

A nonviolent understanding of power helps us to see how constructive programmes are different to “development” or “charity” work done on behalf of people or communities, that does little or nothing to challenge the status quo. Traditionally, power is thought of as deriving from positions of authority; so kings and queens, prime ministers, presidents, head teachers, CEOs, military commanders are all the most powerful, and they bequeath power to their subordinates, who follow orders. In this model, power flows from the top down, and has been described as **power-over**, to distinguish from types of movement or collective power. Maintaining power-over often requires coercion and violence (direct, structural or cultural – see how it all starts to fit together?!). For example, social structures like patriarchy mean some individuals and groups are assumed to have power-over others, who are expected to act on perceived – and often oppressive – social norms, by handing their power to others.

Power-over can be an appealing idea, but is actually a very inaccurate understanding of what is occurring in many of our societies. A nonviolent understanding of power asks the question; what is it that allows those in authority to be effective, to have command? Where is their power derived from? Is their power innate? Or does it come from others, those they have power over handing their own power – often collectively, en masse – to their superiors? If power-over is actually derived from collaboration and obedience – by paying taxes, working in factories, obeying the laws – then there are also a lot of options for nonviolent resistance. Rather than power being bequeathed from above, maybe it is handed over from below. The dependence power holders have on larger professional groups and citizens that provide the political, economic and cultural resource can be broken by massive and creative non-cooperation campaigns.

4.1 Power-with

Some (though of course not all) forms of trade union organising show how power can be brought back to the grassroots; as individuals, people feel they have very little power against bosses and large corporations, especially when their livelihoods are at stake from the decisions being made. Trade unions – especially those with strong grassroots activism - show us an example of how people can recentre power back towards those most effected by the decisions being made. This kind of power is called **power-with**, because power is derived from the willingness and ability for a group of people to act collectively, to achieve what perhaps no individual would be able to on their own. Sometimes just a handful of people, with very little power individually, can force a change by acting collectively. In 2003, in preparation for the invasion of Iraq, the British military was moving large amounts of ammunition to its base in Scotland, where it would be shipped to military bases around the world in preparation for war. There was a single track train line to the base, [and it took just 12 unionised train drivers to refuse to obey orders](#) to dramatically impact the ability of the military to make the shipments.

Constructive programmes rely heavily on cultivating power-with, not only because these sorts of projects would be impossible for an individual to manage on their own, but because in a constructive programme we are imagining a new way of doing society; the care and attention put into the internal transformation of a community – in part by cultivating power-with – is as important as the objective outcomes (the houses that are built, the gardens grown, etc.)

4.2 Power-within

Before taking action for social change we have to believe change is possible, and that we have the skills to make it happen. Without this **power-within**, we might not even realise the injustice and oppression present in everyday life, and if we do, we might not believe we can do anything about it. This silence, this inability to act, might be one of the best examples of how people and communities hand over their power. In contrast,

individuals and communities with lots of power-within, who really believe in their ability to make change, are often able to achieve amazing things.

The process of gaining **power-within** is sometimes called 'empowerment', and can be achieved through experiencing successful campaigns, actions or projects, training and education, building community and networks, and a broader culture that promotes expression, participation in decision-making, and self-reliance. Individuals and communities developing **power-within** is an essential component of a constructive programme, because such work means communities taking control of their own destiny's (or at least, some element of it), without appealing to institutions, governments, or other groups to act on their behalf.

There is a stark difference between true empowerment and pseudo, reactionary, hysterical politics; there is a rich history of fascist and populist politicians appealing to communities sense of alienation, disenfranchisement, or hopelessness. Easy answers are provided – often by vilifying a scapegoat – and such movements thrive on misinformation, hysteria and anger. If anything, truly empowered communities are immune to attempts to be provoked to act so violently.

So a successful constructive programme tries to build power-with and power-within, while helping us to understand and undermine power-over. As well as the 'macro' forms of power-over that their constructive programmes are trying to address, there are also forms of oppression and violence that can be manifested as power-over internally, within the community or group, and constructive programmes set about directly addressing these. Robert Burrowes described Gandhi's nonviolence as having an impact on how constructive programme impacts how power is manifested in the individual and on the wider community: “For the individual, constructive programme meant increased power-from-within through the development of personal identity, self-reliance, and fearlessness. For the community, it meant the creation of a new set of political, social, and economic relations'.”

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