Empowerment

People-centred advocacy requires that activists be prepared and capable of challenging authoritarian and unjust power dynamics. However, in a world marked by social inequalities and the denial of basic rights many individuals and organisations, particularly ones linked to the poor and excluded, often do not feel powerful or confident enough to enter the struggle. Indeed in some contexts, cultural beliefs are so rooted, it is hard to even see social change as possible.

Strengthening people’s individual and group potential for engaging in different levels of public debate and governance is an enormous challenge for people-centred advocacy. Empowerment strategies inspired by the feminist movement and the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, have become common responses to this challenge. But the meaning of the term empowerment has become the centre of an ongoing and intense debate. It has been fuelled by the different, and sometimes contradictory, ways in which the concept is used by organisations that range from the World Bank to groups questioning the Bank’s existence. We therefore want to clarify our meaning and reclaim the original emancipatory vision of empowerment since we believe it remains a strong and valuable tool for organisations engaged in the struggle for rights, democracy and social justice.

EMPOWERMENT IS SIMULTANEOUSLY AN APPROACH AND A PROCESS

Empowerment is an approach that puts the notions of ‘people’ and ‘power’ at the centre of the struggle for rights and justice. It is rooted in a people-centred perspective of social change, in which the main force of transformation is the action and active reflection of the individuals and social groups most affected by poverty and social injustice.

Empowerment is a process that strengthens the abilities, confidence, analysis and power of poor and excluded people and their organisations so they can challenge unjust and authoritarian power relations. While empowerment is not something that can be done to or for someone, opportunities for reflection and action can be created that open up possibilities for empowerment. These help people, both as individuals and as part of a group, begin to understand how power operates in their lives, to explore their own sources of power and inspiration and to grapple with the implications. This is sometimes called consciousness-raising or awareness-raising.

EMPOWERMENT ENCOURAGES POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

At the heart of empowerment is the development of political consciousness, or as it is sometimes called, critical consciousness - a way of seeing, caring about and acting in the world. Guided by a commitment to rights and justice, it is developed, in part through, an understanding of how power and inequity operate in social, political and economic systems, in cultural values and in human relationships. It’s

Citizen Empowerment is...
A process of learning and action that strengthens people’s self-esteem, analytical and organising skills, and political consciousness so they can gain a sense of their rights and join together to develop more democratic societies
[Veneklasen with Miller, 2002. A New Weave of Power People and Politics. World Neighbors]
meaning comes from the Greek word ‘polis’ which meant city-state; the term political had to do with the life of the community. For us, political consciousness, therefore, involves caring about community and coming together in a mutual quest and struggle for dignity.

EMPOWERMENT IS A COLLECTIVE PROCESS

Empowerment is a collective process that affects one’s relationships with self and others. The strengthening of confidence and capacity to challenge unequal power relations must take into account the complex dynamics of power in which the person and their social group are immersed. Empowerment must go beyond the liberal perspective that tends to focus almost exclusively on the individual: it is important simultaneously for people to develop a

For individuals and groups where class, caste, ethnicity and gender determine their access to resources and power, their empowerment begins when they not only recognise the systemic forces that oppress them, but act to change existing power relationships.

Srilatha Batliwala
Indian Activist and Scholar

Political Consciousness:
Grounded in critical thinking and values of solidarity and human rights, political consciousness is a lifelong personal exploration of who we are, how we have been shaped, and how our values, world view and actions can contribute to a better world for all. It is a creative journey filled with conflict and growth that can be both liberating and painful. Latin American colleagues working on gender describe it as an interactive and iterative process that involves four overlapping levels of consciousness. These range from passive (accepting roles of subordination as natural) to questioning (asking why) to analytical (naming and analysing oppressive situations) and finally active-critical consciousness (developing a critical analysis of inequitable systems and structures and taking action with others to transform them) [Miller, Political Consciousness: A Perpetual Quest, Pakistani NGO Resource Center Journal, June 2002].

A rally of tenant farmers with placards demanding their land tenancy rights in Nepal
sense of solidarity and collectivity. Even the most intimate strengthening of individual self-esteem should be rooted in values of community.

**EMPOWERMENT IS NOT A NEUTRAL OR SERENE PROCESS WITHOUT EMOTION AND CONFLICT**

Empowerment involves challenging our perceptions of who we are and our relationships with people - from the most intimate to the more formal and public types of relations. Rooted in cultural system of values and beliefs empowerment processes therefore go beyond neutral rationality. To overcome poverty and social injustice it is necessary to face real – but sometime hidden – structures of domination and privilege which are maintained by diverse types of power relations. These can be especially difficult to confront since in some cases they involve not only challenging the oppressive exercise of power by public authorities but also by those closest to us - relatives and spouses or partners. For women, this can be particularly problematic and painful since raising questions about such relationships may mean that their sources of emotional and economic support may be threatened and their place in the community jeopardised.

**Developing individual and collective consciousness**

Individual critical consciousness developed by Dalit women in Nepal through involvement in REFLECT circles gradually evolved into a powerful collective consciousness within their entire community. (REFLECT is a literacy process that encourages people to reflect on their circumstances in order to improve them.)

When discussing the root causes of their marginalisation, women in one circle concluded that the traditional job that the caste system required them to do was at the core of their exclusion from society. As part of the untouchable class, they were required to dispose of dead animals - universally seen as a demeaning, dirty and unhealthy task. They shared this new realisation with the leaders and men in their community who agreed with their analysis. Subsequently local Dalit leaders began to mobilise Dalits to organise against untouchability and caste-based discrimination. They made a ground-breaking collective decision to stop disposing of animal carcasses altogether, a powerful symbol of the community’s unwillingness to support a system that oppressed them. From this decision, a campaign grew that included Dalits from other communities and resulted in Dalits in that area no longer being forced to carry out their traditional occupation of carcass disposal. (Dalit is the name given to a grouping of people who over the centuries have been labelled as unclean and untouchable and thus have been marginalised from making decisions in society or exercising their human rights.) See Section 4 for further description of this campaign.

Attempts to encourage empowerment, however, do not always make the critical link to a collective vision of power and change. A detailed study of REFLECT projects in two countries (Fiedrich and Jellema, Literacy, Gender and Social Agency Adventures in Empowerment. DFID Researching the Issues 53, 2003) raises some important questions about the connection between individual and collective empowerment. In reviewing the cases, we found that NGO workers, facilitators and participants were motivated primarily by what appeared to be concerns for individual respectability and credibility and what people could gain from such status or authority. While individuals demonstrated a sense of personal empowerment, neither researchers or participants seemed to have any sense of a more collective perspective on empowerment or challenging the wider societal prejudices that affected the community at large.
EMPOWERMENT CAN WORK AT THE INDIVIDUAL, COLLECTIVE OR ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL.

The core of empowerment is to strengthen people to enable them to change the unequal power relations in which poverty and social inequalities are rooted. To do this it is important to take into account all potential dimensions of people’s action: as individuals, as groups sharing a common identity or as organisations.

To illustrate the empowerment process we have developed a diagram that tries to incorporate some of its key elements. As we can see in the diagram on the next page empowerment involves a complex set of dimensions and connections. At its core are processes of reflection and action that challenge and transform inequitable power relations. These reinforce, and are reinforced by, learning and consciousness-raising that in turn affect changes in individual and collective identity and together eventually produce gains in rights, resources and power. The more we strengthen the synergy between these elements, the better the achievements will be.

The dynamic relation between each dimension will vary in intensity and complexity depending on the context and issue to be faced. Our capacity to confront the challenges posed will be directly conditioned by our (socio-cultural-economic-political) context. This diagram can be used to explore and determine what strategies seem most appropriate for encouraging and supporting empowerment. By taking into account contextual opportunities and constraints, we may find that some entry points for reflection and action will be easier and less threatening than others.

When we talk about ‘empowerment’, we are not just talking about the development of technical skills. Empowerment will always have as its main aim strengthening the political awareness and the potential of the person or group to become active protagonists in the struggle for rights. For some, at a particular time, the most appropriate focus will be on building collective action to influence public policy, whilst for others it may be building a positive sense of self-worth. In the long term however it is vital for empowerment strategies to translate consciousness-raising (conscientizacion) into action, where people collectively challenge and work to change the power dynamics which produce poverty and social inequalities.

Questions of Identity and Power
When people see themselves in negative terms, they often find it difficult to act, especially if they internalise these beliefs. For example when society labels certain groups as ignorant and dirty peasants or Dalits or immoral homosexuals or foolish women, their identity as individuals and as a group is associated with degrading traits and characteristics. These labels operate to demean and belittle them and can discourage their willingness to participate and their belief that change is possible. For some, such processes produce apathy but for others, they can spur resistance. Empowerment helps people develop their sense of dignity and worth both as individuals and as a group so they can strengthen their resistance and gain confidence to transform the inequities and prejudice that shape their lives.
Another important point to be considered in empowerment strategies is the relationship between individual identity (a positive sense of self) and collective identity (a sense of solidarity to act and to reflect together). Empowerment approaches that focus on solidarity and changing power relations need to be contrasted with ones based on neo-liberal assumptions of individualism that reinforce current power imbalances. Such assumptions are derived from the logic of the market that focuses on the individual and interprets rights and citizenship more in terms of the consumer, where each consumer demands to have her or his own interest or particular right fulfilled, without a broader perspective of social justice and solidarity.

Empowerment approaches rooted in a people-centred advocacy perspective closely link the personal with the community dimension. Individual change should encompass: a sense of solidarity, community, democracy, social justice and respect for difference and make a connection with a communal perception of rights. So, depending on the context, both ‘individual’ and ‘collective’ dimensions should be used as entry points to develop empowerment processes.

‘Empowered people’ perceive themselves as progressively stronger and more confident to struggle for rights in a collective process. Empowerment will be manifested in different ways: in their capacity to understand and challenge power dynamics, in a positive shift in the way they view their own identify and position in the world, in their openness to review their values and beliefs, in

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**Empowerment Framework**

Developed by the authors with the contribution of Jorge Romano, ActionAid International Brazil
their ability and confidence to mobilise and take action. In other words, empowerment is people building power within themselves and linking it to power with others in order to exercise power to make social change possible.

To reiterate, empowerment is not a theoretical or neutral process: it is intrinsically linked to the struggle for rights and social justice and to the achievement of concrete gains - however small - in access to and control over rights and resources. Sometimes extreme poverty creates obstacles to people’s involvement in advocacy. Prejudice and discrimination suffered by some groups also make it harder for them to stand up for their rights. Of course we need to constantly remind ourselves that social change takes time and does not happen overnight. Our empowerment strategies must deal with real constraints and forces, varying in each situation, which work to prevent the full and active engagement of people, especially the poor and marginalised, in advocacy and action.

**COMMON CHALLENGES FOR EMPOWERMENT**

**Empowerment is not an outside process.**

Although enormous support is often given by external agents, especially as initial facilitators, empowerment is a personal and internal process. Nothing will happen without individual and collective awareness and the full engagement and ownership of the people at the core of the struggle for rights. Indeed the sense of ‘new self’ (seeing ourselves as potential agents of social change joined in common struggle with others) is one of the key dimensions of empowerment. External actors and factors can create favourable or unfavourable contexts but the main engine of change will be the minds, feelings, values and attitudes of the individuals and groups most affected by poverty and social inequalities.

**We should not assume a romantic and simplistic stance that the voice of the poor and marginalised is always right, or always offers the best way forward.**

One of the strongest ways power operates is through the invisible socio-cultural dynamics that shape our minds and influence our actions. Certain dynamics work to maintain the status quo and to hinder the participation and action of anyone who challenges the current structures and relations of power. Gender provides an excellent illustration of this. Within some contexts patriarchal culture is so strongly rooted that the daily violation of women’s rights goes unrecognised as social injustice by the community and even by the women themselves. In certain instances, women even blame themselves for provoking the violence. Such attitudes isolate them and prevent them from understanding the forms of power that keep them oppressed and from working to overcome them. Since they blame themselves, they believe that they must change their behaviour and that will solve the problem. They tell themselves if they just serve their husband’s meals on time or not leave the house without his permission, they will stop the violence.

Immersed in the culture and ideology of patriarchy, leaders are almost always men, and their political agenda and advocacy priorities for the community rarely take gender issues into account. Even when gender policies are proposed and implemented, they are often

*Will you be at the harvest,  
Among the gatherers of new fruits?  
Then you must begin today to remake  
Your mental and spiritual world,  
And join the warriors and celebrants  
Of freedom, realisers of great dreams.*

Ben Okri, Nigerian writer
focused only on extreme situations such as domestic violence. They do not challenge women’s subordinate status in the household and the community or the attitudes that reinforce it. Some of these policies and approaches, such as mediation between spouses, are often implemented in order to ‘re-establish peace’ but not to address the root causes of unjust patriarchal domination and violence. So, in many contexts empowerment processes need to include challenging and changing views and actions of the poor and excluded themselves about power dynamics and cultural fundamentalisms – political issues that are claimed to be undebatable or immutable on the basis of religion, culture or other philosophies.

We have found that work is needed in particular to support people in thinking through how invisible power operates within society and the community and analysing whether this is just or not. Sometimes starting with an examination of how invisible power works to oppress their community as a whole can provide a way into more challenging conversations about cultural and gender dynamics of power. This can then lead to an analysis of how similar dynamics work within their community, particularly in gender relations and hopefully result in a broader understanding and willingness to change such dynamics.

**It is not always possible for the poor and excluded to take on leadership roles.**

In certain moments of struggle, it may not be possible for marginalised peoples to take on overt leadership roles. There are situations in which confronting power may cause drastic and even violent repercussions. Countries that are involved in armed conflicts or are marked by violent inequities and ruthless structures of power provide some examples. In such cases we must be careful not to precipitate dangerous backlashes which the poor and excluded do not yet have the capacity and resources to resist. In certain high-risk circumstances, the best strategy may be for organisations with more protection or international visibility to carry out forms of advocacy on behalf of the poor and marginalised in conjunction with low-key organising, leadership development and consciousness-raising. Although people-centred advocacy focuses on strengthening poor and excluded groups as strategic agents of social change, the complex and hard task of overcoming poverty and promoting social justice can not be put solely on their shoulders. Other sectors of society (both in the South and the North) also have important and strategic roles to play as supporters, allies and voices for justice.

**Contextual constraints are no excuse to avoid challenging power relations and fundamentalisms wherever possible.**

Empowerment strategies should avoid provoking unnecessary backlashes but empowerment inevitably involves tension and controversy. In a world marked by dramatic levels of social inequalities and poverty, it will not always be possible to achieve social justice through negotiation and mediation. To build a better world, it is necessary to push and challenge unfair power structures, this will create some level of discord and conflict. Using gender as an example: many aspects of women’s subjugation are cited as ‘traditional culture’ and seen as integral to a group’s cultural identity and thus not open for debate or transformation.
However, culture is also steeped in power relations, privileging some groups over others. If we believe in a better world, we cannot accept such ‘untouchable cultural features’ and the inequitable forms of power they perpetuate as givens and not open to challenge or change.

Cultures are dynamic and ever-evolving and changing. The potential risk of backlash cannot tie our hands and make us passive accomplices of injustice whether it is the violation of women’s and girls’ rights or those of Dalits and landless farmers. In potentially dangerous situations the question of who makes decisions about acceptable levels of risk and conflict is fundamental. Those who are most vulnerable - nearly always the most marginalised - have the absolute right to make their own decisions about the risk they consider acceptable. The role of outside facilitators should never be to encourage them to take on more risk than they would chose on their own, but be limited to ensuring that any decisions taken are made with the full information available

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1 The following paragraphs are based on Romano, Jorge O. in ActionAid Empowerment publication Dec 2002.
3 This applies equally to ourselves and our own organisations.