EXPANDING UNDERSTANDING OF POWER IN INTERNATIONAL AID RELATIONS

Note 1: Power Literacy – January 2023

Richer Vocabulary =More Nuanced Understanding and Action

If we only have one word to talk about something, we cannot see, analyse and describe it with nuance. A richer vocabulary allows more nuanced views and better focused action. Enrich your vocabulary with: *visible, hidden and invisible power*; *hard, soft and smart power*; *closed, invited and claimed/created spaces*; *power over, power to, power with, power within and power under the burden of the past.*

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1. **Power: What are we talking about?**
2. **Where does power operate?**
3. **What are possible sources of power?**
4. **Power is relational and contextual.**
5. **How can power be exercised?**
   a. **Hard, soft, and smart power**
   b. **Closed, invited and claimed/created spaces**
   c. **Visible, hidden, and invisible power**
6. **How do power inequalities establish and sustain themselves?**
7. **Different kinds of power**

1. Power: What are we Talking About?

'*Power is the ability to affect the behaviour of others to get the outcomes you want.*' (Nye 2008:27)

'*Social power is the capacity of different individuals or groups to determine who gets what, who does what, who decides what, and who sets the agenda.*' (Batliwala 2020:13)

<u>Who gets</u> what? Not only resources, but also opportunities, rights, and privileges in social institutions (like the family, social group, national society).

<u>Who does what?</u> In the distribution of productive and reproductive labour and work.

<u>Who decides what?</u> Who sets the agenda, who is consulted, who is invited to decision-spaces, who views count in the decisions that are constantly made in the various spaces we live in?

<u>Who frames the issues, who determines the meaning?</u> Who decides what is legitimate and what not; what is important and what not; how an issue has to be framed; what choices exist; what the standard must be that decides whether you 'succeed' or 'fail'; what is 'news' and what is not; what is a 'priority' and what not, what cannot and cannot be discussed, what is 'desirable' and 'attractive' and what not, what matters and what does not?

2. Where Does Power Operate?

Power resides at multiple levels, and within the public and private spheres. It does not only exist at the level of national politics. It plays out at the local and at the regional / global level (and given the increasing interconnectedness of the world, we need to acknowledge the reality of the 'glocal'). But it also plays out within the family and other regular social relationships, and within ourselves. We can see it everywhere:

- Between political and economic formations, within countries, between countries and between groups of countries like 'North' and 'South' or aid-giving and aid-receiving countries.
- Within and between organisations and institutions, including aid organisations and government institutions.
- Within and between economic actors.
- Within and across social identity groups.
- In interpersonal relations: in the family, the workspace, between friends, members of social groups like a sport club or a dance group.

- Within ourselves: Within ourselves we may have a deep source of strength, confidence, and courage, even if we do not recognise or use it. Or we may feel powerless.

3. What Are Possible Sources of Power?

There are many different sources of power. Possessing one can help you access others; having multiple sources of power can make you strong indeed.

Power can come from:

- Might: the ability to threaten or use violence.
- A formal position of authority that can punish or reward.
- Material or economic resources: possession of land, money, property, jewelry, gold, but also means of transport, means of communication etc.
- Control over people's bodies and labour: What they can and must do with their bodies (dress, overall look, mobility, sexuality etc.) and the work they can and must do, and the terms and conditions for both.
- Control over information and the knowledge people can access, including but not limited to formal educational opportunities. This includes familiarity with the language spoken, but also with the particular specialised language (and acronyms) around a certain topic.
- Inherited or acquired social rank and status: The social status of the family we were born into; the colour of our skin; what formal educational level we achieved or where we studied; the wealth we accumulated, the status symbols we can buy with it, and the connections it enabled us to make.
- Connections, networks, memberships: Who you know, what network or union or movement you are a member of.
- Self-esteem and self-confidence: based on psychological and/or physical strength.
- Strong negative emotions: Anger, outrage, hate, loathing of certain others.

Certain sources of power can lead to others: Access to information and knowledge can eventually translate into economic resources and power. Who you know may give you privileged access to information that can enable you to control other people's labour. Inherited social status can give you access to networks even if you do not have many material or economic resources.

4. Power is Relational and Contextual

We are powerful or powerless in relation to others - and can be both at the same time: I may feel powerless with regard to my boss at work yet exercise my power over those under my management authority. I may feel powerless towards those that control the market space where I have my stall but show my power to those living under my roof.

The tribal elder can be very influential in his community, but fairly powerless in the face of the international agro-business that is exploiting some of the communities' natural resources. A political actor can be very influential within his ethnic or religious constituency, but powerless in other ethnic or religious groups. A youth activist can be very influential within his peer group, but lose all confidence when confronted with establishment lawyers etc.

5. How Can Power Be Exercised?

a. *Hard, soft, and smart power* (Nye 2008)

Hard power: Exercising hard power means using the formal authority to command and/or the ability to coerce others with the prospect of rewards or punishments – including the (threat of) violence. Fear is often a component of the relational atmosphere. It may go together with the control and management of information and build coalitions. It also manifests itself in the control of access to the spaces where matters of importance or discussed and decided. Its underlying view of power is often that of power over, based on a perception of power as a limited resource: I cannot share it without being weakened.

Soft power: Exercising soft power means attracting and persuading others to follow you where you want them to go. It uses the ability to create an attractive and achievable vision, strong communication skills and emotional intelligence (including self-management). Others feel not coerced by you; they follow you willingly (even if you may be misleading them).

Smart power: Is the contextually appropriate use of combinations of hard and soft power, based on a sharp reading of the context and what kind(s) of power may be the most effective for it.

b. *Closed, invited and claimed/created spaces*

Spaces for participation are not neutral but are themselves shaped by power relations. When examining the spaces for participation you can ask how they were created, and with whose interests and what terms of engagement. A useful distinction has been made in this regard between *closed*, *invited* and *claimed/created spaces*.

▪ *Closed Spaces***:** Many decision-making spaces are closed. That is, decisions are made by a set of actors behind closed doors, without any pretense of broadening the boundaries for inclusion. Within the state, another way of conceiving these spaces is as 'provided' spaces in the sense that elites (be they bureaucrats, experts or elected representatives –with their 'advisors') make decisions and provide services to 'the people', without the need for broader consultation or involvement. Many civil society efforts focus on opening such spaces through greater public involvement, transparency or accountability.

▪ *Invited spaces*: As efforts are made to widen participation, to move from closed spaces to more 'open' ones, new spaces are created which may be referred to as 'invited' spaces, i.e. 'those into which people (as users, partners, citizens or beneficiaries) are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities, be they government, supranational agencies or non-governmental organisations'. Such participation may remain 'by invitation', or can become 'by right', where it is mandated or legislated. Invited spaces may be regularised, that is they are institutionalized and ongoing, or more transient, through one-off forms of consultation. Increasingly with the rise of approaches to participatory governance, these spaces are seen at every level, from local government to national policy and even in global policy forums.

▪ *Claimed/created spaces:* Finally, there are the spaces which are claimed by less powerful actors from or against the power holders or created more autonomously by them. Some authors have referred to these spaces as 'organic' spaces which emerge 'out of sets of common concerns or identifications' and 'may come into being as a result of popular mobilisation, such as around identity or issue-based concerns, or may consist of spaces in which like-minded people join together in common pursuits'. Others talk of these spaces as 'third spaces' where social actors reject hegemonic space and create spaces for themselves. These spaces range from ones created by social movements and community associations to those simply involving natural places where people gather to debate, discuss and resist, outside of the institutionalised policy arenas.
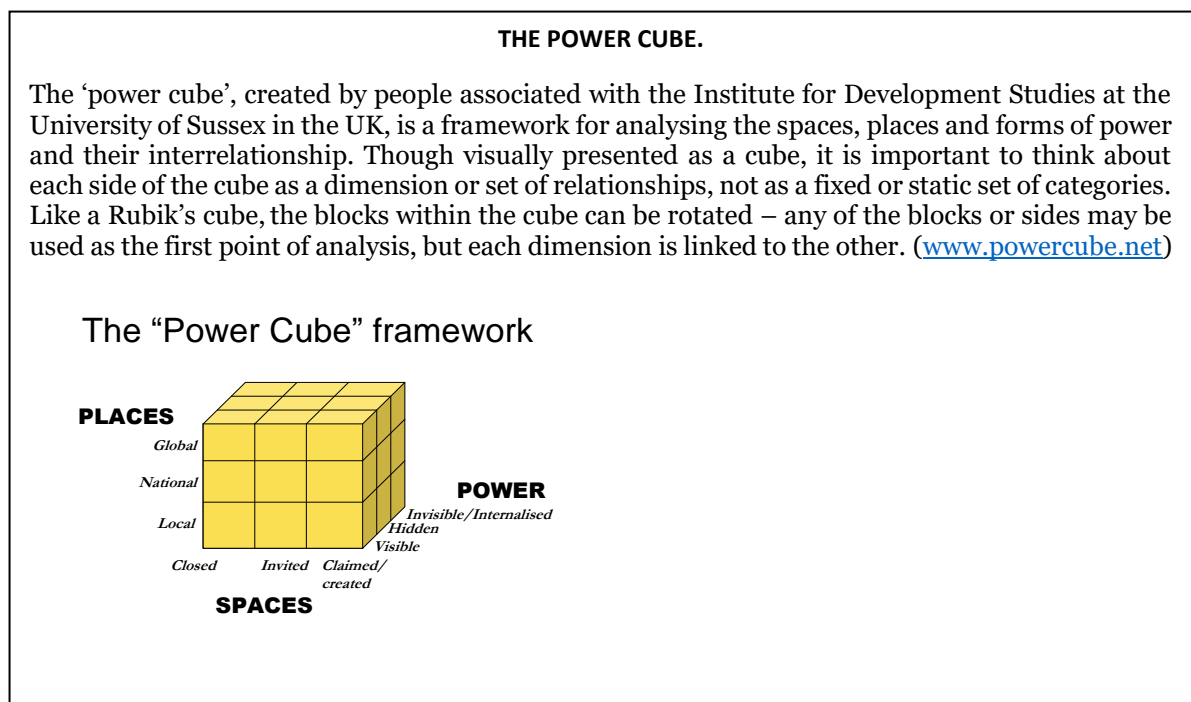
Different spaces exist in dynamic relationship to one another and are constantly opening and closing through struggles for legitimacy and resistance, co-optation and transformation. Closed spaces may seek to restore legitimacy by creating invited spaces; similarly, invited spaces may be created from the other direction, as more autonomous people's movements attempt to use their own fora for engagement with the state. Similarly, power gained in one space, through new skills, capacity, and experiences, can be used to enter and affect other spaces. From this perspective, the transformative potential of spaces for participatory governance must always be assessed in relationship to the other spaces which surround them. Creation of new institutional designs of participatory governance, in the absence of other participatory spaces which serve to provide and sustain countervailing power, might simply be captured by the already empowered elite.

The interrelationships of the spaces also create challenges for civil society strategies of engagement. To challenge 'closed' spaces, civil society organisations may serve the role of advocates, arguing for greater transparency, more democratic structures, or greater forms of public accountability. As new 'invited' spaces emerge, civil society organisations may need other strategies of how to negotiate and collaborate 'at the table', which may require shifting from more confrontational advocacy methods. At the same time, research shows that 'invited spaces' must be held open by ongoing demands of social movements, and that more autonomous spaces of participation are important for new demands to develop and to grow. Spanning these spaces – each of which involves different skills, strategies, and resources – is a challenge. In reality, civil society organisations must have the 'staying power' to move in and out of them over time, or the capacity to build effective horizontal alliances that link strategies across the various spaces for change.

c. *Visible, hidden, and invisible power*

Often, the attention remains focused on the power that is most visible, on who has the formal authority to make decisions or the ability to use or threaten violence to coerce others. But equally important are 'hidden' and 'invisible' power.

- *Visible power: observable decision making*
  This level includes the visible and definable aspects of political, organisational and social power – the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions and procedures of decision making. The minister, the senior manager, the mayor, the head of the household are formal decision-makers, based on an authority given to them by institutional procedures or social norms.

- *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 can be formal decision-makers but also include others that are not visible. These dynamics operate on many levels to exclude and devalue the concerns and representation of other less powerful groups. The exclusions tend to be justified with practical and procedural reasons, as if they are beyond the control of the organisers.

- *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.

THE POWER CUBE.

The 'power cube', created by people associated with the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Sussex in the UK, is a framework for analysing the spaces, places and forms of power and their interrelationship. Though visually presented as a cube, it is important to think about each side of the cube as a dimension or set of relationships, not as a fixed or static set of categories. Like a Rubik's cube, the blocks within the cube can be rotated – any of the blocks or sides may be used as the first point of analysis, but each dimension is linked to the other. (www.powercube.net)

The "Power Cube" framework

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6. How do Power Inequalities Establish and Sustain Themselves?

Power inequalities typically establish themselves when those who control material, knowledge and human resources build their networks of influence and gain control over other intangible resources.

Power inequalities sustain themselves by

- Using incentives and disincentives i.e. reward and punishment, including threats of punishment. These can be formalised in various types of agreements and contracts.
- Creating and enforcing laws, regulations and contracts that formalise and legalise the inequalities.
- Controlling information and knowledge and limiting what the subordinate has access to and what capabilities s/he can develop.
- Creating and replicating ideologies, theories or sets of ideas that justify the power structure, no matter how unfair or unequal it is. These often circulate informally and get internalised to the point we are no longer conscious of them but take them as established truths – rather than unconscious or conscious biases. Even if we are subordinate, we believe that must be our place in the system and do not challenge it. We are ideologically conditioned. The conditioning happens through all sorts of institutions: the

family, the formal education system, the market, religion, constantly repeated narratives about 'us' and 'them' etc.
- Through everyday practices that become social norms and even social rules.

In practice, fear and violence tend to be the last resort of a power structure, not the primary source of control. Ideology and social rules, together with control of information and knowledge, are generally much cheaper and more effective ways, because -when internalised- the subordinate does not challenge the system.

7. Different kinds of power

Power over: Most of us, when we hear or use the word 'power', think about 'power over': the power that an individual or organisation has over others. That type of 'power' exists in a limited quantity: If you have most of it, I only have a bit; previously I had a lot but now you have taken most of it away from me. Power over can come from parents, older siblings, bosses at work, religious and political authorities, security forces etc. The previous paragraphs largely reflect the 'power over' perspective. 'Power over' is emotionally charged: Some who have it get quite intoxicated by the thrill of it, while those who don't have it tend to resent the situation. Because 'power over' exists as a limited quantity, those who have it must exclude others, while those who want more of it enter into 'power struggles' to get a bigger share. In those power struggles, one may try to 'overpower' the other.

Power to: The capacity to act, to exercise 'agency', for ourselves or for others towards a kind of personal, collective, or political goal – without needing someone else's permission or approval.

Power with: Collective power: it can be used to keep other people down and subordinate, or to challenge power inequalities and social injustices. Considering 'power with' can create a different atmosphere. From the friction and negative energy of 'power over', we now can feel the positive energy of our combined strengths, to achieve something that each of us individually could not. We may not bring equal amounts of power to the table, but that is less important than what becomes possible when we act together.

Power within: This power is a deep source of strength, within individuals and sometimes groups, not dependent on others and always with us, even if at times we have difficulty reaching it. It is grounded in a fundamental personal dignity, and healthy self-esteem and self-confidence. It is anchored in deeply held positive values, that remind us of what is really important in life and keep us authentic. It provides the nutrients that allow us to face and live through difficult situations and be 'resilient'. It is green energy, renewable. It can be shaken by 'power over' but is hard to destroy. Strongest when acquired in the course of our early upbringing, it can be developed and strengthened also later in life, with practice.

'*Empowering*' other people refers largely to power within, power to and power with. Yet 'empowerment' can in practice be undertaken within a clear 'power over' relationship – a contradiction that may limit its effectiveness.

Power under the burden of the past: A continuing feeling of victimization even when the situation that created it (intimidation and threat, humiliation, abuse, unfair dismissal, violence, forced displacement etc.) no longer exists for the person. A resulting 'powerless rage' and fear of being victimized again, can lead to bullying and abusive behaviour later on. The victim can adopt the behaviours of her or his past abuser, as an ongoing protective strategy even where it is not required.

"*…we think power is something that has to be changed outside, in the larger society or community – not within ourselves. (…) We cannot ask others to change their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour if we are not willing to change ourselves.*" (Batliwala 2020:63)

References

Batliwala, S. 2020: All About Power. Understanding social power & power structures. CREA, New Delhi

Nye, J. 2008: The Powers to Lead. Oxford University Press

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