capability/ability to use and understand the platforms at hand (i.e., media literacy). Thus, an analysis of empowerment should account for how communication platforms' affordances are interpreted and explored based on the users own defined needs from their standpoints and in their particular situations. By conceiving of communication platforms as affording particular practices while at the same time being open for users' needs and interpretations of such practices, it becomes possible to move beyond framings of technology as inherently good or bad in themselves, while avoiding resorting to the argument that they are neutral. Communication platforms dialectically intersect with society and interact with the users as they appropriate the technology to suit their particular life situation.

It is also important to underline that ICTs are only one part of an overall *communication ecology* of a given community (Treré and Mattoni 2015). Communication should be understood in a holistic and ecological manner (Tufte 2017: 21) and, therefore, not be studied in isolation. Understanding ICTs as part of a communication ecology will overcome the kind of communicative reductionism, one-platform bias, presentism, and fetishization of technological novelty that has

been prevalent in studies of communication for social change (see Treré and Mattoni 2015). A communicative ecology lens also allows for a restoration of the communicative complexity in the study of actors struggling for empowerment and social change because it brings a holistic perspective beyond specific media instances (ibid.).

When studying communication platforms in the global South, deterministic stances should be discarded, which an affordance lens makes possible. Nevertheless, it is important to understand how affordances interact with both the sociocultural/political context/situation and the capabilities of individuals and groups to make use of communication platforms in empowering ways. To summarize, ICTs, or any communication platform for that manner, should not be studied in isolation. A communication platform itself is situated within a larger media and communication ecology in the particular context it is used. To understand the potentially empowering role of communication, an ecological perspective allows for a deeper and more context-aware analysis.

Concluding Remarks

Hill Collins (2000: 274) argues that we cannot develop an approach to empowerment without understanding how power is organized and how it operates. This chapter proposes that power is located in and, thus, operates from the following:

1. How those who are powerless are situated in intersecting structures of oppression (such as ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality).
2. The opportunities and constraints of the social and political systems/institutions of the particular situations that those without power find themselves in.
3. The agency of individuals as well as collectives (and their interrelations).
4. Communication platforms and how they are perceived and used.

To summarize, empowerment is a tool for understanding how those who are powerless are situated in the different intersecting axes of oppression, how they have different opportunities and constraints in the various situations they find themselves in, their agency, and the role of communication platforms affordances. This tool is in line with the critique of development at the beginning of the chapter. A focus on empowering the disempowered through acquiring a critical consciousness and recognizing their capabilities avoids the kind of determinisms that have been prevalent and criticized in the field. Rather, this chapter proposed to study and understand empowerment on four levels – the intersectional, the contextual, the agency, and the technological. It is important to stress that relations, capabilities, situations, and intersections are constantly changing and not static; hence, these levels need to be regularly reviewed. As Van Hemelrijck (2013: 34) emphasizes, persistent and collaborative efforts are needed to realize empowerment and social change.

Development problems are complex (Servaes and Lie 2015: 141). Oppression and powerlessness are also complex (Hill Collins 2000: 289); therefore, the study of empowerment and resistance must also be complex (ibid.). One way to summarize empowerment and its attached levels is to connect questions to each of them. This model of empowerment can also be applied to an analysis of ICTs in the global South.

Intersectional level: This level concerns the roots of powerlessness in terms of intersecting structures of power such as ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality. How are the powerless under study situated in the larger structures of power? Such a description should not be made *von oben*, but rather involve the standpoints of those under study in order for them to define their own realities on their own terms. Here, it is also important to avoid the individual versus collective dichotomy, as it is more appropriate to explain how these dimensions interrelate instead.

Contextual level: This level concerns the particular context of those without power and how their actions are situated in this context. How do their contexts provide both opportunities and constraints (in terms of institutions, local community, local culture, economic and family arrangements, et cetera)? Which configuration of resources, institutional arrangements, and historical precedents exist in the contexts of those under study? How open or closed to change are important institutions, authorities, or organizations? What is the capacity of these institutions, authorities, or organizations to advance change and effectively implement policies once they are decided?

Agency level: This level concerns the capabilities of individuals and groups under study and their ability to make choices and thus control their life situation, destiny, and environment. What capabilities, resources, agencies, skills, choices, and achievements can be discerned? How critically conscious are those under study of their situation? Do they have possibility/ capability to imagine that change is possible? And does such critical consciousness lead to action and, thus, change?

Technological level: This level concerns the affordances of the communication platforms used by those under study. What access to communication platforms do they have? What is their communication/media literacy? How do they use these platforms? What affordances do they perceive these platforms to have? Do they find new affordances over time? And how are these communication platforms situated in larger media/communication ecologies, and how does this influence their use?

The social world is complex, holistic, and dynamic in a manner which is difficult to outline in a linear text such as the format of this chapter. Also apparent in the chapter is that these levels intersect, merge into, and influence each other. It is easier to separate these levels in writing than in an empirical reality. Therefore, the chapter will conclude by applying these levels to the situation that market women in Kampala find themselves in (see Svensson and Wamala-Larsson 2016; Wamala-Larsson and Svensson 2018 for details on the study and how it was carried out).

The study shows that, while mobile phones helped these women stay in control of their small businesses and juggle both family life and coordinate sales goods delivery, larger patriarchal structures and the lack of state welfare held them back. While the mobile phone was used for increasing their customer base and making

transactions through mobile payments, the same device was used by their male partners for surveillance – to control them. Moreover, just when the women began to make money on their own– which, to an extent, led to greater independence and the ability to take control of their own life situation – their male partners, and the fathers of their children, reneged on their financial obligations. The lack of a welfare state in Uganda to provide basic services such as free education intersects with patriarchal notions that women should be in charge of the household and raise children. The fact that these women made money on their own was used as an excuse for their male partners to renege on their parental obligations.

On the contextual level, the market women's stories showed that women in Uganda (and Africa in general) are those who historically are supposed to trade in street markets. This opened up opportunities for these women to earn a small living. Mobile communication in general and mobile money, in particular, have been helpful here. With mobile money, the market women do not need to handle large amounts of cash. Mobile money has also brought banking to segments of the population that previously did not use banks. Via the mobile phone, these women could also keep a repository of customers and their preferences in order to contact them in the future when their stock was renewed. At the same time, the local authority (KCCA – Kampala Capital City Authority) challenged the street markets and tried to push the women out of the open-air street markets in favor of more expensive shopping grounds in a general attempt to beautify the city. The street markets had been burned down many times. Also, stories from the women suggested that mobile service providers, through mandatory SIM card registration, collaborated with KCCA in order to keep track of them. Once again, the drawback of mobile communication in terms of empowerment seems to be its affordance of surveillance – from male partners as well as the local authorities.

When asked questions relating to their empowerment from the agency level, the market women responded that they did not sense they could do anything about their life situation, destiny, and environment. For example, they did not feel they had the capabilities to fight KCCA in order to keep their vending spots in the Kampala street markets. Nevertheless, it cannot be claimed that the women lacked critical awareness. Rather, they did not foresee any possibilities/opportunities for action. Concerning other issues, they did act; for example, the women organized saving circles among themselves to make sure they would all have money when school fees were due. They were also very skillful in dealing with money transactions, in particular mobile money, and could quickly secure mobile money transactions during times of hectic trading with multiple traders.

The women claim that mobile phones also make it easier to keep a repository of customers to contact when goods came in or refer customers to their colleagues (often in the same saving circles). Some of their customers prefer not to go into these maze-likes markets. By sending pictures over their mobile phone and by offering mobile money transactions, the women could secure a deal without meeting in person. The market women would then send the goods by bus to a point where the customer could then collect them. This is about affordances of mobile communication and mobile money and the ability to imagine other possibilities over time.

Developing intricate communication systems (without airtime being lost) via so-called beeping (i.e., lost calls) is another example of this. From an ecology perspective, mobile communication is clearly connected to the important traditional oral culture of Uganda. Mobile communication does not require texting, but rather talking, and thus suits the communication ecology of Uganda.

These short glimpses into an empirical case have hopefully shown that the suggested framework can provide a critical analysis of ICTs in the global South which neither resort to techno-determinism nor view technology as neutral. This analysis also shows how empowerment is a complex concept and how a group – in this case Kampala market women – can both be empowered and disempowered at the same time, depending on the level and situation. This hopefully shows how empowerment can be used as an analytical concept in a defined and structured manner.

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