Individual and Community Empowerment for Human Security

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INTRODUCTION

Human security in the face of global environmental change can be considered “a state that is achieved when and where individuals and communities have the options necessary to end, mitigate or adapt to threats to their human, environmental and social rights; have the capacity and freedom to exercise these options; and actively participate in pursuing these options (O’Brien et al., 2008: 6). This interpretation involves building on strengths, aspirations, capacities and capabilities to respond to threats to human, environmental and social rights by creating creating systems that enable people to live with dignity (Barnett et al 2010; Commission on Human Security 2003). Definitions of human security bear significant resemblance to, and sometimes overlap with many definitions of “empowerment.” Intuitively, one might expect that empowerment is an essential *means* to human security as the *end*, in the same way that development, poverty eradication, greater disaster resilience and adaptive capacity are necessary means to support and achieve human security. In fact, in this book, empowerment is framed as a “break-through condition” for human security.

A vast and diverse multidisciplinary body of literature on empowerment warrants a careful look at its relationship to human security. There are many different ways in which empowerment can be encouraged, supported, and brought about, different forms and degrees in which it manifests in community actions, and different ways in which it is constituted within the community, at the level of individuals, and in relationship to outside forces and networks. This chapter aims to advance a more critical and differentiated view on empowerment as a “break-through condition” for human security through a selective survey of and commentary on some of the pertinent literature on empowerment. It will define and delineate the multiple meanings of this concept, explore common traits of empowerment, and discuss its causes and the ways in which it can be fostered. To achieve this, it is important to place empowerment and achieving human security at the individual and community levels *in relation to* other individuals or communities elsewhere trying to achieve their own goals (security and otherwise), pointing to the challenge of identifying ways to achieve human security through actions oriented toward the common interest.

WHAT IS EMPOWERMENT?

Empowerment as an intensely discussed and debated concept has been around for at least four decades. With principal roots in the liberation pedagogy of Paulo Freire (2008) and studies in gender equality, pertinent work comes from a wide range of fields and disciplines, including organizational change and management studies, psychology, governance and civic studies, philosophy, and in particular economic development and poverty discourses (see Luttrell et al., 2009, for a concise and useful overview). To proponents, empowerment is an essential and subversive process necessary for lasting social transformation of existing dehumanizing, oppressive, or unjust circumstances (e.g., Friedman, 1992). Others lament that empowerment has become one of those “all-purpose terms made plastic by indiscriminate use” (Jouve, 2009: 2), resulting in considerable confusion of meaning, and maybe even rendering the concept meaningless. Yet other critics believe empowerment has become co-opted by neo-liberal agendas (Cornwall and Brock, 2005). Against the backdrop of these perspectives, ongoing scholarly debates focus on whether empowerment is a means or an end in itself, whether it is about structure or agency (or both), what dimensions constitute it and which conditions or interventions are necessary to achieve it, and consequently what would be appropriate ways to measure this enticing, but also elusive concept (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990; Zimmerman, 1995; Kabeer, 1999; Narayan, 2002; Beteta, 2006; Narayan-Parker, 2006; Drydyk, 2008). Rather than whole-heartedly embracing or rejecting the concept, this section aims to lay bare some of the dimensions of empowerment so that its relationship to human security can come into clearer focus.

At the most basic level, empowerment is about attaining the power to make choices. Thus, we must realize first that empowerment implicitly acknowledges and assumes a lack of, or differential in, power or capacity. As such, empowerment is fundamentally about human rights (Jouve, 2009). Empowerment as a relational concept reflects the fact that some individuals or social groups have been deprived and marginalized in some way or another, and can or should be mobilized to obtain that which they heretofore lacked. Only if there is a prior lack of power is em-powerment even possible or necessary. Or, as Kabeer (1999: 437) puts it, “People who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives may be very *powerful*, but they are not *empowered* […] because they were never disempowered in the first place.”

The second immediate implication of even just an intuitive examination of empowerment is that it describes a change process, and more specifically, an emancipatory change process: from having less power to having more. This change affects the thoughts, beliefs, sense of self (in relationship to others and one’s context), and actions of individuals and communities, but can and often must involve a change in the formal and informal institutions and resources that influence or manipulate peoples’ beliefs and enable or constrain their actions (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Zimmerman, 1995).

The normative intention behind empowerment, however, goes even further. It calls for more than just a change in the power to make different choices. It also calls for a change in outcomes. Differently put, it would not be enough to assume an individual or community is empowered if they just had greater capacity and freedom to determine their lives. Only if and when that enhanced capacity and freedom is used, and if and when it results in the empowered actors actually coming closer to the ways they value being and to the things they value doing, is empowerment actually achieved (Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2005; Drydyk, 2008). This emphasis on capabilities and achievements reflects the intrinsic and instrumental values of empowerment (Alsop et al., 2007).

The final general point to raise here is the meaning of *power* at the core of empowerment. Rowlands (1997) distinguishes four types of power, each with quite different implications for the meaning of empowerment. First, empowerment could give one ‘*power over.’* This kind of power describes the ability to influence and coerce, having the formal or informal authority over something or someone. Empowerment in this case would mean changes in the resources and power to challenge one’s constraints. It also assumes power to be a finite or zero-sum resource, where changes in power imply that some gain power, while others inevitably lose it. Empowerment consequently can be expected to entail conflict, struggle, or at least opposition (Drydyk, 2008). Because it assumes existing hierarchical economic and political structures to remain unchanged (i.e., only a shift in who participates in them), this form of empowerment does not entail deep structural changes (Wong, 2003; Luttrell et al., 2009). Second, having the ‘*power to’* is an enabling power, for example, to organize or to change existing hierarchies. Empowerment here means increased capacities, access to decision-making, or opportunities to make certain changes. This type of power can entail structural changes, but emphasizes procedural changes, such as providing services (such as education) that build strengths and abilities, or developing opportunities to participate in decision-making. The third way to think of power is as ‘*power with*,’ i.e., a power that arises from collective action and mutual support. Empowerment in this case reflects increased solidarity, for example, in challenging norms, assumptions, social roles and so on. This conceptualization, contrary to power over, “stresses the way in which gaining power actually strengthens the power of others rather than diminishing it” (Luttrell et al., 2009: 6), often critical for “creating the conditions for change and […] reducing the costs for the individual” to step out of traditional oppressive or disempowered positions (Kabeer, 1999: 457). Finally, ‘*power from within’* pertains to a change in consciousness, attitude, or confidence. Empowerment in this sense might imply an increased awareness, desire, self-esteem and psychological readiness for change. It may also entail changes in perceptions about one’s rights, options, and one’s potential and abilities (Gutierrez et al, 1995; Luttrell et al., 2009).

One can easily imagine that an individual may have one or several of these forms of power, but not others. For example, it is possible for one and the same person to simultaneously have power over another person (say in the household), but not to have power with other community members to affect a change in the economic situation, nor any power from within to actually feel strong, capable and good about him/herself. Alternatively, another person may not have any power over other individuals, yet with strong self-esteem finds her/himself at a community meeting to work with others to develop the skills and capacities to improve health care for children.

These varying interpretations of power reflect the different emphases that scholars have placed on structure versus agency, capacities vs. outcomes, individual vs. collective change, empowerment’s intrinsic vs. instrumental value, and its inner (e.g., psychological) and outer (e.g., institutional or resource) dimensions. Some interpretations of power are clearly complementary, maybe even mutually supportive and necessary; none are obsolete or inherently invalid, though they do not get equal weight in public projects and discussions (e.g., see the analysis of the World Bank’s use of power in Wong, 2003).

Human security is intrinsically related to the components of empowerment discussed above. Table x.1 places side by side some common definitions of human security and empowerment to illustrate the parallels. Both sets of definitions focus on humans and the dichotomous tension between them and their social, natural, political and/or economic environment (Dalby, 2009). Both address individual and collective choices; both in fact go beyond choice, emphasizing achievements; and both speak to the capacity and freedom to exercise choice, and the active participation in that choice. Importantly, however, one notes from this comparison that the definition of human security does not necessarily imply an emancipatory change process, which, as shown above, lies at the heart of empowerment. To put it differently, already powerful and newly empowered actors can achieve security, but those denied power cannot. Only for them is empowerment a break-through condition for human security. And only for them is it a double triumph, as this break-through is often achieved against the will or resistance of those already in positions of power.

TABLE X.1 NEAR HEAR

Kabeer (1999), in discussing “strategic life choices”, distinguishes between first-order and second-order choices. First-order choices are those that are critical for people to live the lives they want (including, presumably, fulfilling one’s basic human needs and ascertaining one’s safety and security, but also choice of livelihood, whether and who to marry, and whether to have children). Second-order choices, by contrast, are less consequential ones – important for one’s quality of life, but not constituting its defining parameters. Moreover, the power to make these choices (resulting from all meanings of power discussed above) is not a thing one does or does not possess, but a capacity one exercises to varying degrees, depending on the capabilities and assets available, the opportunity structure supporting or hindering engagement, and the individual’s or community’s perceived sense of and realized agency (i.e., making choices) in turning opportunities into achievements (Alsop et al., 2007; Crocker, 2007). The degree of empowerment thus can be assessed by examining the three aspects of choice:

* Does an opportunity to make a choice actually exist? (existence of choice, or resources)
* Does a person or group actually use the opportunity to choose? (use of choice, or agency)
* Does the choice result in the desired outcome? (achievement of choice)

(adapted from Alsop et al., 2007: ix).

A careful assessment of which dimensions of choice are wanting can provide useful insights then – particularly on those first-order choices – into whether or not empowerment is a break-through condition for individual and/or collective human security, and what the possible interventions might be to increase the degree of empowerment and security.

THE SUSTAINING FORCES OF DIS-EMPOWERMENT

Speaking rather generically about power and empowerment eventually begs the question: what is at the root of disempowerment? The literature covers a wide and diverse terrain of forms of oppression, exploitation and disrespect – a well-known list ranging from colonialism to capitalism, globalization, imperialism, clientelism and paternalism, from sexism and patriarchy to racism, class and caste systems, state or interpersonal violence, war and related traumatization, other forms of abuse and victimization, and more subtle, but no less impactful legacies of upbringing and family dynamics. While situational triggers for overt violence and deprivation may vary widely (e.g., a change in government, a regional conflict, a natural disaster), sustained forms of oppression and disempowerment typically are supported and further maintained by chronic conditions such as hunger, poverty, land and resource exploitation and degradation, lack (or lack of a particular kind) of education and institutional factors such as landlessness, women’s rights, particular market policies, as well as social and cultural norms.

This list of examples of immediate and chronic underlying causes makes clear that the vicious cycle of disempowerment and oppression begets further disempowerment and oppression until and unless it is broken by people who are empowering themselves, maybe assisted by those who are working in solidarity with them. Whatever different theorists’ philosophical commitment (e.g., feminist, Marxist, humanist, critical), the common thread among all those who have criticized and analyzed oppressive social systems is their finding that such systems dehumanize people. Moreover, as this book and this chapter in particular argue, oppressive disempowering systems make people less secure. They rob individuals of the most basic human rights and freedoms, and they systematically undermine their ability to acquire the education, skills, and means to fully engage their personal and collective power and influence when dealing with others or with institutions on matters related to their lives and livelihoods. For example, John Friedman discusses the root causes of oppression in exploitative economic development:

No matter how dynamic, an economic system that has little or no use for better than half of the world‘s population can and must be radically transformed. Broadly speaking, the objective of an alternative development is to humanize a system that has shut them out, and to accomplish this through forms of everyday resistance and political struggle that insist on the rights of the excluded population as human beings, as citizens, and as persons intent on realizing their loving and creative powers within. Its central objective is their inclusion in a restructured system that does not make them redundant.

(Friedman 1992: 13)

Individuals stuck in a system that deprives them of their power are Objects being acted upon by visible or invisible oppressors, their circumstances, externally imposed changes, natural or technological powers; they are not Subjects or creators and shapers of their own lives (Freire, 2008). What’s more, such disempowered individuals are prisoners of a “circle of certainty”, in which they see neither the causes of their disempowerment, nor the possibilities of an escape (Freire, 2008: 39). The space for personal will and individual thought, much less choice and action, is narrowly circumscribed as that prescribed and permitted by the power holders. The dominant consciousness does not allow, or rather, makes it impossible for such individuals to see the possibility (and necessity) of transformation. The truly disempowered thus have become one with what Freire (2008) called a “Culture of Silence” in which there is no consciousness of, and no permission to name or question, the deeply engrained existence of injustice, exploitation and human insecurity.

Importantly, as feminism, liberation psychologies and theologies, political ecology, as well as liberation pedagogy have argued, all oppression has an external and an internal dimension (e.g., Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Thomas and Velthouse, 1990; Prilleltensky and Gonick, 1994; Zimmerman, 1995; Peet and Watts, 1996; Gutierrez, 1998; Bryant, 2001; Forsyth, 2002; Schroeder et al., 2006; Freire, 2008; Watkins and Shulman, 2008). The importance of this finding cannot be overstated. As Prilleltensky and Gonick (1994: 149) argue, “it is extremely difficult to rise above the collective disempowerment of one’s reference community to enjoy these rights [of self-determination, distributive justice, and collaborative and democratic participation], because the individual’s ability to claim self-determination, justice, and a voice is tied to the group’s capacity to secure these values.”

If external forces deprive the powerless of the material access and resources to be active shapers of their lives, the internal disempowerment stems from the almost always present internalization of inferiority and resulting self-rejection, hopelessness and psychological immobility (see Watkins and Shulman, 2008 for a careful discussion of the deep interrelatedness of external and internal oppression for the perpetrator, the victims, and the bystanders). It is from this recognition that we can now turn to the question where emancipatory change may come from.

EMPOWERMENT FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT

From an interdisciplinary perspective, it is somewhat surprising that there is much debate about whether empowerment comes from within or from without. Yet the dichotomous discussion persists and is in fact quite prevalent in a number of pertinent literatures (e.g., development, poverty and community psychology studies) (Gruber and Trickett, 1987; Davis, 2007). Whether writers privilege initiation of change from within or from without, many warn against a simplistic endogenous or exogenous determinism. As early as the 1970s, Freire recognized the need to address both dimensions:

The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressors whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the actions of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world.

(Freire 2008: 48)

It is from this recognition of internalized oppression that it becomes clear that no attempt at empowerment can succeed if the deeply absorbed and personalized oppression and dehumanization is not also and directly addressed. Individuals have to become Subjects of their own lives; they have to free themselves from being Objects of others determining their lives. Differently put, the principal goal of individual, internal empowerment is to find one’s voice in the Culture of Silence (Drydyk, 2008; Freire, 2008; Maton, 2008).

If this form of endogenous empowerment or liberation is to succeed, one must acknowledge the need for, and possibilities of, interrelated economic, political, sociocultural, spiritual and psychological transformation. This holistic perspective, as Watkins and Shulman (2008: 46) remind us, “helps us resist thinking that one could be psychologically liberated or individuated[[1]](#endnote-1) while economically or culturally enslaved.” Thus, changes at the collective, contextual, structural level are also needed to ultimately ensure the empowerment of individuals. Rowlands (1997), for example, challenges researchers and practitioners involved in development initiatives to not make “unrealistic claims about the positive changes which can result from their [empowerment] work. [She] also questions how far genuine empowerment is possible for women without major changes in social attitudes.”

Yet how does an individual ever create enough space to consider his or her situation and what to do about it in a context that demands unwavering attention to the needs of day-to-day survival, for meeting all but the most basic needs? Alternatively one may ask, how can change in the contextual conditions come about that would allow an individual to even contemplate a better, more secure, more dignified life? This tension between individual agency and broader economic, political and social structures may always persist and the “chicken-or-egg” question forever remain unanswered, were it not for the fact that empowerment is not an all-or-nothing state of affairs. Rather, empowerment is at all times and in all places realized to varying degrees by different people. Thus, even in places where most people are powerless and dehumanized by the political, economic and social forces of oppression, there are community settings and conditions that assist in the empowerment of individuals (Maton, 2008); there are always some individuals that are slightly more empowered, that have already achieved some degree – as Freire would say – of conscientization.[[2]](#endnote-2) There are always some who are somewhat less under the spell of the myth created by the power holders of what the social order ought to be, who have more of a voice already, who have access to some useful resources, and who have begun the hard work of decolonizing their minds and growing a critical consciousness that allows them to see that theirs is not a life conditioned by fate, but a historical circumstance that can be transformed (Freire, 2008). These individuals can become the true allies of those still less conscious and worse off.

Support from those in true solidarity with the disempowered – be it in the form of material, social, psychological, or legal assistance – thus may well be the necessary condition to create an opening from which internal and external empowerment of individuals and of the broader community can commence. In fact, it may be such true, committed solidarity – as opposed to missionary zealotry, temporary humanitarian aid, however benignly-intended cultural invasion, or economic development in the (disguised) name of further entrenchment in the structures and institutions of the power holders – that is the foundational shift required to help bring about empowerment and human security.

True solidarity then is first and foremost a matter of “power with” between those already more and those less empowered. Yet true solidarity also implies that empowerment cannot be done *for* another. While the door can be opened, the opportunity space created, ultimately the disempowered have to make an emancipatory move and take part in their own liberation from the conditions that keep them in less powerful positions. This is the moment where individuals become Subjects in their lives.

It is from this vantage point that the issue of participation has become central to the question of empowerment, development and related discourses, and thus why it is also central to the question of enhancing human security (Prestby et al., 1990; Parfitt, 2004; Cornwall and Brock, 2005; Crocker, 2007). Participation is variously and ambiguously discussed as a means to empowerment and development or as an end in itself. It also has become a contested notion in no small part because of the demands it makes on those already burdened unfairly, and maybe for fear that it opens the door to those not used to wielding any power and who thus may misuse it (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Williams, 2004; Hickey and Mohan, 2005; Kamete, 2009). This point will be addressed in the next section. Suffice it to say here that while allies can be essential in linking individuals and communities to wider networks and resources (including employment opportunities, financial resources, or information), and while they can provide social and political support in the face of resistance or opposition, true empowerment only occurs when individuals become the active and self-directed co-creators of their lives. Thus, the notion of empowerment advanced here recognizes free will, full personal capacity, and the freedom to participate in the creation of a dignified and secure life. It does not, however, impose a Western ideal of the individual, autonomous (atomized) self. How individuals define themselves as Subjects in relation to others in their varying communities is largely conditioned by personal history and culture, and as such reflects collective notions of the balance between individual autonomy and empowerment. But it also makes space for an individual’s capacity to continually renegotiate his or her position with others.

EMPOWERMENT FOR THE COMMON GOOD

The definitions of empowerment advanced above suggest that the achieved outcome of empowerment – namely a real and durable improvement in the life circumstances of the empowered – is a critical element and indicator of its presence. Yet it is legitimate to ask about incidences and circumstances in which successful individual or local empowerment may work against the broader common good at the interpersonal, regional or even global scale. Empowered and well-meaning action at the individual or local level does not necessarily ensure human security for others elsewhere and thus can still be counterproductive. For example, community empowerment that leads to local economic growth and greater consumption but also related waste (e.g., water, materials, or emissions of greenhouse gases) ultimately contributes to environmental degradation that undermines human security for all. Or consider an example from a developed-country context: empowerment for the “common good” here may be defined by one community as attaining the resources to build security fences, alarm systems, golf courses and swimming pools, which can easily turn into a “common bad” for another community (i.e., lack of water, pesticide pollution, lack of access to land, etc.).

These examples make apparent the double-edged normative character of empowerment: those favoring and working for empowerment clearly have a normative agenda, namely to distribute power more justly among people. They present having power – choice, capability, and freedom – as a desirable means and outcome. Yet once such power is ascertained, the second normative imperative of empowerment comes into play. If this power is to be wielded not just for personal ends, but for the common good, the use of that power becomes morally and ethically constrained. It demands that one asks: who is “we” and who is “other”? Who does one feel in communal bond with, who is one’s community? How far does one’s power reach, and thus what responsibility comes with this new-found power? As Jouve (2009) so aptly pointed out,

Empowerment relies on a general hypothesis that it is possible and necessary to (re-) build local communities gathering individuals who share common interests, same identities. The empowerment strategies implemented, both in developed and developing countries, put the emphasis on this social dimension in which the building and activation of territorial and/or social identities, from which it is possible to generate collective action, are key factors of success, or failure.

(Jouve 2009: 6)

Clearly, there is always a danger of empowerment becoming hijacked by new forms of self-interest, be they personal or collective, i.e., where empowerment is for one person’s or one group’s narrow and immediate good at the expense of another’s. Often it is neither easily determined that this is happening, nor is it necessarily intentional or conscious on the part of those who have just empowered themselves enough to act in their self-interest. Freire (2008: 45) recognized this risk, stating that, “almost always, during the initial stage of the [empowerment] struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or ’sub-oppressors’.” Or, as Prilleltensky and Gonek (1994) noted, “[a]n empowerment agenda that seeks primarily to acquire more power for *my* group is bound to disempower other oppressed groups, thereby undermining the principle of distributive justice” (168-9). In a globalized cultural context that favors Cartesian, consumptive and individualistic beliefs and values, those empowering themselves are easily tempted to adopt the prevalent model of how to be human, powerful and free to do as one pleases from those who have previously subjugated them. Thus, the ideals of Western, modern society – reiterated and spread through the media – can easily become the uncritically adopted aspirations of the newly empowered. Watkins and Shulman (2008), however, warn against the simple exchange of material deprivation for psychic emptiness. Thus, the newly gained autonomy must be tempered with a recognition of our social and ecological interdependence, even if many don’t do so. It is, indeed, a difficult dichotomy to hold. But only when we can manage to do so can “community” be understood not as a group fighting or asking for rights to be granted from another, but as a collective linked by mutual obligations (Esteva, 2006, cited in Watkins and Shulman, 2008: 48).

Empowerment of one group or individual *without* diminishing the power, humanity, dignity and integrity of another (or of non-human nature) thus emerges as a crucial normative modification to the very basic need for empowerment as a break-through condition for human security (see also Wong, 2003). Consequently, the interpretation of power as “power over” becomes a less desirable, maybe even counterproductive, form of power and should not be the (sole) goal of empowerment if it is to enhance human security as a common good for all.

This is not to presume idealistically that there are any easy answers or solutions that would allow us to achieve broadly beneficial outcomes. But the recognition of mutual obligation and interdependence (including with the natural environment), and the problematic dual ethical imperative involved in empowerment demands that we critically question any action for the alleged common good from a multi-scalar, systems perspective. It demands that empowerment first and foremost build the critical consciousness and self-affirmation that helps people resist the enticing values of those who exploited them before. It must also foster the requisite interpersonal and communication skills, and create spaces, for dialogue and negotiation of mutually beneficial or acceptable solutions. Given the inevitable blindness to some outcomes of our actions, the constant changes in the social and natural environment, and the distance between the local and other communities elsewhere, empowerment actions must also establish in individuals and groups a commitment to reflexivity and social learning to make adjustments to their choices in the future as they become necessary.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD RECIPROCIAL EMPOWERMENT AND HUMAN SECURITY

This chapter developed an understanding of empowerment as an emancipatory change process, in which those previously deprived of power attain the opportunities, capabilities and freedom to make strategic life choices that positively improve their lives and livelihoods, and thus their human security. In principle, the powers that are being gained in the process can be power over, power to, power with, and power-from-within. In recognizing that empowerment stands in the ever-present tension between structure and agency, it has become clear that true solidarity between the powerless and the already-more empowered – that is a “power with” – may well be the foundational shift required to enable further empowerment. Moreover, the danger of uncritically using one’s power and adopting the very values and action options prescribed by the exploitative culture once individuals or communities obtain a certain degree of empowerment brings to the fore the necessary tempering of power with a recognition of mutual interdependence and obligation. The relational aspects of power and empowerment thus privilege forms and uses of power that do not diminish the humanity and integrity of others.

The struggle for empowerment, as depicted here, is the path from silence to finding or restoring voice, from talk-back to dialogue, from compliance to disruption, from resisting another’s vision to dreaming one’s own, from deconstruction and critique of the dominant paradigm to imagining, building, and celebrating something new. This work is rarely clean and it is never easy. It may occasionally involve overt struggle in the streets, fields or halls of power, but it always requires the difficult psychological work of freeing oneself from internalized oppression and dehumanization. In this sense, true empowerment is deeply radical, i.e. it has to address the root of the matter to succeed. Ultimately, the most radical aspect of empowerment may be that it cannot be achieved alone or forever. In the context of ever-changing social, economic, and environmental relationships, reciprocal empowerment is not an end that can be achieved once and for all but a continual struggle among individuals and communities. If empowerment can begin from a place of “power with” among people in solidarity with one another, it must lead to the “power to” make structural changes, or else – if undertaken without a critical awareness of interdependence – may only lead to a power swap or a “power over”, but not true liberation for all. Thus, the deepest task of empowerment is always to work toward “power-from-within” so as to dismantle the internal and external structures of exploitation that undermine human security.

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NOTES

1. Individuation refers to the process of psychological differentiation, by which a person becomes a more stable, internally integrated, mature, and self-actualized person (Sharp, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Conscientization, from the Portuguese word conscientização, denotes a state of critical consciousness individuals can attain that reflects an awareness and in-depth understanding of the world with all its social and political contradictions (Freire, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)