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POWER, EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Edited by Rosemary McGee and Jethro Pettit

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4.2

MICRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS OF POWER AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR PRACTICE

Walter Flores

Introduction

In development work, we frequently analyse power at the macro level: power relations between government institutions and citizens, between economic and political elites and marginalised populations and between transnational corporations and southern countries. This analysis of power is important, but, depending on where one is positioned, it can seem very dense and complex.

Many intermediary organisations (those made up of professionals paid to work in the development field) implement their actions at the local or subnational level. Often, the frameworks and tools used to analyse power at the 'macro' level of national and international structures are transferred or adapted to do power analysis at the 'micro' (local or subnational) level. However, the situation is so different between the macro and the micro level that adapting methods and tools from one level to use at another may come with major limitations. This chapter will describe the approach we followed in my organisation, the challenges we faced and the learning we acquired along the way.

The Center for the Study of Equity and Governance in Health Systems (CEGSS) is a civic association of professionals founded in 2006, in Guatemala. Its purpose is to contribute to reducing social exclusion and inequality in health care, which mainly affects the rural indigenous population. The interdisciplinary team conducts participatory research, capacity building for grassroots groups and advocacy around public policies and services. Promoting citizen participation is fundamental to CEGSS's approach. For this, we provide training, basic equipment and technical assistance to a network of volunteer community-based defenders of the right to health who have been chosen by their own communities. These community defenders are organised in a grassroots network named the Network of Community Defenders of the Right to Health (*Red de Defensores y Defensoras Comunitarios por el Derecho a la Salud*, REDC-SALUD).

In its efforts to study and analyse social exclusion and marginalisation, CEGSS developed tools to analyse power and power relations among, within and between community-based organisations and government authorities in rural indigenous municipalities of Guatemala (Flores and Gómez Sánchez 2010). From those first studies and tools, we then gradually moved to develop more participatory tools (card games, categorising of actors, scoring or ranking them according to their influence by placing beans against their names), which were useful in revealing asymmetrical power relations. However, the explaining and using of the tools to generate the information was a relatively long process. We were wondering how to make the process shorter when one of our field assistants, an indigenous person who lived in a rural municipality, suggested that asking people questions directly about what we wanted to know (i.e. who and why one has influence) would be easier, and that with the help of local translators people would trust us and talk openly.

We decided to follow our field assistant's advice and conducted several individual and group interviews. To our surprise, interviewees readily understood what power and influence was about, and immediately named who had power in the community and what resources they had that gave them that level of influence. They would also identify less powerful actors and the most powerless in the community. One interviewee who participated in municipal development meetings said openly that he was not elected by his community but appointed by the local mayor, and that his job was attending community meetings and informing the authorities about what went on at them. He further explained that he did not see his role as any different from the roles that other community people play for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or churches: they all collect information and pass it on to external organisations.

From that experience, we realised that it was wrong to assume that people in rural indigenous municipalities need frameworks and tools to understand what power is and to elicit information about it. My team and I became aware that although we meant well with our participatory tools, they might in fact be causing a disempowering effect on the community participants by undervaluing their extensive experiential knowledge about power and disempowerment.

As a result of our reflection, we ditched the tools we had been using and started generative conversations with community members and government officials.¹ From those rich conversations, we elaborated interview guides to further explore: a) specific examples of power and influence; b) what were the most relevant power resources in the locality; and c) what ideas interviewees had about how to change power relations to benefit those who were among the most excluded. From these generative conversations, we, together with communities, have developed theory and concepts that have informed our strategies and actions aimed at shifting power

¹ Generative conversation is method used variously in qualitative research, organisational development and adult education. Participants are encouraged to converse freely and without judgement in order to arrive at common and deeper understandings. Also known as generative dialogue, the method has diverse origins and influences, but has mainly been inspired by the physicist David Bohm (1996).

in health care service delivery for rural indigenous populations (Flores 2018, Flores and Hernández 2018, Hernández et al. 2019).

This experience of using open generative conversations was also fed into all of our activities, including within our own organisation and among our own staff. In the next sections I will briefly explain what these micro levels of power are and how we apply such analysis to our work. I will conclude with some final reflections on why analysing and acting on micro levels of power is of relevance to improve our practice.

What is a micro level analysis of power?

In the literature, there are different academic research studies looking at power at the micro level. Several of these studies make reference to Foucault's theories, particularly the concepts he developed of a 'micro power' and 'micro physics of power' in his work *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (1977/1995). For instance, Silva and Arantes (2017) use Foucault's theory to study micro-level power relations among a family medicine team in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. Other authors use political economy frameworks to analyse macro and micro levels of power. Kwami et al. (2011), in their essay about macro and micro analysis of gender, power and information and communication technology, state that while a macro-level analysis unveils power dynamics shaped by political and economic structures and processes, a micro-level approach analyses the dynamics that affect access, use and appropriation of technology and services in terms of gender, class and geographical location. The authors state that micro-level analysis is important to understand the nature of inequities.

Within CEGSS, an analysis of power at the micro level is understood as the exercise of enquiring into relationships, resources and influence among the individuals and organisations we engage with: for instance, the power resources and influence within the grassroots organisations we support; among and within the staff of our own organisation; and between ourselves and other organisations we collaborate with. The purpose of carrying out such analysis is to identify power-related challenges affecting our organisational mission and objectives, thus enabling us to strategise actions to navigate those challenges. These exercises are highly participatory, conversational and reflective. Below I discuss three examples of how micro-level analysis of power helped us identify issues and barriers affecting our work, and the strategies we implemented to either circumnavigate or resolve them.

Gender barriers to participation

As part of our approach to working with grassroots organisations, we provide subsidies for food and transport to all participants in capacity-building workshops. As an organisation, we have to produce evidence that transport and food costs are barriers to participation so that our donor will agree to such subsidies (Flores and Gómez-Sánchez 2010). Obviously, we were proud of convincing donors and providing this type of support to community leaders. However, after several months of training, we noted

that many female participants who were actively participating in their municipalities were not attending the regional training workshops. After enquiring with other participants, we found that they had small children who would have had to come with them to the regional workshops. For some people, attending a regional workshop meant travelling for more than a day and staying overnight. The subsidy we were proudly providing was for one individual, so female leaders with young children were precluded from attending because the subsidy would not cover the additional food and transport for their children.

We thought of creating a differentiated subsidy for women who travel with children. This created a power struggle within our organisation. For administrators, standardised procedures are the best thing, and they do not like exceptions to rules. External auditors did not like exceptions either. The easiest approach would have been to avoid exceptions so as to maintain harmony within our personnel. But we decided that this barrier affecting female leaders was not acceptable, and so pushed for the exception, which created the conditions to convince our administrative staff and auditors. Six years after this decision, 40 per cent of all community defenders who are part of REDC-SALUD are female leaders. We cannot say this is a direct result of the support through differentiated subsidies. However, we do know that we removed a barrier that was restricting women's leadership.

From the above experience, we also assessed whether our own staff were experiencing gender barriers. By discussing it with our staff, we identified that, due to safety concerns, female field staff sometimes preferred travelling to the field in pairs rather than on their own. Also, parents of very young children needed a more flexible schedule to be able to care for their children. As result, our organisation allows team members to accompany each other during field travel when requested, and parents can request and arrange a highly flexible work schedule.

Legitimacy as a power resource

In 2013, our collaboration with communities evolved to working with citizen leaders mobilised to assume the role of Community Defenders of the Right to Health (henceforth, Defenders). There are currently over 160 Defenders (about 60 per cent male and 40 per cent female) elected by their own communities to defend them from abuses by officials and providers of health services; to act on their behalf to dialogue and engage with officials to improve the responsiveness of local services; and to inform and educate communities about their rights, entitlements and obligations. All are volunteers who receive ongoing training and technical assistance from CEGSS.

During our annual assembly at the end of that year, a group representing the majority of Defenders declared that carrying out defender roles was taking up a lot of their time. Having been trained, they said they now had the relevant knowledge and skills. In their view these factors justified that they should no longer be treated as volunteers, but be paid salaries by CEGSS to continue performing as Defenders. Although the assembly was meant to work on preparing the action plan for the

year ahead, the Defenders refused to continue until we discussed and agreed upon their demands to receive payment for their work.

Under these circumstances, we started a dialogue about what power resources we as CEGSS had, what resources they as Defenders had and what resources we were able to generate once working together. During the dialogue, we identified the following:

- CEGSS's power lies in the financial resources obtained from donors.
- We had decision-making *power over* regarding the use of those resources, but at the same time had to be accountable to our donors; and, with our power, we could decide to use the resources to pay a modest income to Defenders.
- However, this would mean Defenders were no longer accountable to their communities but to us (CEGSS).
- In the case of Defenders, their power resource was the respect, trust and credibility they have in the eyes of their communities. Defenders were able to mobilise hundreds and thousands and families. This occurs because communities know Defenders represent their interests – not the priorities or interests of an NGO, political party or government authority.

We also analysed what power we would lose if we were to change our current resourcing arrangements:

- From CEGSS's perspective, the success of the Community Defenders scheme was connected to its reliance on volunteers elected by their own communities. If Defenders were no longer volunteers, that would reduce the significance of the role in CEGSS's overall work, and CEGSS would likely fail to obtain funding for this work. This would mean CEGSS would cease to exist and the Defenders would be left without the income.
- From the Defenders' perspective, they would cease to have the capacity to mobilise communities if they were to become NGO employees. Without the backup of communities, Defenders would lose the most important power resource they have. In turn, neither CEGSS nor any other NGO would be interested in employing a community-based leader who did not enjoy trust and credibility among their community.

As a result of this participatory analysis of micro levels of power, all Defenders decided that receiving a payment from CEGSS was not an option. Instead, they decided they would like to receive basic equipment that would aid their work: a jacket and ID card, a mobile phone and a small camera. CEGSS agreed that providing basic equipment was feasible, and at the same time may contribute to making their work more effective.

After an entire day of dialogue, the next day we were able to move on to planning the year ahead, building in fundraising activities to provide Defenders with this basic equipment. Since that dialogue, the issue of payment to community

volunteers has never emerged again. In addition, as a norm, each annual assembly includes a discussion and planning session about what other basic equipment may be needed. For instance, last year CEGSS provided raincoats at the request of Defenders.

We transposed the learning from this dialogue to help us in convening a dialogue on power resources among ourselves as CEGSS staff. Central in that analysis was whether we as an organisation would be able to offer competitive salaries to our staff and a significant salary increase each year. Through our analysis, we identified that because CEGSS is 100 per cent dependent on grants, we do not have control in the medium and long term. However, there are non-salary resources that are very important for all the staff: for instance, an open door policy among senior management; fomenting team building activities; and supporting staff to attend professional development events at national and international level. CEGSS took these commitments seriously. In addition to a more open management and activities to strengthen the communication and relationship among our staff, both research and field staff have been supported to participate in international conferences and events.

The power of solidarity

As mentioned earlier, the network of Community Defenders that CEGSS works with and supports consists of around 160 leaders, and about 40 per cent are women (females over 18). Among the females, we noticed that while there were a few well-established middle-aged leaders, the rest were young women who did not yet have the confidence and skills of the older leaders. The CEGSS team thought up a new initiative in which established female leaders would mentor and train the young women. We envisaged that this new initiative would mostly require allocating resources for training (i.e. attendance of formal workshops and courses) and travel. We were excited about this new initiative and took the next step of sharing the idea with one of the key women leaders of REDC-SALUD – Estela, a middle-aged woman with over three decades of experience in grassroots organising.² Estela listened carefully to our idea and told us: 'I understand your aim and I agree it is very important for us, the experienced leaders, to support young women. However, I am already doing it.' Following Estela's comment, we assumed she meant she was mentoring others through training, and responded: 'This is great news. What kind of training are you providing to them?' To our question, Estela replied:

There is no training at all. Young women wanting to become community leaders first need solidarity and accompaniment to survive the most difficult test. This occurs when her own family is unhappy about her attending many meetings with older females and men; when her own community is gossiping and mocking about her aspiration to learn why is there injustice and poverty

2 Estela's name has been changed to preserve her anonymity. This text is a reconstruction of a conversation held in early 2018.

in the community; gossiping because she wants to learn about the law, because she dares to speak in public; because she travels outside her community to talk to authorities, government officials and others.

Estela went on to say that her role was to talk to the families of the young women, to explain to them the work of a female community leader in terms of their daughter (or wife) wanting to help her community. She also provides comfort and emotional support to young women when they feel down as a result of community gossip and lack of family support. Estela said that she experienced this pressure herself when she started as a community leader:

I did not have the solidarity or support of an older female leader to help me through, but I did survive that phase and became a leader recognised within and outside my community. Many young women that wanted to become leaders are not able to surpass this pressure.

Estela finished her comment thus: 'Training and similar activities may happen later. At this moment, young women need my solidarity, and the solidarity of many others.'

After the above exchange with Estela, we at CEGSS realised how wrong and naïve we were about what a young female leader needs. Instead of the new initiative that we had been imagining, we just told Estela to let us know what kind of support she needed from us to continue her solidarity and accompaniment. She did not ask for much support, only food and transport to attend a few meetings together with the young women.

About a year later, we noticed that the young female leaders that Estela had taken under her wing were more confident and assertive during the REDC-SALUD meetings. They were also more assertive and effective when engaging with authorities and implementing their roles as Community Defenders. Estela was right – solidarity is a powerful resource.

The lesson that Estela taught us is now central to our understanding and approach to supporting the development of community leaders. Instead of a pre-defined training or capacity-building programme, we promote exchanges in which leaders more experienced in a specific theme or skill are grouped with other leaders interested in learning about that theme or skill. Solidarity is central in the exchange, and each group decides what they want to do and how.

We are also striving to extend this learning to our own organisation's staff. We aim to show solidarity among ourselves, not only in our daily work but also in our family situation and other life events.

Final reflection

Although we should not lose track of macro determinants of power and dynamics, we should also pay attention to the micro levels of power that occur everywhere and all the time. An intermediary organisation like the one described in this

chapter, without realising it, could be creating barriers to the population we support. If we develop ways to be conscious of this and reflect on it continuously, we may be able to identify and remove some of those barriers. As an intermediary organisation, we can achieve a lot more than we might imagine. We may not be able to change the macro determinants of power, but we can ensure that we are not exacerbating existing inequities of power that occur every day and everywhere.

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