

Learning about Power and Participation: A peek into our first experiences and outcomes!

“All civil society relations or interaction or interrelation imply the game of power. The more you are conscious of this, the more you are able to make strategic choices in order to facilitate the mobilisation and process of change”. (participant)



“Power directs our actions all the time, not only in ‘civil society participation’, but we seem reluctant to talk about it! As a result, participation suffers”. (participant)

Issues of power and participation are at the root of the challenges we face in development cooperation today. How can southern civil society actors obtain influence on (public) policy agendas? How do CSOs relate to their beneficiaries; how are their voices actually heard, or incorporated? What say do northern donors give partners in the development ‘game’? Is it real participation or just consultation and why does it matter? What is ‘empowerment’ and is it possible for some people to be empowered by others? What strategies for understanding and shifting power might be effective in different development contexts? Where do ‘I’ come in as a development practitioner in ‘my own’ organisation. What language / discourse am I using and what am I doing in practise? How can I consciously apply concepts of power and participation in my daily work?

These and other questions are at the heart of PSO’s learning trajectory on power and participation. The trajectory combines understanding concepts, with examining own discourse and practises, and the identification (and possibly experimentation with) of possible strategies for changes.

This article contains a short reflection on first experiences with this experimental trajectory (see for more info the [PSO-website](#))¹. It gives a peek into how participants find it to be relevant and which outcomes they have created for themselves. By making these experiences practical and visible we hope to encourage others to join this learning trajectory which we will be running in an adapted form as of 2008.

Getting in touch with your own 'power'

With practitioners from NOVIB, Edukans, Prisma, UNOY, PSO and ICCO we have set out on an interesting journey facilitated by Jethro Pettit from the University of Sussex and Irene Guijt from Learning by Design. Although most participants have a lot of experience and are actually 'brought up' with all kinds of notions on participatory development, they highly appreciate the theoretical refresher on development discourse and the input on concepts of power and participation: *"lots to digest, lots of new insights ... made a nice basis for further learning / studying / experiencing."* And as another puts it: *"I had no idea of the dimension of power we are dealing with and how we can use it to improve our critical dialogue with partners; very useful, interesting. Actually I thought we are aware of 'our power' and are very 'participatory', but only now I know what it really means."*

A powerful tool to get to this realisation was not only the amount and quality of the theoretical input ("which can sometimes be very abstract") but also using it in simply analysing discourse. During the learning trajectory participants have used various tools and frameworks (see box below) to explore what significant (policy) plans of their own organisation 'say' or don't say on participation. Discourse analysis has helped to reveal gaps between participation policies and practises and encouraged participants to identify ways to align the way they do things better with partnership policies. As one of the participants said: *"the 'answers' I find are quite revealing in terms of the implicit value we actually place on it."*

Classifications of Power (to explore discourse and practise)			
Public, Private and Intimate Power	Alternative Forms of Power (power as 'agency')	Three faces of Power / Power Cube	Power as Knowledge Truth and Norms
<u>Public</u> : visible, employment, public life	<u>Power over</u> : domination or control of one over another	<u>Visible power</u> : decision-making mechanisms	Power as deeply embedded social <u>norms, values and behaviours</u>
<u>Private</u> : family, relationships, friends, marriage	<u>Power to</u> : individual ability to act	<u>Hidden power</u> : setting the agenda behind the scene, exclusion	
<u>Intimate</u> : self-esteem, confidence, relationship to body	<u>Power with</u> : collective action, working together	<u>Invisible power</u> : social conditioning, ideology, bias	
	<u>Power within</u> : self-worth, dignity	<u>Levels</u> at which participation is pursued (local, national and international)	
		<u>Spaces</u> in which participation occurs (invited, closed and created)	

¹ <http://www.pso.nl/knowledgecenter/dossier.asp?dossier=28>

Applying new knowledge through action research

While the combination of theoretical input / instruction with doing simple analytical exercise provided participants with a deeper understanding, the proof of the pudding lay in the practical application while back at work. In between the workshops each participant has done action research, thus experimenting with the newly gained knowledge in the workplace. Topics chosen for the action research tie in with the work priorities of participants and their organisations. This has resulted in a diverse and rich range of studies and findings which have in one way or another provided a direct input in ongoing organisational processes. Some examples of these you find below.

Examples of Action Research
Marthe Hesselmans and Nina Aeckerle (UNOY) have hooked into the re-structuring process of their own partner network towards more emphasis on partnership and solid, intensive relations. <i>"How do we work with power in our design of the restructuring process?"</i>
Woord & Daad had already planned an evaluation together with a partner on the relationship between the partner and her target group and the relations within the target community. <i>"I have decided to analyse the power dynamics at play in this process and included relationships within W&D and the relationship between W&D and the partner organisation",</i> says Wouter Rijnveld.
Irene Visser (ICCO) is working on a new ICCO-programme on local markets. <i>"I chose to focus on how two partner organisations in this programme are trying to influence decision making processes."</i>
Rosa Borges (OXFAM/NOVIB) used the opportunity to re-assess the relationship with one of NOVIB's larger partners. <i>"Specifically I used the power framework to compare discourse and practise of the gender policy of a partner."</i>
Joseph Seh (PSO) focused on his task to develop a network of professional migrants. <i>"How have power relations affected my efforts to create enthusiasm and commitment in PSO? How to create power with, shared ownership among network members, in an emerging network?"</i>

In doing the action research participants have developed their understanding not only of power dynamics at the organisational level, but also of how power plays a role in their own communications with colleagues and partners. This can have quite different implications at the personal level seeing the following two quotes from two participants. *"Power analysis, made me realise I need to hold back, be patient and let go at times to allow space for others to contribute and participate".* And another: *"I need to find a more effective balance between taking a leading role and wait/solicit for initiatives of others in the process of forming a network. I need to push stronger and make the network move forward so that momentum does not get lost".*

Influencing organisational practise

In other words doing the experiment has helped participants to get in touch with how they operate and communicate, what that means in how they deal with power relations and what they need to do to become more participative. And, taking it a notch further, these newly found insights provide fresh perspectives on how to help the own organisation move forward. To quote one participant: *"I see*

opportunities to lead through example: not just changing delivery and procedures, but making methodological changes, embed power and participation in the way we do capacity-building. How we dialogue with our partners is part of our delivery, and we need to be more power-conscious in how we do this... also need to do away with old procedures. It is within my sphere of influence to do this." And another: *"we are re-structuring to become a more thematic organisation; what are the power dynamics of this process. In using these tools we can boost internal cooperation."*

Some concrete ideas that participants have identified to make this influence 'happen' are:

- Share action research findings and the frameworks for power analysis in the organisation (brown bag lunch, policy meeting);
- Re-application of the tools in other cases;
- Reviewing assessment methods and evaluation tools.

Touching on relationships

A third level of 'impact' (next to the personal and organisational) has also come into the picture. In a few cases the action research has helped to shed light on the relationships with partners and even directly impacted on the nature of the relationships. Rosa Borges (OXFAM/NOVIB): *"Sharing our analysis with IBASE, our partner, has prompted a critical dialogue with them about how we relate. This dialogue will continue and that will help us to develop our partnership"*. Having experienced how bringing in the power framework has helped exploring a partner relationship, Rosa Borges actively seeks inclusion of power dynamics in the NOVIB toolbox.

Hope Enterprises (Woord en Daad partner) and Wouter Rijnveld designed and implemented the action research together. Wouter Rijnveld has added crucial components to an already developed plan for a joint evaluation with a partner into the relationship of the partner organisation with its target community and the relations in the target community. His additions: including relations within W&D, relations between W&D and the partner and relations in the partner organisation. Thanks to these additions, he hopes they will now get a complete picture and will be able to also look into their own role in the chain. This in turn will have an impact on W&D policy and approach with regard to partner relations.

Focus on joint learning

The learning trajectory has created a lot of movement at various levels: at a personal level through individual and joint reflections on power issues; at an organisational level by experimenting / researching the practise of power and participation; and at the relationship level by using new insights in dialogue with partners. Experience with the learning trajectory shows that it is relevant in various contexts, will resound with a larger audience and has huge potential for joint learning within PSO member organisations and beyond that, with their partners. The interviews with participants of the first cycle and this reflection have been of great help in re-shaping the design.

We have decided to organise the learning trajectory again in 2008, with a number of improvements and changes, with regard to focus and in making the learning process more flexible in time and support. In a 'nutshell' the 'next generation' of the 'PSO learning trajectory on power and participation' will focus on power and participation in partnerships. What do relationships between member organisations and partners look like? What role does power play in these relations? What expectations and perceptions do we have of each other? How are policies put in practise? How is power exercised and participation shaped? How do internal power dynamics within the organisation affect its external relationships? How does power operate systematically within aid relationships and partnerships?

This calls for more involvement of partner organisations in the process. Member organisations will be asked to participate together with one of their partner organisations. This approach will also help to make an even more direct link with organisational practise. Participants will be stimulated to reflect with colleagues of their own organisation on how the learning trajectory takes shape.

Action research will again be a central method in the process as it will help stimulate participation, experimentation and reflection. In the new cycle we will dedicate ample time to the principles, methods, design and application of action research. In addition, we will organise coaching and/or on-line support for participating member organisations and partner organisations in between workshops. At the end we hope participants (members and partners) have not only created concrete results with regard to power and participation dynamics in their relationships, but are also more skilled in the various tools we will use and provide.

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Additional resources

Just Associates - Making Change Happen, Power
http://www.justassociates.org/index_files/MCH3red.pdf

John Gaventa, Reflections on the Uses of the 'Power Cube'
www.pso.nl/asp/documentsite.asp?document=807

IDS bulletin on Power
<http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=941>