Power over, power to, power with: Shifting perceptions of power for local economic development in the Philippines

Amanda Cahill

Department of Human Geography, Research School of Pacific and Asia Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia.
Email: amanda.cahill@anu.edu.au; a.cahill@ewb.org.au

Abstract: *Power has long been recognised as crucial to the sustainability of community development interventions; however, the way in which space affects power relations within such interventions has remained relatively under-theorised in the development literature. Many practitioners continue to regard power as located centrally and as embedded in particular institutions, networks, knowledge and resources. According to this logic, processes of empowerment involve the redistribution of these resources to marginalised groups through their participation in development interventions such as microfinance and sustainable livelihood initiatives. The danger inherent in such development approaches is that they can discourage the potential for participants to use their own agency by overemphasising an existing lack of resources locally and inadvertently feeding a sense of dependency on formal development interventions initiated by external agencies. This paper suggests that a post-structural conceptualisation of power as dynamic, multiple and mediated at the local level offers a more productive starting point for thinking about approaches to empowerment. Drawing on data from an action research project designed to initiate community enterprises in a small rural municipality in the Philippines, I suggest how a post-structural approach to power can be enacted by building on the existing local resources and practices of everyday life.*

Keywords: *economic development, empowerment, livelihood, South-East Asia*

Introduction

Power remains central to the concerns community development seeks to address, whether improving access to basic health and education services, generating sustainable livelihood opportunities, addressing gender inequalities or negotiating community management of natural resources. Yet development scholars and practitioners alike continue to overlook the specific ways power is enacted in place, focussing their attention instead on related yet secondary processes such as participation, citizenship and good governance. I became interested in power and how its enactment peaked after the 2004 presidential election in the Philippines, when rumours abounded in the nation's capital about suspected *coup d'état* plots. Having spent two weeks in Manila during this tumultuous period, I returned to my field site in the distant province of Bohol in the central Philippines and broached the seemingly sensitive topic of a government takeover with close friends working in local government and non-government agencies. Who did they think was behind the plots? What would happen if they did succeed in ousting the government? What role would the military play after a *coup* attempt? To my surprise, my questions were nonchalantly dismissed. As one local councillor, aged in his late 50s, responded:

> That is only in Manila. Maybe these things happen there, but they don't mean so much here, to us. Manila is only far away. We didn't even know about Marcos and martial law before! Life was just the same here. Like now . . . even (after political) devolution, nothing changed really.

This statement challenged the way I thought about power as emanating from the centre to dominate local relations and stimulated my interest in the way power is enacted in place. Working on experimental action research around local economic alternatives, I was particularly interested in the way space affects relations of power within development projects. It is this interest that frames this paper, as I join with scholars calling for a repoliticisation of development discourses (Moore and Putzel, 1999; Escobar, 2001; Williams, 2004) and for detailed ethnographic analyses of how power is enacted locally (Cornwall, 2004; Kesby, 2005; Mosse, 2005).

In the first section of this paper, I provide some background on the action research from which the data for this paper emerges. I then explore common conceptualisations of power and how they relate to particular spatial imaginaries, drawing on John Allen's *Lost Geographies of Power* (2003). I highlight how these perspectives continue to influence development practice, and then propose how a post-structural understanding of power as multiple, relational and contextual offers alternative pathways to economic empowerment for marginal groups. In the final section, I show how a post-structural approach to power was implemented in a small rural municipality in the Philippines in the Jagna Community Partnering Project.

Action research on alternative economic development in the Philippines

The Jagna Community Partnering Project was initiated by a research team from the Australian National University (ANU) in 2003 to explore alternative local economic development possibilities in the municipality of Jagna on the island province of Bohol in the central Philippines.[1] The research partners were the Jagna Municipal Government and a local non-government organisation (NGO) *Unlad Kabayan-Bohol* and later its offshoot *BoholDev*. To facilitate collaboration between the implementing agencies, one field researcher was employed from each agency to work on a full-time basis. These were Jocelyn Miralles-Apag from the NGO *Boholdev*, Maureen Balaba from the Municipal Planning and Development Council at the local government unit (LGU) and myself from the ANU. The

three agencies shared equal responsibility for decisions about the daily management and overall methodology of the project.

The aim of the action research project was to explore the possibility of stimulating local economic development through the establishment of group enterprises that mobilised locally available resources, knowledge and economic practices. Three community enterprises were formed and three and a half years after the inception of the project, they continue to grow and generate income for their members. One involves a group of eight women who produce ginger tea. Another consists of 13 small-scale farmers (both men and women) producing a local coconut confectionary called *nata de coco*. The third enterprise is made up of six women dressmakers who accept large orders for hire clothing, uniforms and costumes. A fourth group consisting of 48 local men who work part-time at the port was initiated to explore the feasibility of a trucking business; however, as I describe later, the group decided not to pursue their idea after market research deemed it not feasible.

The way in which each group was established and sustained is not the focus of this paper.[2] Suffice to say, however, that increased income generation, which was the immediate goal of participants, was achieved by the three enterprises. More interesting, from the perspective of theories of power, were the ways that participants' notions of their own power in place shifted as a precursor to becoming more active in the local cash economy. This paper takes up this shift and focuses on how the project methodology created a space for exploring, challenging and mobilising existing power relations. Allen's theorisation of the spatiality of power has proved particularly useful in analysing how these shifts occurred.

Power and space

There are numerous summaries of the various theories of power, each with its own disciplinary bias (see for example: Hindess, 1996; Cheater, 1999; Gledhill, 2000; Tew, 2002; Turner, 2005). Allen (2003) offers a geographical analysis of common theories of power in his book *Lost Geographies of Power*. Allen's synthesis is unique in that he critiques current theories from a spatial perspective, arguing that space –

whether in terms of proximity, reach or contextual factors – affects the way power is both enacted and experienced. Allen's work is timely, as a number of development scholars have recently called attention to space as an important ingredient in understanding how power operates in development interventions (Cornwall, 2004; Williams, 2004; Kesby, 2005). Cornwall (2004: 75) proposes that a spatial understanding of power allows us to:

> . . . think about the ways in which particular sites come to be populated, appropriated or designated by particular actors for particular kinds of purposes; its metaphorical qualities allow attention to be paid to issues of discursive closure, to the animation or domestication of sites for engagement, to the absence of opportunity as well as to the dynamism of political agency in forging new possibilities for voice. By illuminating the dynamics of power, voice and agency, thinking spatially can help towards building strategies for more genuinely transformative social action.

Allen argues that until recently, attempts to build the transformative strategies Cornwall refers to have been hampered by our lack of insight into the spatial dimension of power. In particular, he points to the limiting assumptions embedded in three common conceptualisations of power, namely: power in things, power through mobilisation and power as immanent.

Power in things

Inspired by the work of Weber, Allen's conceptualisation of power in things locates power as embedded in certain resources such as finance or formal institutions. In this vision, the powerful are those who amass resources and capabilities, who 'hold' or 'have' power over others. It is a view of power as domination. As a process, empowerment entails the 'disempowered' gaining control over the resources and institutions of the 'powerful', which, spatially, tend to be located centrally. This view promotes a finite view of power and fosters a sense of empowerment as involving resistance against the powerful structures of the centre and the redistribution of resources to the less powerful on the margins.

Allen argues that this view of power is too restrictive. While he concedes a relationship between resources and power, as resources can be mobilised to strengthen individual or group power, he suggests that this cannot always be assumed. First, he argues that even those with vast resources and capacities do not always exercise the power available to them. Power is not found in the resources, but in the use of those resources. As he states, 'Power in this sense is no more to be found 'in' the apparatus of rule than sound is to be found 'in' the wood of musical instruments' (Allen, 2003: 5). Instead of power being held by individuals or institutions, Allen sees power as being based on the enduring nature of socially constituted relationships.

Despite the limitations of the 'power in things' perspective, it has informed development practice through the implicit assumption that for people to become empowered to pursue their own well-being, they require increased access to resources such as money or positions in institutions perceived to hold power (Hunt and Kasynathan, 2002; Kilby, 2002; Mayoux, 2002). This assumption is implicit in development interventions as diverse as agrarian reform programmes calling for the redistribution of land from wealthy elites to tenant farmers, participatory development programmes encouraging the representation of marginal groups on government committees and microfinance projects calling for greater access to cash resources by the poor.

Despite noble intentions, such initiatives are fraught with difficulties and contradictions. For example, microfinance programmes targeting women have not always had an empowering effect, particularly if male relatives commandeer the funds provided or if they increase women's workload (Goetz and Gupta, 1996; Kabeer, 2001; Hunt and Kasynathan, 2002; Kilby, 2002). While women nominally have increased access to resources, this has not disrupted the existing relations of power within the household (Goetz and Gupta, 1996; Goetz, 1997; Kabeer, 1998; Rosario, 2002). It is therefore important for scholars and practitioners to distinguish between the potential mobilisation of resources and the exercise of power, as even when access to resources and institutions is increased at the margins, people still may not be able to exploit the opportunities presented in an effective or empowering way (Hunt and Kasynathan, 2002; Mayoux, 2002).

Another challenge to the idea that simply improving access to resources will increase people's power arises from the work of Scott (1985) and Kerkvliet (1991), who explore the strategies used by those with seemingly limited power to exert influence. Scott argues that even peasant farmers exploited through traditional patron–client relationships can enact power by pretending not to understand, remaining silent, stealing harvests and staging an argument – strategies he refers to as 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985). This example demonstrates that everyone has access to diverse types and levels of power and so it is unproductive to reify a false dichotomy of the 'empowered' and 'disempowered'. Even those who are considered powerful do not have total power at all times. In the often discouraging and frustrating world of development, simply acknowledging this may open up new spaces for hope and creative engagement. Furthermore, it suggests that power is not only located in particular resources and institutions at the centre, but also available in all contexts, thus placing new emphasis on the importance of local forms of power.

Power through mobilisation

In Allen's second conceptualisation of 'power through mobilisation', power is analysed as an effect produced through networks of social interaction. This approach is evident in both network theory and studies of collective action. According to the network approach, exemplified by Mann (1993) and Castells (1996, 2000), power is not a resource, but rather something that is generated through the control and reproduction of different kinds of resources through various networks of social interaction.

In critiquing the network approach, Allen argues that it often fails to problematise the way power is exercised across space and how this results in its uneven distribution. As he states:

> . . . in a comforting sort of way (power's) extension or distribution over space is taken for granted. There is a homely promise that nothing much really happens between here and there to cause us to worry about what moves exactly or what, if anything, is distributed . . . power still seems to be regarded as something which shifts across borders or is

redistributed between sites of authority without too much difficulty. (Allen, 2003: 8)

The importance of space in the extension and distribution of power can be clearly seen in the case of development interventions influenced by neo-liberal economic discourses. Such thinking has generally failed to problematise the way power moves across space, assuming that it somehow naturally flows from one place to another. This is exemplified by the World Bank's push for political decentralisation in developing countries, which is based on the assumption that devolving decision-making powers from the centre to the periphery will improve the capacity of local government units to govern more effectively. This assumption has been challenged by critics who describe the many obstacles that can thwart a straightforward transfer of power from the centre to the margins (Bird and Rodriguez, 1999; Blair, 2000; Eaton, 2001).

Power through mobilisation also encompasses that of collective action. Drawing primarily on the work of Arendt (1958, 1961, 1970), Allen sees this as a productive view of power actualised through mass social interaction, which draws attention to power's transient and shifting nature. While he applauds the more positive nature of this view, he argues that it can neglect power dynamics within and across groups – dynamics that are again mediated by both space and scale.

Within development studies, a conceptualisation of power as mobilisation is most obvious in the renewed interest in social movements that connect groups with diverse interests and from different geographical backgrounds for a common cause, as exemplified by the World Social Forum and various anti-globalisation movements. There are also traces of the idea of power through mobilisation in the participatory development approaches championed by Chambers (1997, 2005), which assume that if the marginalised are linked into the appropriate networks of power, they can influence formal decision-making processes. While both social movement theory and participatory development approaches have contributed significantly to theorising the way communities are organised for action, numerous authors have critiqued the naiveté of the assumptions about

space implicit in these approaches (Oliphant, 1999; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2004; Williams, 2004; Kesby, 2005). They stress the failure of participatory development projects in particular to acknowledge the complexity of power relations in place, and show that even when the marginalised participate, these dynamics can restrict voice and agency. Such critiques remind us that power does not move across space evenly because it is mediated by the different types of social relations that are embedded in place and across different scales. Power is not some static capacity, but constantly shifts across time and space.

Power as immanent

The final conceptualisation of power that Allen discusses is a post-structural approach inspired by the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1988) and Foucault (1991, 2001) that envisions power as everywhere, through the discourses and practices that structure daily life. In this view, power is not inherent within powerful subjects, but is dispersed throughout a complex web of discourses, practices and relationships that position some subjects as more powerful than others. The effects of power are not stable, as the discourses and practices maintaining power relations require constant reproduction. This reproduction is not only enacted by the powerful but also by dominated subjects acting out socially defined roles and identities, a process Foucault refers to as 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1991). Empowerment then, can no longer be treated as a change in status at a particular moment in time, but instead is a relative and reversible process that is in need of constant maintenance.

A post-structuralist approach also highlights the multiple ways power is enacted, often simultaneously and in contradictory ways. Not only does power simply involve processes of domination and resistance, but also seduction, persuasion, manipulation, coercion, authority and cooption (Allen, 2003). This post-structural recognition of the multiple ways power is continually reproduced has enabled more sophisticated analyses of the political implications of development practice, as exemplified by the works of Crush (1995) and Escobar (1995, 2001), and more recently, Cooke and Kothari

(2001), Hickey and Mohan (2004), Kesby (2005) and Mosse (2005).

While Allen acknowledges that post-structuralism has enhanced our understandings of power as something that is constantly reproduced in multiple ways, he believes that this view has been taken to an extreme that limits our understanding of relationships between power and geography. He argues that 'we have lost sight of the *particularities* of power, the diverse and specific *modalities* of power that make a difference to how we are put in our place, how we experience power' (author's emphasis) (Allen, 2003: 2). Allen reminds us that the relative potency of different modalities of power can only be determined in time and place. For example, while seduction can operate very effectively from afar as it relies on a sense of mystery for effect, other acts of power such as coercion, are more potent when the perpetrator's presence is felt nearby.

Recognising the multiple strategies people use to negotiate power relations in place is an important step in understanding how power operates through development interventions. While comprehending and intervening in local power dynamics is a complex challenge, I offer one approach to establishing a more situated and ethnographic analysis of the discourses and practices of power below, using the example of the Jagna Community Partnering Project.

Challenging relations of power through action research

The main premise informing the action research methodology of the Jagna Community Partnering Project was that power is multiple, relational and contextual. Motivated by the goal of finding alternative ways to stimulate development in areas constructed as lacking economic power, the project team started with the assumption that there are multiple ways people exercise power, rejecting a dualism of the 'empowered' and 'disempowered'. By accepting that everyone has access to some form of power and that this power is context-dependent, local researchers explored the nature of economic power in the local area as a prelude to challenging existing power relations.

As a way of recognising the existing power base of local people, the project team used an

assets-based approach that assumed that resources, knowledges, skills and economic practices already existed in those communities and that these could contribute to economic development (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Cameron and Gibson, 2001; Cameron and Gibson, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2005). In this way, the project approach distanced itself from the resource view of power that informs national Philippine economic policy and promotes the integration of the local into national and global markets. Instead, local economic strategies were privileged as powerful and effective means for people to meet their daily requirements.

The challenge facing the project was to foster an enabling environment where individuals and groups could come together to reflect on the forms of power and resources they could mobilise, and then experiment with these to build further confidence. The aim was to foster a sense of people having multiple avenues to initiate change, disrupting their notions of self as dependent on the national government or foreign funds for action. In order to achieve this, the project had three main objectives. The first objective was to reframe local relations, knowledge and resources as potential forms of economic power that disadvantaged groups could mobilise to challenge structural notions of power in the community. The second was to provide a safe environment in which people could start to experiment with existing forms of economic power to construct a new local vision of development. The final objective was to build on existing relations of power within the community. I discuss how we addressed these three objectives through the project methodology, as well as some of the resistances to it, in the following section.

Identifying local strengths

Challenging people's beliefs about their own power was a difficult and necessarily long and intensive process, consuming the first 12 months of the project. Initially, the project team held a range of community meetings, reviewed available government documents and conducted transect walks to create an inventory of the range of physical, economic, human and institutional assets in the community. The results were then presented at community meetings to stimulate discussion. By identifying local assets, the aim was to challenge the inclination of people to focus on what the community lacked or needed for development from external sources, and instead focus on what they already had to work with locally.

In addition to the assets inventory exercise, we also conducted a survey called the 'Portrait of Gifts' in which 305 people documented the range of skills they commonly used in everyday life. Conducted verbally in small groups of three to five people, the project team used the survey as an opportunity to generate discussion about the abundance of capacities within the town. Exclamations such as: 'Really? I didn't know you could do that' and 'Can you teach me how to do that?' were common during each survey session. This activity highlighted the multiple resources and knowledge people could mobilise individually and collectively to expand their economic power, such as farming techniques, food processing and craft skills, basic marketing and accounting knowledge. This simple exercise challenged the common assumption many participants, NGO and government staff held of people in the community as somehow deficient and needing more training. Instead, they started to recognise the potential that lay within the existing skills base. As one female project participant stated after an assets mapping session:

> I always see so many problems here, it always seemed so hopeless, with the bad roads, lazy *istandbays*[3] and officials only interested in themselves . . . but now I see there are so many things and beautiful, God-fearing people who are very hard-working, that now maybe we can do [something]![4]

To consolidate participants' confidence that they could pursue and succeed in developing an enterprise, the project organised a field trip for each group to visit successful group enterprises in other parts of the province. Participants were amazed and inspired to see people 'just like them' succeed in business. Field trips for enterprise groups like this are uncommon in Bohol, but it was an activity that the participants later considered to be crucial in consolidating group solidarity and dispelling local beliefs that only ethnic Chinese or more educated people

could succeed in business. They started to imagine their local economy as no longer needy and dependent on resources from 'powerful' external sources at national and global levels, but as powerful in its own right.

The Jagna project also acknowledged the potential power embedded in the informal economic practices that sustained the local economy. In rural areas like Jagna, practices such as bartering, gift-giving, donating, informal group savings, rotating credit, volunteer labour and reciprocal labour exchange remain common (Urich, 1996; Urich and Edgecombe, 1999; Cahill, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2005; McKay *et al.*, 2007). Most development agencies do not consider these less formal economic practices as a viable avenue for improving people's well-being compared with the formal market capitalist system. By ignoring these economic practices in their planning, they overlook a whole range of resources, networks and activities that could stimulate local economic development. For example, by exploring the range of informal economic networks participants participated in as well as the forms of power within those networks, participants were able to identify groups within the community who had access to a wide range of resources. In recognising who these local patrons were and their position within wider economic networks, new possibilities emerged for reducing local dependence on assistance from patrons in distant provincial, national and even foreign centres.

By acknowledging the range of economic practices across the community, the project challenged the local belief that little could be achieved without significant amounts of funding and technical assistance from external sources. The project also publicly celebrated how much the community was already achieving through informal economic practices. Examples included the amount of time, money, food and labour people invested in religious and cultural festivals, as well as in constructing public infrastructure such as community halls and basketball courts. By highlighting these examples, the project team fostered a more empowering vision of the economy, one that offered the possibility of 'ordinary' community members driving economic development using locally available resources and practices. It was important for people to embrace these ideas of

a 'diverse economy' (Gibson-Graham, 1996) and an assets-rich community, as the project did not have dedicated funding for the groups to initiate production.

This process of recognising the power of the local was far from straightforward however, and resistances were twofold: first, from participants who understood themselves as powerless; and second, from local elites bent on maintaining an image of unwavering control. As Foucault (1991) suggests, people who have suffered discrimination and hardship tend to internalise dominant discourses of power that construct them as less powerful. Consequently, when project staff suggested that people in Jagna already had the ability, energy, knowledge and resources to start an enterprise, many people were sceptical and even angry. Many believed that the town had lacked sufficient investment capital, knowledge and skills to initiate an economic development project and that people were poor because the national government and foreign agencies would not help them. Ironically, there had been a number of government- and NGO-led development projects implemented to stimulate economic development in the past, but many had inadvertently strengthened a sense of impotence and dependence among many participants by focussing heavily on local community needs rather than assets. The answer to local economic empowerment, for government, NGOs and project participants alike was seen to lie elsewhere – in the export market, large-scale industrialisation and in labour migration. Adopting a vision of power as embedded in certain resources and networks, local residents considered economic opportunities as absent from the place of Jagna and the people as *needy* in terms of the resources, knowledge and power to drive economic development processes. This power was seen to lie in the hands of outsiders or professionals. Structural notions of power had been privileged to a degree that wiped out the potential agency of disadvantaged individuals and groups to drive local economic development.

Consequently, when the project team convened a public meeting to present the results of the skills survey and assets mapping to government and NGO officials, they were met with cynicism. As one councillor exclaimed, 'If

people in Jagna really knew how to do all that, then no-one would be poor!' Many at the meeting remained adamant that more formal training and funding were required before a group enterprise could be established and so refused to support the project. Despite these difficulties, there were a number of people in the community who were inspired by the idea that they were already empowered to initiate an enterprise, and so the project staff set out to create a safe environment for participants to practice this new sense of local power.

Experimenting with local power

The first opportunity for the groups to enact their emerging sense of power was in conducting a feasibility study on their enterprise ideas, followed by small-scale production using local resources. These activities reflected a post-structural approach to empowerment as they drew on the multiple forms and relations of power each member brought to the group. Members researched the feasibility of their enterprise and initiated production without pay. This investment of time and labour produced a sense of ownership over the project. Even the porters felt a sense of achievement and became stronger as a group, despite deciding after the feasibility study not to pursue their trucking business. As one porter stated, 'It's okay . . . because we were the ones to decide (not to do it). And we haven't lost anything because we learnt a lot. We can start a business later if we want and (now) we know how to start one'. As it turned out, three porters used their newly acquired business skills to improve the management of other family livelihood activities.

By encouraging participants to conduct the feasibility study and experiment with production techniques using the skills and knowledge they already had before receiving any grants or loans, the project facilitated a safe space where participants could draw on peer support. This fostered a growing sense of empowerment that spread to other areas of group members' lives. While general lifestyle improvements were reported by both men and women involved in the project, they were particularly evident among the women. A number of women participants, for example, reported that they experienced various forms of oppression as a result

of traditional gender relations within their households. After participating in the project for 18 months, 10 of these women commented that the support and experience they had gained through the project had increased their confidence, enough to confront their husbands more easily on a range of issues relating to financial matters, child rearing, reproduction and freedom of movement outside the home. One woman reported that her husband no longer hit her because she had confronted him more confidently, knowing that she had more support and economic options outside the home.

The use of local resources, skills and labour also reduced the financial burden for participants and inadvertently increased their sense of ownership over the project. The dressmaker group, for example, used members' personal sewing machines and convinced their first customers (local schools) to pay half of the total cost upfront in the form of a deposit so they could buy what they needed for production. Because of this approach, all of the groups were able to commence production for the local market with minimal financial assistance from the project. The ginger group started production by saving the meagre allowance the project provided to them for transport to conduct the feasibility study (less than $20 Australian) and the coconut and dressmaker groups borrowed around $150 and $200 Australian respectively. Not only were these amounts much less than the normal government and NGO loans, but also the groups were able to repay the project after only a few production cycles. Apart from the obvious financial advantage this approach offered, it also increased group members' sense of power over the project. As one female participant commented: 'We are the ones that will make (the project) work, because we are the ones who worked so hard and so long (for it)'.

Not only did the minimal start-up costs demonstrate the capacity of the local economy to generate funds and meet basic needs, but it also showed the groups how to better utilise the leverage they had to elicit support from local patrons. The schoolteachers, for example, felt obliged to assist the dressmakers by offering them a market for their product, as they were from a disadvantaged sector within the community. It is unlikely that the same response would have been forthcoming if it had been an

individual entrepreneur approaching them for assistance. The feasibility study and small-scale production therefore helped the participants to fashion new relationships and mobilise networks of support both within and outside the enterprise group by working with and building on existing relations of power within the community.

Consolidating enabling networks

Instead of privileging resistance as the only way to challenge formal structures of power, the project worked within existing power structures to create spaces for participants to enact power in alternative ways. It was accepted that people are already linked into various networks within and outside a community that either confine or augment their ability to make decisions and act. The project team intentionally invited the participation of key stakeholders such as local business owners, government and NGOs in the feasibility study, so that project activities were not seen to be posing a threat to their interests. Furthermore, by researching business networks and economic activities in the town, the groups were able to carve out their own niche that worked alongside and even supported other local business activities. For example, a local tailoring business identified a need for someone to manage large orders of uniforms that they could not fill themselves. This provided a niche for the dressmaking group, who had the capacity to manage larger orders. Approaching key stakeholders in this way also appealed to them as patrons, obliging them to support the groups, rather than regard them as a threat. Instead of challenging or ignoring traditional and entrenched patron–client networks, in Allen's terms, the project 'seduced' some of the town's more prosperous residents into supporting the enterprise groups.

Surprisingly, resistances to the groups drawing on local resources and taking more control over project activities came from some of the key supporters of the project in government and the NGO partner, who felt the project participants did not have sufficient social skills, education, confidence, time and money to do their own feasibility study without pay. As one NGO worker stated: 'They (the groups) are doing it! Not the staff? You are crazy or very very

patient. That will take forever'. With the groups taking charge of deciding what enterprise idea to pursue and how to do it, however, they not only consolidated the growing sense of empowerment and confidence in the decision-making abilities they had, but also shifted their relations of power with government and NGO staff. Instead of continuing to feel dependent on formal and external agencies to instigate new projects, many members started to consider them as tools that could be drawn on as they determined what they needed. In this way, the groups approached government agencies for technical and funding inputs only after they had initiated production and decided what input they wanted. Change therefore started from the inside-out, rather than from the top-down.

Through this process, some of the group members started to see themselves as being able to act and speak in arenas from which they had previously felt excluded. With great reluctance, for example, the president of the porters' group accepted a mayoral invitation to join a municipal government committee investigating the training needs of part-time labourers. Not only did the porter later comment that his experiences in the enterprise project had given him the confidence to attend the committee meetings, but also to voice his opinion in front of some of the 'important people in the town . . . like councillors, engineers and lawyers'. In turn, this experience prompted him to consider contesting the next local council elections, which his family and neighbours had asked him to do for years. He had previously thought people would not listen to his ideas because he was 'just a porter', and was now 'proud' that his influence had extended to more formal arenas of power.

Conclusion

The strategies used in the project were only an initial step towards fostering new discourses, practices and relations of power, and as critics of participatory development argue, such efforts need continual reinforcement and negotiation if they are to endure (Kesby, 2005). Power relations are always changing and any gains may shift with time. It is difficult to shift deeply embedded patterns, but at least the project opened up the possibility for change by creating

a space where participants could start to relate differently to others and experiment with their own multiple forms of power at a local level.

Allen's (2003) critique of the way current theories of power fail to consider the spatial dimension of power is a timely reminder to development scholars and practitioners wanting to understand processes of empowerment. While common conceptualisations of power continue to privilege centralised, global and top-down spatial imaginaries, the local opportunities for people to start enacting the power they already have will be overlooked. Ethnographic and place-based analyses of local power relations can uncover new pathways towards empowerment and help to ensure that well-meaning programmes do not inadvertently consolidate power differentials rather than challenge them.

Development programmes with the goal of empowerment could also benefit from experimenting with multiple strategies of power in both formal and informal arenas. Well-meaning practitioners can all too quickly dismiss traditional economic and political practices such as patronage as quaint, backward or even 'bad' social capital that needs replacing with practices of 'good governance'. If agencies are serious about intervening in complex webs of power in non-Western societies however, these practices and relationships cannot be so easily dismissed or replaced with more 'rational' or less 'corrupt' frameworks. These relations form a part of local power dynamics, and an ethnographic approach to understanding the specific discourses and practices that maintain them may offer fruitful insights into new opportunities for empowerment.

Notes

1   The Jagna project formed part of a multi-site action research intervention, *Negotiating Alternative Economic Strategies for Regional Development in Indonesia and the Philippines*, funded by the Australian Research Council and AusAID through an ARC Linkage Grant (No. 0347118) from March 2003 to the end of 2008. Katherine Gibson, Deirdre McKay and the author (Human Geography, RSPAS) coordinated research in the Philippines research sites and Kathryn Robinson, Andrew McWilliam and Jayne Curnow (Anthropology, RSPAS) coordinated the Indonesian research. The project was supported by Ann Hill's research assistance. The local Jagna project team consisted of Jocelyn

Miralles-Apag, Maureen Balaba and Nimfa Lloren. I am grateful to all of the project team for their assistance in writing this paper, and especially to Joy and Maureen.
2   For more detail on the project methodology, see Cahill (2005), Gibson-Graham (2005) and McKay *et al.* (2007).
3   *Istandbay* is slang for people (most commonly men) who stand around in the street because they have no work.
4   The quotes used in this paper from government officials and NGOs were originally spoken in English, whereas quotes from project participants were originally spoken in the local Visayan dialect.

References

Allen, J. (2003) *Lost geographies of power*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.

Arendt, H. (1958) *The human condition*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, H. (1961) *Between past and future: Six exercises in political thought*. London: Faber and Faber.

Arendt, H. (1970) *On violence*. San Diego: Harvest.

Bird, R. and E.R. Rodriguez (1999) Decentralization and poverty alleviation. International experience and the case of the Philippines, *Public Administration and Development* 19(3): 299–319.

Blair, H. (2000) Participation and accountability at the periphery: Democratic local governance in six countries, *World, Development* 28(1): 21–39.

Cahill, A. (2005) *Engaging communities for local economic development: Lessons from the Philippines*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Engaging Communities, 14–17 August, Brisbane, Australia. Retrieved 20 November 2007, from Website: http://www.engagingcommunities2005.org/abstracts/Cahill-Amanda-final.pdf

Cameron, J. and K. Gibson (2001) *Shifting focus: Alternative pathways for communities and economies, a resource kit*. Traralgon and Melbourne: Latrobe City and Monash University.

Cameron, J. and K. Gibson (2005) Alternative pathways to community and economic development: The Latrobe Valley community partnering project, *Geographical Research* 43(3): 274–285.

Castells, M. (1996) *The rise of the network society*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Castells, M. (2000) Materials for an explanatory theory of the network society, *British Journal of Sociology* 51(1): 5–24.

Chambers, R. (1997) *Whose reality counts? Putting the first last*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Chambers, R. (2005) *Ideas for development*. London: Earthscan Publications.

Cheater, A. (ed.) (1999) *The anthropology of power: Empowerment and disempowerment in changing structures*. London and New York: Routledge.

Cooke, B. and U. Kothari (2001) The case for participation as tyranny, in B. Cooke and U. Kothari (eds.), *Participation: The new tyranny?*, pp. 1–15. London: Zed Books.

Cornwall, A. (2004) Spaces for transformation? Reflections on issues of power and difference in participation in

development, in S. Hickey and G. Mohan (eds.), *Participation: From tyranny to transformation? Exploring new approaches to participation in development*, pp. 75–91. London: Zed Books.

Crush, J. (1995) Introduction: Imagining development, in J. Crush (ed.), *Power of development*, pp. 1–27. London: Routledge.

Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1988) *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. London: Athlone Press.

Eaton, K. (2001) Political obstacles to decentralization: Evidence from Argentina and the Philippines, *Development and Change* 32(1): 101–127.

Escobar, A. (1995) *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Escobar, A. (2001) Place, economy and culture in a post-development era, in R. Prazniak and A. Dirlik (eds.), *Place and politics in an age of globalization*, pp. 193–218. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Foucault, M. (1991) Governmentality, in G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality*, pp. 87–104. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, M. (2001) Space, knowledge and power, in J. Faubion (ed.), *Power, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984, Volume III*, pp. 349–64. New York: New Press.

Gibson-Graham, J.K. (1996) *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): A feminist critique of political economy*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.

Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2005) Surplus possibilities: Postdevelopment and community economies, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 26(1): 4–26.

Gledhill, J. (2000) *Power and its disguises: Anthropological perspectives on politics*. London: Pluto Press.

Goetz, A.M. (ed.) (1997) *Getting institutions right for women in development*. London: Zed Books.

Goetz, A.M. and R.S. Gupta (1996) Who takes the credit? Gender, power, and control over loan use in rural credit programs in Bangladesh, *World Development* 24(1): 45–63.

Hickey, S. and G. Mohan (eds.) (2004) *Participation: From tyranny to transformation? Exploring new approaches to participation in development*. London and New York: Zed Books.

Hindess, B. (1996) *Discourses of power: From Hobbes to Foucault*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Hunt, J. and N. Kasynathan (2002) Reflections on microfinance and women's empowerment, *Development Bulletin* 57: 71–76.

Kabeer, N. (1998) 'Money can't buy me love'? Re-evaluation of gender, credit and empowerment in rural Bangladesh, IDS Discussion Paper, No. 363.

Kabeer, N. (2001) Conflicts over credit: Re-evaluating the empowerment potential of loans to women in rural Bangladesh, *World Development* 29(1): 63–84.

Kerkvliet, B.J. (1991) *Everyday politics in the Philippines: Class and status relations in a Central Luzon village*. Quezon City: New Day Press.

Kesby, M. (2005) Retheorizing empowerment-through-participation as a performance in space: Beyond tyranny to transformation, *Signs* 30(4): 2037–2067.

Kilby, P. (2002) Microfinance and poverty alleviation: The dangers of a development 'snake oil', *Development Bulletin* 57: 117–120.

Kretzmann, J. and J. McKnight (1993) *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. Evanston, Illinois: The Assets-Based Community Development Institute, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University.

McKay, D., A. Cahill and K. Gibson (2007) Strengthening community economies: Strategies for decreasing dependence and stimulating local development, *Development Bulletin* 72(March): 60–70.

Mann, M. (1993) *The sources of social power, Volume II: The rise of classes and nation states, 1760–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mayoux, L. (2002) Microfinance and women's empowerment: Rethinking 'best practice', *Development Bulletin* 57: 76–81.

Moore, M. and J. Putzel (1999) *Thinking strategically about politics and poverty*, IDS Working Paper 101. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

Mosse, D. (2005) *Cultivating development: An ethnography of aid policy and practice*. London: Pluto Press.

Oliphant, S.A. (1999) Breaking new ground? Farmers' participation in an agricultural development project in the Philippines, Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Human Geography, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra.

Rosario, S. (2002) Grameen Bank-style microcredit: Impact on dowry and women's solidarity, *Development Bulletin* 57: 67–71.

Scott, J.C. (1985) *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Tew, J. (2002) *Social theory, power and practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Turner, J.C. (2005) Explaining the nature of power: A three-process theory, *European Journal of Social Psychology* 35: 1–22.

Urich, P.B. (1996) Resource control and environmental change in the Philippine uplands, Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Human Geography, The Australian National University, Canberra.

Urich, P.B. and M. Edgecombe (1999) Bohol's indigenous social institutions: A development perspective, *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 27: 178–201.

Williams, G. (2004) Towards a repoliticisation of participatory development: Political capabilities and spaces of empowerment, in S. Hickey and G. Mohan (eds.), *Participation: From tyranny to transformation? Exploring new approaches to participation in development*, pp. 92–107. London: Zed Books.