



Operationalising empowerment: *A framework for an understanding of empowerment within SDC*

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1. Introduction

This paper presents an overview of key empowerment principles. It has been produced for SDC following the publication of an independent evaluation of SDC's application of empowerment approaches in its development programming. It discusses:

- different interpretations of power and their operational implications,
- the balance between an agency approach and that which emphasises social structures (see Box 1, below)
- the implications of these for working with partners.

Box 1: Agency and structure explained

Agency

Agency refers to an individual's capacity to act independently and to make their own free choices.

Structure

Structure refers to those factors such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, customs etc. that seem to limit or influence the opportunities that individuals have.

This lies at the heart of sociological theory. Do social structures determine an individual's behaviour or does human agency rule supreme? There are three possible theoretical positions:

1. Our social existence is determined by the structure of society. An individual's agency is affected by the way this structure works.
2. Individual 'agents' have a capacity to construct and reconstruct their worlds (structure is not important).
3. Many modern social theorists attempt to compromise between the two previous positions. They see structure and agency as complementary forces – structure influences human behaviour, and humans are capable of changing the social structures they inhabit.

Source: Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structure_and_agency
(downloaded 26.02.07)

2. Operational implications of the different interpretations of power

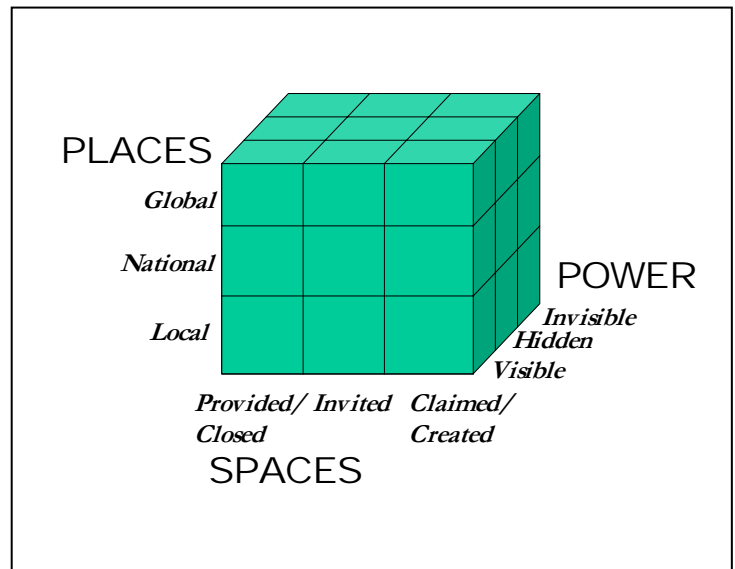
Different interpretations of power have significant implications for the operationalisation of empowerment (see Table 1). Empowerment based on a view of power as '**power over**' emphasises the importance of participation in existing economic and political structures of society but does not involve changes to those structures. A focus on '**power to**' has led to an emphasis on access to decision making¹ whereas an emphasis on '**power within**' has led to a focus around building self-esteem. The process of acquiring such power must start with the individual and requires a change in their own perceptions about their rights, capacities and potential.

Table 1: The operational implications of different definitions of power

Type of power relation	Corresponding empowerment outcomes
Power Over: ability to influence & coerce	Changes in underlying resources and power to challenge constraints
Power To: organise & change existing hierarchies	Increased individual capacity and opportunities for access
Power With: increased power from collective action	Increased awareness and desire for change
Power from Within: increased individual consciousness	Increased solidarity to challenge underlying constraints

Gaventa's (2003) Power Cube presents a dynamic understanding of how power operates, how different interests can be marginalised from decision-making and the strategies needed to increase inclusion. It describes three continuums which show i) Spaces: how arenas are created; ii) Power: the degree of visibility of power with them (see Box 2 for an application of these two dimensions); and iii) Places: the levels and places of engagement. (The power cube is explained with a number of examples in Annex 2.)

Box 2: The Power Cube (Gaventa, 2003)



Decision-making takes place in a variety of arenas or 'spaces'. Distinguishing between different spaces helps identify entry points for change

¹ For example SIDA supports and promotes equal rights of participation in central political institutions such as political parties, parliaments and elections.

identify entry points for change and encourage self-reflection on the power which donors exercise. In terms of the different spaces in which power operates (and how these spaces are created), he distinguishes between three types:

- a) 'Provided' or 'closed' spaces: spaces which are controlled by an elite group. These may exist within many government systems, the international finance institutions (IFIs) or institutions such as the WTO.
- b) 'Invited' spaces: with external pressure, or in an attempt to increase legitimacy, some policy makers may create 'invited' spaces for outsiders to share their opinions. This may offer some possibility for influence but it is unlikely that they will create real opportunities for long-term change. In extreme cases it may act to legitimate the *status quo* or perpetuate the subordination of those who are delegated with 'power'.
- c) 'Claimed' spaces: these spaces can provide the less powerful with a chance to develop their agendas and create solidarity without control from power-holders. An example of this is the participatory budget process in Porto Alegre.

Depicting these different arenas as falling along a continuum, suggests that moving up from 'closed' to 'open' spaces creates new spaces but does not necessarily close old ones (as zero-sum theory might suggest). Power gained in one space, through increased capacity and experience, can be used to enter other spaces.

Understanding the distinctions between visible and less visible forms of power enables one to explore the way in which laws and institutions may be perpetuating repressive social norms and values

ii. The Power Cube also distinguishes between the degree of visibility of power:

- a) Visible power: this is the conventional understanding of power which is negotiated through formal rules and structures, institutions and procedures. Strategies for empowerment focus on policies, the legislature and the courts and tools such as lobbying, media and litigation.
- b) Hidden power: this focuses on the *actual* controls over decision-making, and the way certain powerful people and institutions maintain their influence over the process and often exclude and devalue concerns and agendas of less powerful groups. Strategies for empowerment might include leadership development, movement building and the development of organisational strength and voice.
- c) Invisible (internalised) power: this operates by influencing how individuals think of their place in society and explains why some are prevented from questioning existing power relations. Strategies for empowerment focus on strengthening confidence and increasing a sense of rights.

Box 3: Applying the Power Cube to understanding power and empowerment strategies for the livelihoods of sex-workers (drawing on work by Jana et al., 2006)

SPACES

Provided space

If a sex worker has a grievance s/he will seldom approach official authorities but restricts their grievances to those 'provided' spaces permitted by their employers.

Invited space

If a health organisation wishes to work with sex-workers and invites them to share opinions, this engagement takes places within an 'invited' space.

Claimed space

If a network of sex-workers intervenes on behalf of a worker to claim the right to unionise, as other informal workers can, and therefore be eligible for rights and services or judicial intervention, this would be seen as a 'claimed' space.

The Power Cube helps us to understand these different forms of space and therefore how to use provided spaces better, how to create more invited space and how to facilitate the claiming of space through negotiation

POWER

Visible power: These *definable* aspects of power include the legislation which controls the sex-trade, the police and administration who control 'entry' into the trade, and the power of local 'pimps' who dictate the terms of the trade.

Hidden power: The manager of a brothel may not be present but may have an important role in decision-making. Therefore their power is present even when they are absent.

Invisible power: This includes the social norms and values that are attached to sex, sexuality and the sex trade which can act as a tool to subjugate sex workers and prevent them being able to raise their voices against exploitative practises.

The Power Cube helps to make these distinctions and therefore move beyond assumptions such as it is the enforcers of rules that are oppressive. This may enable us to explore the way in which laws and institutions may be perpetuating repressive social norms and values.

There are important interdependencies between the various levels and 'places' at which empowerment occurs

iii. The Power Cube emphasises the importance of understanding interaction between 'levels' of power and the places of engagement, in particular it distinguishes between the international, national and local 'places'. This is important as some approaches to empowerment lay a heavy emphasis on the local.² The Power Cube helps us to understand how, in addition to this, global forces can both enhance and marginalise livelihoods depending on the circumstances. Parpart et al. (2002) discuss the way in which globalisation can lead to increased opportunities for some marginalised groups such as increased opportunities to engage in markets. Gaventa is also keen to avoid the 'false dichotomy between evil global power holders and virtuous social movements', as, he points out, both can suffer from unequal power relations.

However, Parpart et al. (2002) highlight the way in which shifts in trade have led not only to opportunity but also to feminisation of some labour sectors which can result in additional burdens. On a global scale, women own little property and are rarely in control of financial and export flows of global enterprises (Marchand and Runyan, 2000). They therefore tend to be involved in globalisation through access to labour markets (as is the case for Filipina domestic workers) rather than through financial or production markets. A big question remains as to how those who are currently marginalised can be empowered to take advantage of markets they cannot access. By emphasising the various levels, the Power Cube helps us to understand the way in which the local is intimately embedded in national and global 'places'.

3. Combining an agency approach with an emphasis on structure³

Much thinking about empowerment originated at the grassroots level and was based on the core elements of agency and the importance of self-esteem. Many writers lay a special emphasis on self respect: 'there is a core to the empowerment process which consists of increases in self-confidence and self-esteem, a sense of agency and of "self" in a wider context, and a sense of *dignidad* (being worthy of having a right to respect from others)' (Rowlands, 1997: 129-30). Agencies, such as SDC, CIDA and CARE International have adopted this focus. Associated empowerment activities focused on transformation through organisational change and education.

More recently however, there has been increased recognition of the importance of social and political

² Parpart et al. (2002), for example, claim this 'encourages a rather romantic equation between empowerment, inclusion and voice that papers over the complexities of em(power)ment'.

³ A fundamental debate in sociology is that of the relative roles of agency vs. structure. Agency is the capacity that individuals have to act freely and without constraints by larger social structures. Structures are those elements of social systems that determine the actions of individuals.

context. This recognises the need to take into account structural inequalities that affect entire social groups rather than focusing only on individual characteristics. DFID in particular talks about the need for 'reforming political institutions' and it is this focus which is often combined with a 'Rights-based Approach' (see Annex 1).

These different approaches have important implications. 'Practical needs' result from one's position in society, whereas addressing strategic needs (such as the subordinate role of women or the division of work between women and men) may be what is needed to challenge the underlying structures behind subordination. Many outcome-focused, or instrumental, development activities associated with empowerment were seen to be focusing on improving daily 'practical' conditions such as wages, nutrition and access to services, and less attention was being paid to the underlying 'strategic' structures. Falquet (2003), for example, discusses the way in which micro-credit programmes, designed around the logic of individualistic values, conceive empowerment as merely gaining access to income without taking into account the way in which social transformation often happens collectively and through social movement.

There is an important distinction between practical daily needs and strategic needs to challenge underlying structures which may lead to subordination

This difference between 'practical' and 'strategic' needs has been lost in the uptake of the concept of empowerment by many development agencies, and it is this lack of distinction that has led to critique from feminists of the way empowerment-focused interventions fail to address power. However, focusing only on strengthening the 'strategic' position of the disempowered through transforming underlying power structure is meaningless unless people are in the condition (for example in terms of health) to do so. There is also a contradiction in the way service-delivery projects provide top-down empowerment to the poor whereas democratisation and participation projects bring empowerment to middle classes. Fulfilling such immediate needs first may be a necessary step to enable other forms of empowerment. This suggests that care should be taken not to over-emphasise the separation between 'practical' and 'strategic'⁴ and that attention should be paid to a combination of both forms of needs.

The role of outsiders in empowerment: the need to challenge internalised oppression while at the same time avoiding external 'manipulation' of the agenda and the process

⁴ Alsop's (1993) work on gender planning in North-East India suggests that satisfying a practical need *can* support a strategic concern, but only if the women identify the needs for themselves.

Related to the distinctions in the different definitions of empowerment and concepts of power, there is some debate over the extent to which outsiders can actually empower others, either at an individual or at a group level. Many of those perceiving empowerment as an agency-led process believe that it is problematic to attempt to empower from the outside. Therefore devising any form of external programme is problematic due to the danger of manipulation. This thinking is evident in the particular approaches of some organisations. For example, CONCERN promotes self-help approaches to bring about empowerment with the belief that doing things for people which they could do themselves could be harmful. According to OXFAM (2005), empowerment is not something that is 'done' to people; rather it is about releasing their potential.

The power relations behind disempowerment make it unrealistic for the disempowered to tackle internalised structural aspects such as inequality and disempowerment

On the other hand, by its very nature, disempowerment creates disadvantage through the way power relations shape choices, opportunities and well being. Due to the internalisation of oppression, the process of demanding increased rights or change cannot be expected to emerge spontaneously from within and to easily challenge entrenched inequalities, discrimination and structural causes of disempowerment. Those that advocate external intervention suggest that it is the role of external institutions to facilitate these necessary internal strategic and practical change processes. This puts the development agency or facilitator in a difficult position: on the one hand they must challenge the disempowered to change their values and behaviour, whilst on the other hand they should not be perceived as imposing their own values and the potential for disempowerment which this brings. This links into the discussion of cultural imperialism and the right of outsiders to push for change of an existing cultural form;⁵ a debate which is particularly pertinent for the issue of female circumcision.

4. Empowerment and the implications for partnership

The wide scope of activities and outcomes encompassed by the term 'empowerment' means that the sharing of common principles (not prescriptions) and generalised outcomes is an important prerequisite for healthy partnerships. For organisations striving to promote empowering relationships, the lack of a definition can itself be considered disempowering, as it does not allow important accountability dynamics between the donor, their partners and target groups. There is much concern in the literature, particularly that from the south, about the 'misuse' of the concept, and much of this can be blamed on the 'fuzziness' of the term. However, this does raise the question of how clarification of what these common principles are, should take place with partners. This question is also pertinent for the relationships with government partners and

⁵ This is a common dilemma in the human rights field: do rights-based approaches 'impose' western values?

partnerships with other donors. For some organisations, an ambiguous definition is an active strategy related to the desire not to impose centralised thinking onto operational partners and country offices.⁶⁷

There are a number of key issues concerning the criteria and profiles of partnerships for any agency endeavouring to promote empowerment. These issues include:

- I. the behavioural and operational competencies of the partner;
- II. how shared values on empowerment can be developed. For example, a shared approach towards poverty and power is vital, but an important concern is how the donor can avoid manipulation of the approach.

An increased emphasis on the political aspects of empowerment has implications for the competency requirements from partners

If the approach to empowerment which is taken requires particular attention to be paid to power structures and relationships within a system, an increased emphasis on aspects of advocacy may be needed. Such aspects require capacity for facilitation, mediation, leadership and analysis. A shift from a focus on partnerships with grassroots service delivery to advocacy can have implications for the credibility and impact of an organisation.⁸ UNICEF, for example, has been accused of losing its focus on becoming an advocacy organisation, as it has lost its link to 'on the ground' work. As a result, there is a tendency by most organisations to stress the importance of maintaining some direct service delivery.

The context influences the feasibility of certain empowerment activities and partnerships

Lessons from the introduction of a rights-based approach in UNICEF suggest the importance of programme strategies which suit specific contexts (Theis, 2004). This is partly due to regional variations in civil society and the availability of types of partners. In Latin America, with stronger government institutions and better developed civil society, UNICEF focuses at the national level on working with legislative, policy and institutional reform, and on analysis of public spending. In East and Southern Africa, it is felt to be more strategic

⁶ Care International accept there are many different concepts and definitions of empowerment and specifically do not provide an official definition. DANIDA notes how its partner-NGOs often hold more radical views of empowerment than it does. DANIDA's policies are 'filtered' through Danish NGOs, all of which position participation and empowerment as central in their visions, policies and strategies.

⁷ Fiedrich (2003: 17-18) suggests that 'empowerment' is better understood as a set of metaphors that have normative value and symbolic power for the would-be 'empowerers', rather than as a factual description or theoretical explanation of changes in the lives of the 'empowered'.

⁸ These issues, and how they concern partnerships, are discussed in more detail in relation to the introduction of a rights-based approach in Luttrell and Piron (2005).

to work at the community level, because there are fewer institutions and resources to implement political decisions and the delivery of services is lacking.

The approach which is taken to empowerment needs to be adapted to the cultures and histories of the context. Analysis of a Southern partner's own conceptualisation of empowerment can pre-empt possible cultural and value-based tensions. There is also a question about the degree to which the partners themselves should be involved in strategy development. A decentralised approach and definition can result in a stronger sense of ownership and more creativity but also in a lack of coherence across the organisation.

One dilemma is that the term 'empowerment' does not translate easily or equally. The Spanish word '*empoderamiento*' implies that power is something provided by a benefactor to a beneficiary, a clear example of 'power over'. According to the *La Real Academia de la Lengua Espanola* dictionary, *empoderar* is an obsolete word. Garcia Moreno (2005: 8) questions why *empoderamiento* is used for its translation by development agencies instead of *apoderamiento* or *fortalecimiento* which are verbs in current use. He suggests that the term *empoderamiento* allows the perpetuation of an ambiguous discourse which allows institutions with different ideologies to establish their own agendas. Bucheli and Ditren (2001: 106) describe how one workshop discussion in Nicaragua led to a consensus that the term '*participacion social*' better reflects the English use of the word. In both German and French, the English 'to empower' can be translated into two different verbs: '*ermächtigen/autorise*' (which suggests 'power over') on the one hand, and '*befähigen/rendre capable*' ('power to') on the other. There are a number of other possibilities for a French translation: the Quebec French dictionary uses the word '*autonomisation*'; the World Bank (2000) uses the words '*demarginalisation*' and '*integration*'. Empowerment is also found in the literature as '*renforcement des capacites*' and '*participation*' (Doligez, 2003: 4). In order to promote a common understanding of empowerment, both terms may be necessary to encompass not only the formal, legal strengthening of entitlements, but also the *capacity* to make practical use of these formal entitlements.

Contextual risk assessment is needed to ensure that partners are in a position to make an informed choice about the nature of the risks that they are likely to face

All organisations recognise the risk entailed in a political empowerment approach of exposing both partners and vulnerable members of the community. In extreme circumstances, there are examples of the killing or arrest of human rights defenders and those who challenge traditional power bases; addressing the political causes of poverty can lead to many forms of retaliation. Therefore, there is a need to operate differently according to the political context in which one is working.

5. Conclusion

A failure to clearly define what is meant by 'empowerment' can weaken its value either as an agent for change or a tool for analysis. A lack of distinction between the types of power, and clarity about what the appropriate strategies are to address such imbalances, can mean that many empowerment-focused interventions may fail to explicitly address power. Being aware of the different forms of power and their dynamic nature helps to understand the multiple ways in which voices can be marginalised from (or included in) decision-making. Understanding this helps to identify the kinds of strategies needed to shift unequal power dynamics.

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Annex 1. Conceptual linkages between a rights-based approach and empowerment

Many of those writing on empowerment from an agency perspective (such as Rowlands, 1997 and Kabeer, 2001) do not consider the political or legal aspects of empowerment, nor place much, if any, emphasis on rights-based approaches (RBA). However, others such as Alsop (2005) and Carney (2002) bring out strong conceptual affinities between rights and empowerment approaches in their emphasis on power and respect for individuals. This emphasis is related to the increasing association of empowerment with Sen's (1992) capabilities approach since the 1990s (see also Annex 3 for a discussion on the link between RBAs and the SLA). These writers stress that successful poverty reduction depends on providing opportunities for poor people to contest their rights through normative changes, including through legal frameworks. Civil and political rights empower poor people not only to claim their economic and social rights but to demand accountability for good public services, pro-poor public policies, and for a transparent participatory process open to hearing their views. UNHCR (2002: 4) also stress that a human rights approach to poverty is about empowerment of the poor.⁹ According to them, the most relevant components of human rights to empowerment are the concept of accountability, the principles of non-discrimination, equality, and participation, and the recognition of the interdependence of rights.

Rights and empowerment approaches may be mutually supportive in practice but they remain analytically distinct (Alsop and Norton, 2005: 9). A human rights approach has a universally accepted set of standards and this presents operational distinctions from empowerment. The most obvious of this is the emphasis on the obligations of the duty bearer. Fox (2005) (see Box 2) stresses the differences between empowerment (as capacities) and rights (as institutionally recognised opportunities): rights may be recognised institutionally, but power imbalances often mean that actors are not able to actually claim them.

In some development agencies there has been a shift away from a generic empowerment approach to a human rights approach as the social and political constraints on the poor are increasingly recognised. Above all, when human rights are introduced in policy making, there is a move away from a needs approach based on 'charity', to recognition of the rights of poor people to entitlements and to obligations on the part of others that are enshrined in law.

There are dilemmas associated with a RBA. One of the main areas of potential conflicts between a RBA and empowerment is over the issue of collective rights and the way they might be in conflict with cultural values. In Latin America, the recognition of indigenous autonomies regulated by their own forms and notions of justice faces dilemmas in relation to the concept of the primacy of

individual human rights over collective rights (Assies, 2002; Gouws, 2005).

The way in which development agencies relate 'empowerment' to rights-based approaches varies. In NORAD and DFID, a human rights approach to empowerment is dominant. NGOs such as Save the Children, CARE International and CONCERN also take a strong rights-based approach to policy and programming of empowerment. On the other hand, until recently, the World Bank has been constrained by its Articles of Agreement from working directly on human rights due to the perception that these are 'political' issues. Despite this, it has have been active in the evolution of thinking around empowerment and has included principles such as empowerment and accountability within its new Social Development Strategy 2005 (Foresti et al., 2006). CIDA also does not mention rights in its discussions of empowerment but its women's empowerment programmes are often implemented alongside women's rights programmes.

In terms of practical implications, many NGOs have experienced significant changes in their relationships with partners accompanying the introduction of a RBA. There are issues for example, over how to avoid disempowering partners whilst introducing a RBA to previously service-delivery orientated organisations (see, for example, Luttrell and Piron, 2005). A RBA helps move from 'passive beneficiaries' to 'active citizens' and therefore implies greater attention to advocacy and capacity-building. This forces engagement in politics and power relations and can create increased tensions when partners are not themselves committed to a RBA. A RBA requires a different skills base with more emphasis on analytical than technical skills; skills which may not be present in the existing partner organisation.

A focus on the empowerment aspects of a RBA stresses the importance of the ability to *exercise* rights rather than merely their possession. Save the Children have faced concerns associated with the empowerment of children in contexts where there is no acceptance of children expressing their views. Attempts by Save the Children to take children out of employment to go to school halted following consultations with children themselves. Save the Children decided to stop advocating for the full eradication of child labour, and have tried instead to find ways of combining education opportunities with children's responsibilities towards their families, including through appropriate labour practices that do not undermine their development.

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⁹ See for example, Article 21 UNDHR, Article 25 ICCPR and Article 13(1) ICESCR. 5

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Annex 2: Table 1 – The Power Cube Explained: dimensions of power

Technical Phrase	What does this mean?	Example 1: Commercial sex workers	Example 2: Ethnic minority groups
Invisible power	We internalise the norms and values of our society. This may lead to individuals controlling their own behaviour to meet social expectations.	The social norms and values that are attached to sex, sexuality and the sex trade can act as a tool to subjugate sex workers and prevent them being able to raise their voices against exploitative practises.	Racist assumptions may be internalised and Black and Asian staff may perform poorly at work. They may not seek promotion and may not complain when their boss fails to give them opportunities to excel.
Hidden power	Powerful people may exert their power even when they are not physically present. This may influence the behaviour of others.	The manager of a brothel may not be present but may have an important role in decision-making. Therefore their power is present even when they are absent.	A manager may be racist and may assume that employees from Africa or Asia will be less capable than those from Western Europe. S/he may avoid recruiting Black and Asian staff, and if such staff are recruited, they may patronise them and fail to give them responsible roles. Black and Asian staff may find that they are rarely put forward for promotion.
Visible power	Laws, rules and the people who ensure that the rules are kept (e.g. police, bureaucrats).	These <i>definable</i> aspects of power include the legislation which controls the sex-trade, the police and administration who control 'entry' into the trade, the power of local 'pimps' who dictate the terms of the trade.	<i>Equal opportunities</i> legislation (power held by the police, government and local government officers, in addition to teachers, social workers, human resources officers in companies and other organisations).

Table 2 – The Power Cube Explained: spaces where power is expressed

‘Spaces’ are fora for discussion or areas where interactions take place. They can be virtual (e.g. a web-based discussion) or an actual physical place (e.g. a meeting is called at parliament)

Technical Phrase	What does this mean?	Commercial sex workers	Ethnic minority groups
Provided/closed spaces	This forum is controlled by an elite group. They identify which issues they wish to discuss and control the decision-making process.	Employers in the sex trade meet to discuss their issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Switzerland, parliamentary discussion was stimulated by the International Convention on the elimination of all forms of Racist Discrimination (ICERD). A new law was drafted, the Swiss Penal Law Article 261bis (accepted by popular vote on 25 September 1994) (fact). A special parliamentary committee discusses racial harmony and multiculturalism in Switzerland in the context of evidence from bomb attacks in Madrid, New York and London (fictional example).
Invited spaces	This forum is also controlled by an elite group but they invite others to join them to discuss issues of mutual interest. However, they frame the nature of the engagement. They chose <u>if</u> to call a meeting, <u>who</u> to invite to the meeting and the <u>agenda</u> for the meeting. They also ensure that the meeting is reported in a way that reflects their interests (e.g. the minutes, press release etc.).	Sex-workers visit a local hospital, where they can meet specialised health staff. Discussions focus on health-related issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Swiss Federal Commission Against Racism holds an annual conference and invites a variety of stakeholders. In 2002 anti-Black racism was discussed for the first time (fact).
Claimed/created spaces	A group normally excluded by elites acts to open up a new space for exercising power (e.g. by lobbying to influencing national policy).	A network of sex-workers intervenes on behalf of a worker to claim their right to unionise, seeking to improve their legal rights.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaders of a multi-ethnic alliance launch the ‘Black Swiss Awards for Business Achievement’ to highlight the contribution made by Black, Asian and ethnic minority business men and women to Swiss life (fictional example). Anti-racists in Switzerland establish GRAN (Reflection and Action Group against Anti-Black Racism) during the preparations for the European conference on racism (Strasbourg 2000) (fact). Victims of racial harassment (and others) establish a counselling organisation, SoS Rassismus, www.sos-rassismus.ch (fact).

Table 3 – The Power Cube Explained: places where power is expressed

Technical Phrase	What does this mean?	Example
Global	Global places, where power is expressed	Global fora might include the United Nations, World Trade Organisation, the World Wide Web, satellite TV channels with global reach (e.g. CNN, BBC World, Sky), the Roman Catholic Church, international criminal courts
National	National places, where power is expressed	National fora might include parliament, national media, networked organisations (e.g. local branches of civil society organisations, churches, national trade unions, chambers of commerce), national criminal courts
Local	Local places, where power is expressed	Local fora might include local government, local civil society organisations, community-based organisations, clubs, local media, local courts

Annex 3: Caste in India seen through an empowerment lens

Introduction: what is caste?

The caste system in India is a form of inherited labelling, which divides people into a hierarchy of social classes or sub-classes. The main caste groups (*varnas*) are the *Brahmins* (traditionally teachers, scholars and priests), the *Kshatriyas* (traditionally kings, landowners, and warriors), the *Vaishyas* (traditionally traders and some artisan groups), and *Shudras* (traditionally agriculturists, service providers, and some artisan groups). Another group (the *Parjanya* or *Antyajaj*) was considered to be either the lower section of *Shudras* or outside the caste system altogether. They were thought to be “untouchable” (preferred description is now *Dalit*). Hindus believe that these groups or *varnas* are determined patrilineally, and fixed for life - but that the karma of previous life will determine the caste an individual will be (re)born into. In addition to the four *varnas* is the *jati* sub-caste system which are associated with livelihood activities and might be described as being similar to traditional guilds. These can be changed, along with occupation, but only to a limited extent¹⁰. Overall, caste is a highly complex issue, and one that has been moulded to regional differences within India, resulting in a wide range of different sub-castes.

The caste system traditionally determines the position and role of every member of Hindu society. Strict social norms surrounded caste, determining who who may drink water from the same source, who might eat with or serve food to whom, and who might marry whom. Traditionally, a person's occupation was strongly determined by caste and the freedom of ‘low caste’ groups to move into high status roles was limited. Caste in India is an important ingredient into the social framework or **structure of society**. It provides the ‘rules of the game’ within which everyone must act. It makes discrimination based on labelling possible and severely limits social mobility for low caste individuals. Although the norms around caste are gradually relaxing, particularly in cities, the system is still strictly adhered to in many rural areas. Social differentiation is further complicated by the existence of tribal peoples or *adiavasis*, who also suffer severe discrimination and are mainly found in forest areas, in poorly accessible regions.

In recognition of the social inequality stemming from the effects of caste, the Government of India has a number of affirmative action policies which provide reservations and quotas for education and employment. These are based on a classification system of Scheduled Castes - historically termed “untouchable”, now *dalit*; Scheduled Tribes - tribal peoples, , and Other Backward Classes. Whilst the categorisation of some groups under this system is clear, there is still on-going debate on the status of others.

¹⁰ For further reading see

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste_system_in_India

Caste and empowerment

The caste system has tended to entrench the political, economic and social power of land owners, providing people from high caste groups with a religious justification for retaining **power over** people from low caste or *dalit* groups. This power over lower caste people enables them to influence the livelihood options of low caste households, and allows them to block their active involvement in village level decision-making. Low caste individuals whose only source of livelihood is from providing artisanal services such as tailoring or pottery, or share-cropping the fields of the land owner simply cannot afford to speak out and risk the anger of the high castes.

Social movements have formed to support *dalits* demand change to existing hierarchies (**power to**) through collective action (**power with**). Some of these movements are linked to NGOs interested in the empowerment agenda, others are linked to political parties¹¹ and their approaches range from seeking media coverage to lobbying parliamentarians to – in some cases – political violence. Some of the NGOs have a philosophical sympathy with the need to increase the consciousness of the individual (**power from within**) if they are going to be able to use their own **agency** (ability to decide and freedom to implement those decisions) to challenge the **structural** constraints created by the society in which they live. Arguably, activists are seeking to open up political debate around caste and increase the likelihood of change. They are trying to **create space** for political debate about caste discrimination. This is in response to having been excluded from decision making which has at times taken place behind closed doors (in **provided or closed spaces**) and attempts to set the terms of the engagement, in contrast to when this is set by government or other elites in **invited spaces**. The SDC approach in India has had a strong emphasis on fighting discrimination. Work at the village level focuses on challenging caste norms, promoting social responsibility and equitable decision-making processes. Typical examples include when a village accepts a *dalit* women to cook the meals of all school-children, a new well is dug, and used by all, in the traditional *dalit* part of the village, or a *dalit* is voluntarily elected to be the chairperson of a village institution.

Despite caste discrimination being illegal (**visible power**), and despite reservations for particular job categories and places in universities, there is a long way to go before the impact of caste discrimination is removed. Low caste people anticipate discrimination and this means that the caste system has an **invisible power** over people. For example, a low caste child may know that others will assume her to be stupid. As a result she may under-perform at school and never complete her education. Her parents may not visit the

¹¹ The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Samajwadi Party and the Janata Dal claim to represent the “backward castes”. Their main support comes from “other backward caste” groups often in alliance with *Dalit* and Muslim support to win the elections.

new bank branch in town because they anticipate being rebuffed, and may rely on local money-lenders instead, thus paying extortionate interest rates and being unable to invest in high return diversification projects. The **hidden power** of high caste families in their village may mean that they control decision-making in the *panchayat*

(local council), even when, as a result of the enforced quota system, a Dalit is elected as the Panchayat Head. New to office and commonly poorly literate, s/he is at risk of becoming the puppet of the high castes unless offered external support to build her/his capacities and knowledge of *panchayat* procedures.