



## **EMPOWERMENT AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Nola-Kate Seymoar, Ph.D.

### **Introduction**

There is a tendency to confuse public participation with community empowerment. Partly this confusion is caused by the continuum of activities included under the phrase “public participation”, activities ranging from disseminating information, through consultations, workshops and collaborative mechanisms, to empowerment – or the sharing of decision-making. Public participation professionals are often involved in assisting groups in developing countries to learn the skills and technologies of participatory processes as part of the capacity building activities of various and projects. Parallel to these activities, there is a long tradition within the community development field of empowerment activities based on the work of community organizers such as Saul Alinsky and Paulo Friere. In the environmental, women’s, and indigenous peoples movements, empowerment has a long history of association with consciousness raising activities, assertiveness training, advocacy, affirmative action and legal/human rights challenges. Yet another group of professionals involved in the empowerment game are the mediators and conflict resolution professionals, who often come into the middle of disputes between those with power and those without it.

This paper is an attempt to build a conceptual framework to clarify the activities or interventions appropriate to empowerment and to distinguish them from those appropriate to public participation.

### **Empowerment**

Empowerment means sharing power as equals. One cannot empower someone else. Although one may offer to share power or decision-making, the other party must stand as an equal and have the desire, skills and legal mandate to share that power. Most situations of shared power go unnoticed. They are situations where groups partner with one another for a common goal. Some partnerships however, are particularly notable because they go across sectors, borders, disciplines or cultures. One outstanding example of shared power was the government and civil sector coalition to ban anti-personnel landmines. The “Ottawa Process” as it became known, was characterized by high levels of participation by thousands of non-government organizations from around the world and demonstrated the impact of middle power countries who were prepared to act together. It is a testament to the government leaders, the officials and the NGO coalition that they were able to negotiate an international treaty in a shorter time than had ever been done before. The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Jody Powell and the Coalition highlighted the success of the efforts. The lessons from that experience were reviewed by the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development. See reports on their “New Diplomacy” efforts at [www. Cpf-pec.gc.ca](http://www.Cpf-pec.gc.ca)

This example stands out because it involved governments in making a conscious choice to share some of their power in decision making. There is no question that the ultimate decisions rested with the governments – no one sign the international treaty except national governments. But in these and other cases, governments realize that they require other partners in order to be able to implement certain kinds of decisions. NGOs who become involved in such fora, often want to expand the scope of their influence to tackle other similar problems. In the field of sustainable development, multi-sectoral Sustainable Development Councils and Round Tables are part of the post-Rio legacy. Only a few involve shared power and decision-making. Most are advisory in nature. There is another type of empowerment that goes on in the field of international and community development. It is the self empowerment of groups, often won through political and economic struggles. This process is very different than the “Ottawa Process” or Round Table process. It is characterized by different activities and results at different times.

In the 60s and early 70s, popular movements for the environment, women and indigenous peoples developed in North America and Europe. The movements had much in common. They all viewed power as characteristically held by those with access to capital (including land), financial resources, governance institutions – including political and legal structures (and their enforcement agencies – the military and police), educational structures, and the media. Activists work with groups lacking in power to assist them in obtaining greater power. Although frequently the activists were themselves from the educated, white, middle class, many were able to effectively empathize and mobilize the poor or the disenfranchised. Local or indigenous leaders emerged quickly in all of these movements.

### **The Self Empowerment Cycle**

I have argued elsewhere that one can track the process of empowerment that these groups went through as involving four phases of group development.<sup>1</sup> Those phases can be labeled as “powerlessness”, “protesting”, and “partnering”. Each phase is characterized by both objective and psychological elements, and the movement of groups from one phase to the next can be predicted and facilitated by conscious interventions on the part of leaders, members or outside facilitators.

A brief summary of the cycle may assist those involved in public participation processes to understand why their efforts to inform, consult or involve, may end in conflict or confrontation rather than discussion or consensus.

### **Powerlessness**

This phase of the cycle is characterized by a lack of access to financial, political, legal, institutional or media resources. Psychologically it is characterized by low energy and feelings of apathy, dependency, hopelessness or helplessness. Those in the dependent group often empathize with or want to be like the power group. This difficulty was identified by writers such as Andre Gunder Frank and the early feminists who saw the need to overcome this “encogido syndrome” before groups could be mobilized to act on their own interests.

Interventions that move groups or individuals from this position include consciousness raising techniques, educational interventions (literacy and legal information are particularly potent) and experiential events such as peer exchanges. Saul Alinsky believed that one had to “rub the sores raw” in order to motivate people to change. The common experience of the award winning communities in the *We the Peoples Awards Program* for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the

---

<sup>1</sup> N.K. Seymoar, J.Ponce de Leon, *Creating Common Unity: Models of Self Empowerment, 50 Award Winning Communities*, Weigl Educational Publishers 1997

United Nations would also suggest that communities do not change unless and until they experience or become aware of significant discomfort.<sup>2</sup>

### **Protesting**

This phase of the empowerment cycle is characterized by active critiques and confrontation or challenges of the status quo. Psychologically it involves high emotional energy, anger, frustration and hostility. Shortages of power are typically blamed on the powerful group, and there is a notable lack of empathy for those who are perceived as part of the established power group.

Because polarization is common, appropriate facilitation during this phase involves use of techniques to encourage dialogue and problem solving and discourage violence. Thus the introduction of institutionalized structures to enable dialogue among key stakeholder group, and there is appropriate. In the absence of such structures, protests escalate and may move from local issues to mass demonstration or violent confrontations.

Just as groups and individuals may be stuck in dependency, so too they may get stuck in the protesting phase. Interventions may be needed to facilitate the movement of groups from protesting what they do not want to examining what they do want.

### **Proposing**

It is a curious fact that after a degree of awareness and protest, groups want to withdraw and look inward – rethinking their own values and establishing their identity as different from the power group. Thus this phase is characterized by separation. At a psychological level it involves introspection and assertion of the group's independence. It often involves an attitude of superiority of one's own values or a (re)discovery and celebration of cultural or group identity.

Facilitating movement from protesting to proposing involves asking the group for its vision of what it wants and for concrete proposals to solve problems or implement that vision. Thus visioning, strategic planning, values clarification, cultural and identity related activities are most effective at this stage. Structures that allow "separation" without requiring "divorce" are needed.

Again, there is a possibility of individuals or groups remaining stuck in separation and being unable or unwilling to have anything to do with the previous power group. Facilitating movement towards renewed interaction and shared activities involves a process of reconciliation or forgiveness. Where protesting has enabled the group or individual to gain "freedom from", reconciliation processes are often needed to move the groups to be "free to" work together again.

When individuals and groups have a strong sense of their own identity, they are able to move to more equal power relationships.

### **Partnering**

This phase is characterized by shared decision-making and shared access to resources. Psychologically there is an awareness of the value of working together with the previous power group, to accomplish mutual goals. It is a recognition of inter-dependence or perhaps more descriptively, inter-dependence, in that the relationship is one of equals. The relationship is one

---

<sup>2</sup> ibid

of mutual respect and empathy for each other's positions, strengths and limitations. Both parties are free "from" and free "to" interact as appropriate in the situation. Appropriate activities or interventions during this phase involves structures that support shared decision-making among relatively equal partners. Round Tables are an example, as are other consensus-based processes.

Research and observations have shown that groups and individuals do not move to partnering – or sharing power as equals without going through the protesting and proposing stages. Many of those in the business of development or social change would prefer that this were not the case. They would rather not face the negative emotions associated with protesting, nor experience the rejection often associated with withdrawal and focusing inward that occurs before proposals are made. Yet both phases are necessary precursors of partnering. Furthermore, experience shows that this process is not a direct linear progression, but is rather a cycle on another set of issues, and then work through a similar cycle on another set of issues. Thus, the cycle becomes a spiral leading in the long-run to increased political space.

### **Implication of the Empowerment Cycle**

For public participation practitioners, the fact that groups and individuals go through certain predictable phases of behavior and exhibit predictable attitudes, allows the practitioner to assess where the group is at and to identify appropriate interventions that would be needed to reinforce the group's status or move it to a next stage. Happily, groups will seldom allow anyone to manipulate them or move them until they are ready, so it is not really so much a matter of diagnosis and intervention, as it is a matter of reflecting to the group a picture of its own behavior and asking where it wants to be or to go.

Understanding the empowerment cycle may contribute to an understanding of why certain activities related to public participation take a different course than the one intended by the government officials or private sector staff wanting to engage the public or community. Often the public activity – a consultation, hearing, or public meeting – is intended to inform or even to listen to the views of stakeholders, but it is not intended as a vehicle for sharing power or making joint decisions. Community groups however, may attend believing that they will have real input and expect that they are entitled to power. Clarifying the expectations before and during the event will help. Recognizing as well that public events may be used differently by different interests is also important. Groups in the protesting stage will often hijack the process for their own ends.

The first question to be asked remains: what is the purpose of the participation process? IF it is to share power and build partnership for joint action, then one can look to using Round Tables or the Ottawa process. If that is not the case, given the sophistication of advocacy groups in the present context it is likely that some of those involved will try and change the agenda. They will demand more voice and influence. Thus when one considers building the capacity of groups to influence decisions and participate more democratically, one must also recognize the need to build the capacity of governments or the private sector to respond appropriately to active and demanding groups. The use of police or para-military to quell protests only escalates polarization and leads towards conflict rather than towards resolution. Participation practitioners need to use knowledge of the phases of empowerment to guide their facilitation efforts and require skills in conflict management as part of their tool kit.