

EXPERIENCES WITH A LEARNING TRAJECTORY ON POWER IN OXFAM NOVIB

Why a power learning trajectory?

Oxfam Novib engaged in a 10-month learning trajectory on power between May 2008 and February 2009 with Irene Guijt and Jethro Pettit as facilitators. We had come to learn and appreciate the power cube in 2005 when we were involved in an evaluation (by Irene Guijt et al) of support for Civil Society Participation by 4 international NGOs including Oxfam Novib. The reason for starting this trajectory was actually quite logical: using a rights-based approach implies an aim to shift existing power relations in favour of poor and marginalised people. An explicit analysis of these power relations therefore is useful both for understanding *needs* for 'empowerment' as well as for seeking *opportunities* (and assessing possible risks) for changing existing power relations. After a number of years in which a focus on result-based approach prevailed, time and space was there to focus on the quality of our rights-based approach.

When starting the learning trajectory, we hoped power analysis would prove to be useful and do-able at a national level so that it would feed into country strategy setting. We had just finished a proces of country strategy development in which we had deliberately opted for a rather inductive approach. Desk officers were asked to make explicit what they would propose Oxfam Novib to do for the coming 4 years ("the strategy") based on their current understanding, commitments and interest. This strategy was then submitted to a risk analysis; a sound and much appreciated methology desk officers were already familiar with as we use it for grant appraisals as well. While this risk analysis carries some elements of power analysis (analyses how favourable and hostile internal and external actors and factors, influence the strategy, either positively or negatively) we acknowledged its limited character and agreed to improve on this during the 4-year programme cycle so that we would be in better shape for the next multi-annual planning period.

We had questions though about the possibility to use power tools at such 'high' national level; would we not be overwhelmed by the huge amount of interactions one could analyse? We decided to go ahead and find out, as a pilot. At the same time, we wanted to test the applicability of power tools at other levels and identified the following:

1. Country level. We started with Mali, working across the portfolio on all five aims, but primarily with an education perspective.
2. Counterpart level. One regional partner participated: the women's rights network within ALOP, a regional NGO association in Latin America
3. Thematic level. This turned out to be 1) the promotion of the female condom, 2) participation of people living with HIV/AIDS in hiv/aids programming and 3) climate change.
4. Campaigning level. The Publish what you Pay campaign in Africa and a power analysis feeding into our decision whether or not to engage in a multi-stakeholder initiative on palm oil in Colombia.

While the trajectory had a carefully designed set-up with three 2-day workshops (see section on the lerning trajectory by Irene and Jethro in the powerpack), we experienced quite a big change in participants' attendance. This was due to time problems or to people leaving the organisation. Also, new people who heard about the trajectory wanted to join halfway. This meant that the first workshop had to be redone to bring new participants at the same level with the group, which was ok. No participants pulled out because of lack of interest or

questions about the relevance. It was interesting to note that some people who neatly included their participation in their annual plan, eventually did not (fully) participate, whereas others just joined and created space in their calendar when they heard about the trajectory through the grapevine because they really had a burning issue and believed power analysis would help solving that. It helped that Jethro presented the trajectory as “ your daily work is your action research” and indeed I advertised the trajectory as an excellent opportunity to get someone think and work with you on some of the trouble spots you have to deal with anyway.

A relatively large portion of participants worked on campaign issues. We had not really expected this, the initial idea was to have power analysis tools for program officers, so that they could better strategise and know for example, what type of counterparts to select for funding. The sample has been too small to really interpret this but thinking about it, it may be that people involved in campaigns are much more directly trying to influence other actors and live the victories and frustrations of (not) exercising power (influencing powerful) themselves. It also meant that the action researches focused on well defined issues and no one actually did a “national power analysis”.

We are no researchers

While it proved a challenge to sustain the group and deepen the experiences over the period of the trajectory, the long-term nature also proved to be very valuable. The action-research form indeed meant it was not an academic, only-on-the-long-term-useful training but it benefitted people immediately, it was really experiential and deep learning. It was not easy though, in the midst of hectic, targets and deadlines, to shift to a more reflective mode where time to think seems a luxury, although you very well know it is not. The coaching of the facilitators by kindly reminding participants of their action plan, their support and feedback both over email and talk by phone was crucial in between the workshops to get the necessary quality but also to simply to help create an environment that fosters reflection. We needed encouragement and reassurance that you don't need to be an academic researcher in order to do action research.

Outcomes of the trajectory

At the end of the trajectory, without exception, all participants were convinced about the value of including an analysis of power relations in their work. At an individual level, each person is committed to continue using a power lens. We all noted though that it requires continued support and reflection to be able to do this. Applying a power analysis is not a matter of filling out yet another tool; it is a mindset that needs to be sharpened in critical dialogue with peers and back stoppers. A striking outcome was that all participants acknowledged understanding and appreciating the power they have themselves better although in the process it proved difficult to look at yourself without a mirror. Someone to pose the tough questions is really helpful. In any case, we realised that being a powerful donor is not something to play down or ignore anymore, but rather to use effectively once you acknowledge and understand it. Participants reported that after the trajectory, they see things differently that help them participate more confidently in conferences and negotiations.

Some quotes of reasons to engage in power analysis are the following:

- With power analysis we gain more insight that enable us to make better informed choices, undertake more strategic actions, leading to better impact.

- We will have a clearer story on the effectiveness of our work, including an understanding of the obstacles and disappointments we face; the reasons why things have *not* worked the way we expected.
- As such, it will reveal the validity of our assumptions.
- It opens up a dialogue about our core values, which increases our transparency, also vis-à-vis counterparts
- It will clarify the mutual expectations and roles of Oxfam Novib and counterparts
- It might very well lead to more conflict as hidden differences or conflicting interests come to the surface. This will provide a basis though for more productive debates.
- It will encourage a –desired- risk-taking culture. Awareness of our own power makes us more pro-active in running calculated risk and insight in the relations between actors will lead us to engage with the not-so-usual suspects and more easily think of alternative ways of engagement beyond funding counterparts.
- It might help brake through a ‘political paralysis’ when working in coalitions.
- It will give clarity, flesh on the bones of the Rights Based Approach

Concerns

Concerns we still have too. We realise analysing power relations is a constant mindset rather than applying technical tools. This needs personal commitment, interest and time investment too. Not everybody may feel ready to take the risk of looking at one’s own power and be explicit about motifs, drivers and the choices made in exercising power, including the ‘trade-offs’. We therefore have to accept it is a long-term process to get a big (or: moderate size?) organisation working effectively on power issues. That is a mindset in itself! The challenges may be similar to those in gender awareness raising. We know all too well the dangers of ‘mainstreaming away’. We therefore seekways to have it ‘spread like a virus’, exactly the way we started with motivated people. There is a tension in that while we believe that the intensive trajectory fostered the deep learning and, most crucial, awareness of our own power, we also know it is unrealistic to expect such intensive process on a big scale.

Regarding our ambition for “doing a national power analysis” we learned that our focus should not be on the outcome of ‘the analysis’ but more on the process of who do we include and exclude in our analysis, which questions do we pose and how do we relate to others and use not abuse our own power effectively. As a first milestone, a much stronger focus on stakeholder participation in strategy development is already a fact.