



Bringing Power Back

Summary report

Towards a framework for child and youth emPOWERment

'I felt empowered when I could raise my voice against discrimination by my parents based on my gender, enabling me to convince them to allow me to live my life by my own choices.'

FGD with Girls in Mahananda Colony, Malda, India, 16/07/22.



Terre des hommes

Helping children worldwide.

Authors:

This document is based on the consultancy reports produced by Elise Klein and Neil Howard for Tdh in 2022, with contributions from Maria Bray, Kristen Hope Burchill, Sophie Mareschal, Nina Marx, Olsi Dudumi and Amy Seaman.

Date of publication: November 2024

Disclaimer: This paper reflects the views of the consultants, Dr. Elise Klein, Associate Professor of Public Policy at the Crawford School, the Australian National University, and Dr. Neil Howard, Reader at the Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, based on the study they conducted for Tdh in 2022.

Notes:

- The contents of this report reflect the findings of a study conducted in 2022 by Dr. Elise Klein, Senior Lecturer of Public Policy at the Crawford School, the Australian National University, and Dr. Neil Howard, Reader at the department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, working as independent experts. As a technical document, this report does not represent a formal institutional position of Terre des hommes Foundation. Rather, the purpose of this report is to convey, in an accessible language, the theoretical framework on empowerment that was the outcome of the consultancy, with a view to fostering an environment conducive to learning, reflection and strategic thinking, both within Tdh and with partners in the larger child protection community.
- This publication is one of a series of documents that the Tdh Child and Youth Empowerment Working group (composed of the different experts from the Child Protection Expertise, the Migration program, as well as the Quality and Accountability Sector) will issue as part of the Child and Youth Empowerment Framework.

Contact info: For more information on Tdh Child and Youth Empowerment Framework, please contact Maria Bray maria.bray@tdh.org

Contents

Introduction.....	4
Part 1: Where have we come from?	6
What is a “power-informed approach”?.....	6
What are emPOWERment’s radical roots?	6
Part 2: Where has Tdh stood in relation to empowerment?	8
What are the main emPOWERment strategies Tdh has used?	8
How do children, youth and Tdh staff understand emPOWERment?	11
Challenges and limitations: where are the spaces for improvement?	13
Part 3: What’s next?.....	17
How to bring power back into emPOWERment?	17
Towards a power-informed emPOWERment approach	17
18	
Conclusion	20
References.....	21
Impressum.....	22

Introduction

Tdh's [organisational values](#) articulate a direct commitment to child and youth participation and empowerment: working **with** children, **for** children to bolster resilience, improve well-being and to empower youth as agents of change. [As articulated in its Strategy 21-24](#), Tdh is committed to empowering children to define what matters to them regarding the realization of their rights, express their perceptions effectively, and have their views taken into account by those who have duties towards them. In its long-term vision (Tdh, 2023) Tdh advocates to allow the voices of children and young people to be heard by national and local actors through empowering them to become agents of change. In line with [Article 12](#) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that *'every child has the right to express their views ... and to have their views taken seriously and considered'*, child participation is a cornerstone of [Tdh's approach to child protection](#).

Whilst Tdh has made significant efforts to develop methodologies for child participation and [empowerment](#), consistently championing co-creation, delegating power and creating the spaces for active participation, Tdh recognizes that further work is needed to adopt a fully **"power-informed"** approach both at the organizational and programmatic level.

Consequently, Tdh commissioned a "Child and Youth Empowerment Consultancy" in 2022, to explore what it means to be a child and youth empowerment-focused organization and what steps it should take to transform itself. The consultancy team, composed of Elise Klein, Senior Lecturer of Public Policy at the Crawford School, the Australian National University and Dr. Neil Howard, Reader in University of Bath, working under the direction of the Child Protection Sector conducted an extensive academic research, including an operational review of Tdh's existing practices, centered around the pursuit of politically and critically engaged practice in the context of child and youth empowerment.

This 'Child and Youth EmPOWERment' study can be understood as a year-long journey in which Tdh sought to explore what a truly power-informed and empowerment-focused NGO might look like, as well as take the necessary steps to becoming one.

It builds on the openness and commitment of Tdh to address structural barriers to the inclusion of the voices and perspectives of children and youth who are so central to Tdh work.



The study aimed to answer three main research questions:

1. *What does the latest and best empowerment-related research say about how to operationalise a power-informed approach to child and youth empowerment?*
2. *Where does Tdh stand in relation to this body of work, and what are the main empowerment strategies used in Tdh programming?*
3. *What do key stakeholders, especially children and young people, think about empowerment and opportunities to move towards more empowering approaches to working with children and young people?*

This document provides a short, accessible, and reader-friendly summary of the full findings of Howard and Klein's consultancy. It aims to answer the question: *how can a power-informed approach to child empowerment be operationalised, and why is it necessary.* The structure of this document is as follows:

Part 1 Where have we come from ?

What were emPOWERment's radical roots?

Part 2 Where has Tdh stood in relation to empowerment?

What are the main empowerment strategies used in Tdh programming?

How does Tdh understand empowerment?

Challenges and Limitations: what are the spaces for improvement?

Part 3 Where are we heading?

How to bring power back into emPOWERment?

Towards a power-informed emPOWERment approach

Study Methodology:

The study started with a review of relevant academic and grey literature. It then employed a variety of participatory methods to understand how Tdh approached empowerment, including:



A document review of over 30 internal documents and published material across various Tdh programmes.



Case-studies developed by Tdh teams covering all major operating regions. These case-studies included self-assessments of Tdh empowerment work, with 10 case-studies assessed in total.



Interviews with Tdh staff based in Head Office and across the world. These were used to garner staff understandings of empowerment, as well as perceptions of challenges and opportunities within the organisation.



Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with children and youth globally. These were structured using child-friendly, participatory tools and aimed to incite discussions around power and empowerment. Ten FGDs were conducted in total, providing space for children and youth to further evaluate Tdh's empowerment efforts.

Part 1: Where have we come from?

What is a “power-informed approach”?

What is power?

In some understandings of empowerment, we seem to forget that it has the word ‘power’ as a root. Power has been:

1. Classically understood in zero-sum terms, effectively meaning the more power one individual has, the less there will be for others.

- This form of power is often underpinned by force and domination.

However, power is increasingly understood as:

2. A necessary social force that has a vastly productive and transformative potential.

- It can be wielded by those on the ground to challenge inequalities and drive human agency
- It often exists in and emerges from collective strength, action and collaboration.
- Feminist perspectives emphasize the personal and inner dimensions of power, including the invisible and visible ways in which domination is secured.

EmPOWERment practice can be significantly strengthened by having a greater awareness of power, with it essential for Tdh to understand power as multi-dimensional, dynamic and relational going forward.

What are emPOWERment’s radical roots?

Scholars have long critiqued the use of the word “empowerment” for being one of the most loosely used terms in the development lexicon. It is often described as a buzz-word, “understood and practiced so variably that it has come to mean all things to all people” (Batliwala, 2007:557). However, the concept of empowerment was not always marred by such problematic vagueness. Indeed, it largely emerged, from Brazilian philosopher **Paulo Freire’s** (1970) **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**. His approach of conscientisation was employed to help those he considered oppressed develop the critical consciousness necessary in recognising, understanding, and collectively challenging their oppression. By **using locally relevant approaches and giving voice to the voiceless, marginalised communities were able to work collectively to undo the structures of subordination, reclaim power and forge a new, more equitable, reality.**



Freire's approach greatly informed the Global South, grass roots, **feminist movements of the 1980s**, where his approach of consciousness-raising was extended for the purposes of **challenging patriarchy**. Empowerment consequently became an **essential process in addressing the structural and intersectional drivers of gender inequality**. This work demonstrates the centrality of power to empowerment, leading to empowerment definitions such as:

1. *'An unfolding process of changes in consciousness and collective power'*¹
2. *A 'multi-faceted process of social transformation'*²
3. *A 'radical approach concerned with transforming power relations'*³

By the 1990s however, the 'business case' for empowerment, with its focus on efficiency-based outcomes and results-based management, was increasingly emphasised, eventually becoming the dominant paradigm that overshadowed the more power-informed approaches⁴. Consequently, **the goals of empowerment became linked to those of economic growth**, with empowerment steadily seen as a 'magic bullet' for poverty alleviation and rapid economic development. Contemporary empowerment approaches have, therefore, largely distanced themselves from their political, emancipatory and power-informed roots, **reduced to a set of predominantly technocratic, a-political and narrow interventions**. This has led to accusations that empowerment represents development's most **'widely used and abused buzzword'** of the 21st century, with it being this context that we find ourselves in in the third decade of the 21st century.

¹ A. Cornwall (2016) Women's empowerment : What works?, Journal of International Development- J. Int. Dev. 28, 342–359 ([Cornwall, 2016:343](#))

² Srilatha Batliwala (2007) Taking the power out of empowerment – an experiential account, Development in Practice, 17:4-5, 557-565 ([Batliwala, 2007:343](#))

³ A. Cornwall (2016) Women's empowerment : What works?, Journal of International Development- J. Int. Dev. 28, 342–359 ([Cornwall, 2016:343](#))

⁴ Informed by the neoliberal shift, increasing financial constraints and heightened questioning of the efficacy of aid, there has been growing pressure since the early 2000s for development organisations to reorient their management systems towards effectiveness and results. Results-based management (RBM) refers to a management strategy focussed on improving performance 'and achievement of outputs, outcomes and impacts' (OECD, 2007). RBM supports greater accountability by applying a clear framework to plan, manage and measure intervention outcomes. For more information, this resource and this Tdh document offer a robust overview of RBM.

Part 2: Where has Tdh stood in relation to empowerment?

What are the main emPOWERment strategies Tdh has used?

1) Psychosocial / psychological emPOWERment

This approach focusses on the **individual and collective skills, capacities, and behaviours necessary for empowerment, particularly those of self-confidence, decision-making and self and collective efficacy.** These behaviours are often regarded as the first steps to being empowered. Tdh's work, particularly [within MHPSS](#) and Migration, focuses on promoting mechanisms for the development of resilience. Reflecting this, Tdh's [Move On and Engage methodology](#) is rooted in collective action and is dedicated to strengthening the core 'ENGAGE' skills: trust, co-operation, communication, emotional management, creative thinking and responsibility. This is further evident in the Sport for Protection methodologies, where participation of girls and women in traditionally male dominated sports in the communities has challenged existing unequal gender norms (see [Kabaddi project](#)).

'In the beginning, my family did not permit me to wear jeans or any short dresses, but after engaging with Tdh I started playing Kabaddi and for that reason I had to wear short pants. Initially there was huge opposition from my parents in this regard. But slowly I was able to convince them and they agreed'.

Girl in an FGD in Mahananda Colony, Malda, India, 16/07/22.

Kabaddi:

a sport that empowers girls in India

Migrant families in West Bengal are at high risk of sexual abuse, trafficking and child marriage. Since 2020, in 60 migrant communities, Tdh and partner Praajak have been using the traditionally male-dominated sport of Kabaddi to empower over 1620 girls and 1000 boys to make safer choices about their futures. Through Kabaddi, girls explore how gendered power dynamics impact their lives and place them at risk of trafficking and early marriage. The sport is also an entry point to engage with local child protection committees about gender-based violence and unsafe migration, contributing to more coordinated tracking of boys and girls who drop out of school and improved referrals to support services. Tdh and Praajak have jointly organised discussions with parents, local clubs and child protection actors to promote Kabaddi as a protection and empowerment tool for girls and boys alike.



2) EmPOWERment as opportunity structure

This refers to the wider social, political, and institutional context surrounding an individual that can promote empowerment. A favourable opportunity structure can be achieved through improving access to resources like legal frameworks, money and Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). In achieving this, Tdh and partners regularly advocate with national and international bodies to improve the legal and socio-ecological conditions in which children and young people live. Success is evident in the adoption of new laws or national practices, or in changes of harmful social norms, as illustrated by the projects in the boxes below. Additionally, Tdh integrates approaches such as income-generating activities, marketable skills training and support for formal education, as evidenced in the “YouCreate” project explained below.

YouCreate

[The project](#), developed in Egypt (Cairo) from 2017 to 2022 worked to mobilise community resources for the attainment of better protection outcomes for refugee communities, with a particular focus on enhancing refugee youth’s access to positive development opportunities and enterprise development services. The project focusses on leadership training and uses participatory action research, with youth leaders trained to lead their peers in implementing, ‘arts-based research projects’ that directly address youth-determined issues within their communities. Youth leaders and youth participants are at the heart of YouCreate, with well-being, resilience and social cohesion consequently bolstered.



3) Choice and decision-making

This reflects Kabeer’s⁵ understanding of **empowerment as a process where ‘those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability’** (1999:437). Increasing young people’s access to information such as sexual and reproductive health and on wider questions of child rights is central to Tdh’s field work, as illustrated by SheDecides project description below:

⁵ Naila Kabeer (1999) Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment, Development and Change journal, issue 3, 435-464 ([Kabeer, 1999:437](#))

SheDecides: Collective action for bodily autonomy



SheDecides (Guinée, from 2021 to 2023), recognises that gender equality will only be achieved when every person has the undisputed right to decide about their body, life, and future. With sexual and reproductive rights increasingly being pushed back, disregarded, de-prioritised, and de-funded, SheDecides aims to counter opposition by advancing sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for all. It unites and mobilises a diverse, global group of changemakers, empowering them to stand up and take action for the right to decide. It strives to build collective power amongst its members to advance bodily autonomy, ultimately convening and strengthening co-ordinated political action for local norm and wider social change.

Through this collective movement, SheDecides enables an expansion in opportunity structure through its dismantling of discriminatory power structures, successfully advancing access to information about the bodies and rights of children and youth.



Although these three approaches to empowerment are distinct, there are some notable areas of theoretical and practical overlap. Meaningful differences in young people lives are consistently achieved through creating spaces where:



1

they can come together



2

build their self-belief and learn new skills



3

make nourishing choices that



4

advance their well-being

However, despite the many merits and successes of these approaches, they remain limited as they:

- Do not fully consider and address the structural conditions that cause inequality and oppression.
- Fail to articulate empowerment in terms of a power-aware project.
- Remain largely a-political and do not sustain decolonial practice.

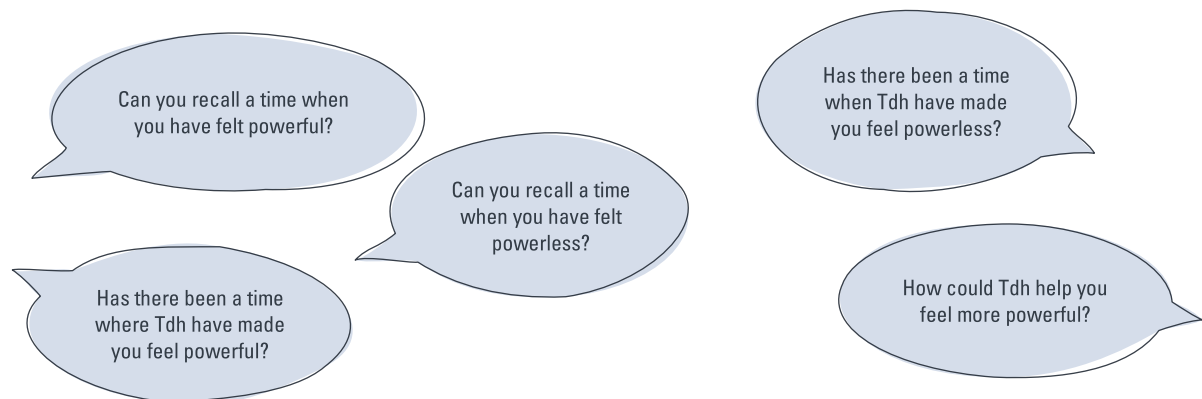
The study suggested that Tdh programmes held **clear aspirations towards a power-informed approach**, with significant efforts to consult adult, child and youth stakeholders in projects, consistent application of [safeguarding principles](#) and internal guidelines such as the [Accountability Framework](#) and [Methodology Guidelines](#). These all represent important resources that can act as a base capable of contributing to power-informed practice. At the same time, it suggested further opportunities for Tdh to reinforce its approach to empowerment by using a **power analysis lens in its programmes and general practices to inform its work**.

How do children, youth and Tdh staff understand emPOWERment?

How do children and youth understand emPOWERment?

In total, nine FGDs with nearly 150 girls, boys and transgender children and youth were conducted by Tdh staff in Egypt, Guinea, Hungary, India and Jordan, as well as one FGD online with in international group of children and young people involved in global child rights advocacy as part of the #CovidUnder19 project.

Children and young people were invited to give their perspectives during group discussions around the following questions:



It is important to highlight that Tdh staff facilitated all but one group discussion, meaning that any participant assessment of Tdh practice may have been affected by confirmation bias.

Empowerment was broadly seen by child and youth participants in terms of:



The FGDs with girls in Jordan and India further demonstrate this stance, with participants stating:

'Once I was in a situation where I had to choose between maintaining my dignity or losing a really close and dear person, I chose my dignity and let go of that person leading to feeling powerful.'

Extracts from FGD with Girls in Jordan, 18/07/22.

'I felt empowered when I could raise my voice against discrimination by my parents based on my gender, enabling me to convince my parents to allow me to live my life by my own choices.'

FGD with Girls in Mahananda Colony, Malda, India, 16/07/22.

Many children shared stories of **feeling empowered when seeking to change the structural conditions around them**, as well as when their courage to protest an issue in their locality was appreciated by their communities. Children noted the importance of critical awareness and education to challenge marginalizing environments, as shown in the definition of empowerment conceptualized by the #CovidUnder19 group as:

'a process fostering critical collectiveness, connectedness and power to act' and as 'a space, creating the conditions for me and others to think critically, hopefully, together, about what we want our lives to be, what we can change and how we can change it'.

FGD with Mixed Group, Online, 19/08/22.

Demonstrating the validity and strength of Tdh's existing empowerment approaches, **participants heavily emphasised how Tdh's work helped children and youth feel empowered.** For instance:

'The participants wanted to refer to the word 'Power' as empowerment after they got involved with Tdh. Though they had passion, dedication and devotion to fight against all the challenges, they did not have knowledge and information about their own body and mind. That they learnt after attending sessions organised by Tdh, helping them to become more confident and challenge social stigma'.

Notes from FGD with Transgender Youth in Mahananda Colony, Malda, India, 18/07/22.

'Tdh have helped us gain self-confidence and made us feel like we are able to achieve things. They have supported us to be stronger and heard what we have to say'.

Notes from FGD with Boys in Jordan, 18/07/22.

'Most of the boys shared that after they got involved with Tdh they felt powerful when they did sessions on gender, sexuality and child rights. They were able to identify different abuses, they could raise their voices on these in their locality. They also understood that their effort would be successful if they worked unitedly, with failure to prevent incidences of violence against children making them feel powerless'.

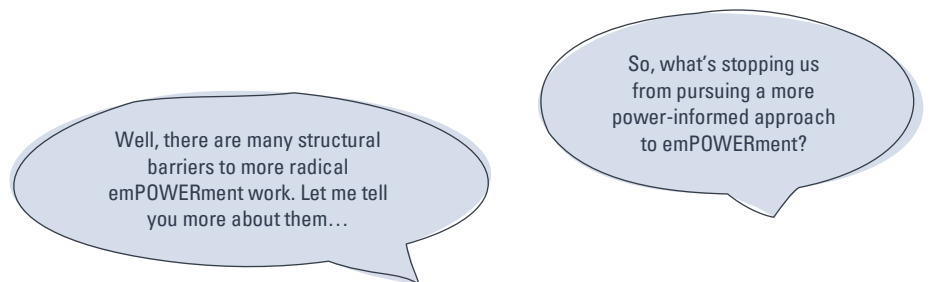
Notes from FGD with Boys in Mahananda Colony, Malada, India, 17/07/22.

How do Tdh staff understand emPOWERment?

The study revealed the considerable sophistication in how Tdh staff conceptualize empowerment, with staff overwhelmingly committed to developing and implementing better empowerment practice. Indeed, many interviewees defined empowerment in complex terms centered on privilege, structure and oppression. Some expressed frustration at not knowing how to integrate these understandings into their practice. Crucially, discussions with both staff and children displayed a significant overlap in thinking around what power 'is', and the ideals of collective action, service and change. This points strongly to awareness amongst certain Tdh staff that adopting a power-informed approach to empowerment is necessary to address the multiple and compounding factors that drive children, families and communities to experience the marginalisation and vulnerability that Tdh's programming addresses.

Nevertheless, the study revealed the absence of a fully shared, organisational understanding of empowerment. Whilst many interviewees from projects and from the Tdh internal Child and youth empowerment working group" considered empowerment as a '**vital practice**' and '**direction of desired travel for the organisation as a whole**', wider analysis of Tdh documentation revealed that empowerment was often highlighted as an aspiration, but with little concrete steps to put it into practice.

Challenges and limitations: where are the spaces for improvement?



In light of the gradual disconnection of power from empowerment identified in the literature, it is important to explore why this is the case. This following section aims to provide an answer, offering a brief overview of the challenges and limitations to pursuing a **power-informed approach** to empowerment.

Structural challenges to adopting power-informed approaches within development and humanitarian sectors

- **Donor limitations:** these may inhibit the scope for transformative political, social or structural change, with funding typically restricted to a-political service-delivery and 'symptom-alleviation' projects as opposed to the time-intensive process of enacting structural change. Indeed, funding is liable to withdrawal if organizations rock the boat by overly questioning established power relationships and vested interests. Meanwhile, **the prevalence of short-term** funding cycles in development generally, and humanitarian action specifically, can prevent NGO staff from thinking more in terms of long-term, structural changes.



- **Exclusively economic:** Mainstream empowerment approaches typically reduce empowerment to increasing individual wealth and access to material resources, as opposed to challenging the very bases of wealth distribution and inequality. This has led to claims that empowerment has become co-opted and adapted to the capitalist system, rather than used as a process of transformation beyond it.
- **Top-downism :** Despite empowerment's origins as bottom-up struggles for social transformation, contemporary institutions typically work *on* rather than *with* those requiring empowerment. This has led to criticism that empowerment approaches perpetuate asymmetric power hierarchies, rather than act as a mechanism for radical social change. This top-down fashion is particularly visible in efforts to empower children, where despite growing recognition of their importance and competence as social actors, children are all too often being perceived as 'human becomings' rather than 'human beings'. There is a real risk of exacerbating harm if interventions are developed externally and without the full collaboration of children and young people, once more reproducing powerlessness, heightening resistance and increasing risk of limited project impacts.
- **Technical not political:** a further challenge is mainstream empowerment's excessively technical nature, regularly painting socio-structural challenges as technical issues that can be fixed with the correct inputs. The study argues that to render technical is to depoliticise, where instead of tackling the underlying causes of development problems, mainstream empowerment approaches strive to provide individuals with the tools to better endure such problems. Coined as the 'empowerment-as-coping' approach, such strategies seek to accommodate individuals within existing social and political systems as opposed to challenging them.
- **Overly individualistic:** Empowerment approaches commonly depict empowerment as an isolated, individual journey, rather than a process of radical collective transformation. This marks a wider tendency of neoliberalism to paint poverty as a problem of the individual, particularly in the Global North. Empowerment's subsequent focus on modifying individual behaviour therefore disregards and diverts attention away from the structural conditions causing and underpinning inequality. Even group empowerment initiatives are typically employed instrumentally, used mainly 'as vehicles for individual change' rather than for inspiring collective efforts for structural-political transformation.
- **Lacking intersectionality:** Intersectionality can be understood as an analysis of power used for understanding the multiple, overlapping vectors of identity along the lines of which privilege, and inequality are organised, including race, class, caste and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). Mainstream empowerment approaches typically reduce complex problems to one-dimensional issues, rather than understanding them as the outcome of a multiplicity of interlocking oppressions. By neglecting the difference that differences make, empowerment approaches may only relieve the symptoms of oppression as opposed to sufficiently addressing its causes, heightening the likelihood of harm or failure.

Institutional challenges to adopting power-informed approaches within development and humanitarian sectors

According to both the literature and interviews, these challenges include:

- **Limited time** for operational teams to engage with the latest research, to reflect on best practice or to assess and re-work existing organisational practices. This is largely conditioned by the fast-paced, rigid grant management practices that often perpetuate a state of 'crisis mode', typically inconducive for deep reflection and learning.
- **Insufficient organisational learning architectures**, which means that excellent internal and external research and clear examples of best practice may get lost or face limited scope for replication.

- **Institutional 'silo-ing'** that accompanies the thematic division of organisational operations. Although this thematic division may make sense for developing in-house expertise, streamlining coordination work and focusing interventions, it may limit the intersectional and coordinated actions so essential to empowerment efforts. This may also restrict bottom-up initiatives for organisational change.
- **Hesitancy to challenge entrenched ways of working**, with an increasing internalisation that 'technical approaches to power relations are the only solution'. This is especially the case if newness feels experimental and staff lack clear pathways towards implementation. Despite their expertise, the most experienced staff may be steeped in more traditional, top-down ways of working that are inconducive to more radical, participatory forms of empowerment.

Reflecting on these challenges, the study looked at specific Tdh projects and methodologies and suggested ways in which these challenges could be overcome by adopting a power-informed lens.

From individualism to collective action : Re-imagining FabLab



FabLab

FabLab's represent innovative, open spaces in which marginalized youth in eastern Europe and Western Africa can receive psychosocial support and use specialised equipment such as 3D printers to design and create their own products. The project has contributed to building digital skills, resilience, social cohesion and community, bridging innovation with traditional, social-work inspired child protection. The project is focused predominantly on the psychosocial level, with intergenerational collaboration between facilitators and young participants remaining at an individual, rather than building collective movement level.

Through a power-informed lens, the FabLab project could be reinforced through greater attention to the collective and structural dimensions that contribute to the marginalization of young people in the first place. For example, for young people who have experienced forced migration, FabLabs could be a channel for challenging discrimination and stereotypes of migrant communities in wider social settings.

From technical to political : Re-imagining YouCreate

YouCreate

Despite YouCreate's commitment to participatory action research, the extent to which it evolves into forms of collective conscientisation and politicisation is limited. With its focus on empowering marginalised and excluded young people to become 'active community agents' and promoting 'social cohesion and inclusion at the community level', the YouCreate methodology harbours the potential to work structurally on catalysing deeper changes in the social and political systems that oppress young people. Adopting a power-informed lens in projects using the YouCreate methodology would shift emphasis from supporting individuals to cope with adversity towards reinforcing their capacity to take collective action against the surrounding structures and systems remain largely disempowering.

From top-down problem identification towards participatory approached : Re-imagining programming around child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

Child Marriage in the MENA region



"Understanding child marriage amongst Syrian Refugee Communities in Jordan and Lebanon" was a Tdh and University of Bedfordshire research project conducted between 2016 and 2020. The research engaged with Syrian girls and young women in Jordan and Lebanon 'at risk' of being married early or who had already married early, to understand their perspectives and experiences. Based on literature about increased rates of child marriage amongst Syrian refugee communities, the decision to focus on child-marriage was made by adult researchers. Despite the inclusion of young people within the project, more could have been done to integrate children and young people into the research design process, in the spirit of intergenerational allyship.

Through an intersectional, power-informed lens, adopting a participatory action research process early on in the research design phase could have opened up space for co-creation with children and young people, in turn allowing them to identify different aspects of oppression that they were experiencing. This would have reinforced an intersectional approach, supporting children and young people to identify the issues they themselves want to work on, including different forms of gender-based violence amongst boys and girls, which may have added additional issues to the focus on child marriage.

Bringing Power back in EmPOWERment!

By pursuing and advancing power-informed empowerment approaches, I/NGO programming can contribute to addressing the major structural issues facing children and young people today, including racial discrimination, increasing social and economic inequality and climate crisis. Intersectional, participatory and child-led practices are all the more requisite to remain at the cutting-edge of positive, transformative empowerment work.

Through its work on emPOWERment, Tdh is attempting to a critical awareness in the wider sector that change is needed.

Based on these challenges, these models have been identified as a potential resources...

Part 3: What's next?

How to bring power back into emPOWERment?

Let me introduce you to Gaventa's Power Cube, Rowland's Empowerment Framework and Howard and Klein's 5 Guiding Principles. Radical change is starting to happen!

Surely emPOWERment can't stay as a buzzword forever. How can we help to bring power back into emPOWERment?



The challenge for organisations like Tdh may seem stark:

- How to push in the direction of more radical, power-informed empowerment?
- How can we foster genuine power sharing forms of co-creation with the children and communities we serve, in ways that overturn traditional development hierarchies?



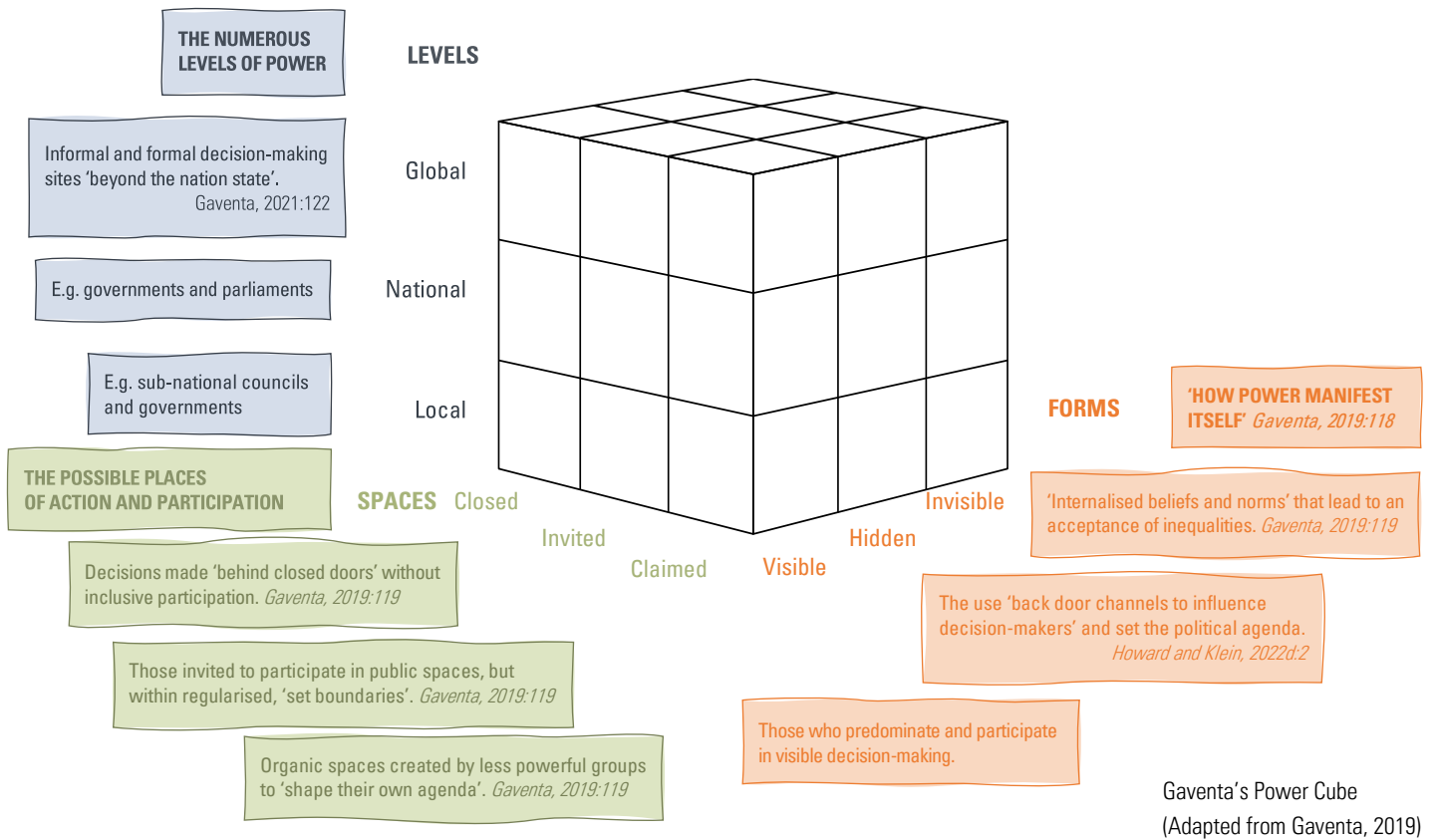
Despite empowerment's de-politicising tendencies, Klein & Howard's study suggests that there are opportunities to bring a power-informed approach to empowerment back in. Indeed, significant efforts have been made to bring power back into empowerment, ultimately reclaiming it as a feminist strategy and political force. **Power analysis is a key tool to achieve this, defined as a learning process supporting development actors to understand and address the complexity of power.** Such tools are highly valuable in improving programme design, used by country team to anticipate responses, mitigate risks and prevent unintended consequences.

Towards a power-informed emPOWERment approach

1. John Gaventa's Power Cube⁶

This represents one of the most widely applied power analysis tools, used to make topographical sense of how and where power is in operation. By examining the [multiple forms, levels and spaces](#) of power and their interactions, the power cube illustrates that power is fundamentally multi-layered, ensuring the devising of strategies that interrogate *all* forms of inequitable power. It is evident that transformative change can only occur when development actors work across all areas of the cube, rendering coalitions and networks even more essential. For a closer look at how the Power Cube has been applied in practice, [this resource](#) offers particularly illuminating insights.

⁶ Gaventa, J. (2020). "Applying Power Analysis: Using the 'Powercube' to Explore Forms, Levels and Spaces". In: McGee, R. and Pettit, J. (Eds.) Power, Empowerment and Social Change. Abingdon: Routledge, 117–138



2. Jo Rowland's emPOWERment framework⁷

This framework is highly valuable in guiding multi-layered efforts to grow power, understanding power in four primary ways:

- 1. Power over:** the power of the strong over the vulnerable, including domination but also the power to exclude.
- 2. Power to:** understood as a 'productive or generative power', reflecting the unique potential of individuals to choose actions and carry them out.
- 3. Power with:** a relational form of power that represents collective strength, emerging through organisation, solidarity and coalition building.
- 4. Power within:** reflecting one's inner-strength, self-worth and self-reflexivity so essential in envisioning and striving for change.

⁷ Rowlands, J. (2020). "Finding the Right Power Tool(s) For the Job: Rendering the Invisible Visible". In: McGee, R. and Pettit, J. (Eds.) Power, Empowerment and Social Change. Abingdon: Routledge, 152-166

In order to **push beyond the mainstream** and in the **direction of greater emancipation**, Howard and Klein's consultancy have developed five 'Guiding Principles' to support Tdh towards a different way of institutional and personal being.

3. Klein and Howard's Five Guiding Principles

1. Working Internally

In order to recognise, understand and challenge development's de-politicising tendencies, it is essential that child-focused I/NGOs put in place robust learning architectures that go beyond simple monitoring and evaluation, and instead work on exposing staff to critical scholarship and practice. This involves actively seeking out diverse, critical perspectives and creating space and support for decolonial, self-reflexive praxis.

2. Working Structurally

In its most radical form, empowerment is a process of transformation within the struggle against oppression and inequality. Given that both oppression and inequality are structural problems that rely on and are reproduced by structurally determined power relations, it is critical that empowerment practice recognises and addresses such structures and relations. For child-focused I/NGOs, this involves working 'upstream' with allies, targeting key leverage points to shift system dynamics as opposed to merely alleviating symptoms.

3. Working Intersectionally

Child-focused I/NGOs need to take intersectional theory and practice seriously, working with stakeholders to address multiple domains of injustice identified as a priority by beneficiaries, including gender, generation, sexuality, and race. Intersectionality is also crucial for alliance and movement building, with intersectional alliances essential in the struggle for change. If organisations wish to push strategically and structurally for radical transformation, then forging coalitions beyond the usual suspects will be necessary.

4. Working Intergenerationally

With power typically concentrated in adult hands and children systematically excluded from decision making, it is essential that children are viewed by I/NGOs as human beings and not 'human becomings' who need to be heard *and* listened to within the context of meaningful co-design and power-sharing. This demands a change of internal organisational practice, in addition to advocating for change beyond organisational boundaries.

5. Working Collaboratively

Working intergenerationally points in the direction of genuine allyship. This requires deep collaboration with youth, placing youth agency and decision-making central, whilst ensuring significant autonomy for youth to decide on both 'the issues' and their possible remedies.

Collectively, these tools and approaches can help transform both empowerment practice within child-focused I/NGOs. It is essential organisations recognises that there can be no change without critically evaluating power: actively seeking to understand, analyse, transfer and challenge it in all aspects of work.

Conclusion

Empowerment is a process 'creating the conditions for me and others to think critically, hopefully, together, about what we want our lives to be, what we can change and how we can change it'.

FGD with Mixed Group, Online, 19/08/22

Klein and Howard's study reaffirms that there are opportunities to bring a power-informed approach to empowerment back in. Indeed, significant efforts have been made to bring power back into empowerment, including through feminist, racial and climate justice initiatives. Given that power dynamics are present in every social relationship, power analysis is a key tool to achieve this, defined as a learning process supporting development actors to understand and address the complexity of power.

This document has sought to reinvigorate empowerment with a power-informed definition and purpose, arguing that the more that child-focused I/NGOs adopt power-informed approaches to empowerment, the more that meaningful and structural change will occur in the lives of marginalized and excluded children and young people.

Reflecting on Tdh's programming, Klein and Howard's study highlighted the pressing need for institutional transformation and a shift in organisational culture, with this essential in foregrounding youth voices and enabling empowerment to be placed at the heart of all that Tdh does.

Guided by the study and committed efforts of staff, Tdh have begun to rearticulate its approach to empowerment, with power becoming central to definition and practice within Tdh. The approaches to using the three frameworks presented here (Gaventa's power cube, Rowland's framework and Klein & Howard's five Principles) are the subject of the forthcoming publication '*Towards a Framework for Child and Youth Empowerment: Operational Guidance*' (expected in 2025), which proposes concrete, strategic and operational recommendations to nurture a power-informed approach to empowerment within international child-focused programming. Watch this space!



References

Batliwala, S. (2007). "Taking the power out of empowerment - experiential account." *Development in Practice* 17(4): 557-565.

Cornwall, A. (2016) "Women's empowerment : What works?", *Journal of International Development- J. Int. Dev.* 28, 342–359.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color". *Stanford Law Review.* 43(6), 1241-99.

Rowlands, J. (2020). "Finding the Right Power Tool(s) For the Job: Rendering the Invisible Visible". In: McGee, R. and Pettit, J. (Eds.) *Power, Empowerment and Social Change.* Abingdon: Routledge, 152-166

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* London: Penguin Books.

Kabeer, N. (1999). "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment." *Development and Change,* 30: 435-464.

Rowlands, J. (2020). "Finding the Right Power Tool(s) For the Job: Rendering the Invisible Visible". In: McGee, R. and Pettit, J. (Eds.) *Power, Empowerment and Social Change.* Abingdon: Routledge, 152-166

Impressum

Version: November 2024

Authors: This document is based on the consultancy reports produced by Elise Klein and Neil Howard for Tdh in 2022, with contributions from Maria Bray, Kristen Hope Burchill, Sophie Mareschal, Nina Marx, Olsi Dudumi and Amy Seaman.

Suggested citation: Terre des hommes, 2024, *Bringing Power Back – Towards a framework for child & youth empowerment*. Lausanne : Terre des homes Foundation.

Illustrations: freepik.com

Photos: Atdhe Mulla, Tanmay Bhaduri, Diego Ibarra, Aly Condé

Graphic design: Tdh, Angel-Grafik

© 2024, Terre des hommes – helping children worldwide


*Every child in the world
has the right to a childhood.
It's that simple.*

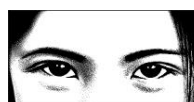


© Tdh / Diego Ibarra



Siège | Hauptsitz | Sede | Headquarters
Route des Plaines-du-Loup 55, 1018 Lausanne
T +41 58 611 06 11, donorcare@tdh.org
www.tdh.org, CH41 0900 0000 1001 1504 8

 www.tdh.org
 www.linkedin.com/company/tdh-org
 www.facebook.com/www.tdh.org
 www.twitter.com/tdh_org



Terre des hommes
Helping children worldwide.