1. The Right to be Heard

An overview

Introduction

This is the first of 12 papers in a series drawing on Oxfam GB's global programme of work on the theme of 'the right to be heard'. The focus of this series of papers is on how the right to be heard can strengthen the participation of people in poverty in formulating public policy, and enable them to hold decision-makers accountable. The other Oxfam themes are the right to a sustainable livelihood, the right to basic services, the right to life and security, and the right to equity. Together, these themes provide an integrated rights-based approach to Oxfam GB's core purpose of overcoming poverty and suffering.

The right to be heard is about the right to be an active participant in political processes; it is about being able to speak up and be listened to by those in power. Put a different way, it is about enabling people to actively draw on their civil and political rights to achieve their social, economic, and cultural rights. It is about finding ways to ensure that governance structures are responsive to the needs and wishes of poor people. These papers touch on some elements of how this can be achieved.

Some of the issues and challenges illustrated in these papers about the right to be heard include:

- establishing legal identity and citizenship;

- developing personal power in terms of confidence and self-esteem;

- developing collective power that enables the individual voice to be amplified and projected;

- increasing transparency and accountability of governments and institutions;

- developing a state that is capable and responsive to the needs and priorities of its citizens;

- changing the attitudes and beliefs that underlie poverty, discrimination, and prejudice.

Together, these issues concern the development of societies that take seriously the possibility of all their citizens enjoying active citizenship, and not just the most privileged.

These papers attempt to show how poor and marginalised people can become powerful enough to break through the material, organisational, systemic, and psychological barriers and obstacles that prevent them from being heard.

The context of poverty and inequality

There are still 1.4 billion people in the world today living on less than $1.25 a day.[1] Set this alongside increasing levels of inequality both between and within countries, and the global relevance of the right to be heard is clear. A girl born in Norway, for example, is likely to live until she is 82 years old, with good education and health care, while her counterpart in Sierra Leone has a 25 per cent chance of dying before she is five and a life expectancy of just 42 years.[2] If she stays in school until secondary level, she will be one of only 20 per cent of girls who do so.

However, statistics alone cannot give a realistic insight into why poverty occurs and what factors cause and perpetuate it. The dollar a day definition of poverty is still in widespread use, and enables comparisons to be made between and within countries. But this measure does not on its own tell you about the extent of poverty, since people's needs for income vary depending on their circumstances and context. Simple income-based definitions do not tell you, for example, whether the income is adequate to meet the actual needs of the individual or family, or whether they are able to make use of the income to address their needs. Poverty is affected by what choices are available in practice, and whether the individual or family is able to make their choices freely. People need access to goods, services (including health care and education), and potential sources of livelihood to change their situation. Culture, the attitudes and prejudices of others, and the power structures within which people live affect their choices, as does their vulnerability to sudden changes of circumstance such as illness or extreme climatic events.

It is for this reason that poverty is now often defined in non-monetary ways.[3] Vulnerability, powerlessness, and isolation are now

considered to be as significant in understanding the dynamics of poverty as lack of income or food. For example, the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID)'s 'sustainable livelihoods framework'[4] includes human and social capital alongside financial capital and other assets.

Looking at it the other way round, what do people need in order not to be poor? They need a means of livelihood which is at least sustainable in the short term. They need basic services such as education, health care, and water. They need security and protection. They must be able to be active citizens and to be treated equally as citizens whatever their gender, race, age, ability, or culture. They also need the power to inform and influence the decisions that most affect them, and the confidence and knowledge to be able to do so.

People fall into poverty when one or more of these elements goes wrong. Their livelihood becomes unviable, or their health deteriorates and they lack the social ties, backed up by economic capacity, to sustain them; or their security evaporates, perhaps because of civil war or some kind of disaster, or relationship break-up; or there is a sharp increase in the price of food and energy, and they are suddenly facing very different circumstances. In these situations, people often lose the ability to make their voices heard and influence what happens, and they may have no say and no means to hold anyone to account.

Once they are poor, people stay in poverty partly because their rights are not achieved or respected. They may belong to a social group that has little status or collective voice in society and no control over the decisions that get made about it. Initiatives that address this lack of voice, as well as the more tangible aspects of their situation, can make a big difference to people's ability to achieve greater well-being and get out of poverty.

Poverty and power: why does the right to be heard matter?

Poverty and inequality often persist because unaccountable governments and ineffective institutions block progress towards adopting and implementing pro-poor policies. Many government agencies and other institutions continue to make decisions that fail to respond to the needs of poor and marginalised people; systems of justice are often inaccessible to poor people. They are often excluded from forums where decicions are made on issues that directly affect their welfare. There are many places where women, in particular, are not consulted or included.

People elected or appointed to positions of power rarely represent the interests of poor people. These are issues of governance – the rules of the game and the structures that oversee and implement those rules.

Structures and systems thus impinge on the lives of poor people and power is exercised over them in many ways, both overt and more subtle.

Through the papers in this series there is a constant thread concerning power and power relations, including the power created by taking action. In thinking about what work can and should be done to support poor women and men in realising their rights and voice in decisions that affect them, it is useful to look at the whole spectrum of power and power relations, and not just at the visible power relations and formal power relationships that are perhaps more familiar targets for advocacy in trying to make change happen. It is clear that there is a wide spectrum of starting points – whether geographic, or in terms of the kinds of spaces where power operates such as public forums and institutions, informal social interactions, mass mobilisations, and so on. Only strategies which address the many-layered nature of power can lead to effective, sustainable change. The task looks very different in different contexts and historical moments; and has to be specific to the gender power relations and other power inequalities.

Power takes many forms and can be found as much in the nature of relationships as in formal structures and institutions. There is the positive 'power from within' of confidence and self-esteem, the kind of invisible power that can transform the individual from passive or unquestioning to assertive and active. Then there is 'power with'. This is the power of organisation, creating both informal and formal spaces where individual power can be brought together and amplified to engage with power-holders and make effective demands. The Honduras paper is a good example of 'power with', where women *maquila* workers, who had very little power as individuals, were able to improve their situation by joining together and challenging those with 'power over' them. 'Power with' also finds expression in the power of mobilisation, activism, and movements, within or in relation to existing formal or hidden power structures, or as independent spaces of engagement. Examples of this can be found in the papers on the Global Call to Action against Poverty and the *Wada Na Todo* ('Keep Your Promises') movement in India. These camapaigns used tools such as citizens' report cards and tribunals to engage diverse groups in successfully raising their voices in national and local campaigning.

> **Power**
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> Power is often understood merely in terms of one person's ability to achieve a desired end, with or without the consent of others, but it comes in at least four different forms:
>
> - Power *over*: the power of the strong over the weak. This power is often hidden – for example, what elites manage to keep off the table of political debate.
>
> - Power *to*: meaning the capability to decide actions and carry them out.
>
> - Power *with*: collective power, through organisation, solidarity, and joint action.
>
> - Power *within*: personal self-confidence, often linked to culture, religion, or other aspects of collective identity, which influence what thoughts and actions appear legitimate or acceptable.[5]

Becoming full and active citizens is a journey people make. They start in different places, and move at different speeds depending on their context and life experience; they can move backwards as well as forwards on the road. There are obstacles and roadblocks, as well as things that can propel an individual or group forwards. These vary according to context. The papers in this series illustrate action that is being or has been taken in a range of contexts, drawing on Oxfam GB's experience of working with different organisations in 13 countries. They exemplify some of the personal and systemic issues and challenges in working to make the voices of poor and marginalised people heard by people in positions of power. Such issues include:

Legal citizenship rights and inclusion

If you have no right to a legal identity, or your legal identity has stigma attached, it is very difficult to claim your rights or make your voice heard. The Peru paper in this series tells of a successful campaign to address such an issue, in relation to the rights of children to be registered at birth. Legal identity, however, is not necessarily enough to give you full citizenship rights. The Guatemala and Indonesia papers show two different ways of using 'power with' and 'power to' in addressing this issue. In Guatemala, women are using the indigenous justice system to tackle the impunity culture of the formal state system that has prevented women accessing full citizenship rights in the face of high levels of violence. In Indonesia, poor local communities, and particularly women, are using participatory poverty assessments as a mechanism for tackling exclusion from local services and governance.

Developing personal power, self-confidence, and self-esteem

Accessing your rights as a citizen may be prevented because you are afraid, or lack the confidence to claim them. On a personal level,

these are significant obstacles which can only be overcome by the person concerned, though there are many things that can help the individual in this part of the journey. Knowing you are not the only one facing the challenge can make a big difference. Changes in personal power are often closely linked with actions that also strengthen 'power with' or 'power to'. In Bangladesh, a programme with indigenous *adibashi* people led to women taking leadership for the first time, and speaking out within traditional governance structures. In Georgia, local community members were able to develop the skills and confidence to participate in formal budget-monitoring processes in local government. These are some ways in which 'power within' can be nurtured and strengthened, allowing positive changes to take place.

Collective organisation

Collective voice is more effective than individuals speaking out on their own. In general, the more voices the better, as these papers show. The Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) involved millions of people in mass protests, raising collective voice, and had significant successes in changing policies and promises on aid, trade, and development, and articulating the voices of poor and marginalised people. In India, the *Wa Na Todo* movement mobilised thousands of people to demand change from the government in a range of areas such as health and education. In Malawi, local-level awareness and capacity and mobilisation were achieved though organising training and village-level discussion groups. In the UK, it was possible for disparate groups of poor and marginalised people to be brought together to influence government policy.

Transparency and accountability

But just making a lot of noise about an issue may not achieve results. Good solutions to the problems of an absence of rights and capabilities require accurate information, which is not always easily available. The paper on India shows how the introduction of a freedom of information act, after much campaigning and the mobilisation of many people, was a major step forward in supporting people's right to be heard. Equally, technical work such as budget monitoring can be very useful in providing a tangible hook for programme work and an entry point through 'power to' for engaging with formal power structures. However, this needs to be in conjunction with advocacy, awareness-raising, and economic-literacy work rather than on its own, as the paper on budget monitoring in Malawi demonstrates.

Even when policy change is achieved, it is not sufficient unless that policy is implemented effectively, by people and institutions with the required skills and capacities, and unless it is given the resources necessary for the changes to reach people on the ground. Therefore accountability also needs to be part of the mix, whether through

citizens monitoring government decisions and actions (for example on budget allocations), or through campaigning and other forms of collective action that demand account to be given (as seen in the papers on Malawi, India, and GCAP).

Work with power-holders: responsive states

Lasting change requires more than just change on the part of poor and marginalised people and their organisations. Change is also needed in duty-bearers' responsiveness to citizens – these duty-bearers are usually the government ministers or officials who are so often the holders and wielders of 'power over'. Constructive proposals for change can be made, but if they meet a blank wall of unresponsiveness, poor people's lives will be no better for it. It is often necessary to work on both the 'supply' and 'demand' sides of governance – with both the institutions of the state and with citizens and their organisations. In Indonesia, as well as working with poor communities to develop knowledge and confidence, the Driving Change project worked with partners to build relationships with local and district governments, and in some cases to tackle unjust and corrupt practices. In the UK the Get Heard project deliberately set out to demonstrate a methodology for getting poor people to engage with power-holders who had expressed a willingness to listen but did not know how.
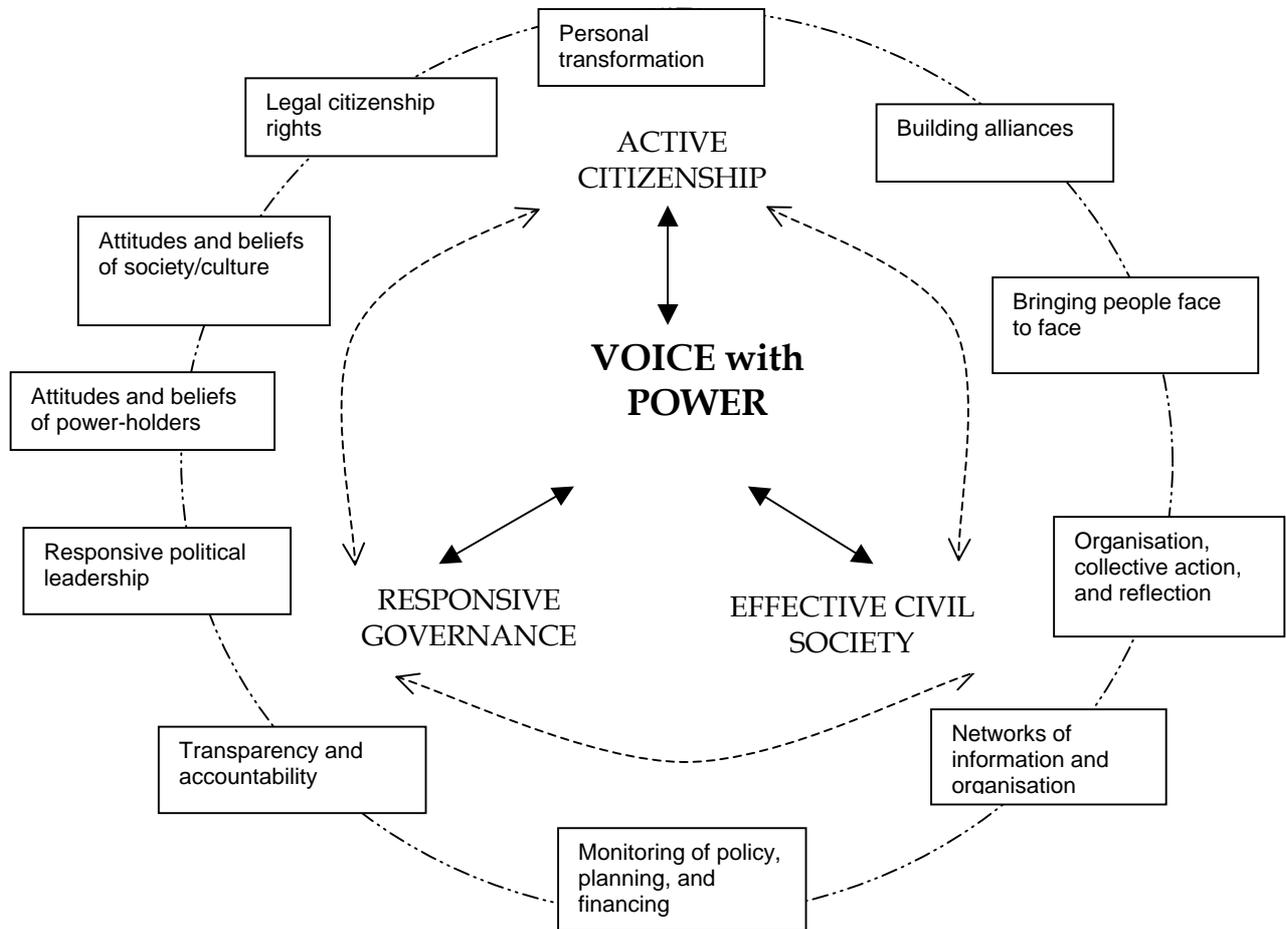
Attitudes and beliefs

It is also necessary to work at the level of those attitudes and beliefs that underpin how people act and interact, in order for accountability to be meaningful. These may be the attitudes and beliefs about poor people (for example, where poor people are seen as 'deserving' or 'undeserving') held by many people who are not poor. Or they may be the attitudes and beliefs held by people who control resource allocation, which may allow self-serving behaviour to take precedence over behaviour that delivers just and equitable use of resources. Examples of this can be seen in the paper on corruption, which explores ways of addressing the issue through some of the apparently tangential but essential cultural and attitudinal changes that enable people to have higher expectations of probity and accountability from power-holders.

The right to be heard

The case studies in this series can be located in different places on the diagram below, which shows how the different aspects of the right to be heard outlined earlier, and the range of issues identified above, fit together. Most of the examples can fit in more than one place. The kinds of changes required for poor and marginalised people to have an effective voice demand action at all points in the model.

The dimensions of voice with power

Personal transformation

Legal citizenship rights

Building alliances

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Attitudes and beliefs of society/culture

Bringing people face to face

VOICE with POWER

Attitudes and beliefs of power-holders

Responsive political leadership

Organisation, collective action, and reflection

RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE

EFFECTIVE CIVIL SOCIETY

Transparency and accountability

Networks of information and organisation

Monitoring of policy, planning, and financing

How can people be supported to make their voices heard?

Support to poor and marginalised people can be direct – through provision of finance and skills development to enable effective organisation, or activities that develop confidence and self-esteem. But in addition to this, there is much that can be done, less directly, to strengthen the elements of an environment that will make it more likely for people to be heard and responded to. For example, one difficulty encountered in attempts to embed 'voice' and participation into formal systems is that it is all too easy for well-intentioned attempts at inclusion to become tokenistic. Spaces that are successfully opened up for inclusion often get 'captured' by elites and lead to little real change for poor people. Such attempts can unintentionally reduce the space for voice, since power-holders can

then claim that the change has already been made. There is a useful role, therefore, for supportive action to prevent 'capture', and to develop capacity for receptiveness among people in power such as those in local government.

Another element of an enabling environment is sensitivity to gender issues, and to the issues of other groups of people whose voices are often not heard because they are marginalised in some way in society. It can help if the people who are not the ones missing out highlight the absence of the issues of marginalised groups in power structures; this kind of action is particularly supportive if these attitudes can be constructively challenged, so that there is greater awareness and understanding of the issues and more possibility for developing a responsive attitude.

Conclusion

There are a number of lessons and general recommendations from this series of papers, that others seeking to make similar changes can learn from, though there is no claim to have all the answers. These lessons need to be adapted and implemented, amplified and reinterpreted many times over; they also need to be linked up 'vertically' with work designed to have a greater impact on underlying rules, structures, institutions, attitudes, and beliefs. Adequate recognition of the points below will mean that poor and marginalised people can be supported to lobby for changes in their situation.

1   **Recognise that change is long-term.** Encouraging voice and supporting active citizenship is not a quick fix; it can only happen over a number of years. Institutionalising the participation of poor men and women as part of government structures remains a challenge. Regular follow-up action is needed to consolidate learning, as well as forward planning in order to institutionalise change.

2   **Understand that attitudinal change is important.** Attitudes about the use of power and accountability are a key entry point for NGOs into work on governance and accountability. A culture of respect and inclusiveness promotes the participation of marginalised groups in decision-making.

3   **Put local priorities first.** For any large network to be successful in ensuring poor people's right to be heard, priorities must be built from local, regional, and national contexts and then draw on international frameworks. Local communities have lots of energy and know the details of the issues that affect them. What they lack are mechanisms to effectively engage and hold their representatives accountable.

4   **Work at a number of levels and build alliances.** Such alliances must be built with people in poverty, with people in power, and with those who have the responsibility for implementing policy. The work also needs to happen at local, national, and international levels. The links between popular mobilisation, awareness-raising, policy change, and implementation are important. Adequate attention must be given to issues of implementation as well as policy change. Successful alliances are key to a successful project.

5   **Bring people face to face.** Formal power-holders and policy makers often have limited direct contact with poor and marginalised people. There is plenty more scope for bringing people face to face; such encounters, if well handled, can be very powerful.

6   **Use a range of strategies to build success.** Information, research, and training are all important. Many of the papers show how capacity-building of local-level organisations is often crucial in achieving the desired impact. A number of projects used participatory methodologies. The methods used matter: disempowering methodology, however unintentional, can invalidate the best-laid plans; empowering methodology contributes positively to change.

7   **Take different perspectives into account.** The national framework has to take account of the perspectives and voices of groups that are marginalised in social and economic terms, as well as groups cutting across gender and age (for example, children) in order to seek their support and build their capacity. The different needs and views of different groups must be accounted for.

8   **Acknowledge gender differences.** Paying good attention to gender differences and gender power relations can enable more effective change to happen.

9   **Use the right language.** It is possible to create excitement and enthusiasm for issues such as health, education, and even budgeting. The key is to articulate these in a language that people understand and want to respond to.

10 **Monitor and evaluate projects.** This shows how far bringing policy makers face to face with those who are affected by the policies they design can influence these policies, and what else has an influence on change processes.

11 **Recognise that international agencies can play an advocacy role.** They can influence the United Nations and other donor agencies to comply with their own policies and commitments to support development projects that encourage voice. Besides building technical capacities, international agencies can play a very

significant role in building links to civil society, governments, and private-sector stakeholders inside and outside the country.

12 **Understand that NGOs are important as role models of accountability and integrity.** If NGOs successfully demonstrate good practice, this not only shows people an example of how accountability can work in action, but also lays foundations for relationships of trust and mutual respect.

Notes

[1] S. Chen and M. Revallion (2008) 'The Developing World is Poorer than we Thought, but No Less Successful in the Fight against Poverty', Policy Research Working Paper 4703, Washington DC: World Bank.

[2] D. Green and I. Allen (2008) *The Urgency of Now*, Oxford: Oxfam GB.

[3] Best-known is the thinking of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum in their writing on capabilities. See A. Sen (2001) *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, and M. Nussbaum (2000) *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[4] See National Strategies for Sustainable Development (2004) 'The DFID Approach to Sustainable Livelihoods', www.nssd.net/references/SustLiveli/DFIDapproach.htm (last accessed September 2008).

[5] D. Green (2008) *From Poverty to Power*, Oxford: Oxfam GB.

Oxfam GB

Oxfam GB is a development, relief, and campaigning organisation that works with others to find lasting solutions to poverty and suffering around the world. Oxfam GB is a member of Oxfam International.

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