

# Empowerment examined

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## Power and empowerment

The often uncritical use of the term 'empowerment' in development thinking and practice disguises a problematic concept. Many development practitioners and policy-makers will have come across the term in Caroline Moser's work (1989) on gender analysis. However, development is not the only context in which it is used. We now hear about empowerment from mainstream politicians such as Bill Clinton and John Major. Its use in some disciplines — adult education, community work, and social work in particular — is relatively advanced, though here too there is room for greater clarity about the concept and its application.

Some of the confusion arises because the root-concept — power — is itself disputed, and so is understood and experienced in differing ways by different people. Indeed, the person invoking 'empowerment' may not even be aware of the potential for misunderstanding. Power has been the subject of much debate across the social sciences.<sup>1</sup> Some definitions focus, with varying degrees of subtlety, on the availability of one person or group to get another person or group to do something against their will. Such 'power' is located in decision-making processes, conflict, and force, and could be described as 'zero-sum': the more power one person has, the less the other has. Other definitions differentiate between various kinds of power, which can then be understood as serving distinct purposes and having different effects in or on society. These include 'a threat

power', 'economic power', and 'integrative power'; or 'the power to create such relationships as love, respect, friendship, legitimacy and so on'.<sup>2</sup>

Most frameworks for understanding power appear to be 'neutral': that is, they make no mention of how power is *actually* distributed within a society. There is no consideration of the power dynamics of gender, or of race, class, or any other force of oppression. This absence is tackled by a number of feminist theorists.<sup>3</sup> Conventionally, power is defined in relation to obedience, or 'power over', since some people are seen to have control or influence over others. A gender analysis shows that 'power over' is wielded predominantly by men over other men, by men over women, and by dominant social, political, economic, or cultural groups over those who are marginalised. It is thus an instrument of domination, whose use can be seen in people's personal lives, their close relationships, their communities, and beyond.

Power of this kind can be subtly exercised. Various feminist writers have described the way in which people who are systematically denied power and influence in the dominant society internalise the messages they receive about what they are supposed to be like, and how they may come to believe the messages to be true.<sup>4</sup> This 'internalised oppression' is adopted as a survival mechanism, but becomes so well ingrained that the effects are mistaken for reality. Thus, for example, a woman who is subjected to violent abuse when she expresses her own opinions may start to withhold them, and eventually come to

believe that she has no opinions of her own. When control becomes internalised in this way, the overt use of 'power over' is no longer necessary.

The definition of power in terms of domination and obedience contrasts with one which views it in generative terms: for instance 'the power some people have of stimulating activity in others and raising their morale'.<sup>5</sup> One aspect of this is the kind of leadership that comes from the wish to see a group achieve what it is capable of, where there is no conflict of interests and the group sets its own collective agenda. This model of power is not a zero-sum: an increase in one person's power does not necessarily diminish that of another. And, as Liz Kelly (1992) observes, 'I suspect it is "power to" that the term "empowerment" refers to, and it is achieved by increasing one's ability to resist and challenge "power over".'

### What is empowerment?

The meaning of 'empowerment' can now be seen to relate to the user's interpretation of power. In the context of the conventional definition, empowerment must be about bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it. This puts a strong emphasis on access to political structures and formal decision-making and, in the economic sphere, on access to markets and incomes that enable people to participate in economic decision-making. It is about individuals being able to maximise the opportunities available to them without or despite constraints of structure and State. Within the generative interpretation of power, empowerment also includes access to intangible decision-making processes. It is concerned with the processes by which people become aware of their own interests and how these relate to those of others, in order to participate from a position of greater strength in decision-making and actually to influence such decisions.

Feminist interpretations of power lead to a still broader understanding of empowerment,

since they go beyond formal and institutional definitions of power, and incorporate the idea of 'the personal as political'.<sup>6</sup> From a feminist perspective, interpreting 'power over' entails understanding the dynamics of oppression and internalised oppression. Since these affect the ability of less powerful groups to participate in formal and informal decision-making, and to exert influence, they also affect the way that individuals or groups perceive themselves and their ability to act and influence the world around them. Empowerment is thus more than simply opening up access to decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy that decision-making space, and so overlaps with the other categories of 'power to' and 'power from within'.

These interpretations of empowerment involve giving full scope to the full range of human abilities and potential. As feminist and other social theorists have shown, the abilities ascribed to a particular set of people are to a large degree socially constructed. Empowerment must involve undoing negative social constructions, so that the people affected come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and have influence.

This wider picture of empowerment can be seen to have three dimensions:

- **Personal:** where empowerment is about developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalised oppression.
- **Close relationships:** where empowerment is about developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationship and decisions made within it.
- **Collective:** where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone. This includes involvement in political structures, but might also cover collective action based on cooperation rather than competition. Collective action may be locally focused — for example, at village or neighbourhood level

— or institutional, such as national networks or the United Nations.

The profound — but often unrecognised — differences in the ways in which power is understood perhaps explain how it is that people and organisations as far apart politically as feminists, Western politicians, and the World Bank have embraced the concept with such enthusiasm.

### Empowerment in practice

The idea of empowerment is increasingly used as a tool for understanding what is needed to change the situation of poor and marginalised people. In this context, there is broad agreement that empowerment is a process; that it involves some degree of personal development, but that this is not sufficient; and that it involves moving from insight to action.

In a counselling context, McWhirter (1991) defines empowerment as:

*The process by which people, organisations or groups who are powerless (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others and (d) support the empowerment of others in the community.* (my emphasis)

She makes a useful distinction between ‘the situation of empowerment’, where all four of these conditions are met; and ‘an empowering situation’, where one or more of the conditions is in place or being developed, but where the full requirements are not present.

Through all these definitions runs the theme of understanding: if you understand your situation, you are more likely to act to do something about it. There is also the theme of acting collectively. McWhirter’s definition makes clear that taking action is not about gaining the power to dominate others. Writers on social group work also insist that

empowerment must be used in the context of oppression, since empowerment is about working to remove the existence and effects of unjust inequalities (Ward and Mullender, 1991). Empowerment can take place on a small scale, linking people with others in similar situations through self-help, education, support, or social action groups and network building; or on a larger scale, through community organisation, campaigning, legislative lobbying, social planning, and policy development (Parsons, 1991).

The definitions of empowerment used in education, counselling, and social work, although developed through work in industrialised countries, are broadly similar to Freire’s concept of *conscientisation*, which centres on individuals becoming ‘subjects’ in their own lives and developing a ‘critical consciousness’ — that is, an understanding of their circumstances and the social environment that leads to action.

In practice, much empowerment work involves forms of group work. The role of the outside professional in this context becomes one of helper and facilitator; anything more directive is seen as interfering with the empowerment of the people concerned. Since facilitation skills require subtlety in order to be effective, this has usually meant that professionals must to some extent re-learn how to do their jobs, and develop high-level skills of self-awareness. In some cases, the professional facilitator has to become a member of the group, and be willing to do the same kind of personal sharing as is encouraged from other participants.

The outside professional cannot expect to control the outcomes of authentic empowerment. Writing about education, Taliaferro (1991) points out that true power cannot be bestowed: it comes from within. Any notion of empowerment being given by one group or another hides an attempt to keep control, and she describes the idea of gradual empowerment as ‘especially dubious’. Real empowerment may take unanticipated directions. Outside professionals should therefore be clear that any ‘power over’ which

they have in relation to the people they work with is likely to be challenged by them. This raises an ethical and political issue: if the reality is that you *do* have 'power over' — as is the case with statutory authorities or financially powerful organisations, such as development agencies — it is misleading to deny that this is so.

### Empowerment in a development context

How can the concept of empowerment be most usefully applied in a development context? Most of the literature about empowerment, with the exception of Freire and Batliwala, originates from work in industrialised societies. Do poor or otherwise marginalised women and men experience similar problems in developing countries? In both cases, their lack of access to resources and to formal power is significant, even if the contexts within which that lack is experienced are very different. McWhirter's definition of empowerment seems equally relevant to either context. Any difference is more likely to show up in the way in which it is put into practice, and in the particular activities that are called for. This is confirmed in one of the few definitions of empowerment which has a specific focus on development (Keller and Mbwewe, 1991), in which it is described as:

*A process whereby women become able to organise themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination.*

Srilatha Batliwala, writing about women's empowerment, has made a detailed analysis of women's empowerment programmes, looking at Integrated Rural Development (IRD: economic interventions, awareness-building, and organising of women) and at Research, Training, and Resource Support.<sup>7</sup> She notes that in some (especially IRD) programmes, the terms *empowerment* and *development* are used

synonymously. It is often assumed that power comes automatically through economic strength. It may do, but often it does not, depending on specific relations determined by gender, culture, class, or caste. Economic relations do not always improve women's economic situation, and often add an extra burden. Often, development work is still done 'for' women, and an exclusive focus on economic activities does not automatically create a space for women to look at their own role *as women*, or at other problematic aspects of their lives.

### *Economic activities and the empowerment process*

Economic activities may widen the range of options for marginalised people, but do not necessarily enable them to reach a point where they can take charge of creating for themselves the options from which they get to choose. To do that, a combination of confidence and self-esteem, information, analytical skills, ability to identify and tap into available resources, political and social influence, and so on, is needed. Programmes that build on the demands and wishes of the people who participate in them are a step towards empowerment, but they do not in and of themselves tackle the assumptions that those people (and the people around them) are already making about what they can and cannot do: the point where the internalised oppression works in combination with the particular economic and social context to restrict the options that people *perceive* as available, and legitimate. An empowerment approach centred on economic activity must pay attention to more than the activity itself. The processes and structures through which an economic activity operates need to be deliberately designed to create opportunities for an empowerment process to happen.

### *The role of outsiders*

The role of the professional or the outsider in the development setting is just as important as in the social-work contexts described earlier.

Price describes the crucial role played by women staff of an Indian NGO, giving an example of an occasion when a key worker talking about her own personal experience enabled other women to do likewise. This is in stark contrast to the tendency in many development projects, as in Ngau's account (1987) of the Kenyan Harambee movement, for professional–client relationships to be fostered by para-professionals, fuelling resentment and withdrawal among local people. This has implications for the way in which personnel in development programmes and projects — as well as in aid agencies — perform their work. A process of empowerment that seeks to engage poor and marginalised people cannot be effective if the methodology is 'top-down' and directive, or encourages dependency. Empowerment is a process that cannot be imposed by outsiders — although appropriate external support and intervention can speed up and encourage it. It calls for a facilitative approach and an attitude of complete respect for and confidence in the people being worked with, or accompanied.<sup>8</sup> It therefore makes great demands on the change-agents, and may require (and feed into) their own empowerment. Furthermore, since most professionals are trained to work in ways that disempower — and which tell other people what they should do and think — it requires conscious and sustained efforts to modify that pattern of behaviour and to clarify mutual expectations.

### *Individual empowerment*

In discussing empowerment through awareness-building and organising of women, Batliwala highlights an aspect of an empowerment approach that poses a difficulty for many agencies working in development: it can be desperately slow. Most funding agencies are understandably preoccupied with showing results. Yet the work needed for raising levels of confidence and self-esteem among poor and marginalised people in such a way that will enhance their ability to take charge of their own needs

is necessarily time-consuming. It is a process for each individual to do at her or his own pace. Because of this, there is a temptation to work with people who have already a degree of self-confidence. This is one reason why even empowerment-focused programmes often fail to engage with the poorest and most marginalised. Even to participate in a group, you require a certain minimal sense of your own abilities and worth, as well as being able to overcome the obstacles to making the time to participate.

### *Collective empowerment*

In the context of development, while individual empowerment is one ingredient in achieving empowerment at the collective and institutional levels, concentration on individuals alone is not enough. Changes are needed in the collective abilities of individuals to take charge of identifying and meeting their own needs — as households, communities, organisations, institutions, and societies. At the same time, we must recognise that the effectiveness of such group activity rests also on the individual empowerment of at least some people.

Professionals involved in such empowerment work should repeatedly ask how the development intervention is affecting the various aspects of the lives of the people directly involved. A monitoring and evaluation process that reflects the empowerment process is essential. People need to be involved in the identification of appropriate indicators of change, and in the setting of criteria for evaluating impact. As the empowerment process proceeds, these will inevitably need to be modified and revised. Clarity about the dynamics that push poor and marginalised people to stay within what is safe and familiar is vital, in order to ensure that the empowerment process is kept well in focus. Qualitative indicators are, self-evidently, central to the evaluation of empowerment.

## Conclusion

'Empowerment' has much in common with other concepts used by development practitioners and planners, such as 'participation', 'capacity-building', 'sustainability', or 'institutional development'. There is, however, a worrying temptation to use them in a way that takes the troublesome notions of power, and the distribution of power, out of the picture. For in spite of their appeal, these terms can easily become one more way to ignore or hide the realities of power, inequality, and oppression. Yet it is precisely those realities which shape the lives of poor and marginalised people, and the communities in which they live.

The concept of 'empowerment', if it is used precisely and deliberately, can help to focus thought, planning, and action in development. However, when its use is careless, deliberately vague, or sloganising, it risks becoming degraded and valueless.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Bachrach and Baratz (1970), Lukes (1974), Foucault (1980), Giddens (1984), Hartsock (1985 and 1990), and Boulding (1988).
- 2 These distinctions are from Boulding (1988) p.10.
- 3 See, for example, Hartsock (1985, 1990), and Starhawk (1987).
- 4 See, for example, Pheterson (1990), and Jackins (1983).
- 5 Nancy Hartsock (1985) draws on the writings of Hannah Arendt, Mary Parker Follett, Dorothy Emmett, Hannah Pitkin and Berenice Carroll in her analysis.
- 6 I do not wish to imply here that there is one 'feminist' model of power. Space constraints have led me to generalise and leave out important variations in analysis.
- 7 Batliwala (1993). I had access to the second draft and not to the final version.
- 8 *Acompañamiento*, or accompaniment, is a word widely used in Latin America to describe an outside agent's sense of solidarity and willingness to share risks with poor and marginalised people, and a willingness to engage with the processes of social change in which they are directly involved. It contrasts with the position of outside agents — whether these are church workers, development NGOs, or funding agencies — which maintain a greater sense of distance.

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