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Gender, development and empowerment

Power shared is power gained

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Development is empowerment, and that is not just a methodology or a development gimmick. Empowerment means that people get equipped to deal with their own situation in a practical and viable way. The first step towards empowerment is assisting communities in making power analyses. Help them understand the difference between positive and negative power and how to cope with that. Power is important, believe me, I have been in different power circles including being a Minister, I know what power is.

In Sindebele, the language spoken in south western Zimbabwe, the equivalent word for 'development' means actually taking control over what you need to work with for survival. So development in this sense means empowerment and that is a very fundamental human right. When things are difficult and resources are scarce, it are always the weakest, who benefit the last, and it are the strongest that get the resources before the poor. I find that a great deal of the poorest people in the poverty stricken bracket of our communities are women. So it is not by design that I focus on women, it is because women are there and because the majority of people that need empowerment, are women.

A foremost strategy of people working for development has to be assisting communities to understand power. One cannot empower somebody else. People can only empower themselves and an essential prerequisite for empowerment is understanding power and how it is acquired, exercised and maintained, between women and men, between those who own

to be felt. However, since everybody has to take part in this power analyses, I favour a family approach rather than a women approach. Both men and women must be exposed to the same kind of dialogue.

The powers that be

As a member of a rural community, for instance, ask yourself what the existing powers are and which powers prevent you from acquiring positive power. Who is it that is sharing positive power in your family and in your community and how can you link up to this person? Power shared is power gained. If it is a negative power that is exercised in your community; who is exercising it? Is it your husband, your children, your neighbour, a rich neighbour, the politician, the rural councillor? This power could prevent your community from doing things, from accessing economic resources or infrastructure. Then together you determine what the strategies are which need to be put in place in order to acquire positive power and to reverse

grow or build and having identified that you can see and find out whether your neighbours also want to grow or build the same and how they want to do that. This is a process of empowering themselves through empowering each other. This applies for any activity, be it food processing, harvesting or building dams.

One example is the 'Give a Dam Programme' that started with the drought of 1993-94. Various member communities wanted to have a dam for water. In order for the communities to achieve the implementation of a dam, they needed for instance the approval of a councillor for permits, a government official to peg the dam, they had to authorise a NGO to get the tools and had to organise themselves to arrange manual labour.

By working around this, they also discover that individuals might be blocking the process. An NGO or political leader, who is promising things that do not happen, a local leader who is corrupt and using people's time and resources. The process of discovering, discussing and developing strategies to cope is really learning and understanding the power dynamics. Identifying the problem is the problem half solved. A politician who wanted to peg a dam for political reasons at a spot not to the liking of the community, saw his intentions abandoned. On the other hand communities can be convinced by a technical expert to choose a spot farther away from the village than their initial choice, simply for physical and geographical reasons. To me both examples illustrate positive power. Constructive criticism and engagement with others along the line. Then together you share power.

"Identifying the problem is the problem half solved."

resources and those who do not. Power dynamics play within the family, the community, the society and the globe.

Power is neutral until it is acquired and used. But completely without it, we just are lethargic. Power enables people and enhances life but one should clearly distinguish positive and negative power. Positive power is one of caring and sharing, the power to connect and to work together. Negative power is the power that dominates and oppresses. It is selfish, greedy and wants things for itself. It is often possessed by men, but by powerful women too. They want to flex their muscles and exercise their power in order for their presence

this negative power. There is a limit to which you can hold negative power. Sustainable development exists when you can regenerate your energies and when you can refocus and reconnect to a wider world.

The positive power is the power we should use in development. In agriculture for instance we go back to our culture of working together. The basis of the village groups is a tradition of collective work called 'amalima' whereby all members attend to each family's fields in rotation. Most jobs are done collectively—gathering firewood, fetching water, even home improvements, which have been extensive. You have to identify what you need to

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