

Handout on Power and Empowerment: Summary of some concepts and approaches

'Empowerment' has become a central objective for many organisations, but like 'power' this can have many different meanings. One criticism of participatory approaches to development, democracy and governance is that they sometimes seek to involve or consult people without examining the underlying power dynamics of the situation. Power analysis can help to address this. Power is complex, however, and is best understood using various frameworks.

A. Alternative forms of power (Rowlands, VeneKlasen and Miller)

A dominant view is one of 'Power over' – domination or control of one over another
But power can also be seen as a positive force:

- Power to – individual ability to act
- Power with – collective action, working together
- Power within – self-worth, dignity

B. Public, Private and Intimate Power (from gender analysis, VeneKlasen & Miller)

- Public realm of power (visible, employment, public life)
- Private realm of power (family, relationships, friends, marriage)
- Intimate realm of power (self-esteem, confidence, relationship to body)

C. 'three faces of power' (Gaventa, Lukes, VeneKlasen and Miller)

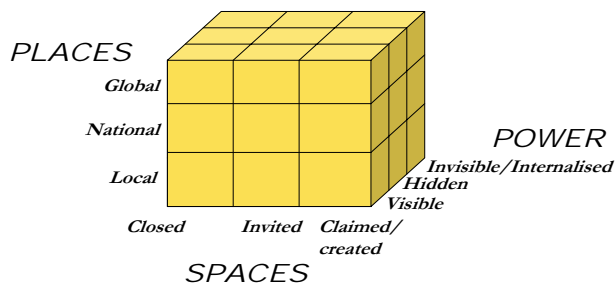
- * visible power: observable decision-making mechanisms, winners and losers
- * hidden power: setting the agenda behind the scene, biases which exclude
- * invisible power: social conditioning, ideology, influencing people's needs

D. Socialised and internalised power (Foucault, Bourdieu, Hayward, others)

The "third face" of power (invisible power), can also be seen as deeply embedded social norms, values and world views which shape power relations in society.

- (a) Foucault: Power as truth or knowledge . A "structural" view of power (v. seeing power as a question of "agency", or individual or group action). Foucault saw power as a "regime of truth" or "discourse" that can take a long time to change, involving basic changes in perception or thinking. He also saw power as embodied through socialised processes of discipline and control.
- (b) Bourdieu: Power as 'symbolic violence' which creates 'embodied dispositions', or *habitus* ...These give rise to 'fields' or 'socially stratified spaces', norms and conventions. We 'incorporate' or 'inscribe' these ways of behaving into our bodies and actions. Our dispositions or 'habitus' are 'spontaneously attuned' and perceived as part of the natural order of things
- (c) Hayward: 'Defacing power' (1998) Power as a network of social boundaries that enables or constrains the behaviour or freedom of all actors

The “Power Cube” framework



Visible power: observable decision making

This level includes the visible and definable aspects of political power – the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions and procedures of decision making ... Strategies that target this level are usually to change the 'who, how and what' of policymaking so that the policy process is more democratic and accountable, and serves the needs and rights of people and the survival of the planet.

Hidden power: setting the political agenda

Certain powerful people and institutions maintain their influence by controlling who gets to the decision-making table and what gets on the agenda. These dynamics operate on many levels to exclude and devalue the concerns and representation of other less powerful groups ... Empowering advocacy strategies that focus on strengthening organisations and movements of the poor can build the collective power of numbers and new leadership to influence the way the political agenda is shaped and increase the visibility and legitimacy of their issues, voice and demands.

Invisible power: shaping meaning and what is acceptable

Probably the most insidious of the three dimensions of power, invisible power shapes the psychological and ideological boundaries of participation. Significant problems and issues are not only kept from the decision-making table, but also from the minds and consciousness of the different players involved, even those directly affected by the problem. By influencing how individuals think about their place in the world, this level of power shapes people's beliefs, sense of self and acceptance of the *status quo* – even their own superiority or inferiority. Processes of socialisation, culture and ideology perpetuate exclusion and inequality by defining what is normal, acceptable and safe. Change strategies in this area target social and political culture as well as individual consciousness to transform the way people perceive themselves and those around them, and how they envisage future possibilities and alternatives.

Adapted from Just Associates from VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) *A New Weave of Power*

From...	Power Spectrum (from all the above)		...To
Actors and processes <i>(visible, power over)</i>	↔		Norms and beliefs <i>(invisible, socialised power)</i>
Emphasis Focus on “visible” and “hidden” forms of power as forms of wilful domination, observable control and “power over”	↔		Focus on “invisible” power reproduced through social and cultural norms, and internalised by powerful and powerless people
Strategies Action to strengthen the “power to” and “power with” of poor and marginalised people, and to build influence and participation in decision-making processes	↔		Action to strengthen awareness, dignity and “power within”, to redefine social consensus on norms and behaviour, and to reshape conditions behind decision-making
Example: Gender Finding ways to ensure women and their issues are represented and have influence in decision-making spaces	↔		Strengthening dignity and self-esteem of women, and challenging socially constructed biases in men's and women's gendered behaviour