



To support or to empower? Maybe that is the question

Gülesin Nemetli Unal



In the quest to find the common ground of youth work, practitioners, researchers, policy makers, institutional representatives from all over Europe and beyond came together, sat down in a circle and wrote down exactly and concretely what it is that they do with young people. Two verbs kept on popping up during this exercise: to support and to empower.

During the discussion it turned out that often these two words are used interchangeably. Do these two verbs mean the same thing? Is there a nuance of difference between them? Could revealing the difference lead our way in the quest of finding common ground or am I just on a wild goose chase?

Being aware of the international version of the English language that we use in the European youth work field, I first checked a dictionary. Bearing in mind *Coyote's* readers, I did not check any dictionary but the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary.

It turns out that "to support" is one of the top 1 000 most frequently used words, with various meanings: from encouraging and giving help to providing money, or from holding somebody or something in position to helping in proving something.

Then I also checked the meaning of the verb "to empower". I must say that the meaning was much clearer: to give someone the authority or power to do something.



Support

Line breaks: support
Pronunciation: /sə'pɔ:t/
verb

- Encourage / give help
1. to help or encourage somebody/something by saying or showing that you agree with them/it;
 2. support somebody to give or be ready to give help to somebody if they need it. Provide money, etc.
 3. support something to help or encourage something to be successful by giving it money;
 4. support somebody/something/yourself to provide everything necessary, especially money, so that somebody/something can live or exist.
- Hold in position
5. support somebody/something to hold somebody/something in position; to prevent somebody/something from falling.
- Help prove something
6. support something to help to show that something is true.
- Reference: *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*

Empower

Line breaks: em|power
Pronunciation: /ɪm'paʊə/ /ɛm'paʊə/
verb

1. Give (someone) the authority or power to do something
 - 1.1. Make (someone) stronger and more confident, especially in controlling their life and claiming their rights
- Reference: *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*

But what is the difference?

"To support" has a lot to do with helping, giving a push or providing means for someone to do something, to encourage. For example supporting young unemployed people to find jobs, or supporting LGBTI youth who face discrimination in schools, or supporting young migrants in their language learning.

Whereas when we talk about empowering, we talk about youth work practices that give authority to young people. To empower means giving the power or the right to take decisions. And taking decisions comes with the responsibility of being aware of the consequences.

Let's try to give examples of empowering youth work practices to similar target groups that we mentioned above. For example providing information to young unemployed people about the welfare system and the rights that they have, or organising LGBTI youth to take an active role in school boards or initiating a dialogue between young migrants and the local authorities about the specific needs of young people.

Empowerment has a lot to do with being active in taking decisions, and being active in decision making has a lot to do with participation.

» To support or to empower? Maybe that is the question

The ladder and the nightmare

The famous “ladder of participation” by Roger Hart can help us dig deeper into the topic. The ladder presents several degrees of participation, from being assigned and informed about a decision to actually being an active agent that takes the decision.

In youth work, while naming and recognising our practices, I think it would be fair to keep “the ladder” in mind before calling what we do empowering. Is the result of our youth work practice young people becoming more autonomous in taking decisions? How about during our youth work practice? Who takes the decisions on the timing? Who has the authority that shapes the group culture? Who takes the initiative?

Sometimes, through youth work, we help young people to climb up the ladder in areas where we as youth workers do not take an immediately visible place, such as family, school or different areas of their social lives. Through participating in youth work activities and the experience of being an active agent, young people can become eager to be more active in other aspects of their lives too.

Another theory that might help us in reflecting on empowering is the (not quite so famous) “nightmare of participation”. Architect and writer Markus Miessen criticises the current discourse on participation in his book with the same name. In a nutshell, Miessen argues that participation became the new norm of political correctness. For a process to be open for participation, there has to be a person or a group that let others contribute to decision making. Miessen argues that this person or group also qualifies the means and the limits of participation. And these means and limits define what is acceptable or not in our participation. Going back to our dictionary definition, to empower is to give the authority to do something. So Miessen brings our attention back to the one who “gives”.

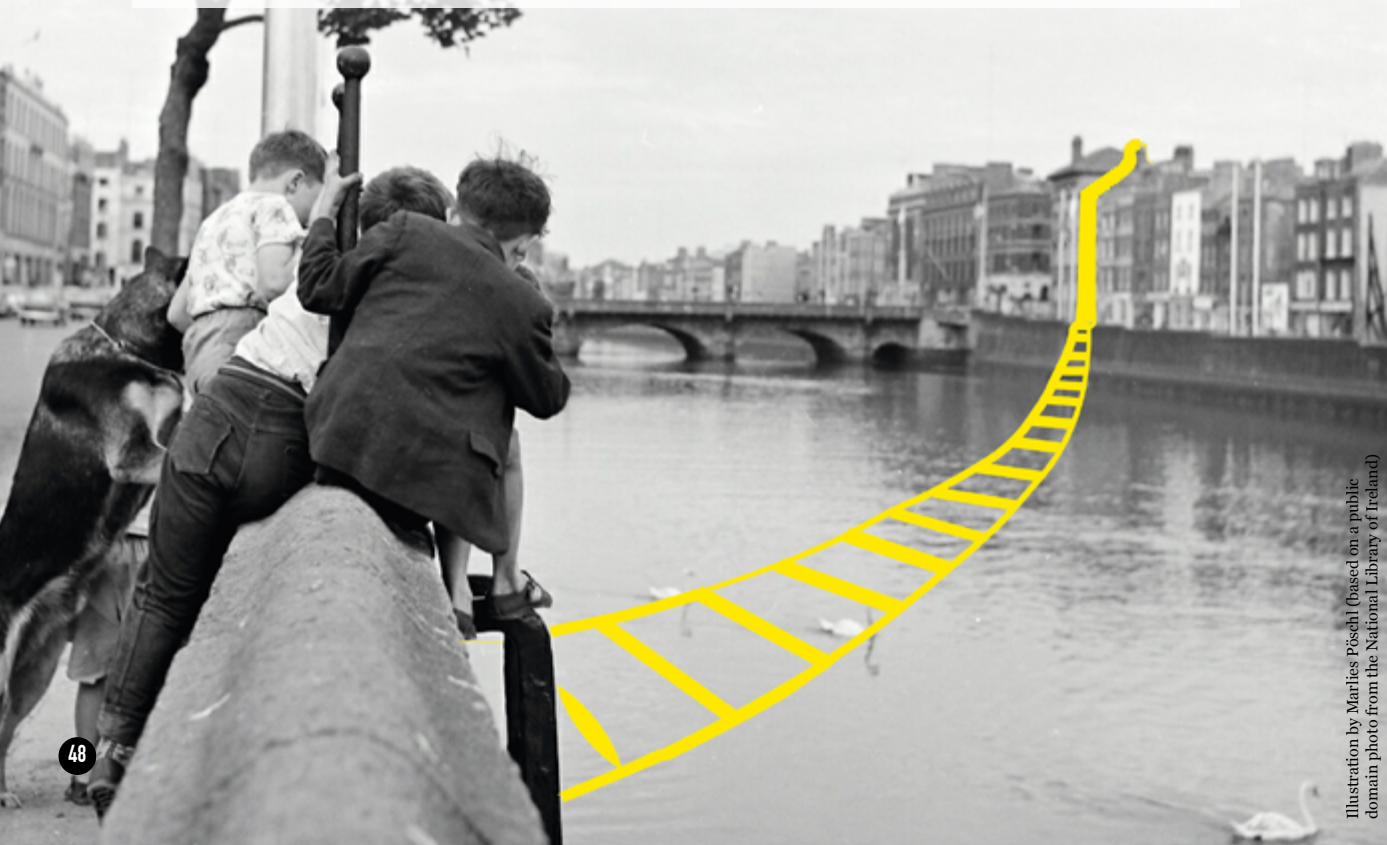


Illustration by Marlies Pöschl (based on a public domain photo from the National Library of Ireland)

So which one is a better common ground, to support or to empower?

Not only in youth work but in all social sciences, structures or actions that are created to help or to support are being criticised, by some, because they do not change the circumstances that put people in need of support but rather ease the difficulties and therefore contribute to the continuity of the current system. Whereas structures or actions that are there to empower individuals and advocate for changes in the system are there to create long-term improvement based on people’s rights. When put like this, empowering sounds more solid, right?

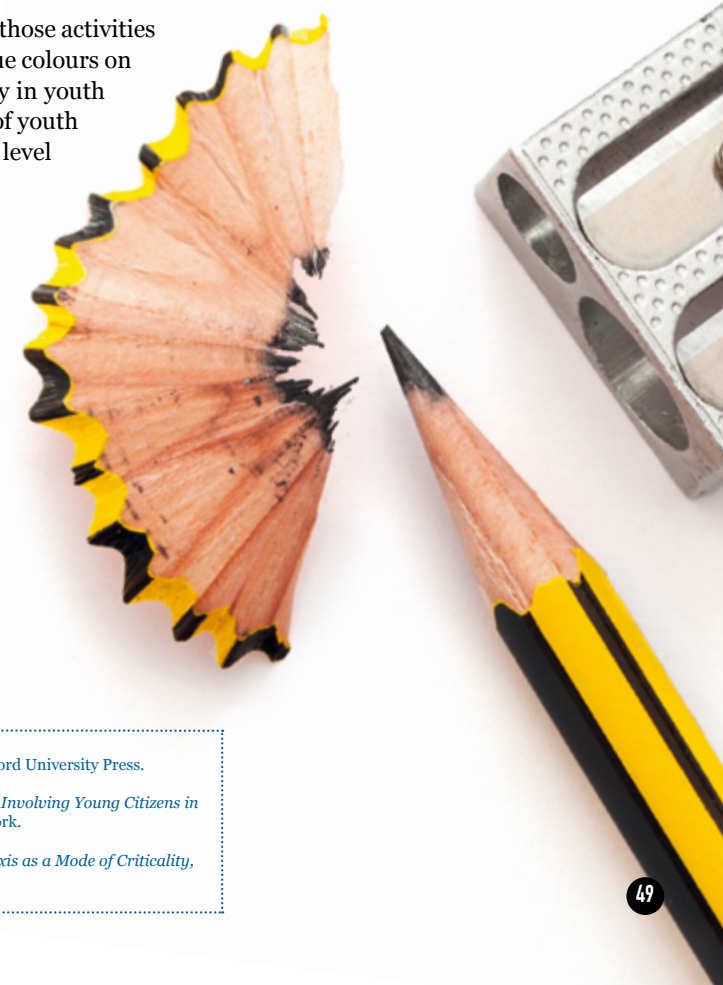
I am not sure. I think both approaches (and then the million other possible formations in between the two) have good reasons to exist. After an earthquake (or a disaster at any level) you cannot really say that the best thing would be to immediately go and empower the people to ask for their rights. There are urgent needs that should be covered through support mechanisms and by simply providing help. Or, in another example, when urban policies start to reduce public spaces which can be used by youth, one might choose to provide space for youngsters – and therefore increase their capacity to cope with the current politics. Using the same example, another organisation or initiative might choose to get organised and ask for the public spaces back through advocacy and demonstrations, therefore asking for power in decision making.

Which way is yours?

The course of action and principles that surround those activities are defined by policies. And policies show their true colours on the issues at the margins. The celebrated diversity in youth work practices is certainly based on the diversity of youth policies; not only at national level, but also at the level of youth organisations.

So, to support or to empower? Maybe that is the question for your organisation too.

What do you think?



References

- Wehmeier S. et al. (2005), *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary*, Oxford University Press.
- Hart R. (1997), *Children's Participation – The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care*, UNICEF, New York.
- Miessen M. (2011), *The Nightmare of Participation – Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality*, Sternberg Press.