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Transformations

by **ROBERT CHAMBERS**

Power relations

Power is a latecomer to the development agenda. Participation is about power relations. It is about much else, as well; but power relations are pervasive: they are always there, and they affect the quality of process and experience. *Transforming Power* (ActionAid, 2001) is the synthesis of a workshop held in Bangladesh in 2001. Since the workshop was billed as the ActionAid Participatory Methodologies Forum, most of the 40-odd participants, including myself, went expecting to share experiences with participatory methodologies. In the event, we never did that. Instead, we found ourselves engaged with power and power relations.

We observed and reflected critically on how we were behaving and relating to one another. One group monitored this and reported back daily. The planning team of eight individuals was itself a workshop within a workshop, and at the end presented diagrams to show its own internal power dynamics and conflicts. At times I felt frustrated, at times threatened, and often inhibited. I came out finally recognising more of my own power (white, male, educated, older, with English as my native language, a trustee of ActionAid, etc.) and my tendency to dominate. The experience was traumatic because I did not want to see myself as I was. It

was inhibiting because I felt I had to hold back and not speak when I wanted to, sometimes when I was bursting with something to say. Three years later, after prolonged convalescence, I recognise the experience as seminal. I have come to see more than ever the central significance of power and power relations in development practice. As one participant put it:

Only with a deep awareness of power at all times and at all levels can we use participatory processes effectively.

The stream for the future is to develop and spread good ways of understanding and managing power relations. 'Good' is critical. To be good, such methodologies should enable people to:

- Acknowledge their own power. 'If we deny our power, it does not go away. We must recognise it if we are to transform it positively.'
- Be aware of how they (often habitually) disempower others.
- Learn to use power to empower those with less power.
- Avoid being harmfully inhibited by the learning.

It is possible to be too participatory. There are times for leadership, for decisiveness and even for dominance, especially in crisis. Nevertheless, the scope for better development practice through levelling and reversing power relations is immense. This applies in all hierarchies. And the bottom line is empowering those who are marginalised, powerless and poor.

Innovation as a way of being

A more obvious heading might have been 'participation as a way of being'. For some, that may be right. For some, participation is more of an end than a means, something of an ideology. For myself, it is only by chance that I have stumbled on participation. For me, it deserves a place among other words and ideals, recognising that too much of it can become a tyranny, as in 'You will participate'; 'You did not participate'; 'Where were you?'; 'What were you doing?'; 'Why are you not participating?'

Participation can result from social pressures. It can take excessive time. It can be tedious, as well as exhilarating. It has to involve other people, and too much of it can negate the basic human right, for those who wish, to spend time on their own. Participation has wonderful power and potential. But it is not the whole of life. It is something to optimise, not maximise. Participation is always something new. It is continuously improvised and invented through interactions and relationships. Past experience and known methods and approaches contribute; but if made routine and repeated like rote, they become rigid, wooden and disempowering. Good participation is co-produced, a collective improvisation. Irene Guijt's striking phrase 'seeking surprise' (Guijt, forthcoming) expresses the intention of exploration, excitement and learning. As Heraclitus famously said: 'You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters are continually flowing on'¹. The river may be channelled between banks; but the currents, eddies, whirlpools and flows are constantly changing and never repeated. Different every time, participation is, of its nature, always innovative. Innovation as a way of being is saying something different from participation as a way of being. Participatory or not, in a sense we innovate all the time. Every moment we are doing something new: every moment, every situation, every encounter is unique. It has never happened before and will never happen again; and

we respond and, at the same time, influence and fashion what happens. Innovation is a way of being because it is part of welcoming and enjoying uncertainty. Good participatory processes are unpredictable. So those who facilitate them must be at ease with not knowing what will happen and then able and willing to help it happen. They may channel processes and use controls, but lightly. The spirit of this is captured in Salil Shetty's (2000) introduction to the ALPS (Accountability, Learning and Planning System) when he describes

...fostering a culture where staff and partners do not have the comfort of relying on rules and procedures, but have to use their own initiative to achieve our common mission.

Innovation, initiative, taking responsibility and participation go together. Trying new ways of doing things, exploring new relationships, improvising and inventing with others – these are all part of good participation.

For the future

The lessons from the past are positive: to continue to evolve and improve participatory practices; and to make innovation and learning a way of life. The flip side of bad practice is the opportunity to do better. So much remains to be learnt, discovered and achieved. The conclusion to draw from experience is not to give up and look for something else. It is, instead, to engage; to commit; to persist (exploring, inventing, taking risks, learning by doing and often failing forwards); to deepen and intensify self-critical reflection on practice, learning from experience and critiques; and to seek congruence through internalising participation personally, professionally and institutionally and at all levels. It is to accept participation as an enduring opportunity to form good relationships and to confront and transform over-centralised power. Thus, above all, it is to meet the overarching challenge: to enable and empower those who are marginalised, powerless and poor to gain for themselves the better life that is their right.

¹ This is the translation in Wheelwright (1959, p29).

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NOTES

This extract taken from 'Behaviour, Attitude and Beyond', Chapter Six of Robert Chamber's book *Ideas for Development*, and is reproduced with kind permission from Robert Chambers and Earthscan Publications. See *In Touch* for ordering details.

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