Linking economics and emotions: towards a more integrated understanding of empowerment in conflict areas

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The disintegration and disempowerment caused by war and organized violence in conflict areas are often reinforced by aid projects. Instead of addressing the social and psychological processes of threat and fear, destruction and trauma, loss and grief through interventions, they separate them, delegate them to specialists and ignore them in the other sectors of programming humanitarian aid. On the other hand, in psychosocial projects, the material needs of people are not always addressed adequately. In this article, a tool is introduced that helps to better understand the real extent of individual and collective disempowerment in conflict areas, and to facilitate an integrated psychosocial approach to empowerment. The application of this tool will be illustrated with two examples. One example looks at economic projects in Nepal, where staff examined more closely their individual beneficiaries and realized how the fears of both past and future influence economic performance. The other is in a psychosocial project in Gaza where this tool helped counsellors to take the material needs of their clients more seriously, and to turn sewing and pottery courses from occupational therapy into a form of economic empowerment.

Keywords: empowerment, Gaza, Nepal, psychosocial, sequential traumatization, toolkit

Introduction

A growing number of professionals are convinced that a psychosocial approach should not remain confined to a specific sector of programming but should be adopted by all humanitarian and development interventions in conflict and post conflict areas (Williamson & Robinson, 2006; van Ommeren, Morris & Saxena, 2006; Ager, Strang & Wessels, 2006). Every armed conflict has social, psychological and material consequences for the affected populations and 'recovery' implies that those consequences be addressed simultaneously. If the interventions are segregated from each other, none of them can be individually successful.

Psychosocial projects often focus only on the psychological and social needs of impacted populations and neglect the material problems of their clients, or the vital social and political processes that so fundamentally influence the wellbeing of their beneficiaries. Whether a widow can recover after the war depends on how she is accepted in her community, as well as whether the injustice of her husband's murder is publicly acknowledged. In their health, or shelter, or livelihood programmes, aid agencies neglect the non project related aspects of people's lives. This is true, even though they significantly determine whether an intervention is effective or not. For example, in a temporary shelter project in Bosnia, the NGO (nongovernmental organisation) staff had difficulties in maintaining the sanitary

installations. Although plumbers regularly repaired them, the inhabitants of the centre were very quickly damaging them again. The staff could not understand why and blamed the people for being unreasonable and destructive. Finally, one of the NGO staff members sat down with the displaced people in the centre and asked them to talk about their lives. The situation they described was one of great frustration. It seemed less likely than ever that they could return to their place of origin, and for most of them there was no possibility of earning an income. The lack of space in the shelter also contributed to already strained family relations. In this powerless situation, people directed their anger at the blocked toilets where the consequence of overcrowding was particularly noticeable. Regular repairs by technicians from outside did nothing to resolve their actual problems, and therefore their anger and helplessness grew. However, through the act of really listening to people and acknowledging their difficulties, it became possible to develop ways of preventing toilet blockages and, slowly through better self-organization, they were able to improve some of the living conditions of their exile.

Only if the full extent of the beneficiaries' disempowerment is understood, can the interventions be shaped so as to support their recovery. The integration of a psychosocial approach in every sector of programming therefore implies first of all that a comprehensive situation analysis be based on the understanding that people's wellbeing can only be improved if:

- individuals are seen as having social, material and psychological needs and capacities[1]; and
- the complex dynamics between people and their social environment, i.e. between the individual and the collective, are understood and addressed.

This article will introduce an 'empowerment tool' that helps to identify the target population's problems more holistically. Examples from Nepal and Gaza will illustrate how the improved understanding of the project participants' actual situation helped to shape activities in the given project framework to foster wellbeing. As the comprehension of disempowerment is at the core of any attempt to facilitate the empowerment of project participants, the article will begin by introducing the main social and psychological processes that affect people in conflict areas.

Disempowerment

Direct and structural violence produce social processes of threat, destruction and loss. The psychological reactions are fear, traumatization and grief. These social and psychological processes are closely interlinked and result in disempowerment (see Figure 1).[2]

Threat/fear. Under normal circumstances, fear helps us to perceive danger and to protect ourselves. Once the dangerous situation is brought under some control the fear usually stops. However, in a context of chronic threat, fear becomes chronic. It becomes part of the

Disempowerment processes		
Social processes		*Mental processes*
Threat	⟺	Fear
Destruction	⟺	Trauma
Loss	⟺	Grief
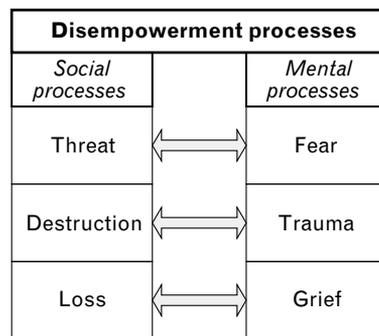
Becker and Weyermann, 2006

Figure 1: Disempowerment processes in conflict areas.

mental structure and exists independently of the actual danger. Chronic fear leads to constant watchfulness and caution, distrust and reserve, and causes social withdrawal and emotional isolation. People do not speak about their fear because they want to conceal their vulnerability in front of others. Additionally, they do not wish to re-experience the terrifying moments of acute fear and the feelings of powerlessness. The collective silence that ensues protects people from each other, but it also weakens and isolates them because it stops them from sharing what are, in fact, common preoccupations.

As long as there is threat, fear cannot be overcome, but fear can become better integrated. Creating spaces where people feel safe to share their worries and to discuss strategies of self-protection helps them to cope better in a threatening environment. Gaining a clearer understanding of how fear affects behaviour and relationships is particularly important in project teams. If the risk is high and the fear is chronic, staff members often become unable to judge the threat adequately and, either expose themselves unnecessarily or, alternatively, overestimate the danger, thus hindering their abilities to carry out their normal tasks.

Destruction/traumatization. Referring to trauma in the context of socio-political conflict has become complicated because of the long-standing controversy about the concept of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Summerfield 1996; 2001; Becker 2000). In the course of rejecting the apolitical, de-contextualized, symptom-focused concept of PTSD, the notion of trauma is, unfortunately, often discarded altogether. However, traumatization is a crucial concept to comprehend the break-up and rupture in the psychic and social fabric that occurs when the political and social destruction exceeds the coping capacity of individuals and collectives.

The most important feature of a more productive understanding of trauma is its process oriented nature. Trauma does not equal the symptoms that may appear after a specific event; instead it can be understood as a lifelong vulnerability that develops in close relation to the socio-political processes, which cause it. This concept of 'sequential traumatisation' was developed by Hans Keilson (1992) in his study on Jewish war orphans in the Netherlands. He shows how the experience of these children in different sequences of World War II and its aftermath[3] influenced how they later, as adults, were able to live their lives. If children suffered severely during the war but were cared for by good foster parents and a supportive environment after the war, they were able to live their lives quite well. However, if their suffering was similar or less grave during acute terror but they later ended up in children's homes or with uncaring foster families, they found it difficult to cope throughout their lives. Keilson, in other words, demonstrates that the effect of traumatic experiences on the development of a person depends directly on the presence or absence of a supportive socio-political environment *after* the events that set off the traumatic process.

Aid agencies must work towards creating such a favourable environment at each stage of the conflict. In an adaptation of Keilson's concept, seven distinct sequences of a violent conflict can be identified, each demanding and allowing certain support measures (Becker & Weyermann, 2006). The first sequence is the pre-conflict phase because what people experience during this period will influence how they cope during a war. At the beginning of the persecution or violent conflict (sequence 2), the threat starts building but is not yet generalized. Later, when the conflict is acute, the threat of detention, murder, torture, and destruction becomes a reality for large

numbers of people (sequence 3). This direct terror is often followed by periods of relative calm (sequence 4), when the threat looms and the fear is chronic. When nothing happens and yet everything could happen. Usually, the movement is back and forth between periods of relative calm and acute terror. When peace talks start and a ceasefire is declared, hopes are high but the fear remains. This phase of transition (phase 5) can be short or long and, often, the movement goes back to war before the negotiations eventually lead to post conflict situation (sequence 6). For refugees and displaced persons, exile is an additional, following traumatic sequence (sequence 7). The often unfavourable, discriminatory and humiliating conditions that they are likely to confront in the place of refuge greatly influence how their vulnerabilities develop (van der Veer, 1998; Becker & Weyermann, 2006). In each of these sequences, the possibilities of support differ significantly. During acute terror, emergency relief has to be provided; people need help to survive the crisis and to deal with risk and fear. During periods of relative calm, it is often possible to contribute to stabilizing social networks and to help creating spaces for reflection and communication. Mourning processes can begin. In the transition phase, it is important to work towards overcoming chronic fear and to start, both literally and symbolically, to bury the dead. Yet, only after the violent conflict has ended will it become possible to really work through trauma and grief. The post conflict phase is the most important sequence of the traumatic process. 'War is what comes after the bombs', said a Lebanese woman in the 1990s, 'the years of suffering helplessly with a disabled husband and no money, or struggling to rebuild when all your property has been destroyed' (Bennett, Bexley & Warnock, 1995). When people take stock of their losses, often with little perspective that life will improve, it is important to help them with their grief because what happens in this sequence will determine whether the traumatic process develops in a healing, or destructive, way.

Loss/grief. Grief and mourning, the psychic response to the loss of a loved person, but also includes loss of one's home, one's sense of belonging or one's physical integrity, are never uncomplicated in the context of violent conflict. The circumstances of the loss cannot be fully grasped and are difficult to accept. Often, family members are not able to bury their dead with dignity and they cannot share their pain with anyone. Unstable conditions, the traumatization of the survivors and the struggle for survival make it even harder for people to allow room for grief. However, if the mourning process comes to a standstill and cannot be completed, people are at risk. Emotionally, they cannot let go, and they remain entangled with death and do not engage with life. Depression, increased susceptibility to disease, excessive medication and substance abuse are typical symptoms. After violent conflict, when the threat ceases and conditions are more stable, it is essential to help people deal with their losses. 'Grief', Joan Didion (2006) observed in her devastating memoir of the year after her husband's sudden death, '*was passive. Grief happened. Mourning, the act of dealing with grief, required attention.*' Grief is disabling and disempowering, yet without working through it, life cannot continue. Mourning, therefore, is ultimately empowering. How each individual is able to mourn, however, is greatly influenced by the way a society deals with the past. The socio-political conflict has left wounds in individuals and often, they come to perceive their pain as their own, personal problem. Truth and justice procedures recognize that injustice was done and contribute to restoring the dignity

of victims and their families. The collective forms of remembrance and memory work to de-individualize suffering, and thus lessen it, as it can be shared with others.

Empowerment

Fear, trauma and incomplete mourning are disempowering processes that induce a feeling of total helplessness and powerlessness. Recovery is thus dependent on regaining a degree of control over one's life, and this must go hand in hand with a reduction in social and political injustice. Empowerment therefore is the process of improving the wellbeing of conflict affected people. The word power in empowerment has several meanings.

Power from within is the self-acceptance that comes from understanding one's past and present situation, one's needs and the nature of one's relationships. Power from within is also connected to the perception that one is entitled and able to make changes.

Closely linked to power from within is *power together with others*, the experience that others are in a similar situation and that, together, changes are possible. Such changes are never possible without shifts in existing power relations (*power over*).

People who stand outside the decision making process have to be brought into it (Rowlands, 1997). In a context of direct and structural violence, empowerment is thus more than gaining individual strength. It aims at participation in order to change unjust and unacceptable social and political conditions.

The 'empowerment tool' (Figure 2) helps to chart out a path to empowerment. This instrument was developed by David Becker and myself as part of the toolkit '*Gender, conflict transformation and the psychosocial approach,*' which is intended to help programmes funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) to look at their area of intervention through a psychosocial lens.[4]

In the first step, a set of questions guides the description of the destruction and fragmentation of a person or a community. The emphasis on the disempowerment is a reflection of the understanding that only if people's despair and adverse life changes are not denied will they be able to mobilize their resources and strength. In the second step, the empowerment tool assists in defining the envisioned transformation: what are the changes required in order to improve the situation? Only in a third step is the tool user asked to identify the activities required to support empowerment.

The instrument suggests that the situation has to be analysed both at the individual and at the collective level. If a project deals with individual clients, the community must be equally analysed. If the project deals with groups (user groups, women's groups, youth groups, etc.), the inquiry has to also be carried out on the individual level for at least a few of the group members. At the same time, the analysis of the community level will further the understanding of the particular group's situation. If a project, however, deals with a certain population (for example: internally displaced persons or ex-combatants), not only should the collective level (mechanisms of exclusion and support within the communities) have been understood, but also the analysis must be extended to a certain number of individuals and families. Whether a project works with groups, or with individuals, the analysis should always be made at both the micro and the macro level since social groups consist of individuals, and individuals make up the collective.

The list of questions suggested by the empowerment tool is by no means exhaustive; additions can be made according to the situation and context. However, it is vital to pay attention to the social, material and psychological dimension of the problem.
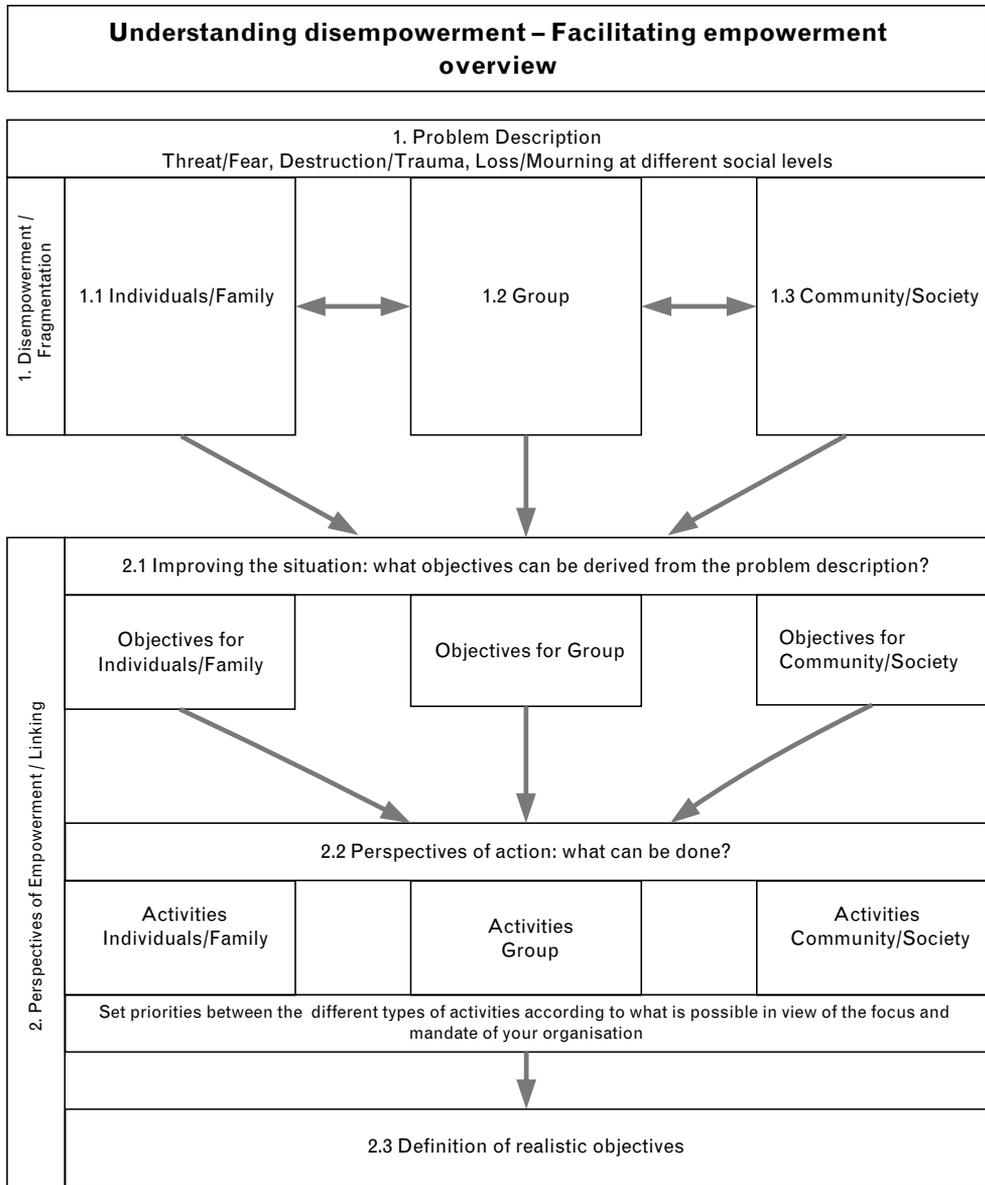

Understanding disempowerment – Facilitating empowerment overview

1. Problem Description
Threat/Fear, Destruction/Trauma, Loss/Mourning at different social levels

1. Disempowerment / Fragmentation

| 1.1 Individuals/Family | ⟷ | 1.2 Group | ⟷ | 1.3 Community/Society |

2. Perspectives of Empowerment / Linking

2.1 Improving the situation: what objectives can be derived from the problem description?

| Objectives for Individuals/Family | Objectives for Group | Objectives for Community/Society |

2.2 Perspectives of action: what can be done?

| Activities Individuals/Family | Activities Group | Activities Community/Society |

Set priorities between the different types of activities according to what is possible in view of the focus and mandate of your organisation

2.3 Definition of realistic objectives

Figure 2: The empowerment tool.

When the answers to these questions are put next to each other as suggested by the tool (Figure 3), the tool user will see that it does not make sense to only deal with a person's fear in a therapeutic setting if the fears are partly caused by ongoing precarious material conditions. On the other hand, putting the description of different aspects of the problem next to each other will further the understanding that a person, suffering from depression and a lack of hope or a vision for the future, will not be able to thoroughly benefit from livelihood improvement interventions.

1.1 Disempowerment processes Fragmentation and destruction: problem definition - Individuals/Families		
Social	**Material**	**Psychological**
☐ How threatening is the situation? ☐ What kinds of relationships exist between the family members? What conflicts, hierarchical structures and alliances do they have? ☐ How well are the children looked after/protected? Do they go to school? ☐ How are the relationships with neighbours and friends, colleagues at work etc. ? Is the family isolated or part of a reliable social network? ☐ Do social values and/or traditions, or the destruction of such values and norms play a role in their social situation? ☐ What are the positive aspects of their social situation? What resources are there that can be used? ☐ For how long has the situation been the way it is now?	☐ What does the person/family live on? What is their income? ☐ Can the person/family fall back on savings/assets/property? ☐ Is the person/family indebted? Are they financially dependent? ☐ What kind of accomodation do they have? Is ist adequate? ☐ Has the person/family any qualifications/abilities/skills/ capacities which could help to improve the material situation? ☐ How long has the material situation been like this? What was it like previously?	• How does the person feel (fear, insecurity, suppressed feelings, hopelessness, resentment, shame anger, depression, etc)? • What characterises the emotional climate in the family (e.g. fear, mutual suspicion, lack of mutual support, no clear boundaries, lingering conflicts etc.)? • Are there physical illnesses in the family and, if so, what significance do they have? • Does the person/family have any particular emotional and social qualities and strengths? • How is the present emotional situation linked with the biography of the person and with the family history?

Figure 3: Defining the problem at the individual level.

Most aid agencies have elaborate tools to explore the collective level, but here too, all three dimensions – social, material and psychological – have to be considered. It is important, for example, to understand how different groups in a community communicate with each other and to determine whether hate, anger or fear within groups, or between groups, have to be addressed. The questions for groups and community/society are not printed here for lack of space but can be found on the internet.[5]

Empowerment in Nepal

Barriers to understanding disempowerment. In Nepal, aid agencies have tried to continue their development work throughout the 11 years of war between the guerrillas of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the government forces. While a limited number of projects dealt directly with the problems of conflict affected people, most development agency projects ignored the psychosocial impact of the war, such as the erosion and disintegration of social groups and the exclusion of direct victims of human rights violations. The conflict affected people were often left to themselves, as they were too vulnerable or too stigmatized to participate in normal development activities. In the beginning of 2006, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) decided that conflict transformation at project level also meant dealing with the psychosocial effects of the conflict on the population. Instead of starting specialized projects, they

decided to integrate psychosocial concerns in their ongoing programs. I began work on five of their projects, three of which deal with the improvement of the target groups' economic situation. Initially, the discussion with the staff about the needs of conflict affected beneficiaries was difficult because the field workers had avoided close contact with families or individuals that had been attacked. Like most people in the villages, they felt it was not safe to be seen as supporting someone that had been singled out and victimized by either the Maoists or the Nepal Army. Not surprisingly, a key issue of victims of human rights violations in Nepal is their loneliness; their neighbours maintained a distance in order to protect themselves from possible retaliation by the perpetrators, and equally, from feelings of helplessness and shame in view of the overwhelming suffering. In the first step, therefore, field workers had to be motivated and encouraged to contact those individuals among their target population that had been most seriously affected by the war. This became easier after the people's movement forced King Gyanendra to step down in April 2006 and the subsequent declaration of a ceasefire. However, the staff members did not trust the new agreement of the political forces, and their own chronic fear sometimes impaired their ability to judge the risk entailed. For example, in contacting a person who had been attacked by the rebels in a village still controlled by them. Finally, however, the field workers identified a number of conflict affected persons and talked to them, beginning the process of getting to know them well enough to answer most of the questions of the empowerment tool. This information provided the basis for reflections on how, within their existing project framework, they could extend support.

Exploring fragmentation. One project provides vocational training courses for men and women seeking to improve their livelihood. Among them are young men who plan to find a job overseas,[6] preferably in the Gulf States, and thus enrol in short training courses in scaffolding or masonry. The project staff previously knew nothing about their trainees besides their name, age, caste and educational background. When they conducted the 12 in-depth interviews, staff was taken back by the urgency with which many of the trainees wanted to talk about their personal situation. Their stories helped the team members to understand why the vocational instructors reported that about one third of their students seemed volatile, and cried sometimes during courses, or appeared restless or down, shy or withdrawn. Each case was different but all of them illustrated, as Lakpa's story did (see Figure 4), that trauma is a process: one incident set off a chain of events which all undermined Lakpa's wellbeing and needed to be addressed before he could feel easier and better prepared for the next sequence of the traumatic process, that of 'exile'. Although neither the young men, nor society in general, associates labour migration with exile, going overseas, particularly for those that left their villages as a result of the conflict, parallels the situation of refugees.[7] The need to come to terms with an alien environment and to be subjected to new traumatic experiences in the context of harsh living conditions, the subjection to exploitation and humiliation, an insecure legal status, grief and sadness about being separated from homeland and family, and worries about their wellbeing are all similar to the experience of a refugee. However, while exile is often considered a defeat, migration for employment is a dream for most young Nepalese, and those that make it are envied and admired. While making it easier to leave and to return, it also adds to the pressure to succeed.
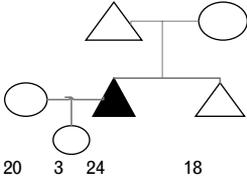
SOCIAL	MATERIAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL
Threat: Presently no physical threat. Two years ago, government forces killed a Maoist leader and the Maoists blamed Lakpa's family for having provided information to the army. They beat up his father and his brother very badly; his father's hand was broken. Lakpa hid nearby, heard his father and brother's screams but couldn't help them. The Maoists took all his family's property away. The family left the village and moved to the district's headquarters. After one year, Lakpa moved alone to Kathmandu, hoping to find an opportunity to go overseas.	At present, Lakpa does not have many belongings. He stays in the training centre hostel. Back in his village, he used to work in the fields. His family members in the district break stones to make a living. They earn very little, sometimes not enough to eat.	Lakpa was crying during the talk with the staff member. It was hard for him to express himself. The major reason for him to come to Kathmandu was because he could not cope with the poverty – and possibly with his feelings of guilt. His father's hand is still broken. His younger brother who was beaten up is in a very bad emotional state. Lakpa often remembers the scene of the beating and suffers because of his inability to protect his father and brother; he feels guilty for not being able to help his family now, financially and emotionally. He feels under pressure to earn enough soon so he can support them. He feels lost in the city and humiliated because he often doesn't find his way and gets cheated a lot. He very much misses his three-year-old daughter and his wife.
Family situation: Father – mother Lakpa (24) – wife (20) – daughter (3) Younger brother (22)	Lakpa is training to be a mason. He just about manages to cover his expenses. He does not know where to get the money to pay for the employment agency that should get him a job in Qatar.	
 20 3 24 18		He feels shy and lonely. He is scared that he doesn't find the money to go overseas and very worried of going abroad and of not seeing his family for a long time.
Lakpa (24 years) says he has good relationships with all his family members. Presently, he is not in contact with them as the district's headquarters is 2 days journey away. **Schooling** : Lakpa has 5 years of schooling **Neighbours/colleagues** In the training he is average. He doesn't have friends in the training course, keeps to himself.		

Main problems: 1. Not enough money to go overseas; 2. Misses his family; 3. Feels guilty that he was not able to protect his father and brother and cannot financially and socially/emotionally support his family; 4. Withdrawn, shy, isolated; 5. Unable to cope in the city; 6. Fear of going abroad

Objectives for Lakpa: 1. Obtain loan at a reasonable interest rate; 2a. Regular contact with the family by phone or other means; 2b. Proper farewell to the family, discussing with family what they can do to cope while he is away ; 3. Deal with the guilt that he

Figure 4:   Lakpa's case as described by staff.

> was not hurt and couldn't protect his relatives – gaining a better understanding of his possibilities/impossibilities to act in that situation; 4. Expand boundaries of trust; win a group of friends that will go to the same country; 5. Learn urban ways; 5. Adequate knowledge of immigration country and preparation for the most likely situations.
>
> Activities by project: 1. Negotiation with employment agencies for fair loans to trainees; 2. Group work: discussions of different key issues, building mutual support of participants; 3. Encourage informal discussions among trainees and trainers during training. 4. Facilitator to have at least three individual discussions with L. 5. Obtain essential information about conditions and support services in target country and pass on to trainees.

Figure 4: (Continued)

A broader understanding of empowerment. The skills training project has no means or likelihood of becoming a 'psychosocial project' and the present budget framework only allows a minimum investment to provide support beyond the vocational training. Yet, the project leadership has realized that they need to adjust their approach if they are to take their objective – preparation of beneficiaries for the labour market – seriously. Therefore, they decided to intervene at both the individual and the collective level. They are working on strengthening the trainees' *power from within* and the *power with others* by helping them not only to learn a technical skill, but to express their concerns, reflect on their feelings and to find solutions in bi-weekly group meetings. These meeting provide essential information and allow participants to speak about and prepare for a long separation from their families, and for the numerous difficult situations in the alien country of destination. In addition, the project has begun to negotiate better conditions for access to loans for trainees, and to establish contacts with organizations that can extend practical advice, and legal and other support for the migrants in the immigration country.

The group facilitators are not psychosocial specialists; they are normal project employees who have decided to address emotional issues with groups of trainees. They are supervised by a psychologist once a month and are beginning to feel more secure in their role, and to become more confident about allowing sensitive issues to come into the open. Still, it is difficult to talk about the experiences of human rights violations in mixed groups of people that have been victimized, and others that have been combatants before they decided to demobilize informally. The facilitators have a personal talk with each trainee at least twice in the course of the training, and the trainers and hostel staff are also prepared to talk to the trainees, particularly when a participant has specific needs. Although project staff cannot act as counsellors, they are ready to listen if someone wishes to talk.

Listening, breaking through the isolation of those that have been victimized, and helping to find solutions for the different problems that contribute to the psychosocial suffering of people is what project staff can and must do. The staff of a completely different set-up, the livelihood-coaching component of a community forestry project, realized this also. The analysis of the problems of conflict affected families with the empowerment tool clearly showed the limitations of their conventional economic support. Passing on a couple of goats does not improve the material or social life of a family whose head member had been so badly beaten up that, two years later, he panics when he sees someone in uniform, feels physically too weak to work and abuses his wife after

spending the money she earned on alcohol. Field workers are now in the process of learning not to run away from such a family. The skills they are acquiring – active listening, defining the problems with the families, setting the objectives of the intervention, and identifying the required activities to help – will aid field workers to deal more effectively with all their beneficiaries, not just those that have been targeted by the conflict parties.

Empowerment in Gaza

Fragmented support. The team of a project for women suffering from domestic violence in Gaza has been extending psychosocial support for over 10 years. When the empowerment tool was introduced to them during an accompanied self-evaluation in 2003, the team members realized that although they provided all the necessary services required to help a woman improve her situation, this support was fragmented. The clients felt better; they improved their self-understanding and gained inner strength, thanks to the counselling and interaction with other women at the centre. They also enjoyed the vocational training in sewing, knitting, ceramics or beauty care. However, at the end of their term with the project, the vast majority were not able to make any lasting changes in their lives, and almost none of them earned more than a few shekels with the skills they had acquired.

The project operates in a highly complicated and very difficult conflict situation, in an environment of constant threat, and acute and chronic fear of operations by the Israeli army, as well as clashes between members of the Fatah and Hamas political parties. Israel, in spite of its official withdrawal in 2005, regularly attacks the Gaza Strip and controls all vital aspects of development, especially the movement of people and goods across the borders. The systematic 'de-development' of the Palestinian economy over the last 38 years

has left Gaza with no viable economy (Roy, 2005), and its inhabitants dependent on handouts and external assistance. The daily humiliations of decades of military occupation and unemployment have left men struggling with the experience of devaluation and emasculation, and desperate to defend their honour where they feel they can. One fallout of this is a high level of domestic violence against women and girls. The public and governmental attitude and the existing discriminatory laws condone and perpetuate such violence (Human Rights Watch, 2006).

The question arises, even more urgently than in other contexts, over the actual scope for individual empowerment under such conditions. The project team has always been aware that individual therapy can only have a limited effect. Also, their efforts to create public awareness have been hesitant and unsystematic. Their doubts about, and ambivalence towards, their own capacity to influence reality were, however, best expressed in their income generation activities. They alternated in their view of the vocational training, sometimes considering it to be a serious means of equipping women for the marketplace, and then again regarding it as occupational therapy with little value in an overwhelmingly adverse economic environment (Weyermann, 2006).

Individual empowerment plans. Case discussions with the help of the empowerment tool led to a change of understanding and organizational structure. Now, the clients are no longer sent mechanically to therapy and to whichever training course has vacancies. Instead, the team prepares an individual empowerment plan with each woman in the first two months of her association with the project. In the six months that follow, the women work through their psychosocial issues in individual counselling sessions and together with other women in groups. In

addition, they attend vocational training at the centre or learn other skills required to realize an economic plan that is tailored to their specific capacities and needs. Staff members that previously preferred to stay inside the NGO compound are now visiting the families at home and accompany the women to other facilities that provide the services and support required to change their situation. The first four months after the clients finish their training, they return regularly to discuss with staff and friends, individually and in groups, their progress in implementing their personal project and about remaining problems.

Rana is a good example of the difference that such an empowerment approach can make. She came from a very poor family and lacked the confidence and imagination to develop a vision of what she wanted to become. Her father beat her and her brother, who raised birds, did not take her seriously. In group discussions and individual counselling sessions, she gained a better understanding of what she wanted in life and what she was able to do. She overcame many of her fears and developed more self-confidence. In terms of her income project, she came to realize that she didn't really want to be in the pottery course that she had initially joined. She liked breeding birds and knew how to do it. Finally, Rana gathered the courage to confront her brother with two options: either he could accept her as a business partner or he could face her as a competitor. He decided to cooperate. The project helped Rana to get a loan and supported her in her discussions with her father who now began to respect her. Discussions also were necessary with neighbours and relatives that were initially reluctant to take her seriously as a businesswoman.

This approach has brought the team members closer. The different professional groups that had acted separately before – the counsellors counselled and the trainers trained – now interact regularly in the interest of their clients' individual growth. The ideas they develop together of how they can help the women have become more creative. And through their more intensive interaction with family and community members, they have realized the possibilities of influencing public opinion and creating awareness. In girls' schools, they now discuss sexuality and other adolescent concerns with students, and about the rights of daughters, as well as the hopes and fears connected to bringing up girls in times of war and crisis with parents' groups.

The staff initially found it difficult to cross the firm demarcations between therapy and vocational training and between the inside of the NGO compound and the public space where they felt their honour could be jeopardized. Yet in deciding to recognize the interdependence of emotions, social relations and economic perspectives and the inter-action between individual wellbeing and socio-political conditions, they began to enjoy expanding their boundaries, leaving their walled compound and venturing into the communities. However, when a period of relative calm ended and the next military operation began, they retreated to the confines of their NGO to help each other cope with their own intense fear, and to grieve with the colleague who lost her fourth brother in a span of a few years.

Conclusions

In crisis areas, an aid agency's staff is constantly flooded with information about suffering. The empowerment tool helps to bring structure into the many facts and facets that unfold when people start to talk about their experience. Therefore, it allows for a better understanding of their situation while at the same time redices the complexity to a level at which it becomes possible to act. Although the instrument is no revolutionary invention, it helps project teams to gain greater clarity about the circumstances of

the population they work with by promoting a broader analysis of the disempowerment at the individual as well as the collective level, and the linkages between the social, material and psychological aspects of a problem. In the interest of the integration of a psychosocial approach, the empowerment tool encourages project staff members to focus on those aspects that they usually ignore. Psychologists and counsellors are supported to reflect on how they can deal with politics and economics while community workers are assisted to understand the complexities of individual families and to address the dynamic interplay between the inner life of people and their social and political action. Often, it is then possible to bring significant support to the empowerment process by a slight accentuation or adjustment of the project framework. This is only possible, however, if project staff members in all sectors of programming are prepared to confront themselves with the vulnerabilities and suffering of the people they work with, instead of delegating trauma and grief to specialized organizations.

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[1] The factors influencing human wellbeing can be categorized in different ways. Williamson & Robinson (2006), for example, identified seven interrelated areas: biological, material, social, spiritual, cultural, mental and emotional. This is more refined and possibly more accurate than the three dimensions of social, material and psychological. However, I understand these categories in a broad sense, i.e. mental and emotional can be summarized in 'psychological' and 'biological' that according to Williamson and Robinson includes access to water, food and relief goods, can also be seen as part of the material conditions. Culture is a difficult issue altogether. If culture is seen as *the ways in which people create categories of meaning and succeed (or fail) to link them into a pattern that seems both immanent and natural'* (Rosen, 2006), then culture is contained in every

dimension of existence as it determines how people speak, feel and relate to each other and how they organize their material world. Whether or not we define culture as a separate category, and whether we differentiate between mental and emotional or subsume it under psychological, is less important than the acknowledgement that different dimensions of human existence are interrelated and the expressions, needs and capacities of people and their groups can always only be understood in their respective context.

[2] The concepts of disempowerment and empowerment are outlined in more detail in Becker & Weyermann, 2006.

[3] Hans Keilson (1992) identified the following sequences of World War II and its aftermath to be relevant for the war orphans he studied:
- Sequence one: enemy occupation of the Netherlands that lead to the beginning of the terror against Jews;
- Sequence two: direct persecution that included deportation and separation of children from their parents:
- Sequence three: post-war period during which children were either sent to foster families in Europe or Israel or to orphanages.

[4] We were inspired to develop the empowerment tool by the KwaZulu-Natal Programme for Survivors of Violence (Higson-Smith, 2002).

[5] http://162.23.39.120/dezaweb/ressources/resource.en.91135.pdf

[6] The 'labour migrants' money transfers are of growing importance for Nepal's crumbling economy. Central bank statistics reveal that the Nepali economy in 2004/05 earned over USD 922 million in remittances from overseas workers – accounting for 12.4 percent of national GDP.

[7] See Sheet 5b and sheet 9 of the toolkit at http://162.23.39.120/dezaweb/ressources/resource.en.91135.pdf

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