

# (Re)politicizing empowerment: Lessons from the South African wine industry

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## Abstract

Despite being a poorly defined and vague concept, empowerment is currently of political and theoretical significance and nowhere more so than in South Africa, where it seen as central to post-apartheid transformation. This paper explores the ways in which empowerment has been understood, defined and deployed by post-apartheid governments in the context of a gradual shift from nation-building to neo-liberal governance. It examines the impact of legislation and government policy through a critical examination of empowerment initiatives in the wine industry. Drawing on research conducted in the Western Cape in 2004, the paper analyses how empowerment is interpreted and appropriated both within legislation and specifically within the wine industry. It explores what the wine industry reveals about the disempowering work of neo-liberalism, even as it is couched in the discourses of empowerment. Findings suggest that equating empowerment with economic empowerment threatens to reinforce structures of domination, rather than transforming them, while leaving power relations largely untouched. The case study reveals that until more radical understandings of power and empowerment are acknowledged and incorporated into government policies the failure to address broader issues of social and economic transformation will persist and policies aimed at the empowerment of marginalised individuals and communities will continue to have apparently pre-determined and depoliticised outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

Empowerment is currently at the heart of political and theoretical debate. People from across the political spectrum claim to support ‘empowerment’ as part of the decentering of decision-making power (Perkins et al., 1996; Rowlands, 1997); it has become “a popular, largely unquestioned ‘goal’” (Parpart, 2002, p. 338). And yet, as it has been deployed in political and development discourses, it is a concept that is vague and poorly defined, causing confusion over expectations and over the evaluation of progress and outcomes of ‘empowerment’ strategies

or policies. Some argue that the concept enjoys universal appeal precisely because of its vagueness (Lyons et al., 2001; Sharp et al., 2003); it is defined only loosely or by implication, in contrast with a state of ‘disempowerment’ tacitly assumed to have a generally accepted definition (Marshall, 1998). Critics also suggest that, where empowerment was once a subversive, emancipatory activist tool, it now forms one of the building blocks of neo-liberal governance. As Mirafteb (2004, p. 239) argues, development agencies and governments have both depoliticised the concept, by appropriating it in such a way that negates its implications for dominance, and deployed it in profoundly political ways to rationalise neo-liberal governance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mirafteb uses a case study of community-based waste collection strategies in Cape Town to cast light on the ideological apparatus of neo-liberal governance.

Empowerment strategies have arguably been nowhere more central to government policy than in South Africa, both historically and in the present,<sup>2</sup> and nowhere are they currently more hotly debated and contested. Empowerment is seen as central to post-apartheid nation-building and to the broader transformation from a racialised system of discrimination to one of greater political, social and economic equity. Quite what empowerment means, how it is to be fostered and how much it is achieved are, however, both complex and contested. We wish to argue that the ways in which empowerment has been understood, defined and deployed by post-apartheid governments, and specifically the ways in which it has seemingly been reduced to economic empowerment, are in danger of reinforcing structures of domination, rather than transforming them, while leaving power relations largely untouched.

The paper first explores conceptual arguments about power and empowerment as they have unfolded in South African debates, legislation and policies. It focuses on the gradual shift from nation-building to neo-liberal governance and how this is reflected in economic reductionism evident in concepts of empowerment. We argue that such a reductionism both depoliticises empowerment and potentially has disempowering effects. In order to develop this argument, we explore the impact of legislation and government policy through a critical examination of empowerment initiatives in the wine industry. Agribusiness was known to be particularly exploitative of black labour under apartheid and, because of its connections to issues of land restitution and workers rights, is of immediate significance in socio-economic transformation and issues of empowerment.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, a number of schemes have been implemented to transform the wine industry, with several South African wines now being marketed explicitly at home and internationally as ‘empowerment’ wines (Bek et al., 2006). South African case studies of the wine industry and other agricultural sectors in the Western Cape have played an important role in contributing to broader debates around fair and ethical trade. In this paper we take a different approach in examining what the wine industry reveals of current debates about empowerment and its appropriation by governments. We are interested in what empowerment means in this context, what the wine indus-

try reveals about the disempowering work of neo-liberalism, even as it is couched in the discourses of empowerment, but also what lessons might be learned about potential ways forward in re-politicising empowerment.

Our assessments are based on research conducted in the Western Cape in March/April 2004. A wide range of informants involved in the wine industry were interviewed, including producers, managers, government officials, consultants, representatives of labour unions, employment and marketing associations and empowerment-focused wine industry bodies.<sup>4</sup> We explore the contested meanings and impacts of empowerment strategies, focusing on both industry-wide and grassroots initiatives. South African policies are subject to intense debates and criticism, particularly for their apparent failure to deliver broad-based emancipatory empowerment. To this end we explore some of the complexities and contradictions of trying to effect broad-based empowerment within the context of unprotected free market globalisation and the implications for conceptualising empowerment within this context.

## 2. Empowerment, neo-liberal governance and economic reductionism

Notions of empowerment in post-apartheid South Africa have been closely related to ideas about democratisation, conceived of through processes of state restructuring and increasing participation in all spheres of life (Hill, 2003). Through restructuring of the state, institutions and legislation there has been a focus on increased equity in the distribution of power as it relates to the articulation and satisfaction of needs, stressing local involvement and devolution of power (McEwan, 2003). Empowerment is perceived as a facilitator for the attainment of rights and as central to the creation of participatory democracy, with emphasis on the role of self-organizing. Efforts towards socio-political transformation have thus been based on sophisticated understandings of how power operates; as Fraser (1989, p. 26) argues, “If power is instantiated in mundane social practices and relations, then efforts to dismantle and transform the regime must address those practices and relations”. Following the initial period of refashioning state machinery, focus has shifted towards these social practices and relations, recognising that changes in ideology need to accompany the restructuring of decision-making hierarchies and that both need to occur

<sup>2</sup> Colonial and apartheid policies produced a system of racial capital that empowered whites and relegated blacks to the margins of the economy; prior to apartheid, heavy government subsidies and capital protected Afrikaner farmers (Giliomee, 1979); after 1948, the National Party embarked on economic policies to close the gap between Afrikaners and English-speaking white South Africans through the effective disempowerment of black labourers. Many of the Afrikaner-owned “corporate behemoths” that still exist in South Africa emerged out of this particular empowerment strategy (Iheduru, 2004, p. 4).

<sup>3</sup> We use the term black as inclusive of all people of colour whilst being mindful of the sensitivities associated with such terminology. The complexities and politics of re-figuring the racial self in the project of empowerment, particularly within the Western Cape with its majority Afrikaans-speaking ‘coloured’ population, are dealt with subsequently.

<sup>4</sup> A total of 25 formal interviews and six informal interviews were conducted. A system of referral was used following initial contact in the field with WIETA board members. As WIETA operates as an alliance between private sector, NGOs and labour unions a reasonably representative perspective could be gained cutting across the industry’s key organisations. Due to the politically and commercially sensitive nature of much of the information contained in this paper the identity of all sources is protected.

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