Mother and Guardian Empowerment

Global Outcome Report, 2017

Program Background

As an international organization that works with diverse communities and cultures, Unbound recognizes the need for, and benefits of, periodically taking a step back and looking at the big picture. Global evaluations have allowed Unbound to explore questions of organizational outcomes for all program participants across borders and in every region. There are four primary areas of focus for the global evaluation efforts of Unbound — education or preparation for life path, economic stability, community participation, and empowerment of mothers and guardians.

The empowerment of mothers has been a focus in Unbound’s global evaluation efforts that crosses the boundaries of communities, regions and countries. Over the years, Unbound’s program has promoted and required the participation of mothers and guardians of children in the program, with the belief that a child’s primary caregiver is the best “social worker” for that child, and by empowering mothers the whole family benefits. Unbound’s programs ensure that the families are agents of positive change in their own lives and in their communities.

In 2013, Unbound’s Kansas City headquarters conducted a global evaluation with the purpose of better understanding the ways in which mothers of sponsored children participate in their communities and feel empowered to make changes for their families. The global evaluation looked into factors such as expressed voice, ownership and responsibility in the Unbound program, community problem solving, financial security, and social support as key indicators of community participation and mothers/guardian empowerment.

Purpose of the evaluation

While community participation and empowerment of mothers have been the subjects of evaluation at Unbound in recent years, the purpose behind conducting this evaluation is to gain a deeper understanding of empowerment as we understand, envision, and hope for it in Unbound. The concept of empowerment has been defined and understood in a number of ways. Moreover, it has different connotations in different socio-cultural and political contexts and is shaped by varying beliefs and value systems. It has been associated with the extent to which there is freedom to participate in decision-making as well as the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions. It has also been described as a process and an outcome of participation in different spheres of an individual’s domains of life. Because the concept of empowerment has been understood in such a diverse manner, evaluating it is challenging but at the same time important — especially so given the cross-regional and cultural contexts in which Unbound has been working.

Another key purpose of this evaluation is based on the efforts to answer one of the most important questions we ask in outcomes and impact evaluation — What would have happened in the absence of our program? An effective way to answer that is by comparing the outcomes of the population served by our program to those of another group that represents what would have occurred without it.
This allows us to provide a quantitative estimate of the causal effects of the program or, in certain cases, estimate the impact of the program on its intended outcomes. By evaluating the outcomes for both the participating and the comparison groups, the estimate of what would have happened in the absence of a program can be calculated. By designing and conducting an evaluation of empowerment as we understand it in Unbound and as we envision its value in our programs, we can accurately capture the impact of our programs in mother/guardian empowerment.

**Methods and Design**

Given how complex, contested, and vast the meaning of empowerment can be, a good place to start is to identify the measures that have appeared most frequently in previous research and evaluations of empowerment and assess them for relevance and value from Unbound’s perspective. In other words, do these measures capture what we are trying to achieve with our programs and do they align with our evaluation principles? This becomes particularly important because, as one of the global outcomes, we have to identify internationally comparable measures and indicators of empowerment. Therefore, while it is helpful to review previous literature and identify the sets of measures and indicators used to evaluate empowerment, the only way this evaluation can effectively answer the questions Unbound has regarding the programs’ impacts on mother/guardian empowerment is by selecting the measures that most closely represent its program characteristics and core values. Based on that, three measures of empowerment stood out in our review of previous literature and their alignment with Unbound’s program focus:

**Empowerment as choice:**
Empowerment refers to the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability has previously been denied to them. It refers to making their own decisions, rather than be passive objects of choices made on their behalf. While human development entails enlarging choices, empowerment is the process of acquiring the ability to choose from among these enlarged choices.

**Empowerment as control:**
Control refers to the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. This includes control of decisions that affects them individually, as members of their household, and as members of their larger community.

**Empowerment as change:**
This looks at the psychological assets that empower individuals to envision and act on changing the elements of their lives that they believe deserve change. Within its framework for development, Unbound has identified characteristics that guide programs in not just tackling poverty and in creating an environment for families, but also in building lasting change in communities.

This evaluation will follow a comparative group design, where the results of mothers/guardian who are participating in Unbound’s programs for at least two years are compared to those who are currently on the wait-list. There are many types of comparative group designs. In this case, a simple comparative design where the sample is selected randomly will be used. By designing the evaluation to compare the outcomes of Unbound-sponsored families with the outcomes for families who are not
participating in Unbound’s program, the aim of this pilot was to test the value, utility and feasibility of a
design that is geared towards assigning attribution and providing evidence of causal relationships
between the observed changes and the program.

A sample size calculator was used to determine the appropriate sample size that ensured
feasibility as well as data saturation with a 95% confidence level and 5 as the confidence interval. This
evaluation uses a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data is collected using a survey that is a modified
version of the tool developed by Alsop and Heinsohn. It selects questions that are indicators of
empowerment as measured through choice, control and change. The evaluation also conducted few
personal interviews with mothers to get in-depth thoughts, beliefs and ideas. Even though the personal
interviews were designed to get some contextual information, the primary goal was to allow a platform
for the mothers to share what empowerment means to them and how they perceive it. Such information
can inform and influence selection of indicators and measures in future evaluations of empowerment.

Key Findings

Who — Profiles and Characteristics

A total of 26 projects participated in the evaluation — 8 in Asia, 12 in Latin America, and 6 in
Africa. Out of the 800 mothers/guardians randomly selected to participate in this evaluation, 710
responded to the survey. The part of the evaluation design that included personal interviews was much
smaller with just over 10% of the total sample, i.e. 82 were randomly selected as potential participants.
Out of the 82, we were able to conduct interviews with 53 mothers/guardians who shared their in-depth
thoughts and beliefs. In most of the non-respondent cases, the project data collectors didn’t conduct the
interviews whereas in other cases, it was the mothers who were unable to participate. There weren’t any
reported cases of mothers/guardians who didn’t respond to the personal interviews because they were
uncomfortable or unwilling.

To be able to effectively compare the responses of the mothers/guardians who have been
participating in Unbound’s program and the ones who are on the wait-list, it is important to ensure that
they have at least some common characteristics to begin with. In other words, if there are differences in
some of their characteristics, the observable differences could be as much for those varying characteristics
as for their participation in the Unbound program. While a number of factors can be analyzed to ensure
comparability, in this evaluation, three features — gender, age and level of education — were used. It was
found that the two comparative groups shared fairly similar characteristics:
Gender

A majority of the respondents were females in both the participating and the wait-list groups of this evaluation, which is also consistent with the fact that mothers are at the heart of Unbound programs and the programs mostly target and work with the mothers of sponsored children.

Age

Although the two groups share fairly similar characteristics in terms of age, it was noticed that a majority of the wait-list mothers/guardians fall into a slightly younger age group, i.e. 26-35 compared to the mothers/guardians who have been participating in the program. One of the possible reasons for this difference could be the fact that mothers/guardians who have been participating in the program for at least two years were included in this study, which means that they were most likely in the younger age bracket while waiting to participate in the program.
Level of Education

Respondents from both the groups also have fairly similar levels of education. A majority of the mothers/guardians reported to have not completed the elementary levels of education in both groups.

What- Choice, Control, and Change

Choice

Alsop and Heinsohn have identified a number of indicators to look at choice as a measure of empowerment. A variety of elements have been used in previous evaluations to study and measure choice. In this evaluation, we looked particularly at happiness, choice to change life course, involvement in community decision-making, group membership, physical mobility, and finally choice in occupation decision and change as indicators of choice.

The data and information gathered from the surveys were examined from two different perspectives — first, the percentage of responses between the two groups were compared; second, the average scores of these responses were compared to see if the differences between the two groups were significant or not. If and when there is a significant difference between the two groups, it means that any difference that was seen between the two groups is more than just a chance occurring and has a very high likelihood that it represents the reality of the population.
We found that the responses from the mothers/guardians who are participating in the Unbound programs indicated a higher level of choice as a measure of empowerment than mothers/guardians who are waiting to participate in the program. We saw higher number of Unbound mothers/guardians reporting a higher level in all indicators of empowerment as choice (happiness, higher choice in making decisions that change the course of their lives, a stronger involvement in decision making, higher number of mothers/guardians involved in groups, better physical mobility, more involvement in the decision-making process within the community, and stronger choices in occupation decision and change). We also found that these differences were significant in all of the cases except physical mobility and choice in occupation decision and change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How happy do you consider yourself to be?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unbound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither happy nor unhappy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unbound</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Choice to change life course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waiting list</th>
<th>Totally able to change life</th>
<th>Mostly able to change life</th>
<th>Mostly unable to change life</th>
<th>Totally unable to change life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unbound</th>
<th>Totally able to change life</th>
<th>Mostly able to change life</th>
<th>Mostly unable to change life</th>
<th>Totally unable to change life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>39%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Involvement in decision-making process within community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waiting list</th>
<th>Very involved</th>
<th>Fairly involved</th>
<th>Slightly involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unbound</th>
<th>Very involved</th>
<th>Fairly involved</th>
<th>Slightly involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Are you a member of any group, organization, network or associations?

- Waiting list: Yes 41%, No 59%
- Unbound: Yes 63%, No 37%

Where do you go on your own?

- Waiting list:
  - Everywhere I want to: 31%
  - Most places I want to: 16%
  - Some places I want to: 43%
  - Nowhere: 9%
- Unbound:
  - Everywhere I want to: 34%
  - Most places I want to: 21%
  - Some places I want to: 39%
  - Nowhere: 6%
Another measure of empowerment examined in this evaluation was control. In particular, we looked at control over decisions regarding personal welfare, health, and body, their roles in making decisions on household, and their roles in making education and health related decisions. We found that mothers/guardians who are participating in the Unbound program responded by saying they felt a stronger degree of control over decisions regarding personal welfare, health and body. However, it wasn’t a statistically significant higher number of participating mothers that said they that control over all decisions compared to the mothers in the wait-list group.
We also looked at the decision-making patterns of the mothers who are participating in the program and those who are on the wait-list. ‘Female head of the household’ and ‘combined decision making by male and female heads of household’ were the top two responses among both the participating and wait-list groups, however, a higher number of Unbound mothers as female heads of household reported to be making household expenditure decisions compared to the mothers who are the heads of household in the wait-list group. Similarly, Unbound mothers, as female heads of the household, are more involved in education and health expenditure decisions, with a higher number of Unbound mothers, as heads of household, reported to be making those decisions compared to mothers waiting to participate in the program. We also found that, although a relatively small number, more mothers/guardians reported to have all members of the household (including children) make the household expenditure as well as health and education related decisions.
The final measure of empowerment that was a part of this evaluation was change. We specifically looked at the impact the mothers/guardians felt they had in making their communities a better place, the level of contribution felt from different agencies to bring change in their lives, and their employment status. We found that the mothers/guardians who are participating in Unbound programs reported a higher level of impact they felt they had in making their communities a better place to live. In response to being asked who made the most contribution to bring change in their lives, both Unbound mothers/guardians and mothers/guardians in the participating group reported themselves and their families. However, a higher number of mothers/guardians from the participating group claimed they felt they themselves would be the biggest contribution to change in life than the mothers in the wait-list group. The final indicator we looked at with change as an indicator of empowerment was the status of employment. The respondents were asked to choose from a number of options within the spectrum of being self-employed at one end and unemployed at other end. Not only were we trying to look at their status of employment, but we were also using it as a proxy to measure whether or not the mothers/guardians were empowered to change the circumstances of their lives through their employment status. We found out that the top three responses to these questions were similar for both the participating and the wait-list groups. However with a higher number of Unbound mothers/guardians reporting to be self-employed and fewer of them reporting to be unemployed than the wait-list group, the difference between the two groups was significant.
Additional findings

Interviews

In addition to the survey, this evaluation also had a small qualitative component where mothers/guardians from both the groups were randomly selected to engage in a more detailed and personal conversation about empowerment. By simply asking them two questions - *When I say someone is empowered, what is the image that comes to your mind?* and *Think of a time when you felt empowered in the last year. Can you explain how you felt and why you felt that way?*, the goal was to not just see how empowerment was being experienced by the two groups but also to use the information for future evaluation design improvements. Given how there are only 55 interview responses, the findings from the qualitative piece of this evaluation are not generalizable to the larger population. However, they do present some interesting insights.

A. Themes

After translating, recording and coding the interview responses, the first step was to look for cross-cutting themes or patterns in the responses from the two groups. Needless to say, the open-ended nature of the questions and contextual differences between different projects contributed to a variety of responses. However, some indicators appeared more often than others:

1. Decision-making: Responses from both Unbound mothers/guardians and mothers/guardians from the wait-list group mentioned *decision-making* when answering the two questions related to empowerment. The ability to make decisions that benefit the individual or their family, the choice in making decisions, the quality and nature of decisions, the parties involved in making decisions impacting individuals and families, and the outcomes of the decisions that are made were referenced when the respondents were asked the two questions.

2. Impact in other’s lives/community: Another measure that came up time and again was the impact in the lives of others — be it family members or community at large. Unlike decision-making, where the focal point of empowerment was within an individual or household, when it comes to impact, most of the responses looked at it through a wider lens of the impacts on the society and community. Sometimes it was as simple as “to help a neighbor” while other times, reference to the authority and power to bring about community-wide improvements were mentioned.

3. Economic self-sufficiency/Employment: Another theme that emerged from the responses of the mothers/guardians was economic self-sufficiency, which was often linked with the concept of employment. While economic self-sufficiency and employment status were sometimes referred
to as the direct measure of empowerment, many times mothers/guardians used this as a contributing factor for more opportunities, increased ability to make decisions that impact the individuals, families, or community, degree of control and freedom of participation that individuals feel when they have the necessary resources were mentioned.

4. Power/Authority/Voice: Once in a while, mothers/guardians also referred to personal role models, government or political figures or community leaders when describing what empowerment means to them. In some cases, respondents used the personal qualities and assets of these individuals to describe empowerment. In other cases, the power that a rank or position brings with it in any society was mentioned. We also noticed that the ability to voice opinions, whether that was brought on by personal qualities/assets or by the rights of the position and ranks held by such individuals, was mentioned as a strong measure of empowerment.

These are some of the cross-cutting and recurring themes of empowerment that we noticed in the qualitative section of this evaluation. There are other measures of empowerment that were also mentioned by the mothers/guardians of both groups, such as one’s ability to change the condition of life and getting involved with other community members with the purpose of benefiting the society. Some psycho-emotional assets such as self-confidence, courage, perseverance were also mentioned.

Even though, going into this evaluation, we realized that the sample size was small, one of the ways we wanted to analyze these responses was to compare the responses by Unbound mothers/guardians and mothers/guardians who are waiting to participate in the program. The objective of this analysis was to assess whether mothers/guardians who are participating in the Unbound program and have thus experienced economic support for their children as well as social support from their groups or communities looked at and understood empowerment differently from mothers/guardians in the wait-list group who have not yet experienced those supports yet. While it was a very subjective analysis, such difference was not noticed in the responses from the two groups.
Conclusions

Empowerment is perhaps one of the most popular buzzwords of modern development, and yet one of the most ambiguous. What is empowerment? Who is empowered? And how do we really know if people are empowered? This evaluation brings the concept to practical measures and asks deep questions of accountability. What do we mean when we say we empower? Who is empowered by Unbound? And do they really look any different from people outside the program?

The answers here show an Unbound program that is empowering mothers and guardians of sponsored children through the expansion of choice, control and change. This impacts strategic decision-making: personal, group and community. Likewise, greater empowerment as control and change in women's lives can be attributed to the presence of and participation in Unbound. Mothers and guardians in Unbound feel they are having a greater impact on their community. We are even seeing women make economic risks in small businesses to enact change.

In the absence of Unbound, women in the communities where we work feel they personally have less control over their decisions and ultimately feel they have less impact on the community around them as well. So empowerment is not a cliché, but rather a clear and practical benefit of the program.

While some individual indicators of empowerment do not demonstrate significant difference, many do. Unbound sponsored families experience empowerment outcomes that other families in similar contexts do not. And this is good news for our families. It is also good news for our organization as we grow in greater confidence in the personally directed program of child account models and participant-led development. Empowerment is rarely an end outcome, meaning the very components of its definition point to greater things. For example, when mothers participate in making decisions, or "choice," the whole family experiences improved health and there are increased investments in children's education, or when mothers have the power to change their communities, or "change," the whole community benefits through safer streets and stronger schools. Empowerment suggests a future of broad outcomes, but also ensures that those outcomes will be most desired and best sustained by our Unbound partner families.