

Empowerment and Participation: bridging the gap between understanding and practice

Jethro Pettit
Research Fellow
Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, UK
J.Pettit@ids.ac.uk

For the UNDESA Expert Group Meeting on
Promoting people's empowerment in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and
productive and decent work for all

10–12 September 2012
United Nations Headquarters, New York
UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs
Division for Social Policy and Development

Contents

Bridging understanding and practice: why the gap?	2
The nature of power is to reassert itself.....	3
Empowerment is open to selective interpretation.....	6
Critical analysis of power is not enough.....	8
References.....	9

Bridging understanding and practice: why the gap?

There is widespread agreement that *empowerment*, as understood and promoted in the context of development and poverty reduction, is a multidimensional and interdependent process involving social, political, economic and legal changes that will enable people living in poverty and marginalisation to *participate* meaningfully in shaping their own futures (e.g. Alsop, Bertelsen et al. 2006; Eyben, Cornwall et al. 2008). Without genuine empowerment, participation can quickly become a token exercise or even a means of maintaining power relations; and without meaningful participation, empowerment can remain an empty, unfulfilled promise (Cornwall and Brock 2005). Empowerment and participation are deeply complementary and can be considered both means and ends, processes and outcomes.

Most would also agree that meaningful empowerment and participation require significant changes in power relations, both at the level of *agency* and *structure*. Agency can be defined as the ability of individuals and groups to think and act in their own interests, and structure as the formal and informal institutions, rules, norms and beliefs that enable and constrain thinking and action. Robust theories of power, and sound practices of empowerment and participation, will seriously consider both agency and structure – and the interplay between them. This multidimensional perspective opens up avenues of change that might otherwise be ignored. For example a focus on changing laws that discriminate against women might need to be complemented by public education and awareness-raising, including within the judiciary. Efforts to strengthen poor farmers' access to markets might not succeed without regulating monopolies, or strengthening the collective political voice of small farmers.

The starting point of this discussion paper is that these dynamics of empowerment and participation are by now fairly well understood in development theory, practice and policy. Many intelligent frameworks and concepts are available for revealing the links between agency and structure in different contexts, sectors and spaces; there are innovative strategies for implementation and sound methodologies for measuring outcomes. There are excellent examples of practice and many good lessons have been learned. Yet there remains a serious gap in realising empowered, participatory approaches to reducing poverty on a wider scale. The power relations that drive inequality and exclusion do not yield easily, and efforts to challenge them can be quickly 'hollowed out', co-opted or rendered tokenistic.

Rather than repeating calls for more or better empowerment and participation, this paper asks why this gap between understanding and practice persists, and what might be done to narrow it. Three points are offered for discussion and response:

1. **The nature of power is to reassert itself:** structures run deep, are harder to see and address than agency, and structures do not yield easily to interventions.
2. **Empowerment is open to selective interpretation:** as empowerment has been mainstreamed, it can become diluted and lose its transformative meaning.
3. **Analytical understanding is not enough:** critical awareness can be overridden by identity and belonging, and analysis by embodied feeling and habit.

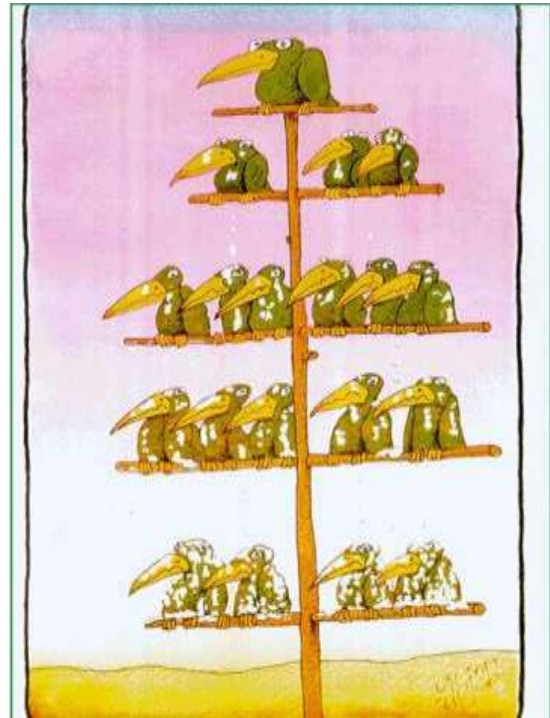
The reflections offered here are based on the author's research and experience introducing methods of power analysis and reflective practice with development practitioners and organisations seeking to support meaningful processes of empowerment and participation.

The nature of power is to reassert itself

The structural dimensions of power run very deep, and can be harder to see and address than dimensions of agency. There is a tendency therefore to focus on visible actors and process, and to analyse them with political economy and actor-network methods that only explain part of the picture. Yet actors do not easily shift their positions in response to new interventions or incentives if underlying structures remain unchanged.

Agency vs Structure

For some, power is something that people and institutions can hold, wield, lose and gain, usually through some kind of contestation. This is referred to as *agency* – the actions and intentions of people and groups. For others, power is embedded in all relationships, institutions and systems of knowledge, and is part of the way societies and cultures work. This view of power focuses on *structure* or the social norms and forces that enable and constrain thinking, action and behaviour.



Many approaches to empowerment tend to focus on power relations among actors and strengthening capabilities to act (agency), but do not always pay attention to shifting the structures, norms and ‘networks of social boundaries’ that enable and constrain the behaviour of all actors, including the powerful (Hayward 2000). This interplay of agency and structure can be represented as a mutually reinforcing ‘spectrum’ of power:

Actors and processes (agency, interests)	Power Spectrum ↔	Norms and beliefs (structure, socialised behaviour)
Emphasis Focus on “visible” and “hidden” forms of power as forms of wilful domination, observable control and “power over”	↔	Focus on “invisible” power reproduced through social and cultural norms, and internalised by powerful and powerless
Strategies Action to strengthen the “power to” and “power with” of poor and marginalised people, and to build influence and participation in decision-making processes	↔	Action to strengthen awareness, dignity and “power within”, to redefine social consensus on norms and behaviour, and to reshape conditions behind decision-making
Example: Gender Finding ways to ensure women and their issues are represented and have influence in decision-making spaces	↔	Strengthening dignity and self-esteem of women, and challenging socially constructed biases in men’s and women’s gendered behaviour

Source: Jethro Pettit and Jo Rowlands, 2007, based on John Gaventa’s power cube (2006) and VeneKlasen and Miller’s alternative forms of power (2002)

Power can be understood as a kind of mutual interaction of agency and structure, and empowerment as a process that requires shifts in both dimensions. Yet the magnitude and depth of the less visible, structural dimensions of power are not always evident. If the 'power spectrum' were rotated vertically, taking the shape of an iceberg, actors and



processes might be represented by the smaller, visible portion above the water line, while the structures, norms and beliefs would be represented by the vast bulk below the surface, not easily perceived or acted upon.

Formal and informal power

This metaphor also captures the relationship between formal and informal structures of power (Pettit 2012 forthcoming). **Formal power** is the **visible, recognisable structures** that are part of the way in which societies work: institutions that mediate the relationship between those with legitimate authority and those who are subject to that authority, the laws and rules that define what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, and how those who break laws and flout norms are treated.

However, formal power may also operate in less visible or legally recognised ways, below the surface, for example through clandestine strategies of coercion that enforce certain belief systems which reproduce inequalities or feelings of powerlessness.

Informal power can be thought of as the **socialised norms, discourses and cultural practices** that are part of our everyday lives. Informal power relations are internalised through socialisation from a young age, starting with acceptance of inequality in roles, for instance, between father and mother and older and younger family members. Informal power relations are often taken for granted as normal, or natural.

The distinction between formal and informal power draws attention to the fact that changes in formal and visible structures or strategies of domination are necessary, but not sufficient, to empower those living in poverty or marginalisation. Laws may precede and hasten social change, but to be effective they need to be accompanied by efforts to change internalised norms, attitudes and values. Empowerment is a multidimensional process requiring changes in the economic, political and social conditions that reproduce poverty and exclusion.

For example, to support the empowerment of women, attention needs to be paid to their social, economic and political empowerment:

- *Social empowerment* is about changing society (e.g. gender norms) so that women's place within it is respected and recognised on the terms on which they want to live, not on terms dictated by others. A sense of autonomy and self-value is important for someone to preserve her bodily integrity, participate in politics, demand a fair return on her work, and take full advantage of public services, such as health and education.

- **Economic empowerment** is about women's capacity to contribute to and benefit from economic activities on terms which recognize the value of their contribution, respect their dignity and make it possible for them to negotiate a fairer distribution of returns. It is also about changing institutions and norms that inhibit women's economic participation, such as attitudes about child care or the type of work that women can do.
- **Political empowerment** concerns equity of representation in political institutions and enhanced voice of the least vocal so that women engage in making the decisions that affect their lives and lives of others like them. It is the ability to speak about, as well as speak for, themselves, gaining a right to engage in political processes. Again, such changes also require changes in social and cultural attitudes about women's political participation and leadership.

It is not possible to support processes of empowerment without looking at power across the spheres of politics, economics, society and culture, and considering the actors, institutions, spaces and levels where it operates. Understanding the identities and relationships that create particular socio-cultural hierarchies – including age, gender, caste, class, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. – can provide vital insights for shaping more effective and realistic development strategies, and identifying obstacles or sources of resistance to change. Cultural codes for social stratification can influence both individual and collective action and may work as an invisible barrier in promoting equality and non-discrimination.

Responses and recommendations

Empowerment is most effective when it draws on the full range of concepts and meanings of power, taking into account the intersection of agency and structure, formal and informal structures, and positive and negative forms of agency. One challenge for policy-makers and practitioners is that theories used to understand power can be difficult to grasp and apply. Fortunately there are useful conceptual and practical tools that can be used to reveal and respond to these multiple dimensions. Gender analysis offers a number of frameworks that link agency and structure, and that can be adapted to other discriminatory social constructs. For example, Kabeer's three-fold empowerment framework of *resources*, *agency* and *achievement* (Kabeer 1999; 2001) recognises that agency cannot be strengthened alone, without attention to the normative conditions within which choice is exercised, or not:

The terms on which people gain access to resources are as important as the resources themselves when the issue of empowerment is being considered. Access may be conditional on highly clientelist forms of dependency relationships or extremely exploitative conditions of work or it may be achieved in ways which offer dignity and a sense of self-worth. Empowerment entails a change in the terms on which resources are acquired as much as an increase in access to resources (Kabeer 2001: 21).

Similarly, useful frameworks for identifying *visible*, *hidden* and *invisible power* are provided in Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller's 'power matrix' (Miller, VeneKlasen et al. 2006) and also in John Gaventa's 'powercube' (Gaventa 2006, both building on Lukes' three-dimensional notion of power; 1974, 2005). *Visible* and *hidden power* are overt and covert forms of agency or 'power over', while *invisible power* is the socialised beliefs that shape people's expectations and possibilities of having a voice. More than abstract theories, these frameworks have proven themselves as useful tools for assessing power relations and identifying strategies that will work right across the agency-structure spectrum.

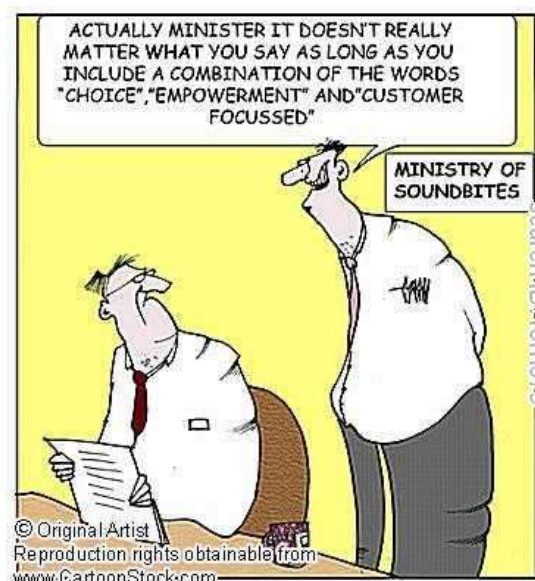


These frameworks also recognise and seek out ways of supporting the *positive expressions of power* that can influence both agency and structure, in the form of *power to* (the ability to do something), *power with* (collective understanding and action) and *power within* (dignity, self-worth) (Rowlands 1997). When people mobilise to show their governments, employers, communities or families that they will not tolerate being exploited or abused, they are exercising positive power. When a woman is able to take the decision to leave a violent husband or to go out to work, she is exercising positive power. *Power to* is often reliant on developing capabilities of *power within* and *power with*.

Empowerment is open to selective interpretation

Empowerment has become a central objective for many organisations but, like power, it can have many different meanings relating to individual and collective participation, capability, choice, autonomy and freedom. While empowerment broadly defined can open new avenues, as discussed above, there is also a risk that it will be interpreted and supported in ways that quietly conform with the interests of powerful actors or with prevailing norms. Approaches to empowerment will be 'cherry-picked' that don't threaten the status quo, or tools and methods will be pursued in more mechanical and technical ways that become divorced from a social change agenda.

The history of empowerment in development thinking and practice is similar to that of participation: both originated with social movements and liberation struggles, and were advanced by civic and political actors seeking collective responses to deeply entrenched structures, including for example the feminist movement. Yet since the 1990s empowerment has become more mainstreamed within the discourse of development agencies and governments, losing its emancipatory roots and taking on a more individualist and neo-populist meanings (Luttrell and Quiroz 2009: 4). Empowerment's 'dissonant elements fell



away as it came to join words like “social capital” as part of a chain of equivalence that stripped it of any political potency’ (Cornwall and Brock 2005: 6).

Some approaches to empowerment focus on enabling individuals to gain access to assets, information, choices and opportunities so that they are able to improve their own situations. This is often coupled with a liberal emphasis on individual rights and responsibilities. One



concern with this approach is that it can lead to enabling some individuals to better adapt to a fundamentally unfair situation, without addressing the conditions that produce poverty in the first place.

Cecilia Sardenberg (2009) contrasts this ‘liberal’ view of empowerment with the ‘liberating’ perspective that originated in social and feminist movements, which do not assume that gaining access to resources – or even achieving the economic or legal rights and equalities that might facilitate

such access – will necessarily translate into greater capacity to act. Liberating empowerment is pedagogical and political, supporting changes in changing individual and group consciousness that can enable people to be more aware of themselves and their situation, and to use this awareness to act collectively. Empowerment becomes not a means to achieve development goals, but an end in itself, and a process ‘by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability’ (Kabeer 1999: 435, cited in Sardenberg 2009).

A major obstacle to achieving liberating vs liberal empowerment is that institutional drivers will often determine the approaches that are favoured and rewarded. This can lead to a gap – widely recognised in many organisations – between ‘espoused theory’ or official discourse and ‘theory in practice’ or what people actually do (Argyris and Schön 1974).

Responses and recommendations

One key message in moving beyond instrumental and liberal empowerment to more socially transformative empowerment is that the *meaning of agency needs to be stretched* so that individuals and groups can develop capacities to address the norms and conditions that determine their choices. Agency need not be limited to action based upon individual rights or self interest; it can include paying attention to the ‘conditions’ and ‘consequences’ of choice that determine what is possible for people to imagine or do (Kabeer 1999: 461); and to creating conditions wherein agency and choice are possible without fear or retribution. Women’s empowerment, for example, requires ‘transformative forms of agency that do not simply address immediate inequalities but are used to initiate longer-term processes of change in the structures of patriarchy’ (Kabeer 2005:16).

Another response to the dilution of meanings of empowerment, and the gap between espoused theory and theory-in-use, is to engage stakeholders in a process of *clarifying the social and political intent* of an empowerment initiative, rather than accepting institutional aims at face value (Pettit 2012). The meanings and assumptions behind empowerment, and

Pettit - Empowerment and Participation: bridging the gap between understanding and practice

the tools, methods and interventions that are expected to help facilitate it, can be questioned critically. In doing this, development actors can reflect on the way power is at work in their everyday language, actions and relationships, in the fabric of their institutions, in how decisions are made, in the ways particular kinds of people are valued or marginalized, and in the extent to which people regard themselves as capable of shaping their own destinies.

Empowerment initiatives will be more successful if critical and reflective methods of power analysis are brought into discrete stages of development policy and practice, e.g. in developing a country strategy, planning a programme, identifying partners, conducting mid-term reviews or as part of a monitoring or evaluation exercise. It can be used to stimulate internal debate, and dialogue with partners, about theory of change and strategy options. Power analysis can also help to build the capacities of staff and partners to engage with complex issues and contexts. It can also be used to



encourage discussion about the role of donors as political actors, and how the micro-politics of organisations and individual behaviour influence the effectiveness of aid relationships.

Critical analysis of power is not enough

Even with more critical and reflective analysis of power in all its dimensions, by external development actors and by those they hope to support and empower, the gaps between understanding and action can remain intact. This is partly because critical awareness is so easily overridden by our felt needs for identity, belonging and community (Klouda 2004). In short, our desire for security and acceptance can trump our rational and intellectual claims freedom and autonomy. We develop unconscious dispositions and 'habitus' in conformity with our upbringing and socialisation (Bourdieu 1980). This is why so many empowerment efforts emphasise the collective processes of shifting underlying norms and beliefs and addressing not just agency but the 'conditions' and 'consequences' of choice (Kabeer 1999). Yet we are social animals, and the need to belong and conform can overrule the will for emancipation – which is one reason why, for example, victims of domestic violence often find it hard to leave their abusers.

The gap between understanding and action is also explained by the nature of cognition, which is increasingly understood in neuroscience and psychology as an embodied rather than as a purely intellectual process. We are not Cartesian rationalists whose actions flow from logical reasoning, but rely to a great degree on the feelings, emotions and 'somatic markers' that have been shaped by our prior experiences (Damasio 2006). There is growing evidence from cognitive and linguistic science to support sociological theories of how our embodied dispositions are formed by, and also help to reproduce, social structures and

norms (e.g. Varela, Thompson et al. 1991; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Thompson 2007). In both mind and body we are structured and structuring agents.

Responses and recommendations

The implications of embodied cognition for engaging in processes of empowerment are that the ways we learn and reflect on power need themselves to be embodied and experiential. Many methods of reflective learning, participatory action research, awareness-raising and creative techniques of social media and 'communication for social change' draw on principles of embodied and experiential learning. They also involve critical and analytical forms of learning and reflection, but rarely without being linked to processes of storytelling, theatre, role-play, and forms of narrative, creative and visual arts. For those who aim to empower themselves, these methods can enable them to feel and act, as well as think, their way into reconfigured structures and relations of power. The imagination plays a vital role in this process of recognising the boundaries that constrain, and opening up new narratives and possibilities that can then be acted upon (Eyben, Cornwall and Kabeer 2008):

Empowerment happens when individuals and organised groups are able to imagine their world differently and to realise that vision by changing the relations of power that have been keeping them in poverty (Eyben, Cornwall and Kabeer 2008: 6).

The overriding power of identity and belonging and the embodied nature of cognition also have implications for development professionals and institutions; we too need to engage in forms of experiential, reflective and embodied learning to complement our analytical processes and insights, as a means of developing more power-conscious and empowering participatory practice. This can be facilitated through experiential and reflective 'action learning' approaches to professional development (Pettit 2006; Hunjan and Pettit 2011; Pettit 2012), and through experiential 'immersions' in communities (Chambers and Pettit 2004). If power is embodied and internalised, empowerment is necessarily also a lived experience.

References

- Alsop, R., M. F. Bertelsen, et al. (2006). Empowerment in Practice: from analysis to implementation. Washington DC, The World Bank.
- Argyris, C. and D. Schön (1974). Theory in Practice: Increasing Organisational Effectiveness. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Bourdieu, P. (1980). The Logic of Practice. Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- Chambers, R. and J. Pettit (2004). Shifting Power to Make a Difference. Inclusive Aid: Changing Power and Relationships in International Development. L. Groves and R. Hinton. London, Earthscan.
- Cornwall, A. and K. Brock (2005). Beyond Buzzwords: 'Poverty Reduction', 'Participation' and 'Empowerment' in Development Policy. Overarching Concerns Programme Paper. Geneva, UNRISD.
- Damasio, A. (2006). Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain. London, Vintage.
- Eyben, R., A. Cornwall, et al. (2008). Conceptualising empowerment and the implications for pro poor growth: A paper for the DAC Poverty Network. Brighton, Institute of Development Studies.
- Pettit - Empowerment and Participation: bridging the gap between understanding and practice

- Gaventa, J. (2006). "Finding the spaces for change; a power analysis." IDS Bulletin 37(5).
- Hayward, C. (2000). De-facing Power. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hunjan, R. and J. Pettit (2011). Power: A Practical Guide for Facilitating Social Change. Dunfermline, Carnegie UK Trust, Democracy and Civil Society Programme.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). "Resources, Agency, Achievements; Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment." Development and Change 30: 435-464.
- Kabeer, N. (2001). Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. Discussing Women's Empowerment: Theory and Practice. Sida. Stockholm, Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency.
- Klouta, T. (2004). Thinking Critically, Speaking Critically.
- Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson (1999). Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought. New York, Basic Books.
- Lukes, S. (1974, 2005). Power: A Radical View. London, Macmillan.
- Luttrell, C. and S. Quiroz (2009). Understanding and Operationalising Empowerment. Working Paper. London, Overseas Development Institute.
- Miller, V., L. VeneKlasen, et al. (2006). Making Change Happen: Power - Concepts for Revisioning Power for Justice, Equality and Peace. Washington DC, Just Associates.
- Pettit, J. (2006). "Power and pedagogy: learning for reflective development practice." IDS Bulletin 37(5).
- Pettit, J. (2012). "Getting to grips with power: action learning for social change in the UK." IDS Bulletin 43(3).
- Pettit, J. (2012 forthcoming). Power Analysis: A Practical Guide. Stockholm, Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency.
- Rowlands, J. (1997). Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras. Oxford, Oxfam Publications.
- Sardenberg, C. (2009). Liberal vs Liberating Empowerment: Latin America. Pathways Working Paper. Brighton, Pathways of Women's Empowerment, Institute of Development Studies.
- Thompson, E. (2007). Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind. Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University.
- Varela, F. J., E. Thompson, et al. (1991). The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.
- VeneKlasen, L. and V. Miller (2002). A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation. Oklahoma City, World Neighbors.