



7 Empowerment and Ownership

Feras Kheirallah and Barbara Unger

“Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political and economic change.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

We know that inequality and limited access to opportunity are key drivers of conflict. Groups that perceive themselves to be disadvantaged try to change their situation, and may use nonviolent (or violent) means (→ Addressing Social Grievances). When actors need to change their behaviour, attitudes and relationships in order to engage with each other differently, a certain degree of horizontality and symmetry – of information, capacities, access

EMPOWERMENT | a process which enables individuals and organised groups to increase their power and autonomy to achieve outcomes they need and desire.

OWNERSHIP | conflict stakeholders and actors having the resources to assume responsibility for conflict-related challenges and all aspects of the conflict transformation process, as this makes it both meaningful and sustainable.

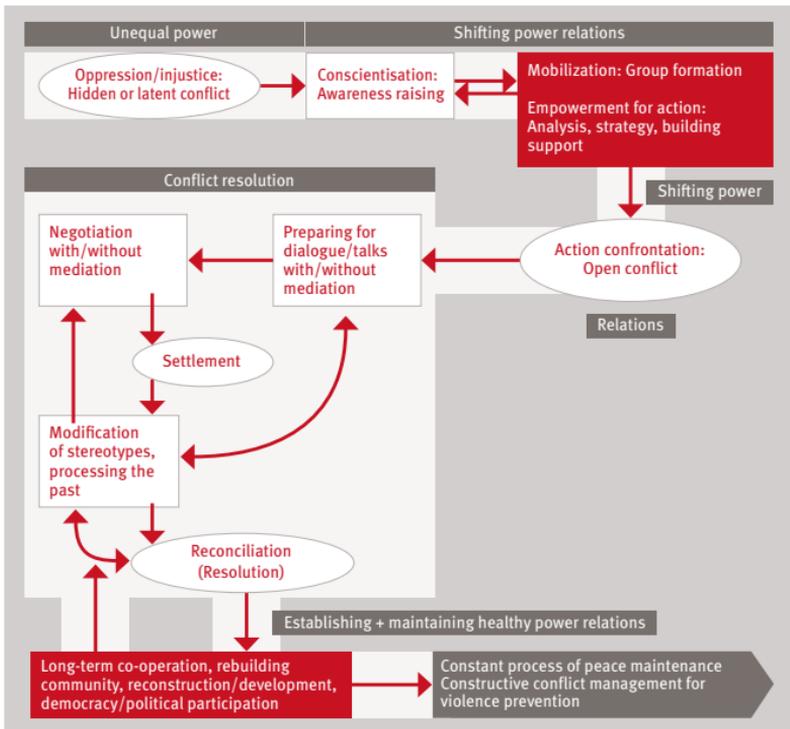
and power – is required. Consequently, asymmetry of power must be dealt with: “Empowerment is a process through which individuals or organised groups increase their power and autonomy to achieve certain outcomes they need and desire” (Eyben, cited in Combaz & Mcloughlin 2014, 4). Conflict transformation and peacebuilding need to consider this.

Empowerment is a concept stemming from community sociology and has been widely explored with regard to gender relations. It happens at several levels. Individuals who are enabled to identify and articulate their own interests can help achieve social change, just as persons who have confidence in their own skills and strength can contribute, for example as responsible citizens, to collective processes. Groups, at the next level, are key to self-empowerment. A shared notion of their own situation, of collective interests and of the means of achieving them creates scope for self-reliance and for engagement with the “dominant” group(s). In this way, relations and interactions can change at the societal level as well.

Conflict transformation, empowerment and ownership

In conflict transformation, Diana Francis has made the point that in order to bring structural and cultural violence, such as injustice and inequality, out of the latent stage, the disadvantaged (and ideally those who “innocently” gain from the status quo)

Stages and processes in conflict transformation



Graph by: Christoph Lang

Figure 3, source: Diana Francis, 2001

must increase their consciousness of their situation and gain “power” to challenge it.

Conflict transformation and empowerment share the notion that only the actors affected can build peace, and that all actors involved have resources to build on. The main role and responsibility for conflict transformation hence lie with those who are affected by conflict. A careful balance must be struck between helpful and catalytic (outside) intervention and nurturing (local) ownership.

The issues of ownership, power and agency are at the core of what we need to discuss when we look at empowerment in conflict transformation. When we opt for empowerment measures as an (external) intervention, we need to be very careful of how these interventions can play out. “Do no harm” (→ Educating for Peace; → Providing Conflict-Sensitive Refugee Assistance) must be a guiding principle.

Working with individuals, groups and institutions towards social change

Some approaches to empowerment focus on supporting individuals and certain previously marginalised groups to have better access to resources, information and services, or to influence decision-makers and legislation and hence improve their living conditions and situation in a given society. The empowerment of women can serve as an example. Its purpose is to enable women first to gain a different understanding of their potential and the context, and also to access and play an active role in influencing (if not shaping) policy. New consciousness and a desire for change do not mean that the empowered women have sufficient capacities to effect changes in the face of the resistance that their empowered stance may encounter in society. Therefore, it is crucial in conflict transformation to understand and enable empowerment by working at different levels: the individual, the group, the institutional and finally the societal level.

While only persons and groups can be empowered, they act within an institutional and societal environment. Thus, working with existing institutions to entice the people within them to play a positive role in transforming conflicts begins with understanding the institutions’ history and importance within society. Ideally, this happens through a joint analysis of the stakeholders. Making these institutions more responsive to the whole of society – for example by strengthening their capacities, enhancing their internal strategies, enabling exchange with other institutions, supporting knowledge production and transfer,

and sharing experience through mediation and dialogue techniques – can contribute to transforming conflicts, provided that the political will is there.

Supporting empowerment as an external actor

The role of outsiders may be to support actors in a multipartial manner by creating spaces and changing perceptions of roles and resources. While there is a close connection between self-empowerment and what externals can contribute for this conscientisation and change to happen, somewhat paradoxically, “to empower” has also been used as a transitive verb to describe interventions, especially in development cooperation and often in relation to gender issues, which aim to support a certain group. As Alan Sharland has rightly observed, “It is a self-contradiction to state on someone’s behalf, without their explicit consent, that they have ‘been empowered’, or, worse that ‘we have empowered them’, as in the very act of saying so, we are speaking for them and assuming the right and power to do so.”

At the individual and group level, participatory analysis of issues, factors and actors can help, as can exchanges with other groups or with experts. Training, workshops, coaching and other measures provide spaces for connection and reflection, which can lead to a change in attitude and behaviour. If, as said above, this is not sufficient to effect change, the groups might look for other mechanisms to support their cause. In Jordan, for example, independent trade unions were established to protest against the dysfunctional state-controlled unions. In such situations, one may need to ask: What institutions are there, how would they need to change? Are new ones needed? A strategy aimed at institutional change can start from various angles, depending, for example, on whether the institution has a mandate to represent a certain group, or responds to all groups’ demands, but has not fulfilled that task. It is crucial that these institutions have a mandate to influence the relationship between decision-makers at a macro level and those subject to policies at a micro level.

If an external actor wants to support such a process, the need to work with core institutions (for example parliament), power-holders (for example men) and traditions (for example masculinity) will most likely come up (→ Gender and Youth). So what might support for empowerment look like in practice?

External actors can best provide support by enabling internal self-reflection and a (gradual but sustainable) transformation process towards a collective understanding and willingness to play a role in transforming conflicts. In response to ownership issues, our main task as externals should lie in creating the space needed for these institutions to develop their own strategies and tools. In Lebanon, the Berghof Foundation performs this role by supporting the official religious institutions in their efforts to foster coexistence and tolerance. Transformative external intervention should then support these institutions in better understanding or even (re-)defining their actual role and original mandate and identifying their potential (strengths) as a collective unit representing a certain group of society in conflict.

Our organisation's mission, "creating space", here means providing a level playing field, as far as possible, so that all actors can participate. Addressing power asymmetries is at the core of that work in many conflict settings. Empowerment and clear local ownership of the empowerment agenda are our preferred approach for doing just that.

References and Further Reading

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