

# Power in Practice:

## The ability to listen, the courage to hear

By James Taylor, Community Development Resource Association, August 2009 Nugget



*“Who is participating is whose process?” Meas Nee*

Increasingly, the world is focusing in on the need to address issues of poverty and exclusion. At the same time, the questions being asked about impact and effectiveness of the aided development sector are becoming all the more urgent and penetrating. But it is worrying that we are getting so lost in the burgeoning impact evaluation and “knowledge management” industries that we overlook what practitioners have already learned from hard experience.

We know from our own experience, and from countless studies and evaluations, that the most effective development interventions are those that support the initiatives of people themselves. Put another way - we know that, from a long-term developmental point of view, externally created expert solutions delivered to those in need are ultimately ineffective, even destructive. This has become so obvious that it is slightly embarrassing to put it forward as the focus of this paper. There is a growing understanding of the need to make this shift. It is reflected in the language of the sector. Terms like: ‘demand driven’; ‘downward accountability’; and ‘civic driven change’; abound. But looking closely at the practices that continue to dominate and shape the work of our sector it is clear that we are not yet really hearing what seems so self-evident, what this really means for practice, and thus we continue to disregard new ways of working.

We are failing to translate what we have learnt, what we know, into new practice.

All too often people continue to participate in the development projects, programmes and solutions of others, of donors, development agencies and NGO practitioners, when the outside agents of development should be participating in and supporting the initiatives of those whose lives and livelihoods are at stake. Who is participating in whose process?

What makes it so difficult to turn this knowledge into effective practice? Primarily, it is the difficulty of addressing issues of power in relationships, of our power in the relationships we have with people we are trying to work with. We talk a lot of the importance of ownership and participation but continue to undermine the ability of people to fully own and control their own development, often unconsciously and unintentionally. Participation is not enough. The challenge is control over processes of resourcing, planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation of impact. Unless there is increasing control over these processes by people themselves as integral to the surfacing and claiming of their own power, then development simply does not take place in any meaningful or sustainable way.

Our lack of consciousness, and possibly our lack of courage to face our own power, could be the biggest barriers.

Power is held in relationships. Human beings exercise power through relationships - so that our work of transforming power is about transforming relationships. People, through their patterns of relationship with each other, create social structures which become crucial to how power is accessed and exercised in society.

*“In sociology, a structure, very simply, is a regular pattern of behaviour in society. Structures are the grooves of accustomed, habituated activity into which people’s lives fit.”<sup>1</sup>*

We have become stuck in the grooves of our habituated activities - and this is what makes it so difficult for us to translate our learning into effective practices that address power imbalances. The habituated, often unconscious, ways in which we relate to each other create structures that are essentially hierarchies of authority and control, particularly over resources, processes and future direction. Our work lies in supporting those at the periphery to challenge the structures that seek to control, ignore or exclude them. But to be really effective we must develop a disciplined way of relating that shifts power in our own relationships and relationship behaviour. These new patterns of behaviour will contribute towards creating structures that support the freedom and creativity that is development.

I am suggesting that through the way we work, the way we consciously relate to others, we must bring our power into relationship with the power of others in new and different ways. This must become central to defining our practice. But where and how do we start? We need to start ourselves, in our own organisations and relationships. *It is deeply disconcerting to see how many organisations striving to empower others are themselves replicating and perpetuating the power relations they seek to change.* There is a very fundamental shift that we must make in ourselves if we are to translate what we know into effective practice.

The first shift we must make lies in how we communicate - this is the essential ingredient of relationship. There is a particular stance we must adopt in our relationships in order to address the uses of power that undermine development. Can we learn to use both our ‘voice’ and our ‘ability to hear’ in a much more conscious and in a more disciplined way? Can we listen for what people think, what they feel and what they want? It takes discipline because what is required of us is initially counter-intuitive. We must learn to listen much more intently to those we are in the habit of telling. And we must show we have heard through adjusting our actions. We must also speak up to those we habitually listen to and accede to. What do we think, feel and want? We must expect to see what we have communicated to them reflected in their actions - we must demand to be heard.

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<sup>1</sup> From “What is Sociology” by Johan Graaff; Oxford University Press Southern Africa, 2001.

Any talk of demand driven development is disingenuous unless we are able to hear and be prepared to act on the needs and requirements of those we seek to serve. In turn, we must be prepared to make demands that drive the actions of those who should be serving us.

Behind what I have described as a stance, or orientation, lie the foundations of our practice. A relational practice based on good communication. As simple as it may sound, the ability to listen and to use our voices are the cornerstones. What makes our task particularly difficult is that to do our real work we must hear those who are not used to being heard. The voices we strive to hear most loudly are of the voiceless. We are drawn to work where there is little trust and much fear, self-doubt, depression, frustration and often anger. To build the quality of relationship through which to hear and make meaning of what is communicated takes great skill and much time. It takes skill to find the right questions to ask, to look behind the content of what is said to what is meant, to interpret silence, to discern truth.

Using our voices to translate what we have heard into actions that support the initiatives of those we serve takes further skill and courage. We are called upon by those we serve to adjust our own actions and to influence and shape the decisions and actions of those more powerful than ourselves. We have to learn to use our voices effectively in our own organisations and in organisations that have power over ours. We must link our voices to the voices of others in order to be heard by those who choose not to hear, or have not yet learned to.

The new practice demands that we stand more firmly and consciously in our own power. In doing so we will be able to make this power more transparent to others, to encourage the same in them, therefore enabling more accountable and collaborative relationships, less determined by hierarchical power dynamics. In the process of learning to hear and to use our voice in ways that promote sovereignty in ourselves and others we start to build new patterns and structures. As power starts shifting into these new forms we will start moving towards collaborations and partnerships that reflect our developmental aspirations.

Until we develop a practice that not only shifts but transforms power our increasingly urgent attempts to force change will only reinforce our collective stuckness.

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