7 Empowerment

We must become the change we want to see.
Mahatma Gandhi

How can people live in a self-determined way and acquire the capabilities to act and deal with conflict non-violently? This is the core issue of multiple approaches to empowerment. Two dimensions can be distinguished: empowerment as self-empowerment, and empowerment as professional external support or element of a third-party intervention. Both dimensions overlap and are mutually dependent. Considering the circumstances of many people and societies in conflict and war regions, empowerment for them is essential. Resisting poverty, oppression, marginalisation, violence and war in a non-violent way requires courage, determination and confidence. Weak conflict parties are often lacking awareness of their own situation and their rights, as well
as capabilities to act and organise themselves. They fail to articulate their interests or claim their rights to participate and negotiate on equal terms. How can the necessary processes in this context be supported? This is the question that empowerment and conflict transformation seek to address.

**Contexts, approaches, expectations**

The issue of empowerment arises in several contexts which are closely interlinked. Empowerment can be understood as a
- psychosocial approach in cross-cultural work on a communal level (community work);
- way of promoting gender mainstreaming and equality;
- dimension of social and civil rights movements;
- development tool, with a focus on poverty reduction and
- approach in the context of peacebuilding, peace education and conflict transformation.

Empowerment is understood and discussed as an objective, method, strategy and process. Its core is individualistic: it’s about enabling individuals to perceive and articulate their own interests. Strong individuals are the key to social change. In psychosocial work, a paradigm shift can be identified: empowerment is no longer about peoples’ alleged need for relief, but about trust in their existing skills and strengths and respect for personal autonomy and self-determination. Empowerment therefore aims at individual and then collective processes of self-reliance and building the capacity to be a responsible citizen.

The challenge is activating and strengthening existing or hidden personal resources, establishing social support networks and promoting political participation and claiming rights. Creating spaces for civic participation and self-organisation is linked to empowerment approaches in community work. The socio-political expectations associated with empowerment are that individuals and collectives (e.g. oppressed and marginalised groups)
learn not only to recognise their own rights, but also to interact with dominant and ruling conflict parties on the basis of equality.

In development cooperation, community-based self-help programmes are designed to enable disadvantaged people to take initiatives that lead them towards independent development. Empowerment is meant to contribute to poverty reduction and build people’s capacities for political engagement. The main goal is to develop grass-roots groups and an awareness of justice through capacity-building.

**Impulses from gender studies**

Some concepts of empowerment originate in the women’s movement and gender studies, which have provided strong impetus here. In the context of gender-oriented empowerment processes, Naila Kabeer, Professorial Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, defines empowerment as follows:

> “Empowerment for me ... starts with individual consciousness. And it starts with individual consciousness because I come from a part of the world where what is possible for women is very, very limited. So, women’s so-called preferences are very narrow and restricted. For me, empowerment is telling you the importance of the power within, of the importance of consciousness, of the ability to recognise your own self-worth, you know, to be able to demand recognition and respect from others. But of course, it must then move on to collective action, or structural change, or public policy, or, you know, the things that happen in the public domain, which make a difference to the larger structures that affect all women.”

For Kabeer, empowerment is about creating freedom of choice for those who currently lack opportunities to choose between different types of being and doing (disempowerment). As she
points out, before a strategy for empowerment can be developed, the structure and extent of disempowerment must be analysed (conflict analysis).

An understanding of power is critically important to empowerment concepts. Empowerment is not about deliberate and repressive power. Naila Kabeer describes power as a process of gaining control over resources and one’s own life: “power within”. This corresponds with the definition of power underlying the United Nations’ concept of human → security: it uses “power to” instead of “power over”.

**Empowerment as a multi-level approach**

Within post-war peacebuilding, one specific strand of work focuses on the empowerment of victims and survivors of violence and war, such as the Victim Empowerment Project set up by the Foundations for Peace Network. Without strengthening self-confidence and the rights of victims in post-war societies, the establishment of a culture of peace is inconceivable. The Foundations for Peace Network members have identified four distinct strategies which have been utilised to support the empowerment of victims/survivors of conflict, namely:

- Working with victims/survivors at the grass-roots level
- Connecting victims/survivors to wider society
- Connecting victims/survivors from diverse sides
- Linking victims/survivors to the policy environment

Measures for empowerment should not reinforce victimhood but be appropriate for guiding affected people out of this role. Critically dealing with the past is one aspect of this process (→ transitional justice). Others are peace education and socio-psychological approaches (trauma healing) or vocational training measures. These micro-level approaches, however, are insufficient for achieving empowerment on a societal level and must be complemented by processes on the meso and macro level. Improving structural and political conditions en-
Empowerment enhances access to political participation, resources and labour markets.

Empowerment in the context of conflict transformation is only promising if it is designed as a holistic approach and multi-level process. The same applies to empowerment in processes for the resolution of violent and asymmetric inter-group conflicts, both in relation to capacity-building in general and the difficult role of third parties in training low-power groups on their negotiation options for a more balanced peace-making process in particular. Empowerment should not only support the unheard, oppressed, weaker groups in articulating their interests in an appropriate and non-violent way and identifying their options for action. It should also include the other groups involved in preparing them for change and for the possibility of resistance and conflict intensification.

References and Further Reading


Online Resources


Interview with Naila Kabeer (podcast), www.berghof-foundation.org > Glossary > 07 Empowerment

International Museum of Women, www.imow.org

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Thanks go to all members of the Berghof teams for their intensive discussions on the glossary entries throughout the process.

Editorial team: Beatrix Austin, Hans J. Giessmann, Uli Jäger
Layout: Edenspiekermann, Christoph Lang
Language Editing and Proofreading: Hillary Crowe

Photo: Afghanistan: Peace Counts Report “The future knows its ABCs. Mosque-based schools for girls and boys”

Photographer: Uli Reinhardt / Zeitenspiegel Reportagen