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In this case an adviser sought to introduce power concepts to staff from six country offices and the regional office in Oxfam GB's Horn, East and Central Africa region. These staff were all connected in some way to programming on pastoralist issues and linked to a regional pastoral programme which seeks to address poverty through livelihoods and governance work, under Oxfam's 'Right to be Heard' aim. The group included a mix of front-line programme and project staff, policy and advocacy staff, and a regional programme coordinator.

The intention of the workshop was to bring fresh energy and new ideas to a programme that has been running for many years. [...and power seemed like the right thing to focus on because....?exclusion from governance and decisions that affect them is at the heart of why pastoralists are poor, and despite ten years of programming, significant poverty persists, which would indicate a need for fresh approaches]

Process

The process involved working through the different types of power (over, to, with etc), and the dimensions of the cube, presenting these as a layered set of spectrums rather than in the cube format.

- As an introduction, participants were asked to reflect on a time they had felt powerful and a time they had felt powerless. This grounded the whole event in people's personal experience of power.
- Next one participant shared a pre-prepared case study of a pastoral programme, to give the group a shared programmatic example to draw on as the workshop unfolded.
- Then the process of unpacking the concept of power began. Firstly, the facilitator introduced the cartoons [link to these in the pack], projecting them onto a wall without any captions or labels. Participants were asked 'what do you see here? do you work with this kind of power in your programme? do you recognise this in your context?'. Participants responded actively, bringing up many examples and raising further questions – some of which were discussed at the time, and others of which were parked for discussion in relation to later slides.
- After this initial conceptualisation process prints of the cartoons were pinned up on the walls, where they were repeatedly referred to through the discussions that followed.
- Participants then spent time in small groups, relating the ideas about power to the case study that had been shared, thinking about what kind of power was being addressed and how, and looking out for missed opportunities or methodologies which might make a difference. Headlines from these groups were shared in plenary.
- Then the participants grouped themselves into country teams to look at their own programmes, again reflecting on current approaches, potential opportunities and possible alternative entry points and ways of working, based on the power concepts. Again, headlines were shared in plenary.
- The final stage of the workshop was an action planning session, with each participant working out what they would do next as a result of the workshop.

Reflections on the process

It was very noticeable how easily participants were able to grasp the power concepts and relate them to their own experience when the visual images were presented without labels or descriptions – something that often proves difficult when starting with a verbal or written explanation of the concepts. The facilitator felt confident knowing that she had her own examples in mind to illustrate each image, should she need to use them, but the process of drawing on participants' experiences first made it much more meaningful for them.

It seemed helpful to avoid naming the emerging ideas about power until participants had had an opportunity to understand and explore them themselves. The process was clearly very engaging, as the level of energy remained high throughout even though the session methodology was quite repetitive.

The changes achieved were largely at the level of individuals' understanding and confidence in using concepts of power to analyse their work – systemic change was not anticipated as a result of the workshop. Nonetheless it is clear that the ideas are filtering their way through the various programmes that participants are working on, for instance appearing in concept notes for new pieces of work. It is expected that further accompaniment would be required to help participants shift from having a new way of understanding their work to developing really new approaches to programming.

What seems particularly significant, though, is that a wide variety of staff were able to take on and apply power analysis. Contrary to expectations and concerns in many settings, 'front-line' staff had no problem grasping the concepts and handling the complex issues it throws up, because it was presented to them in an undaunting way – broken up into manageable pieces and left open for their own explanation. These were ideas that they recognised in their own contexts. When the same ideas have been shared discursively, with long narrative descriptions of the concepts, the reaction has often been resistance or a demand to make the concepts more simple. The lesson here is that it may not be the concepts that need simplification, the process just needs to be more open and engaging. A further benefit of this approach is that participants felt that they were working it all out for themselves, rather than taking on a prescribed set of ideas, and this has generated a profound sense of ownership over the ideas and the analysis that they have done with them.

Context

This workshop was one event in a wider process by which the Adviser is seeking to broaden and deepen power analysis within Oxfam GB. The strategy for doing this is largely opportunistic, taking advantage of the adviser's travels within the organisation for various projects and initiatives and other opportunities such as inductions for new staff. The cartoons have proved a really valuable tool for this work, offering a way of getting across the main distinctions that are central to power analysis in just 15-20 minutes if necessary.

In 2009 Oxfam GB hopes to hold an event at which several of the many people who have been introduced to the power concepts can come together and share experiences, reflecting on how and where they've applied power analysis, what difference it has made, and ideas for rolling the ideas out further in the organisation. The underlying attitude is that ideas that are genuinely useful will spread by word of mouth – and in contrast, ideas that are imposed through management hierarchies tend to be resisted even if they are potentially useful. Therefore the strategy for getting power analysis inserted into Oxfam GB is one that provides opportunities for that word of mouth to develop and spread. Monitoring its progress will be more difficult, but the impacts might be more profound.