

Exploring expressions and forms of power in youth governance work

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Introduction

Youth governance work requires engaging with power. In most countries young people occupy positions in social structures maintained by cultural and social norms. This means that their participation in governance processes is subject to constraints. Expressions like ‘they are too young to understand’ reflect commonly held opinions that affect how adults relate to young people. Such attitudes influence young people’s self-confidence and frustrate their ability to participate in decisions affecting their lives. Both authors have been involved in processes that suggest that consciously exploring the nature of power and how it operates can enable young people to overcome such barriers to participation. We reflect on Salim’s experience working with youth councils in Kenya, and Cathy’s research with student steering

Box 1: Expressions of power¹

Power over: domination or control e.g. through decision-making.

Power within: self-worth, confidence gained through awareness of capabilities or rights, or through participation.

Power to: individual ability to take action and participate.

Power with: produced through collective action. Can enhance power within.

committees (SSCs) in Sierra Leone to propose practical tips towards this aim.

How does power influence our theories of change, what we do and what we achieve in youth governance work?

Cathy’s research illustrated the relevance of various **expressions of power** to theories of change/causal pathways underpinning the SSC programme.² The research found that SSC membership had enabled young

¹ See, among other sources: VeneKlasen, L. and V. Miller (2002), especially p 45.

² A theory of change defines all building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal. This set of connected building blocks – interchangeably referred to as outcomes, results, accomplishments, or preconditions – is depicted on a map known as a pathway of change/change framework, which is a graphic representation of the change process. Source: www.theoryofchange.org

people to overcome constraints to participation. They had gained confidence and found **power within** through discovering capabilities they never knew they had.

Members of the student steering committees (SSCs) in Sierra Leone facilitated decisions about how to use small grants that led to confidence or **power within**. One group who had chosen to buy badly needed desks had 'learnt how to be responsible and how to make certain decisions'. This inspired belief in their right and **power to act** and influence change in their schools:

Decision-making in school, I would say should not only be left to teachers because we the pupils, we know what we want and then we are the ones that go through the sufferings... We are the ones in the classrooms. We know what we go through every day so we think we can make better decisions concerning our schools.

Most students associated the sense of empowerment with responsibility. They were keen to use their power for the good of the wider school community:

Well I have learnt a lot... most especially decision-making... I have learnt how to be a good leader and how to choose things that are more beneficial... Like during the time when we had the money. There were so many suggestions some were just saying anything so really it was a big task for us to choose what we think will be beneficial to everybody.

There were opportunities to increase **power with** and scale up the impact of these changes to improve the governance of schools. In one school, pupils that had used the committee to successfully advocate against corporal punishment felt they had 'bridged a gap' between students and pupils. They were keen to scale up and create **power with** by linking with other schools in Sierra Leone as part of a broader campaign.

Box 2: Power and theories of change

- Get participants to explore the starting points and assumptions about how change is going to happen via youth participation in governance. What change do they want? How are they promoting or achieving that change? What are they assuming will happen along the way?
- Using pictures get participants to explore what power means to them.
- Use participants' examples to illustrate different expressions and forms of power discussed in this article.
- Ask buzz groups to identify how power might a) constrain youth participation and intended changes identified earlier and b) block causal pathways.
- Reflect on opportunities (such as using exercises or role plays below) to enhance power within, power to and power with to overcome constraints.

Cathy argued that in order to leverage the personal transformations and potential power of these young people, they needed to become more explicitly aware of how power affected their participation. Exercises suggested in Box 2 can be adapted to encourage practitioners and/or young people to think more about how power can both constrain and enhance desired change in planning and evaluation activities.

Reflecting on barriers to achieving power to influence governance decisions

Young people need to become more reflexively aware of how they experience the effects of **power relations** that either prevent or enable them to achieve their potential. This is an important part of personal transformation processes that enables the discovery of **power within**, such as those experienced by young people in Sierra Leone. For example, many young people are socialised in ways that act as **invisible power** leading them to think they lack the rights and/or capabilities to participate in spaces controlled by adults. Practitioners' theories of change need to include efforts to build **power within** in ways that go beyond a technical approach to capacity building e.g. one that merely

aims to increase knowledge about rights. Developing a sense of confidence and finding **power within** is important. But in Salim's experience it may not be sufficient to enable individual **power to act**.

Salim works with Kenyan youth groups wanting to participate in youth councils organised by the government. His experience illustrates how, even when **power with** has been generated through collective action, various operations of power still prevent young people having influence. Engaging the state in **invited spaces** organised and chaired by government actors posed challenges for Kenyan youth. Government actors set agendas and determined the rules of engagement making it difficult for youth to speak. So Salim facilitated practical activities to help young people reflect further on how power relations in the space affected their **power within** and **power to participate**.

The power cube

Salim drew on ideas represented in the power cube below. It is another way of unpacking power which focuses on its forms – visible, hidden and invisible – rather than on the expressions discussed

Box 3: Spaces for participation

Closed: Where decisions are made by elite actors behind closed doors.

Invited: Opportunities for involvement and consultation, usually by 'invitation' from various authorities.

Created or claimed: Organic spaces which emerge out of sets of common concerns.

Box 4: Three forms of power

Visible power: formal decision-making.

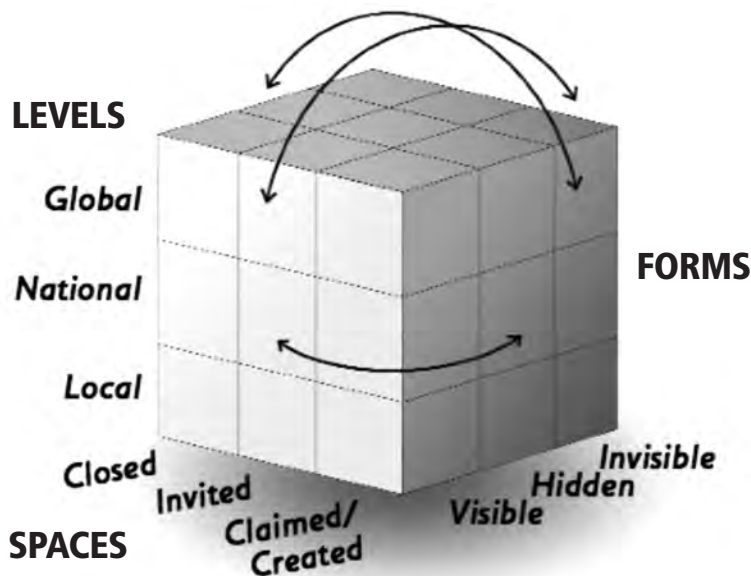
Hidden power – mobilisation of bias: non decision-making, keeping issues off agendas.

Invisible power: social conditioning through e.g. cultural traditions that shapes the psychological and ideological boundaries of what it is possible to think, believe and do.

about (power over, within, to, with).³

Although the power cube is a tool that can enable power analysis at multiple levels, Salim was fundamentally concerned with the local level and enabling youth to think about how different forms of power operated in different types of spaces for engagement with government actors.

Explaining different expressions and forms of power can be done in very theoretical ways drawing on the concepts above. But ironically, efforts that emphasise theo-



³ Source: Gaventa (2006).

retical input can be disempowering and ineffective. Practical exercises are more effective, in which facilitators draw on these theories, such as role play (see Box 5). They can enhance youth understanding about different forms of power that challenge youth participation, as well as tensions related to young people's engagement.

For example, youth councils in Kwale, Kenya were struggling to design strategies to engage local leaders in the management of constituency development funds, local authority transfer funds and the youth enterprise funds. The youth councils wanted to access these funds to finance their activities. However, the youth leaders were hesitant to engage in face-to-face discussions with the leaders for fear of reprisals. This dilemma came at a time when Salim was doing action research, and

he thought a session on analysing power would be helpful to build their confidence to engage. He offered them theoretical inputs on the different forms of power in the power cube, the power of agency (power over, power with, power within), and **spaces** for citizen participation.

Even though they seemed to understand the concepts theoretically, he noted that this was not enough to inspire them to take action. It was not until he did a role play that they began opening up and associating the implications of the different forms of power with their experiences.

As a result of these practical exercises, young people soon recognised how **hidden power** – government control of agendas – affected their power to get their interests discussed and influence decisions. The presence of the commissioner, whom they feared might take action against them if they challenged his authority, acted as **invisible power** that silenced their voice. Internalised notions that as young people they are not citizens and don't know what is best for them, inhibited them from expressing their views.

Box 5: Facilitators' guide: enabling young people to analyse power in invited spaces

- Identify a topic for discussion beforehand, e.g. child marriage.
- Divide participants into several groups.
- Identify someone to be a government representative or figure of authority such as the district youth officer.
- Ask each group to choose an actor they wish to represent e.g. environmentalists, youth club.
- Let each group discuss and agree on a position they will defend in a government-led meeting.
- Get each group to nominate one representative who will attend the meeting.
- Conduct a role play of the meeting in which the person nominated to be the authority figure chairs and moderates the discussion with group representatives while others observe and analyse discussions.
- Facilitate reflections and discussions that encourage young people to think about power dynamics that affected their participation and outcomes. Guiding questions could include:

For the group representatives:

- With reference to Hart's ladder of participation (shown in Tang, this issue), what level of participation did you achieve? Why?
- Did you get your desired outcome or did you have to cede arguments? Why?
- Did women and girls speak up as much as men? Why?

For the government representative:

- Did you let young people speak? Why?
- Did you listen to them? Why?

Box 6: Enhancing direct forms of youth-state engagement using video or drama

- Organise a pre-meeting workshop to orient children and youth on the dialogue process and to identify issues affecting them.
- Prepare a script for drama or video to illustrate the issues. Shoot video if this is the chosen medium, ensuring that child protection protocols are strictly adhered to.
- Organise public meeting with a panel of different duty bearers e.g. community elders, district government officers or NGO leaders.
- Nominate a representative young person to facilitate the meeting.
- Show the video, drama or picture at the meeting.
- Facilitate discussions to encourage the audience i.e. members of the community, to verify/discuss the issues affecting them.
- Youths and children interact with the panel to clarify issues and request specific actions from duty bearers e.g. children ask specific representatives what their office or departments' roles should be in tackling issues and whether and how they will take action.

Photo: Ali Yusuf Mwatsahu

Box 7: Reflections on symbolic power



An intergenerational dialogue session between children, youth and community and the district commissioner on issues of birth registration. One more experience that we can draw from the photo and during the session (which Salim attended) is the ‘symbolic power’ that comes with official uniforms and protocol. In Kenya the district commissioners are powerful. They control the police and other security officers in the districts. They also chair all meetings to discuss development. During the dialogue session illustrated in the photo above, the children, youth and the community were not comfortable asking questions. On reflection, Salim thought the symbolic power of having uniforms and body guards inhibited fruitful dialogue even though the district commissioner was the one who encouraged the community to feel free to ask any questions or make any comments.

Salim’s other experiences relate to the facilitation of intergenerational dialogue between children, youth, community elders, non-state actors and government representatives in more neutral, claimed spaces such as public meetings following steps described in Box 6. Plan Kenya is scaling up these forms of engagement in their areas of operations to profile the voices of young people.

Enabling young people to prepare before meetings in non-intimidating spaces of their own proved powerful. They prepared videos, dramas or pictures that explored local issues such as child marriage. They then took their concerns into government meetings – arguably more intimidating spaces.

The videos, drama or pictures enhanced young people’s sense of power within as they had a more convincing means to communicate their experiences and concerns. This led to more ‘power to’ as they demanded government action in meetings.

Such approaches can produce tensions.

But in Salim’s experience in Kwale, direct forms of engagement through public dialogues on community- or local-level issues, grounded with real-life evidence, have prompted action for social change (see example in Box 8). These kinds of dialogues have had a positive impact in terms of influencing decisions. Children and youth have overcome power that frustrated them in invited government spaces and enhanced

Box 8: Well-prepared public dialogue + evidence = change

In one school that was notorious for child pregnancies, children prepared and showed a video depicting the various child rights violations in communities and schools. A debate ensued, in which it became clear that eight of the school girls were pregnant. The dialogue prompted immediate action from the district education officer and the district commissioner. They initiated investigations leading to prosecutions and the reprimanding and transfer of teachers suspected of involvement. They also created a local task force to conduct sensitisation on child rights and protection and guide those needing to report abuses.

their power to engage the government on issues that concerned them.

Encouraging young leaders to reflect on their own power and accountability

So far so good with expressions and forms of power. Beyond that, an issue arising in both our work is accountability of youth and child 'representatives' to their organisations and members. In Sierra Leone and Kenya we encountered youth 'representatives' selected by teachers and government youth officers. This tended to make young people more accountable to more powerful adults than the youth they were meant to represent and made it difficult for them to challenge their 'patrons'.

Even when young people are elected by their peers, they do not always use democratic mechanisms and processes to prioritise and promote the interests of those they claim to represent. Feedback mechanisms to youth members can be weak. Role play might be adapted as a means to encourage youth representatives to reflect on their own power and accountability to their members. Another way might be to hold participatory

reflection sessions to identify what makes a youth group accountable and transparent, and then use these criteria as the basis for (self)-monitoring the group and its activities. This has been piloted by Plan Kenya's governance programme elsewhere in Kenya.

Integrating power analysis in design and evaluation of governance theories of change

Theories of change underpinning youth governance work often assume causal pathways that look something like this. By discovering **power within** youth will be able to find **power with** and **power to** and act to influence governance decisions. But a number of operations of power mean these changes may not follow a smooth path. Practitioners must seek ways to identify operations of power that prevent youth participation influencing governance processes. Facilitating activities to help young people become aware of barriers to their participation and devise tactics to address them is an important part of the empowerment process. It has the potential to lead to greater social change.

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