

Understanding Power – Workshop

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Defining and Understanding POWER

Power has so many different meanings and definitions however Martin Luther King Jr. defined power “as the ability to achieve a purpose. Whether or not it is good or bad depends on the purpose.”

“Power can also be defined as the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources exercised by different sections of society. The control of these resources becomes the source of individual and social power. Power is dynamic and relational, rather than absolute – it is exercised in the social, economic and political relations between individuals and groups. It is also unequally distributed some individuals and groups having greater control over the sources of power and others having little or no control.

Different degrees of power are sustained and perpetuated through social divisions such as gender, age, class, ethnicity, and race and through institutions such as the family, religion, education, media, the law etc. Our understanding of power would be incomplete unless we recognise its partner, Ideology. Ideology is a complex structure of beliefs, values, attitudes and ways of perceiving and analysing social reality. These ideologies are widely disseminated and enforced through social, economic, political and religious institutions and structure such the family, education system, religion, the media, the economy and the state with its administrative, legislative and military wings.”

From the Asia Pacific Bureau of Adult Education

What are the sources of power?

Responses:

- Control
- Money or wealth
- Position
- Knowledge and information
- Abuse
- Force

Expressions of Power

Power Over

The most commonly recognised form of power – it has many negative associations for people such as repression, force, coercion, discrimination, corruption and abuse. Having power involves taking it from someone else and then using it to dominate and prevent others from gaining it. In politics, those who control resources and decision making have **power over** those without. When people are denied access to important resources like healthcare, education, jobs etc. **power over** perpetuates inequality, discrimination, injustice and poverty.

Three alternative ways of exercising and using power

- Power with
- Power to
- Power within

These three alternatives offer positive ways of expressing power that create the possibility of forming more equitable relationships. By affirming people's capacity to act creatively they provide some basic principles for constructing empowering strategies.

Power Within

- Power with has to do with finding common ground among different interests and building collective strength. Based on mutual support, solidarity and collaboration **power with** multiplies individual talents and knowledge.
- Power with can help bridges across different interests to transform or reduce social conflict and promote equitable relations. Advocacy groups seek allies and build coalitions drawing on the notion of **power within**.

Power to

- Power to refer to the unique potential of every person to shape her or his life and world. When based on mutual support, it opens up the possibility of joint action or power with. Citizen education and leadership development for advocacy are based on the belief that each individual has the power to make a difference.

Power Within

- Power within has to do with a person's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge; it includes an ability to recognise individual differences while respecting others.
- Power within is the capacity to imagine and have hope; it affirms the common human search for dignity and fulfilment. Many grassroots efforts use individual

Storytelling and reflection to help people affirm personal worth and recognise their **power to and power with**.

(Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation 2001)