

## **LINKING POWER AND POVERTY REDUCTION**

Rosalind Eyben

Institute of Development Studies

### **Introduction**

How any one of us thinks and feels about power depends on a number of factors:

- the identity ascribed to us in childhood as female, black, middle class, Moslem, American.....and the identities that we choose for ourselves such as feminist, internationalist, anti-racist, hedonist, Buddhist
- the way of thinking about how the world works that we have learnt from how we have been educated and the disciplines we have specialised in, for example sociology, economics, engineering;
- the trajectory of our engagement with development, career and current professional locus;
- other, contingent life events that have shaped our intellectual and emotional understanding of why the world is at is, how we fit into that world and how we would like that world to change or to stay as it is.

All of these factors come into play in any exchange of views on the themes of power, empowerment and poverty reduction. They also provide the backdrop to this selective review of concepts in a highly complex and contested field of study.

Whatever our differences in views and understandings, I assume that our interest in power derives from a shared concern with pro-poor change. By that, I understand a change in the political, economic and social structures and systems of a country that will facilitate the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Note, however that 'structures' and 'systems' are themselves conceptual statements that are subject to debate. I will return to this issue later.

I also assume that we are interested in the practical implications of our analysis. How can the lens of power enable development organisations, such as the World Bank and DFID to be more effective in supporting pro-poor change? This means factoring into

the analysis ourselves, and the organisations that we represent, as potentially powerful agents in the development arena. By potentially powerful, I mean that we have the capacity to effect positive change but the extent to which we realise that capacity depends on how we work with other organisations and actors. If we work without any clear and explicit conceptual underpinning,<sup>1</sup> we may find that we are perpetuating those very systems that we strive to change.

I do not take the position that the international aid system is part of a global power structure that necessarily reproduces rather than reduces poverty. We have many examples of where aid has contributed to greater social justice and equity. There are also examples of aid making things worse. Greater conceptual clarity can help us do more good and less harm.

In this paper, I look at some definitions and concepts of power. Rather than strive to agree on a single concept that can explain every circumstance, I propose we accept that different concepts may be more or less helpful in illuminating particular development challenges in specific local contexts.

### **Conceiving power**

Power has been understood in many different ways and what follows is a very selective discussion of approaches that can be useful for development practice.<sup>2</sup>

#### **“Power To”**

On the World Bank’s Website, there are over 900 entries for reports on the subject of ‘power’. Yes, they are about electricity and other energy projects! Nevertheless, it is a good starting point for a broad definition. Power is the energy that causes change – or prevents change from happening. According to one dictionary, “Power is the capacity to have an effect”. We can describe this as “power to”.

This understanding of power informs the capability approach of Amartya Sen. (1995) who asserts that people are not free when they do not have the *power to* make choices

---

<sup>1</sup> What Midgely (1996) calls ‘philosophical plumbing’ or Giddens (1984) ‘discursive consciousness’.

<sup>2</sup> Haugaard (2002):1 provides a very helpful schematic diagram showing the historical evolution of different concepts of power in the western intellectual tradition.

about their lives. Sen concludes that utilitarian preference theory cannot be the basis for justice because very deprived people, for example many women, tend to limit their preferences, thereby constraining their freedom. Sen sees relations between men and women in terms of “co-operative conflicts” in which men have a capability advantage. While some social scientists argue that these current arrangements create optimal socioeconomic efficiency, Sen insists upon the need to identify alternative co-operative conflicts that are no less efficient and more equitable.

The inter-play of the lack of different aspects of “power to”, within the household and within the wider economy are well described in a study of farm labourers in the fruit growing area of South Africa and summarised in the box below. (Du Toit, 2003).

#### **POVERTY AND AGENCY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

In a study of farm labourers in the citrus producing area of South Africa, the author argues that any attempt to understand chronic poverty needs to begin and end with the issue of the intimate and mutually reinforcing links between income poverty and a poor household's lack of social power. Women labourers' lack of the basic assets necessary for household food production or entrepreneurial activity, and their consequent dependence on insecure paid jobs and on networks of patronage renders them profoundly marginal in the society to which they have been adversely incorporated. The author's policy recommendations include a reformed welfare system and other government interventions as well as support to 'empowerment' of local communities, bearing in mind the challenge of working against the disempowering effects of patriarchal gender relations.

*Power to* is about agency<sup>3</sup>. It relates to the way the World Bank has used the term *empowerment*, as set out in its *World Development Report 2000/01* and then further elaborated through Deepa Narayan's *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction Sourcebook*. Narayan notes that powerlessness - that is not being able to choose and act as one would wish – can occur on several levels, in households as well with respect to institutions. Narayan focuses on institutions because that is where she sees

---

<sup>3</sup> Agency is about intention or consciousness of action, sometimes with the implication of choices between alternative actions.

the crux of the Bank's work for poverty reduction. Hence, she defines empowerment as *the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives* (Narayan 2002: xviii). Her argument concentrates more on action by the poor, rather than by the state, to improve their own lives at the local level<sup>4</sup>.

The World Bank's current understanding of empowerment, as set out in the note by Alsop, Heinsohn and Somma (2004) was developed to address some of the criticisms of Narayan's approach. This understanding includes the idea of effective choice and introduces structure (institutional formal and informal rules of the game) as a more central issue and as a constraint to agency. Empowerment is also understood as being more than agency at the local level, allowing for possible action at intermediary and macro (national) levels.

Both of these Bank approaches to empowerment derive from a liberal position that values autonomy as an attribute of individuals rather than participation as a social achievement for the general good of the polity. From that perspective, participation is understood as an instrument for enhanced efficiency: it tackles the problem of the self-interested public official and it can help services fit more closely with what people want. This view of empowerment can be critiqued because of an underlying assumption that public servants are typically self-serving, rather than altruistic. ( Le Grand 2003)

It is worth noting that any government's policy approaches to empowerment and participation may well reflect not only the currently popular liberal approach but also other conceptual traditions that contradict or challenge such an approach. In real life, policymakers are often muddled or pragmatic, responding to different pressures and points of view, rarely inspecting the philosophical plumbing that drives their decisions, as illustrated in the box below in relation to the British government, drawing on my own observations and those of Needham (2003)

---

<sup>4</sup> For a recent review of the various criticisms of the World Bank's earlier positions on empowerment, see Kwok-Fu Wong's article (2003).

### **Poverty and empowerment in the UK**

The UK Government's strategy for poverty reduction in deprived areas of England and Wales has a three-fold approach to community participation that reflects different conceptual perspectives. Participation is seen to have a role in building and maintaining social capital (cohesion), to making services more effective and efficient and to address the perceived problem of the democratic deficit. Enhanced citizens' participation is thus understood not just as a means to more effective service delivery but important in its own right because of its potential for personal empowerment and active citizenship. Different philosophical perspectives within the Government (neo-liberalism, communitarianism, civic republicanism) result in some confusion as to meaning of empowerment and citizenship and thus their implications for policy priorities and practice.

Veneklasen and Miller (2002) present a more explicitly political understanding of empowerment. They provide frameworks that build on ideas of collective consciousness-building leading to strong and balanced citizen-state relations. Mick Moore (2001) argues that donors might do better to turn their attention to helping to create the political conditions in which poor people might organise politically, rather than seeking to support social service organisations for the poor. For international development agencies, this requires, he suggests, a subtle and nuanced understanding of politics and political action. He implies that such an approach may well be beyond their capacity. Since he wrote this, DFID, through the work of Sue Unsworth (2002) has directed more attention to the need for good political analysis but it remains an issue as to whether development bureaucracies can make good use of such analysis.

These alternative views on empowerment lead us to other ways of thinking about power that I shall now discuss.

### **Power over**

Returning to the dictionary, we find that power is not only the ability to do something but also 'to act upon a person or thing'. Power becomes *relational*. It is about social action. Robinson Crusoe in isolation had the power to chop down a tree. Relational power came into play when Man Friday arrived on the island.

In international aid, euphemisms are often used for “power over”. For example, the WB’s Country Assistance Strategy for India (2001) speaks of “the *constraints* that inhibit and exclude people from participating in and sharing the benefits of development”. What would be the impact on the Bank’s relations with the Government of India, if this were to be re-worded to read “the exercise of power that inhibits and excludes people from participating in and sharing the benefits of development”? Another common euphemism is “entrenched hierarchy”. We may wish to reflect on why it is so difficult to discuss easily the issue of some people having structural, political, economic and social power over others.

Thinking about power as *power over* others has long-standing roots in the social sciences and in political theory. Much of the debate on this topic in the last century was about whether power should be conceived solely in relation to public decision-making or in a wider sense as diffused in other relationships such as economic or domestic ones. Stephen Lukes’ theory of the three dimensions of power (1974) looks at the institutional and cultural structures that enable A to have power over B. Gaventa (1980) used this theory to explain what he found in the Appalachians where less powerful community members did not challenge *visible power* in ostensibly open fora, such as public meetings. This was in part due to a history of force and discretionary resource distribution that maintained *hidden power* but it was due to *invisible power* - an internalisation of community members’ sense of powerlessness. These three faces of power prevented them from challenging their state of impoverishment.

Invisible power is rooted in the Marxist idea of ‘false consciousness’. It has been a popular concept in feminist and other social movements that seek to liberate people through knowledge of how the world objectively works. “Knowledge is power in the hands of the workers” reads the inscription above the front door to a trades union education centre in Yorkshire.

Associated with *power over* is the idea of *hegemony*, understanding the way the world is as being the only way the world could be. We can recognise the existence of hegemony when we understand a certain social, economic or political practice as

‘natural’. Such an understanding cannot be challenged because we cannot imagine other possibilities. Unlike a hegemonic belief, an ideological belief can be challenged. It is helpful to think of a continuum from hegemony to ideology. Whereas hegemony means that we cannot imagine alternatives, ideology is just one view, among other possibilities of how the world should be. Thus, at a particular moment in time and place there may be present more than one ‘truth’.<sup>5</sup> Of course, one ideology may be more hegemonic and harder to resist than an alternative but we could imagine a stronger capacity to challenge *power over* as we move along that continuum from hegemony to a condition in which all ideologies have equal status. We can then enquire as to whether one way of understanding social change is to see it as a process by which hegemony is resisted and transformed into something that can be rejected. An example is the practice of untouchability in India where what was thought to be ‘natural’ is now changing to reveal prejudice and discrimination in its place.

Not all resistance openly challenges hegemony but seeks to make life slightly less uncomfortable within the existing power regime. Scott (1985) has suggested that the relationship between dominant elites and subordinates is a struggle in which both sides are continually probing for weakness and exploiting small advantages – ‘the weapons of the weak’

People may also resist the exercise of power but not the premises that make that exercise possible. This is the difference between getting rid of a bad king and deciding that kingship itself is bad. Resistance is an adaptive mechanism that may take advantage of (and thus unintentionally reproduces) the very rules of the game that keeps the resister subordinate (by replacing a bad king with a good king). However, Gledhill (2000) notes the importance of analysing the content of such popular practices of resistance in order to see what *kind* of impact they have on power relations. We should not see such resistance as an either/or situation of on the one hand letting of steam to re-establish stability and equilibrium or, on the other hand, an expression of real revolution.

---

<sup>5</sup> I am using ideology’ in the meaning of a truth-thought system, not in the meaning of standing in opposition to something else which is supposed to count as ‘objective’ truth (see Foucault 1980:118-119)

### **Power with and power within**

Concepts of *power with* and *power within* have originated in feminist and other social movement thinking. Many people in a subordinate position may question the way the world is ordered but do not organise themselves for strategic resistance because of the fear of the consequences should they fail. They would need to gain support from others to develop new ways of understanding – or frameworks of meaning – about how the world could work. What are the conditions that allow for the mobilisation of such support? *Power with* is a term that has been coined to do with common ground among different interests and building collective strength through organisation and the development of shared values and strategies. DFID's and the World Bank's interest in moving beyond its traditional support to service delivery NGOs may lead to an engagement with social movements and community and interest-based organisations that have developed a voice and a capacity to influence change through the strength of *power with*. While 'power with' is often thought of as collective action in relation to powerlessness, it is an equally useful concept in considering powerfulness, as for example with Adam Smith's cartel of a butcher, baker and candlestick-maker – or indeed of development agencies.

Power to organise with others is related to a person's self-worth and sense of dignity that has been described as *power within*. There has been a long-standing tradition of civil society activity, such as Action Aid's *REFLECT* based on Freirian principles that seek to enhance the power within.

### **Power everywhere**

The broadest view of power has taken enquiry into the every day practices of all aspects of social life. We are shifting from an idea of *power over* to one of *power everywhere*. This provides a view on power in which every one of us is implicated in the performance of power, each time we walk into a room or participate in a workshop. Feminism and Foucault come together in the idea that power exists not only at the institutional level but also in our daily lives. The personal becomes the political.



### **Power/knowledge**

Post-modernism has challenged the idea of objective value-free knowledge, de-linked from power. Knowledge – how we understand and describe the world – is contingent on our time and place and the relations of power that shape our lives. For Foucault, power and knowledge are inseparable. Power/knowledge works through discourses that frame what is thinkable and do-able. Discourses are not only the way that things are said or written, but also concrete activities associated with words - such as Log Frames or PRSPs, in a development setting. Through deconstruction of these discourses, closely examining the concepts, practices, statements and beliefs associated with them, Foucault showed that the effects of power could be made visible. Thus, the first step to changing power relations is to deconstruct a discourse to reveal it for what it is.

Foucault's interest in what and how we know is important for development practice. His discussion (1980) of historical *amnesia* - what is forgotten by those with the power to construct knowledge - is particularly relevant. Critics of 'development' argue that we collectively suffer from this amnesia. Their critique raises important questions in a debate on the problem of the politics of knowledge. What are the power implications of most research in developing countries being funded by international development organisations such as the World Bank or DFID? Does it matter who owns the knowledge if we think this is means to achieving the Millennium Goals? Alternatively, does our understanding of 'development' and the power of our knowledge constrain their achievement?

### **Power structures**

We often think of power as a thing that we possess in greater or lesser amounts. But we can also think about the relationships that shape how a person or organisation acquires more power to, power with, power within and power over others. When such power relations repeat themselves and form a pattern, they become institutionalised; they become the rules of the game.

In his work on frameworks of power, Clegg (1989) proposes three inter-locking levels or circuits, of power. The most visible is 'episodic agency' in which one agent exercises power over another, for example, when a police officer imposes a traffic

fine on a speeding motorist. This event of one agent exercising power over another is defined and shaped by the rules, relations and resources (structure or dispositional arrangements) that constitute the episodic power that is visible in the relation between policeman and traffic offender. These structures are in turn shaped by the more fundamental systemic forces that define the rules of the game. Each time A gets B to do what A wants, he is not only achieving a desired outcome but is also confirming the dispositional arrangements of the game and reinforcing and maintaining the overall system. Using a chess analogy, Clegg invites us to think about the dispositional arrangements that give queens more moves than pawns and to consider the extent to which deeper systemic properties may allow the most powerful piece on the board, the queen to reinterpret the rules so she can move not only as a queen but also as a knight. What chance does a pawn have in such circumstances? How can individual agency affect these fundamental systemic forces in which the rules of the game are established to benefit the powerful?

Despite everything however, Clegg argues, changes in power relations can and do take place. They occur by collective agency, such as social movements, ‘outflanking’ dispositional arrangements through networks and alliances that take advantage of points of instability.

### **Structures of power in Bolivia**

Clegg’s framework illuminates a process of change in which I was involved when working for DFID in Bolivia. An issue that in 2001 the Bolivian Government found unacceptable for donors to raise in policy dialogue became, over the space of three years an accepted government and donor priority.

The matter concerned DFID and Sida supporting efforts by a section of Bolivian civil society to heighten awareness about undocumented citizens. A significant number of indigenous people in Bolivia are without identity documents, excluding them in a variety of ways from economic, social and political life and contributing to livelihood insecurity and lack of voice. (León et al. 2003) Previously, development agencies had responded technically to this problem by providing the authorities with new computer systems. Thus, they had intervened at the ‘episodic’ level without analysing the dispositional arrangements that continued to prevent people acquiring cards because

of the way the bureaucracy functioned . As the issue gained more prominence, some of those affected asked DFID and Sida to provide the funds to pay lawyers to process individual cases of undocumented individuals. If we had agreed to this, such support, once again at the episodic level, would have reinforced rather than change the existing circuits of power. I wrote at the time in a field visit report

“Even if the organisations in the Consortium were able to assist directly everyone in those communities where they are currently working, this would still leave all the people in the rest of Bolivia without help. I discussed with them how the strategic vision of the Consortium should not be neglected in their understandable anxiety to help particular communities. The current incredibly Byzantine identity card system appears to be designed (consciously or unconsciously) by the State to deny full citizenship rights to a very large number of people in Bolivia.”

A participant at one meeting I attended proposed a radical solution that mocked and challenged the system itself – the third circuit of power. One way – in theory if not in bureaucratic practice – to obtain an identity card was to show a baptism certificate. His idea was that communities organised themselves to expose the system by being mass-baptized by a sympathetic priest in a public ceremony and then marching on the capital city, La Paz, holding their baptism certificates and demanding justice. Thus, the focus of effort shifted from seeking redress for individual problems within the existing dispositional arrangements to considering collective action for changing those arrangements and possibly threatening the deeper historically derived structures of power in Bolivia. Donor support helped create the conditions for bringing this issue to the national consciousness and making it a subject of priority for the in-coming administration in October 2003.

In this matter, I had become engaged in a complex web of power relations in which my personal agency and analytical capacity were both supported and challenged by macro-level dispositional and structural powers. My position as a donor in an aid dependent country gave me the authority to analyse the social situation in the country and the power to help make visible to national policy makers an injustice that they had tacitly chosen to disregard. At the same time, influential people in and outside government actively discouraged me from becoming involved, accusing me of starting a ‘donor-driven’ initiative and of not understanding the real situation. They objected to the power of the donor to analyse a situation and provide the means to

tackle a problem that they did not see as a priority. On the other hand, I interpreted their objections as a reflection of their (unstated) concern that tackling the identity card issue might contribute to an empowerment process threatening the existing power structures. (Eyben and León, forthcoming).

**Conclusion: reflexive engagement with unpredictability**

I began this paper with the comment that how any one of us thinks and feels about power depends on a number of factors. In the story I have just told my analysis and actions were shaped both by my position in the aid system and by my personal history. I conclude by briefly returning to this reflexive theme and relating it to the challenge of unpredictability.

Development agencies are political actors. They use their power/knowledge to define a problem, getting others to agree with them by constructing alliances and networks to sustain the analysis. Our analysis itself is thus part of the process of exercising power. As the way we tend to problematize is specifically along the rational lines of cause and effect, we assume that certain actions will lead to certain other effects, seeking to control the process by defining the parameters for action. In the case of the Bolivian identity cards, I could not have predicted the results of the donor support as one contributing factor to a complex process of political change taking place in the country during the last three years. Was our support more useful because we could not predict the outcome?

De Certeau (1988) argues that the use of tactics is less about being able to have a clear idea of the future and the power to achieve one's desired goals, than it is about the small acts through which people without power can claw back some control and recuperate some sense of their own agency, in situations that are contingent, constantly changing, forever uncertain.<sup>6</sup> This resonates with contemporary thinking about the need for public policy to take a complex adaptive system, rather than a command and control approach. (Chapman 2002, Eyben 2004)

---

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Andrea Cornwall for drawing this thinking by de Certeau to my attention and for her commenting overall on the first draft of this paper.

As development actors, we can more easily recognise the fiction of being in control when we include ourselves in the analysis. We are actors in the play rather than the person directing it. This means asking questions about who we are and why we understand the world in a certain way because of who we are. How does that understanding effect what our organisations do and the way we relate with others? What criteria do we use in deciding with whom we work and whom to support ? What knowledge informs those criteria? These questions require us to reflect on our own power and the dilemmas of engagement in other people's struggles, such as the one I described in Bolivia. How should we use our power? When should we be tentative, rather than certain and modest rather than ambitious? Can good, grounded, conceptual power analysis guide us as to when we should or should not become involved? Is this a practice that development agencies can aspire to?

## References

- Alsop, R., Heinsohn, N. and Somma, A. February 2004 'Measuring empowerment: an analytic framework' Note prepared by members of the World Bank's Empowerment team
- Certeau, de Michel. 1988 *The Practice of Everyday Life* Berkeley: University of California Press
- Chapman, Jake 2002 *System Failure: Why governments must learn to think differently*. London: Demos
- Clegg, Stewart. 1989 *Frameworks of Power* London: Sage
- Du Toit, Andries. 2003 'Hunger in the valley of fruitfulness' Paper presented at the conference *Staying Poor: Chronic Poverty and Development Policy* Manchester IDPM 7-9 April 2003  
[www.chronicpoverty.org](http://www.chronicpoverty.org)
- Eyben, Rosalind 2004 'Relationships matter for supporting change in favour of poor people' *Lessons for Change* no.6 Brighton: Institute of Development Studies
- and León, Rosario (forthcoming) 'Struggles over aid: donor –recipient relations and the national elections in Bolivia' in David Mosse (Ed). *Anthropology Upstream* London: Pluto Press
- Foucault, Michel 1980 *Knowledge/Power; Selected interviews and other writings* Ed. Colin Gordon New York: Pantheon Books
- Gaventa, J. 1980 *Power and Powerlessness. Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Giddens, Anthony 1984 *The Constitution of Society* Cambridge:

- Polity Press
- Gledhill, John (1994)  
 2000, *Power and its Disguises: Anthropological Perspectives on Politics*. London: Pluto Press
- Haugaard, Mark. 2002  
 - 1997 *Power, a Reader*. Manchester: Manchester University Press  
*The Constitution of Power*. Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Le Grand, Julian. 2003 *Motivation, Agency and Public Policy: Of Knights and Knaves, Pawns and Queens*. Oxford University Press
- León, Rosario, Goulden, Jay, Rea, Carmen., Salinas, Huberto., Medrano, Luis., Schollaert, Jan 2003 ‘Social exclusion, rights and chronic poverty in Bolivia’ Paper presented at the *Chronic Poverty and Development Conference*, Manchester IDPM 7 to 9 April 2003  
<http://idpm.man.ac.uk/cprc/Conference/conferencepapers.htm>
- Lukes, Steven 1974 *Power, A Radical View* London: Macmillan  
 Midgley, Mary 1996 *Utopias. Dolphins and Computers* London: Routledge  
 Moore, Mick. 2001 ‘Empowerment at last?’ *Journal of International Development* 13:321-9
- Narayan, Deepa 2002 ‘Introduction’ to D. Narayan (ed) *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: a Source Book* Washington: World Bank
- Needham, Catherine. 2003 ‘Citizen-Consumers. New Labour’s Marketplace Democracy’ *A Catalyst Working Paper*. April 2003 The Catalyst Forum  
<http://www.catalystforum.org.uk/pubs/index.html>
- Scott, James C. 1985, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*, London: Yale University Press
- Sen, Amartya, 1995 ‘Gender inequality and theories of Justice ‘in M. Nussbaum and J. Glover (eds) *Women, culture, and development: a study of human capabilities*, Oxford: Clarendon Press: 259-273.
- Unsworth, Sue. 2003 ‘Better Governance’ Draft Consultation Document, London: DFID
- Veneklasen, Lisa. with Miller Valerie., 2002, *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics* Oklahoma: World Neighbours
- Wong, Kwok Fu. 2003 ‘Empowerment as a panacea for poverty – old wine in new bottles? Reflections on the World Bank’s conception of power’ *Progress in Development Studies* 3,4: 307-322
- World Bank 2000 *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* New York: Oxford University Press
- - 2001 *Country Assistance Strategy for India* New Delhi: World Bank