

Listening and Understanding the Voice of the Poor - Group Discussions

Power Relationships and the Poor:

Money is a fundamental issue in the power relationships, obviously who has more funds and access to it, has more power. Credibility in the long term is another central issue in the power relationships. It is important to look at information and knowledge issues. Without access to information and without knowledge, it is not possible to have power. Apart from knowledge, the possibility of managing legal instruments is also important. Such legal instruments are there at times but capacity to manage these is required.

Visibility is another central issue because it gives political weight and without visibility, it is as if you do not exist. Power is also linked to exercise of authority. For example, male-female power issues are also linked with authority.

Looking together at all these different factors related to power, it seems difficult that the excluded groups, the poorest groups, the differently able persons have access to these factors and so it is going to be very difficult for these groups to have any power.

In CBR programmes, some times the technical consultants do not understand the concept of CBR or the concept of sustainable development, so the power-issue becomes important. In the training of grassroots workers and in promoting the role of community, some times experts and funders force their ideals and plans as part of their “facilitation”.

Foreign Experts and the Poor:

The excluded and poor population groups have their own cultural richness and it is difficult for the expatriates and foreign experts to listen to the poorest and to understand their voices. It is difficult because the poor are an uncomfortable reality for expatriates, they represent the diversity and they force the expatriates to look at issues from different point of views.

Expatriates often create confusion between culture and the quantity of notions, so that one can come to a conclusion that there is nothing to be learned from the poor and the excluded groups. This is a major hurdle in understanding.

Communities have the skills and have the knowledge but it is not visible or understandable to outsiders, so community organisation may be needed to strengthen these skills and to make them understandable. The whole concept of self-help and empowerment plays a key role as an outsider health worker can suggest pills and treatment for an ailment, but persons themselves decide if they want to actually take those pills or treatment.

Helpers and Receivers:

Another significant problem is the disparity, intended as superiority, intentional or unintentional, between those receive “help” and those who give, because it means that one is “good” and the other is “unfortunate”. This disparity makes it difficult for experts and expatriates to listen to and to understand the voices of the poor.

Strategies:

It could be useful to create a network of listening and sharing through the communication technologies, like it happens in the developed world. Such communication means are not always present in poor communities and when they are present, they are very simple. It is important to create this network, where information must circulate, going outwards and coming backwards for a feedback as information is the basis of knowledge and power. Often there are different actors in an area like different associations, workers unions, groups of disabled persons, religious groups, etc., but they sometimes have difficulty to work in network and to inform each other. If each group thinks only about its own sphere then there is risk of wasting part of this energy.

It is not only knowledge or information, necessary for empowerment of the marginalised groups but they also require skills, skills that are essential for sustainable development. Skills, attitudes and knowledge, all play an important role in empowerment.

The different occasions of meetings that are there in all communities need to be encouraged and there must be such occasions where communities can speak to each other, share information and make proposals. In the developed world there are such opportunities between service providers and associations of clients like the meetings between hospital professionals and patient groups to discuss the problems and to find common solutions. There are also courts, which look after the interests of the patients if there is need.

It is important to identify key figures among the poor groups, who can be spokespersons for them and who can explain their point of views. If the key persons are the right persons, it would make every thing else much simpler and effective.

It is important to sustain the programmes through the participatory approach, but there can be other approaches, which are also needed, like the relief approach, which is needed in crises like earthquakes and cyclones, etc. Fixing the targets is a very tricky issue. Many government programmes fix the targets because they have to finish their budget and they must complete the target by the end of the financial year. So some times, they are worried only about official reports and target reporting, without really worrying if the benefits or the facilities reached the needy people.

Excluded population groups, they have a knowledge and experience of their own, which is not facilitated by the outsider, it is part of their own lives. However, outsiders can play a vital role in making sense of their own experiences, see them in relation to outside factors and for a global understanding of the causes. For this, it is important that facilitators and project managers are trained in participatory methodologies and they use these similar methodologies in dealing with the

communities. In this regard, training of the grassroots workers is fundamental because they play a very important role in linking with the communities. They can be the catalysts and they can create the links between the peripheries and central management of the project.