

# Framing the concept of empowering outcomes in Social Design

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing amount of projects developed in the field of social design, raises the need of assessment tools to account for the effectiveness of the intended, contrary to the actual results provided by such interventions. In this context, empowerment should be considered as one of the main expected outcomes, even if measuring people's empowerment response poses itself as a challenge. Nevertheless, if the analysis of social design outcomes is considered as the main focus of this assessment, the attention would be re-directed to more tangible elements susceptible of this kind of evaluation. In that sense, considerations like the psychological experience -of empowerment- and its interaction with the more traditional results of any design process (e.g. new products, services or even business models) will become the subject under analysis. In an attempt to frame the concept of empowering outcomes in social design, a discussion about two design projects will be addressed, in order to explain how the proposed analysis framework works and its implications for future design practices.

## General Terms

Theory, Design.

## Keywords

Empowerment, social design, empowering outcomes, assessment tools.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Designers have become aware of what design interventions are capable of, especially in developing countries where basic needs like access to safe drinking water, education, health and sanitation still remain neglected. In this venture of providing effective solutions to such important matters, also international corporations and NGOs in association with local governments and its communities have initiated innumerable projects with small, medium and large impact. But, where does the success of these projects come from? By looking at what has been written about deliverables of (social) design projects and how they are currently

being defined, it is common to find claims such as 'designing for social impact' or 'for the social and public good'. But such statements do not seem enough to define what a social design project and its respective outcomes should be, especially if their effectiveness will finally depend on the stakeholder's point of view. Regardless of this, social empowerment has been defined as one of the main expected results, as well as the subject under examination on this paper. For this reason, an analysis and assessment tool to frame the concept of empowering outcomes in social design was envisioned as essential.

## 2. STATE OF THE ART

To approach this subject from an objective perspective, it became necessary to broaden the analysis scope and start inquiring about the meaning of empowerment and the implications for the people involved in this kind of interventions.

### 2.1 Empowerment at work

In the research field of empowerment at work, two classic approaches are discussed; Social-structural empowerment and Psychological empowerment. In relation to the Social-structural perspective, Spreitzer [10] refers to the work of Kanter (1977) to explain, how the access to '*Power tools*' –determined as *Opportunity, Information, Support and Resources*– could empower employees at low levels of the organizational hierarchy. So, by getting access to these '*Power tools*', considered as tangible elements in contrast with the intangible experience of psychological empowerment, employees are enabled to gain control over resources, and take part in decision-making processes through new attained responsibilities.

On the other side, Psychological empowerment reflects on the importance of "enhancing feelings of self-efficacy" [3, p. 484] to provide employees with the basis to become truly empowered at work. Within these two different but complementary perspectives, both contextual conditions and psychological states are considered indispensable elements to facilitate employees' empowerment at work.

### 2.2 Empowerment from Participatory Design's perspective

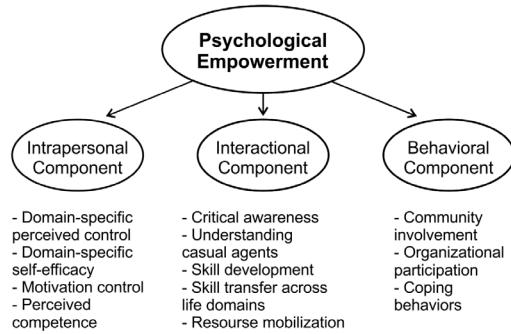
The approach of participatory design on empowerment is based on the distinction between empowerment processes and empowered outcomes [13]; where participatory design can be interpreted as an empowering process that could also result in empowering outcomes [4]. By definition, participatory design is an empowering process that recognizes participants as the experts of their own experiences. As for its empowering outcomes, psychological empowerment is proposed as an intended result, in addition to the products resulting from the design process [5].

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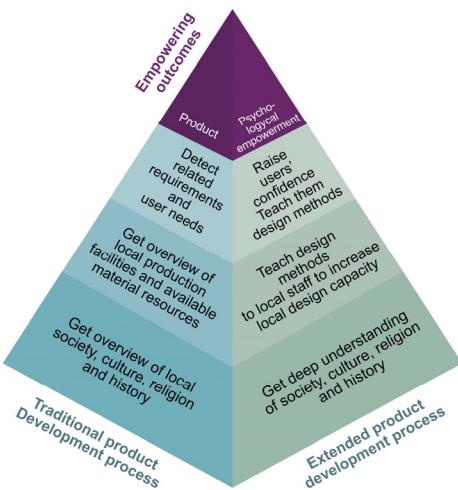
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According to Zimmerman, developing “a universal and global measure of psychological empowerment may not be feasible or an appropriate goal” [13, p. 587], because the emergence of the sense of empowerment is relative to people and varies across contexts and time. In return, Zimmerman [13] proposes a conceptual framework to analyze psychological empowerment as an empowered outcome at the individual level. In this framework, psychological empowerment is constructed from three different components: an intrapersonal component, an interactional component and a behavioral component.



**Figure 1. Nomological network for psychological empowerment [13].**

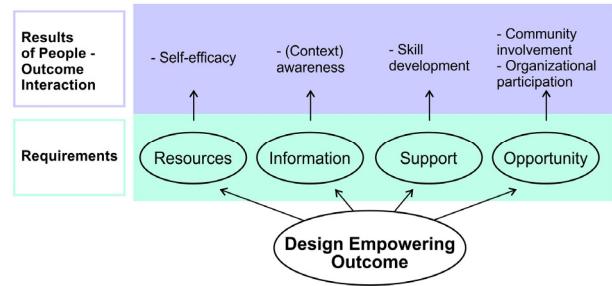
In Figure 1, the distinction between these components explains how psychological empowerment starts by building a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control (Intrapersonal component), then moves to the development of new capabilities and understanding of the context (Interactional component), to finally support the process of moving people into action (Behavioral component). By transferring this integrative approach on empowerment to the field of participatory design, a model of an empowering design process with empowering results was created. As depicted by Hussain, *et al.* [5] in Figure 2, the final result of this process is expected to be an empowering outcome such as psychological empowerment. In spite of this, the model does not further explore on a definition of what could be considered an empowering product.



**Figure 2. Pyramid model representing an empowering design process with empowering outcomes [5].**

### 3. NEW IDEA

With this in mind, it was considered beneficial to work for the construction of a model that deemed the necessary aspects to frame the concept of ‘design empowering outcomes’. A model where the results of social design processes would be taken as input to analyze its ability of driving social empowerment. To start unrolling the concept of this analysis and assessment framework, the definition of ‘Power tools’ stated within the Social-structural perspective of empowerment is used as a starting point. In Figure 3; Kanter’s [6] ‘Power tools’ are adapted to become the requirements that ‘design empowering outcomes’ must fulfill to effectively empower people.

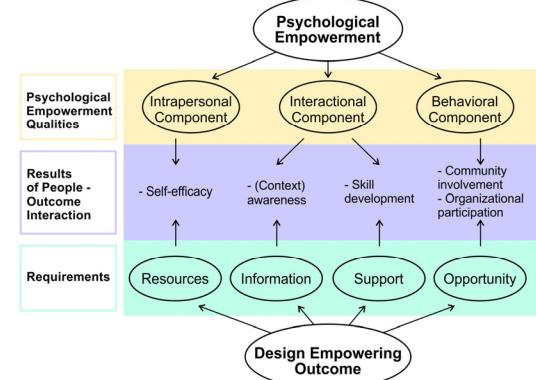


**Figure 3. Kanter’s ‘Power tools’ used as the design empowering outcomes’ requirements.**

By assigning design outcomes the responsibility of driving empowerment, they must:

- Provide access to *Resources*; by facilitating the means to enhance self-efficacy.
- Provide access to *Information*; to promote awareness and the potential to make better and informed decisions.
- Provide access to *Support*; as the foundation for skill development.
- Provide access to *Opportunity*; by encouraging people to feel and get involved.

Up to now, the tangible elements of empowerment have been discussed in regards to ‘design empowering outcomes’. But still, this framework would be incomplete if it would not consider the psychological experience of empowerment. In this sense, the meeting point between psychological empowerment and ‘design empowering outcomes’ would be human-product interaction. As Figure 4 indicates, by aligning the expected results from both experiences, a framework for analyzing empowering outcomes of social design processes is created.



**Figure 4. Framework for the analysis of design outcomes from the perspective of social design and psychological empowerment.**

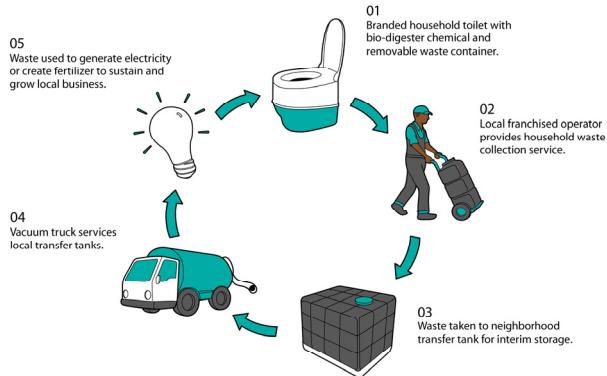
Within this framework people are not referred as users, clients, customers, consumers or participants. In their interaction with ‘design empowering outcomes’, people are recognized as doers and citizens making full exercise of their rights and duties; as such, people become an essential and indispensable subject of empowerment.

## 4. METHOD: ANALYZING DESIGN EMPOWERING OUTCOMES

To illustrate how the proposed framework works, and further analyze how social empowerment is being promoted by design projects, two comparable examples in the field of sanitation for developing countries are considered.

### 4.1 Sanitation Solutions for Ghana

Clean Team [2] was the result of collaborative project between WSUP (Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor), Unilever and design consultants IDEO; which consisted in the design of a new sanitation offering for poor urban communities in Kumasi, Ghana. The proposed system had to adapt to the local context; characterized by the lack of appropriate urban infrastructures such as subsurface sewer systems, the predominance of public toilets usage and unregulated unsanitary practices like open defecation. For this purpose, human-centred design tools like inspiration cards and shadowing were used to uncover people’s sanitation needs and aspirations [7].



**Figure 5. Clean Team Service Model including toilet provision, waste collection and waste re-use for associated business activities [2].**

The end result of this project (Figure 5) comprised a business model for the delivery of private sector’s household sanitation services for the urban poor [8]. Within its scope, people are considered as Clean Team’s service users and customers of the developed business model.

#### 4.1.1 Analyzing Clean Team’s outcomes

- Access to Resources. Clean team delivers a service; though, does it stimulate a sense of self-efficacy on the people through its adoption? Would that be comparable to the empowering outcomes experienced by the people actively involved as Clean Team’s service associates and service persons?

- Access to Information. The company advertises its service with the purpose of promoting it and scale up its implementation. This may create awareness about the importance of proper waste management practices; but does it contribute to people’s potential to make better and informed decisions, besides the one of acquiring or not this paid service?

- Access to Support. By subscribing to a paid service, people benefit from the quality and effectiveness of its supply. Hence, Clean Team may attend their current unmet needs but, does it foster skill development or changes in people’s behavior regarding sanitation or health issues?

- Access to Opportunity. Clean Team provides to those who can afford the service, the opportunity to enhance their quality of life by accessing in-home sanitation; a basic living condition, that not even the local government or the private sector have been able to properly address. In spite of tackling a pivotal issue; does this solution inspire people to develop a sense of commitment and participation with their community? Does it support equality and empathy for others who do not have access to this service?

Dealing with these questions becomes crucial particularly when, according to UNESCO-IHE [11], lack of community involvement causes 50% of (water) projects to fail; a fact that may be extendable to other type of projects aiming to generate social impact.

### 4.2 Sanitary pads for women in Rwanda

SHE [9] stands for Sustainable Health Enterprises; a social venture started by Harvard Business School graduate, Elizabeth Scharpf. Through an initiative called SHE28 campaign, SHE consolidated its focus on promoting awareness on menstruation, and its real impact on women’s lives in developing countries. Due to lack of access to affordable sanitary pads, these women turn to different ways to deal with this situation; ranging from using rags, bark or mud, to even abstain from attending school or their workplace for almost a week every month. These circumstances affect their performance at school and the consistency of their income on the long term, harming thousands of families in their efforts of overcoming poverty.

The ongoing results of this initiative consist of several action plans including promotion of health, hygiene education and moreover, increased access to affordable menstrual pads through a local, eco-friendly and scalable business model for the production and distribution of *LaunchPads* (see Figure 6); sanitary pads made from banana fiber [12]. This way, the benefits of SHE’s initiative are targeted to women looking forward to feel empowered, confident, and be seen as equally capable as men; also including those men willing to change their thinking about women and their role in society.



**Figure 6. How SHE *LaunchPads*’ raw material is produced by banana fiber processing [9].**

#### 4.2.1 Analyzing SHE's outcomes

- Provide access to *Resources*. This becomes evident on the way SHE pursues an increased access to *LaunchPads* in two different ways: by facilitating women's access to loans for the acquisition of the necessary equipment to produce *LaunchPads* and start their own business; while at the same time, securing sanitary pads supply to the market at reduced prices.
- Provide access to *Information*. To effectively improve health and sanitation, SHE acknowledges that pads' supply must be accompanied with health and hygiene education. By doing this, SHE empowers women to take informed decisions and adopt new behaviors regarding self-care and health.
- Provide access to *Support*. This initiative stimulates gender equality and women empowerment; both necessary conditions to drive social and economic development. Additionally, SHE recognizes the importance of going beyond the lessons on sanitary pads usage, because not every woman will be able to get the pads. That's why they teach them how to wash rags properly [1].
- Provide access to *Opportunity*. By enabling women's mobilization towards taking action and becoming self-sufficient, SHE provides new possibilities where before there were no other preferred options.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Emitting a final judgment on each of the discussed design projects is not the objective of this paper. The main goal was to explain how the proposed framework for analyzing empowering outcomes works, through an assessment based on the proposed requirements. Although a few questions remain open for the reader to reflect upon, still a few conclusions can be drawn from these cases.

Clean Team and SHE28 campaign have both started from a market-based approach, according to one objective: providing financially feasible solutions by adapting to the context and attending people's unmet needs in Africa. Yet, as seen on the previous section, their respective outcomes differ from each other in terms of: design process, user perception and the role given to the people involved. Discussing the relevance of the proposed analysis framework depends on the project developer's willingness to adopt empowerment as an expected outcome of social design projects. Regardless from this, sustainable long term solutions will continue being the common ground to any social design intervention, for which social empowerment is a mean to achieve this goal. To conclude, the viability of this framework usage and implementation will reside on its potential to reflect on expected and real results, as a way to identify best practices and build upon successful experiences for future projects execution.

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