

Section 1: Note to Users

These tools aim to help you to develop foundational skills such as listening, asking probing questions, managing conflict, and so on.

It is useful to engage with these tools before, during, and after the training workshop to prepare you for facilitation in a community-led approach. Extensive practice with reflection is needed in order to master the skills that these tools seek to develop.

The tools may be used individually or in small groups. This section enables individual reflection by providing space for reflective writing, using a workbook format. Each tool in this section requires 60–90 minutes to complete.

On an ongoing basis, it is useful to think about which skills you need additional practice on, which challenges (internal or external) make it difficult for you to use a particular skill, and how you will take steps to improve. In small groups, you may want to reflect with three to five colleagues, with group discussion of the questions posed in these tools and of what can be done to deepen particular skills within your agency.

FAC 8. Understanding Power Dynamics in the Community

The term “community” can suggest a homogeneous collective—a group of equal community members. Yet within each community lie significant differences of power and privilege.

Recognized leaders may have much greater influence, prestige, and power than do ordinary community people. Some people hold considerable power by virtue of their wealth, while very poor people may have little power and struggle to feed their families. Gender is often a major fault line regarding power, as most societies are steeped in patriarchy and assign most of the decision-making power to men rather than women.

Similarly, most societies privilege the views of adults over those of children when it comes to making important community decisions. Further, children from well-off families go to school and may have greater status and influence than do very poor children who are out of school and have to work to help support their families. Children with disabilities may be hidden away and have little voice or opportunity to interact with others in the community.

The Importance of Understanding Power Dynamics

It is appropriate to think through the importance of the fact that a community is typically a site of significant power differentials. In the space below, please jot down a few ideas about why understanding these power dynamics are important for community-led work that supports vulnerable children.

Write below:

Did you consider that the power dynamics in the community affect children’s vulnerability? Quite often, it is children from very poor, marginalized families who are at greatest risk and who end up engaging in child labor, sexual exploitation, association with armed forces and groups, etc. These children frequently lack access to supports and services that children from well-connected and relatively wealthy families enjoy. Understanding the local power dynamics can help one to better understand the patterns of risk and protective factors that determine children’s vulnerability. In turn, this puts one in a better position to take steps to reduce the vulnerabilities of children.

Also, understanding the local power dynamics enables one to engage with the community in a way that helps to create an inclusive process, without reproducing the existing power inequities.

For example, the community leader and the male elders might be the first people in a community whom you met. If you asked them whether they would help lead a process of community dialogue and decision-making regarding which harm to children to address and how, and they accepted, you might end up with a process in which decisions are taken by only a few, powerful adults who may not represent well the views of all the people in the community.

Without intending to exclude particular people, you may have boosted the power of the community elite and have done little to engage with or support more vulnerable people. It is of questionable value to speak of “community dialogue” and “community decision-making” if the dialogues and decisions include only—or are controlled by—a handful of relatively powerful people in the community.

Understanding local power dynamics can also help you to enable useful community dialogues about which harm to children to address and how to address that harm to children. For example, it may help you to understand who are the main influence agents in discussions, who may feel confident speaking up and who may feel reluctant to participate, and how participants might shy away from disagreeing with people who are more powerful. With these points in mind, we can now turn to learning about power dynamics.

Learning About Local Power Dynamics

Ideally, the community dialogues you will help to facilitate will be preceded by deep learning about the community that illuminates the local power dynamics. However, power dynamics often shift over time, so it is important to view learning about power dynamics as an ongoing process. Also, it is important that you gain a firsthand understanding of them.

Questions. As an adjunct to the initial learning process, you as facilitator can ask questions such as the following to different people and subgroups:

- Which people in the community hold greater power or influence?
- Are there people who have less power or are marginalized, even by virtue of food insecurity and having to work more than others to feed their families? Who are they?
- Do women and men hold equal power in making decisions? Whose views carry the greatest weight, and who makes most of the decisions?
- Do teenagers and adults hold equal power in making decisions? Whose views carry the greatest weight, and who makes most of the decisions?

In asking questions such as these, it is important to ask probing questions that help to bring out fully the views of the person you are talking with.

Participants. A valuable strategy in learning about power dynamics is to talk with a variety of people who are positioned in different ways according to gender, class or socio-economic status, religion, etc. It might be useful to talk with prestigious, influential people such as community leaders, school teachers, elder men and women, imams or pastors, youth group leaders, etc. It is

also important to talk with women as well as men, with teenagers as well as adults, and with people who are the poorest of the poor or who are part of relatively marginalized subgroups such as refugees, as they may have quite different views. It is less your job to sort through whose views are “correct” than to learn how views of power depend very much on where one sits in the community.

In approaching very poor or marginalized people, care should be taken to respect their schedules, meet at times and places that are convenient for them, and avoid unintentionally stigmatizing them by singling them out or labeling them.

One way to do this is by taking a transect walk through the community. This entails walking on a straight line all the way through a community, from end to center and back out to the other end. Along the way, you can stop and talk with people and visit homes you see so long as this is done in a respectful manner and you do not impose on people. It is best if the imaginary line you follow leads into areas you are not familiar with. By picking the orientation of the line at random, you increase your chances of coming into contact with people and areas that have considerable diversity.

Participant Observation³. Direct observation is also very useful in learning about power dynamics. Deeds speak louder than words, and often there is a gap between what people say and what they actually do. Because you will be spending significant amounts of time in the community, you will be in a position to observe interactions, meetings, and discussions as part of your everyday activities.

For example, in having tea with some men in the community, you might notice that women and men take tea separately and that key community issues and priorities are often discussed by the men when they take tea. Similarly, at community meetings, you might observe that what men, particularly community leaders, say carries greater weight than what women say. You might also notice that families typically send their sons for higher levels of education than they provide for their daughters.

These and other observations could fit a pattern of gender discrimination and male privileging that vests greater power in the hands of men. Being aware of this pattern can be quite valuable when it comes to enabling open discussion since people who hold relatively little power are frequently reluctant to speak openly in front of people who hold greater power, particularly if the latter engage in abusive behavior such as sexual exploitation and abuse or interpersonal violence.

³ See Tool LNG 4 for in depth discussion of participant observation.

Similarly, you might observe that people from very poor families seldom attend community meetings. This is highly useful information in helping to create an inclusive process since it means that community dialogues at regular community meetings are not fully inclusive. Other means may be needed in order to reach out to and engage with people who do not participate in community meetings.

In the process of learning about power dynamics, it is also important to think critically about your own power and position relative to community members. You may want to re-visit tool FAC 2 to help you reflect on how you are likely perceived by community members, whether you are tacitly favoring particular people or subgroups, whether you are observing or also judging, and whether you are garnering too much power by making yourself too central in the dialogue process. Considering these questions is every bit as much of an ongoing process as is learning about local power dynamics.