

emPOWERment:
Power, Capacity and the Requirements of Social Change

Many of us would agree that empowerment is a key dimension of social advancement. Yet the defining element of empowerment, namely *power*, is often left unexamined.

It is widely acknowledged that the concept of power as a means of domination, with the accompanying notions of contest, contention, division and superiority, is ultimately incompatible with the social requirements of justice, solidarity and peace. Conceived in a different manner, however, power is also associated with notions of solidarity, of love, of service to the greater good. Associated with power in this sense are words such as “encourage”, “channel”, “guide” and “enable”.

Through the discussions and reflections in this workshop, we will explore the idea of power and its relationship to empowerment more fully—seeking to do so in a manner that is relevant and helpful for your work. We begin with the questions below.

In your experience, what are some sources of power?

How have you experienced power?

Do you think power can be gained or lost? How?

**YOUTH, MENTORSHIP & SUGAR:
POWER AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE VILLAGE SQUARE**

As you read this vignette please consider what it conveys about the nature of power, its sources, its expression, and how it can be gained or lost.

The Cambodian Organization for Research, Development and Education is an NGO dedicated to helping young people become “promoters of community well-being.” Central to its activities is the Education for Development program, which seeks to develop spiritual, material, and social capacity in 12 to 15-year olds and – crucially – to help them tutor other young people and to accompany them as they engage in social action and community service.

The program was initially introduced in a variety of rural communities and, through successive cycles of action, reflection on action taken, and modification, matured to the point where a core group of participants were able to mentor those younger than themselves. Promising new patterns of interaction and association started to take root and expectations were high. But as the first cohort of participants began to age, one by one, they began to leave the villages, leading to stagnation and even decline in the programs.

Conversations with community members revealed that, once finished with schooling, young people struggled to find work that would allow them to support themselves and their families. Though they were strongly committed to advancing their home communities, the villages’ economic base had eroded to such a degree that emigration, often to neighboring Thailand or Vietnam, was seen as the only path to a viable livelihood.

Realizing that progress could not be sustained unless these realities were addressed, the programs’ coordinators convened a series of meetings, open to all, in the villages. Seeking steps that could be taken to become more economically self-sustaining, discussion came to focus on one central question: what goods or services had the villages previously provided for themselves but now imported? Responses were many and wide-ranging. But consultations eventually converged on a form of raw sugar that had once been produced from local crops but had been largely abandoned when refined white sugar became a symbol of status and success.



United around the vision of enabling more young people to remain in the villages, community members established rudimentary cooperatives dedicated to the production of sugar through local materials and labor. The efforts began modestly and not all proved viable. But several became self-sustaining and gradually came to supply the needs of most local residents. In some cases capacity grew to the point where surpluses could be sold to neighboring areas, generating profits which were placed into a common community development fund.

Significant “cooperative infrastructure” had, by this time, been built by the participation of growing segments of inhabitants in the youth programs and the co-ops. The villages were increasingly able to come to consensus about how these funds should be used, and small but focused projects in agriculture, health and education were initiated. The scope and sophistication of these initiatives gradually grew as the ability to generate shared commitment to achieving them increased. And means were created for growing numbers of young people to support themselves in their home communities – a key requirement for the propagation of the program into the future.

TEXT, PARTICIPATION, AND INFORMAL-INFORMALS: POWER AND NEGOTIATION ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

As you read this vignette please consider what it conveys about the nature of power, its sources, its expression, and how it can be gained or lost.

Negotiation processes at the United Nations seem to have a life all of their own. Nowhere was this more evident than at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20): the largest conference in United Nations history, with more than 45,000 individuals in attendance, over 600 side events, and over 700 commitments made by the private sector, valued at over half a trillion dollars. The process of drafting the outcome document, “The Future We Want,” was an exercise in modern multilateralism which highlighted current challenges to reaching consensus on issues of international concern.

Crafting a document that all Member States could agree to was a tremendous exercise in negotiation and diplomacy. Deliberations initially proceeded as a single body, with Member States individually commenting on the text paragraph by paragraph. By the second preparatory committee, as opinions and positions varied widely between Member States – not to mention the perspectives of experts and NGOs – the process had split into two groups which subsequently divided into a further collection of “splinter groups” responsible for negotiating certain sections of the text.



Regional blocs were integral to these splinter groups. Advocating positions agreed to by the Member States comprising them, these blocs influenced the negotiation process in various and sometimes contradictory ways. On the one hand, these blocs permitted Member States without sufficient resources to have a voice in all groups simultaneously. On the other, ideas put forth by one Member State or regional group often had to be taken back to another regional group for deliberation. This introduced its own delays and impasses, and added new complexity.

Meanwhile, civil society was permitted to meet with government delegations and attend side events, but was not permitted to attend meetings of regional or ideological blocs. Additionally, participation by those NGOs seeking conference-specific accreditation was granted only weeks in advance, as opposed to the months of lead time that had been announced. This left many with only a vague understanding of their role in the conference. Such circumstances led to frustration and a certain degree of introspection, causing some to question the role of civil society in multilateral negotiation and the degree of influence it really exerts. The speech delivered on behalf of the NGO Major Group, for example, demanded that “the words ‘in full participation with civil society’ are removed from the first paragraph.”

Its many challenges notwithstanding, however, Rio+20 offered wide opportunity for suggestions to its outcome text, with individuals, businesses, and institutions from around the world encouraged to contribute online. New methodologies were employed to attempt to 'survey the world,' efforts that ultimately resulted in over 6,000 pages of submitted material, 80% coming from non-governmental sources.

But despite these efforts, the text was not finalized until the eleventh hour, when the government of the host country took over the negotiating process and shepherded compromise text to passage. Member States acknowledged that there were shortcomings in the document, that it lacked important elements, and that it was not as ambitious as they had hoped for. Yet, despite that, many gravitated to the same final conclusion: given the complexity of the issues and the wide diversity of opinions, the final text was the best we could do at this moment in history.

