

Collective Action, Empowerment, and Conflict Mediation



The notion of ‘empowerment’ has been more often deductively claimed than carefully defined or inductively assessed. In Indonesia, the Kecamatan Development Program (KDP) provides a good example on how program empowers participants (especially members of marginalized groups) by building their capacity to manage local conflict.

SOURCE:

Gibson, C. and M. Woolcock. 2005. *Empowerment and Local Level Conflict Mediation in Indonesia: A Comparative Analysis of Concepts, Measures, and Project Efficacy*. Policy Research Working Paper 3713. The World Bank.

Organized collectives — unions, political parties, village councils, women’s groups, etc. — are fundamental to people’s capability to choose the lives they have reason to value. They provide an arena for formulating shared values and preferences and instruments for pursuing them, even in the face of “powerful opposition” (Evans, 2002).

A growing body of research on deliberative decision-making processes has hypothesized a range of mechanisms by which institutional innovations might empower members of marginalized groups. They generally agree that closely tying the exercise of public power to active and broad citizen participation can, under certain conditions, expand the influence of disenfranchised groups.

When the currency of public exchange and decision-making becomes fairness-based reasoning itself, weaker voices can more easily be heard. In such cases, socially marginalized groups may develop the tools to influence productive conflicts about the purposeful structuring of future undertakings by newly formed groups. By generating more open and accessible forums for productive, inter-group conflict, deliberative democratic arrangements give marginalized groups a seat at

the table with more powerful interests. More importantly, they also codify deliberation itself, its overarching value of fairness- and reason-based group decision-making, as the preferred currency of social exchange, which facilitators and a set of incentives for participation by women and the poor are structured to support.

It can be expected that there are substantial qualitative differences between the routines by which people and groups interact, shaped by different concentrations, and types of group influence. Most obviously, a conflict management routine that emerges from high concentrations of power will generally perpetuate group inequalities, while forms of shared or countervailing power may generate more discretion for marginalized groups.

Defining Empowerment

Empowerment is the process of enhancing individual or group capacity to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. It is an increasingly popular term that suggests an emerging, shared understanding that marginalized individuals and groups often possess limited influence in shaping decision-making processes that affect their well-being. Still, relatively little reliable empirical work exists to show whether and how Community-Driven Development (CDD) or other projects increase this influence, thereby improving development processes and outcomes.

Shared or Countervailing Power

The notion of countervailing power grew largely out of the analysis of interest group politics in adversarial arenas. It referred to the ability of trade unions, consumer organizations, and other organized interest groups to mold government rules and regulations that kept highly concentrated American industries in check following World War II.

The form of countervailing power underlying successful experiments with participatory collaboration differs substantially from that which evolves in adversarial arenas. In part, collaborative countervailing power refers to the ability of otherwise disadvantaged groups to put in place a wholly different kind of rule for group decision-making: the principle of fairness itself. The convergence of fairness-based deliberation as a decision rule, with collaboration as an institutionalized style of collective decision-making, discourages the perpetuation of prefabricated interests by pre-formed groups and encourages the exploration of joint interests by new, (often) functionally-oriented identity groups.

In practice, the rise of such routines partially neutralizes elites' prior advantages in organization, knowledge, intensity of interest, rhetorical capabilities, and agenda-setting ability, thereby diminishing several key tools of exclusion and subjugation. One potential result of this shift is a broader distribution of influence between marginalized and dominant groups.

Two analytically crucial parameters of comparison arise for those interested in understanding the routines governing both local-level conflict management and inter-group power relationships: fairness-based versus purely interest-based decision rules and adversarial versus collaborative types of forums. Distinct sources, forms, functions,



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and effects correspond to distinct combinations of each, and determining the qualities of various combinations is the task of empirical analysis. Although the growing literature on participatory collaboration suggests that the most durable forms of empowerment require both countervailing power and collaborative forums, evidence suggests that such happy combinations are rare. More often, conflict management routines feature one, the other, or neither.

Collaborative Forums

Collaborative forums encourage routines of speaking, acting, and group decision-making within which more and less powerful groups define, defend, and represent their interests with less of an orientation toward niche preservation and more of an orientation toward exploring shared preferences. Where forums encourage identity groups to recognize other identity groups in shared social space as potential allies rather than enemies, the potential for marginalized individuals to form coalitions and to begin acting collectively and with more influence ultimately rises.

The Power of Collective Action in Resolving Conflict: The Case of Sumorobangun Dam

In one case from the village of Biting in Ponorogo, East Java, an extended conflict over the repair of a leaky dam served as a flashpoint for the organization of farmers and other villagers dependent on its empty reservoir for irrigation. At the beginning of the conflict, the group mostly used bureaucratic channels to request repairs to the Sumorobangun Dam. After writing a series of letters to the District Legislative Assembly (DPRD) Head and the District Head, starting in 1996, the farmers' group felt their demands for action had fallen upon deaf ears and began expressing their sense of rejection and anger destructively. As farmers suffered more and more from the water scarcity, frequent arguments and limited small-scale violence broke out, including a hoe fight between two family members that resulted in head injuries but no deaths.

As unrest peaked in 2001, the farmers' group changed its tactics. In organizing a public demonstration, the group mobilized a broad web of social networks that included teachers, police, civil servants, rice paddy owners/farmers, and paddy workers from four sub-districts. This mobilization caught the attention of a candidate from a locally weak political party who was running for a DPRD seat and took the opportunity to apply pressure on the incumbent. Together, hundreds of villagers blockaded a key road connecting two districts, and in the middle of the road set up two chairs facing the dilapidated dam. By demanding that the two officials view the condition of the dam and witness the hundreds of villagers demanding its repair, the farmers' group finally solicited a response.

The DPRD Deputy Head arrived on the scene and committed to fixing the dam, a promise the district government ultimately fulfilled one year later. Additionally, a subsequent flurry of peaceful and fruitful activism ensued surrounding government compensation for lands previously inundated by the dam. These groups used the conflict to develop new, more effective routines for promoting their interests from below.

In this case, the farmers' group actually channeled protracted and escalating conflict into a unifying routine of speaking and acting that generated iterative results. On the one hand, appealing to a broad group of protestors generated significant negotiating power for the farmers because while the DPRD incumbent and his challenger could afford to ignore one demographic slice of the sub-district, both had a clear incentive to respond to the broader spectrum and more sizable numbers of potential voters who protested. On the other hand, the farmers' use of the richly symbolic protest action of blocking a road with a crowd of villagers and two empty chairs was a public performance that transformed their new association into a powerful force.



Collective action can empower people and bring about change. In Indonesia, a successful demonstration for the repair a dam solicited a positive response from the government.

Nevertheless, both theory and empirical observation reveal that marginalized groups often wield little clout, suffer from unstable preferences, and may be unaccustomed to confidently representing their preferences in formal associational settings. Without tools of speaking and acting in such settings, they inevitably struggle to be taken seriously by actors who have mastered (and indeed may have invented) dominant norms and rules of interaction. To counter this inherent disadvantage, to avoid being exploited, and to establish collaboration as the preferred norm of interaction within a forum, marginalized groups have to fill the power vacuum with demonstrable proof of their particular abilities.

Channeling Escalating Conflict into Dialogue

The Sumorobangun Dam case illustrates how a coalition of marginalized villagers revised the dominant practical and discursive routines for managing an ongoing conflict. By using a highly symbolic language of public protest, they exposed shared interests between natural allies, whose commonalities had previously gone unrecognized and unused.

The dam case was a telling example of a locally — organized coalition of marginalized groups mobilizing around an issue at a strategic time and with highly innovative discursive and practical tactics that more powerful authorities could not ignore. Numerous attempts to persuade officials to fix the dam using conventional tactics, letter writing, personal lobbying, and formal complaints to public authorities, ultimately failed. In the 2001 protest, which followed three years of the Kecamatan Development Program, a massive community development project focused on community participation in decision-making, in Biting, succeeded for a number of reasons. For one, they generated new, highly symbolic norms that established weaker and traditionally less organized groups as capable of challenging the dominance of sub-district authorities around a certain issue.

Suggested Readings

Evans, P. 2002. *Collective Capabilities, Culture and Amartya Sen's Development as Freedom*. *Studies in Comparative International Development* 37(2): 54-60.

Fung, A. and E. Wright. 2003. *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*. London: Verso.

Galbraith, J.K. 1956. *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Sourcebook on **Resources, Rights, and Cooperation**, produced by the CGIAR Program on Collective Action and Property Rights (CAPRI)