

# Power: understanding how it works and how to use it positively

Thinking critically about power is vitally important when planning effective people-centred advocacy.<sup>i</sup> But what kind of 'power' are we talking about? Increasingly the notion of power is being adopted by many different players (from the most progressive to the most conservative) in their attempts to develop more influential and compelling advocacy strategies. Yet it is often understood and applied in a one-dimensional way that does not reflect its different forms and complexities. If we are not clear about what we mean, the concept runs the risk of turning into empty jargon and losing its ability to help strengthen advocacy efforts, organisations and social change strategies.

## UNPACKING POWER

Our work has shown us the importance of avoiding simplistic perceptions of power. There is a tendency to view power almost exclusively in sinister or oppressive terms and as a force that is monolithic.<sup>ii</sup> Such a perception of power can paralyse people since it seems to indicate there is no hope for change. Yet power is not static, but rather constantly shifting and changing, providing opportunities for action. Nor is it intrinsically negative or positive. Its value depends on how it is structured and used in each context. For some it

may mean control and coercion, but for others it means the capacity to fight for justice.

To unpack and understand power it helps to think about the following points:

### Power is everywhere

Power operates both negatively and positively at many levels, in public and private, in the workplace, market and family, in relations with friends and colleagues and even at a very personal level within each individual. On the negative side it can work to prevent people's participation and the fulfilment of their rights and, on the positive, it can serve as a source of strength to promote their involvement and struggle for justice.

We need to look beyond the notion that power operates almost exclusively in the public sphere of governments and political parties or in conflicts between capital and labour (employers versus workers, small farmers and peasants versus plantation owners). Gender relations, for example, show us how power plays out in the private sphere of family and personal relationships and how it affects women's ability to participate and become active agents of change.

### Different ways of understanding power

The most common way of understanding power tends to be negative:

**Power over** other people: using coercion or force to control resources and decision-making processes.

Alternative ways to understand and use power focus on collaboration and affirm people's capacity to act creatively and work together for a better world:

**Power to act:** the unique potential of every person and social group to shape their life and world and create more equitable relationships and structures of power

**Power within ourselves:** people's sense of self-worth, values and self-knowledge, central to individual and group understanding of being citizens with rights and responsibilities.

**Power with others:** finding common ground among different interests and building collective strength to challenge injustice.

These more positive aspects of power are illustrated in the casestudy on UNAS.

*We can bring to earth a new world from the ashes of the old because our [organisation] transforms us, the powerless, into the powerful. And I ask you to join together in using all that power--all that strength to make the dreams of all workers and communities around the world come true.*

Andy Stern, SEIU Union leader, USA

### **Power is dynamic and multidimensional**

It is never dormant or immovable but shifts according to context, circumstance and interest. These changing dynamics of power form cracks in oppressive systems that can be expanded and used as entry points for action. In the United States, Martin Luther King, the famous civil rights leader, joined together with student activists and used sit-ins (where African-Americans refused to leave restaurants that would not serve black people) as a way to open the cracks in the system. When imprisoned, they used song to reinforce their courage and solidarity. These actions helped spark and strengthen a broader social movement that eventually led to significant changes in oppressive power relations, increasing the abilities of black communities to advance their rights.

Power has multiple forms and expressions that can range from domination and resistance to cooperation and transformation. Understanding that power is not monolithic allows activists to search out the openings and opportunities that occur as structures and forms of power change and shift over time. It also encourages people to identify and use their own sources of power such as commitment, humour, numbers, political awareness, persistence, imagination, solidarity and song among others.

### **Power is always relational**

Power is established and exercised through human interaction at many different levels ranging from the interpersonal to the global. In each situation, the dynamics of power (who has *power over* others, who can build *power with*, who can exercise their *power to*, who can feel *powerful within* or not) is defined within each context and each relationship. For example a small farmer or peasant living in utter poverty is vulnerable to the authority, power and sometimes violence of vast estate owners and multinational agribusiness. Yet this same farmer may establish an authoritarian and violent relationship with the women and female members of his family since he is immersed in a patriarchal and macho culture.

As this illustrates, power relations are entwined within our social fabric and culture beyond the obvious faces of power seen in political and economic relationships. If we analyse our context critically looking at gender, caste and race issues, for instance, we will become more aware of the many different faces and forms of power relationships, and how they affect us. This will better prepare us for developing more effective advocacy and action strategies.

#### **Sources of power:**

To effectively influence the power structures of government or corporate interest, one needs other sources of power. In the context of public advocacy, six major sources are:

- The power of people and citizens' mobilisation
- The power of information and knowledge
- The power of constitutional guarantees
- The power of direct grassroots experience and networking
- The power of solidarity
- The power of moral convictions

[John Samuel]

*What history really shows is that today's empire is tomorrow's ashes, that nothing lasts forever, and that to not resist is to acquiesce in your own oppression. The greatest form of sanity that anyone can exercise is to resist that force that is trying to repress, oppress, and fight down the human spirit.*

Mumia Abu-Jamal, African American activist and journalist, USA. Currently facing death penalty convicted of a crime he denies

**Power relations are not always evident at first sight. They can be:**

**Visible** - the most well known and obvious - observable decision-making processes and structures, both formal and informal, such as legislatures, parliaments, or councils of elders or village chiefs etc.

**Hidden** - the behind the scenes dynamics that shape who participates in the visible decision-making processes and whose voice is heard, as well as what issues are deemed legitimate for consideration as part of the political agenda

**Invisible** - the socio-cultural systems and related ideologies that shape people's consciousness - their beliefs about the world and themselves and their beliefs about their own capacity to participate in decision making processes. [Veneklasen and Miller, 2002]

### **Power is unevenly concentrated and wielded.**

In historical terms, access to resources and decision-making has been monopolised by a few. This concentration of power has contributed to widespread poverty, marginalisation and the violation of human rights. Consequently, it is crucial to reverse this pattern and bring previously excluded groups and individuals into arenas of decision-making, while at the same time transforming how power is understood and used. This uneven concentration of power works to privilege some people and oppress others in many different areas of life - from government and business to community and family. As a result multiple strategies and actions are needed to address these concentrations of power. Strategies range from lobbying and pressuring governments, to protesting unfair business practices, to strengthening social movements and coalitions, and finally to increasing the political awareness, solidarity and confidence of poor and excluded groups and their supporters.

**Power over operates in various ways to maintain the status quo and discourage poor and excluded people from exercising their rights.** Sometimes it is visible and other times

it is hidden or invisible. *Power over* operates by:

- **Shaping norms, values and consciousness.**<sup>iii</sup> Influencing how we (as individuals and groups) perceive the world and our own sense of self-value, status and worthiness to be agents of change and holders of rights.
- **Shaping the political agenda.** Defining which rights or issues are priorities for public debate and policy decision-making and which are not legitimate. Controlling the production of, and access to, information.
- **Determining whose voice is heard in decision-making arenas.** Building hierarchies of citizenship. Defining who is able to participate in, and to influence, the shaping and implementation of public policies.
- **Framing formal decision-making and implementation of public policies.** Setting the structures and mechanisms for governance.

The ways that *power over* operate to maintain inequity and injustice and prevent certain groups from participating in public decision making are shown in more detail in the top half of the table on the following page. The lower half of the same table

**Power over** : Inequality, exclusion and strategy

## Power over

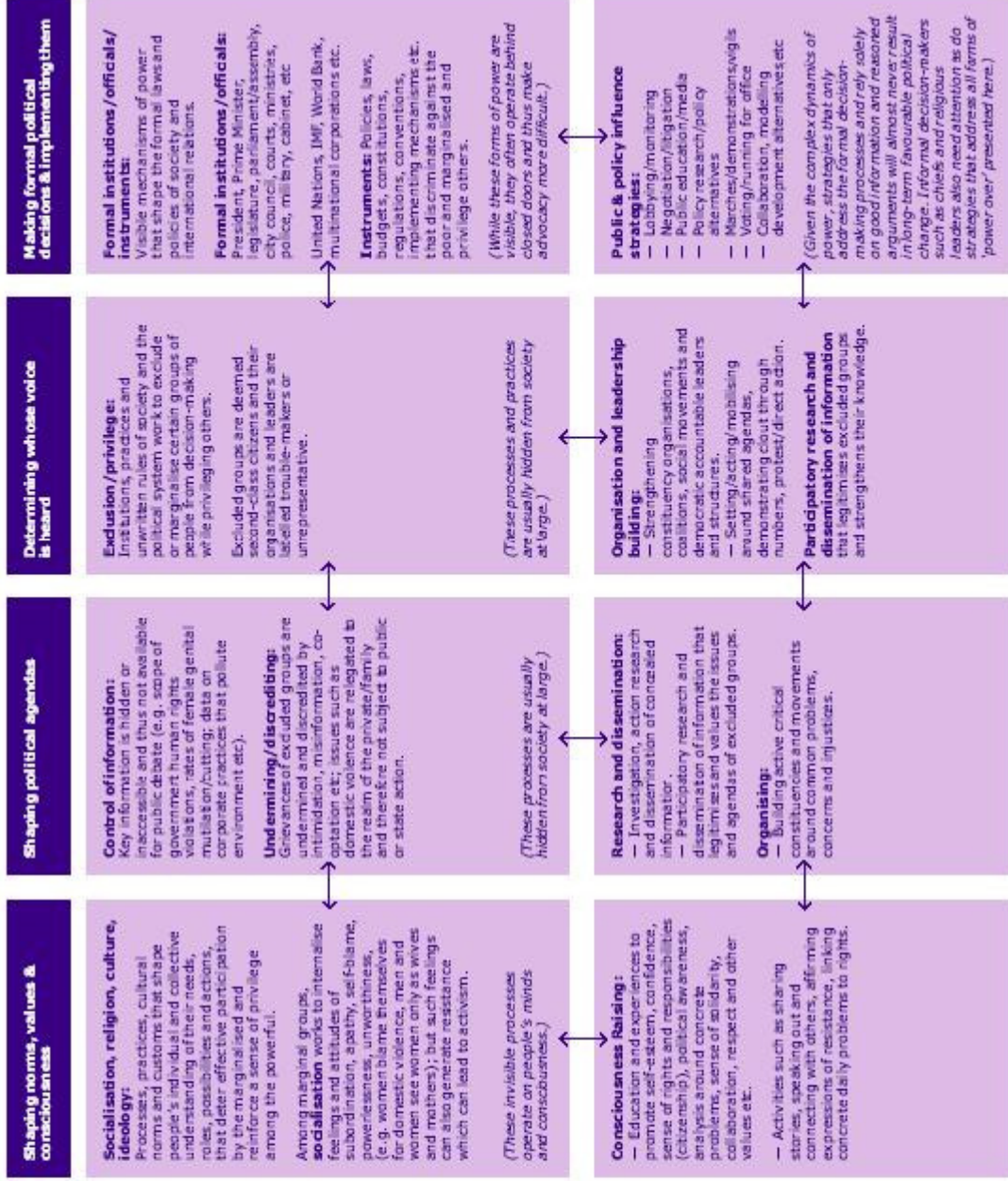
Different ways 'power over' operates to maintain inequality and injustice and prevent certain groups from participating in public-decision making.

*(The arrows reflect the dynamic relationships between the different ways 'power over' operates and different types of strategies that can be used to address it.)*

## Strategies

People-centred advocacy strategies to counter the ways that 'power over' operates.

Multiple strategies are required to counter the dynamics of 'power over' shown above. These strategies tap alternative forms of power – 'power with' others, 'power within self' and 'power to' act individually and collectively. We include a sampling of strategies and actions that can be combined for effective advocacy.



Adapted from: Valerie Miller and Lisa VeneKasen (2000), and work of John Gaventa (1981), Steven Lukes (1974), Nalini Kohler (1994)



*People-centred advocacy is a set of organised actions aimed at influencing public policies, societal attitudes, and social political processes that enable and empower the marginalised to speak for themselves. Its purpose is social transformation through the realisation of human rights: civil, political, economic, social and cultural. People-centred advocacy is by the people, of the people, and for the people*

John Samuel, Indian activist and NGO leader

summarises strategies that can be helpful to counter the different ways *power over* acts to control participation and maintain the status quo. We include a case study, the Treatment Action Campaign, South Africa at the end of this chapter which shows how multiple strategies are required to overcome these dynamics.

### **WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO THINK ABOUT POWER IN PEOPLE-CENTRED ADVOCACY?**

We view 'advocacy' as an 'art' since it involves enormous creativity and has no pre-set guidelines that we can follow uncritically. Advocacy is the art of influencing and changing closed power structures and decision-making systems. It is the art of transforming the policies, laws and unjust cultural and social beliefs, practices and norms that are the stubborn underpinnings of those structures and systems. It is the art of negotiating between the ideal (what we want to achieve) and the real (the cultural, social, economic and political context within which we must intervene)

and the art of amplifying the voice and extending the power of the most impoverished and excluded sectors.<sup>iv</sup>

In brief, people-centred advocacy is political action. It is exercising power to influence political systems, practices and attitudes. It incorporates a vision of change that takes into account multiple dynamics of power where changes in policy and law are never enough. To be effective, policy changes need to be accompanied by changes that strengthen organisations of the poor and excluded and promote greater political awareness, solidarity and self-worth. Never neutral, it is about taking a stand in order to transform inequitable and abusive power relations and develop a more just world. Consequently it is vital to improve our ability to analyse power and act to change relations and structures that have historically blocked the poor and marginalised from fully enjoying their rights.

### **REFLECTING CRITICALLY ON POWER AND ADVOCACY**

#### **Developing political consciousness**

One of the many community activities that UNAS undertakes in the shantytown where it is based is to run children's activity clubs to show alternatives for improving the public education programmes. For Mothers' Day one group decided to build a commemorative mural to be displayed in a key area of the shantytown. This was seen as a celebration of the role played by women in the lives of the children. The art work was made using a collage of images cut from magazines and the children and staff were proud of the beautiful and colourful result.

But then, looking at the mural, some people started to realise that the faces and images of women used by the children in the mural did not look like the real women in the shantytown. As they had been cut out of commercial magazines they showed only the lifestyles and faces that these publications chose to show. On reflection UNAS realised that they were inadvertently reinforcing an image of white middle class women being the ideal.

This simple but very stirring observation started an interesting debate in UNAS about whether they are challenging the cultural and ideological dimensions of power which reproduce exclusion and social inequalities. In this case, they decide to remake the mural with the children. But this time they used it as an opportunity to develop critical consciousness as well as artistic expression and celebration. First they asked the children whether they recognised the most important women in their lives in the images in the mural. When they could not, they asked them why they thought this was the case. After this they asked the children to bring images from home, or to draw pictures which really looked like the women in Heliópolis.

It is not always easy to put ideas into practice. If we don't look at power more deeply there is a danger of losing our way by taking attractive looking short cuts. Here are some points we have found important to consider:

### **The role of culture, prejudice, stigma and discrimination**

Driven by the most visible and dramatic aspects of poverty and exclusion, we often focus on economic issues and basic government policies in our advocacy. We target the legal system, since, at first glance, it is there where unjust government policies and laws can be addressed. It is also a place where the opportunity for gaining widespread influence and change appears most promising. Obviously, this is an important aspect of advocacy, but should not be the only front of our struggle.

Poverty and exclusion have many faces. There are factors that amplify the processes of impoverishment and social exclusion that do not always receive sufficient attention and that ultimately affect the success of work in the government arena. So while advocacy is often seen only in terms of influencing policy, we have come to realise that without work in other arenas such as culture, civil society and personal attitudes, policy gains don't get implemented or sustained.

Thus we need to include cultural and social dimensions of power as key elements in our analysis and advocacy strategies and to probe how power operates within marginalised communities, our own organisations and within ourselves. Poverty and exclusion are not homogenous processes that



UNAS run children's activity clubs in the shantytown to show alternatives to current education practice

*The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.*

Steven Biko,  
black consciousness leader, South Africa  
1946-1977

affect people equally. Some individuals and groups are more vulnerable and oppressed than others. As a result they must surmount even greater obstacles to ensure that their voices are heard and acknowledged as legitimate. Among other factors, gender, race, caste, sexuality, class and age make a difference. We have found that we can develop more effective strategies if we take these social and cultural power relations into account in all aspects and moments of planning, reflection and learning. These include moments when we are deciding what we want to achieve in the long-term as well as when we are undertaking contextual analysis, defining our plan of action, doing our work and analysing our results.

If we really want to strengthen and support the poor and excluded's struggle for rights, we carefully avoid reproducing within ourselves the cultural norms and social hierarchies that generate and maintain inequalities. As activists and leaders of organisations we need to examine and critique our own prejudices and not see beliefs and practices that cause exclusion and social injustice as immutable and unchallengeable elements of local culture. This look inward at ourselves is an important moment in planning.

### **The role of empowerment strategies**

Significant advocacy efforts worldwide are designed to promote empowerment - to strengthen the awareness, analysis, capacities and leadership of those living in poverty and exclusion - and to open up opportunities for them to become the main protagonists in their own struggles. Empowerment is a key element in promoting their participation since these groups have been historically excluded from the arenas of public debate and

governance and discouraged from taking action.

When people themselves are the initial catalyst for their own empowerment and action they have certain experience in making their own judgments about risk and what tactics are appropriate in a particular situation. When the initial catalyst for empowerment and action comes from outsiders, however, advocacy needs to be approached with some caution. A thoughtful analysis and understanding of the realities and dangers of the situation and current power dynamics is crucial whatever the case. However, empowerment and action strategies are not always the best or only approach or entry point to people-centred advocacy. In many cases, such as situations of extreme poverty, stigma and discrimination, working on empowerment will need to go hand in hand with other strategies such as community development initiatives. In some cases - in repressive regimes or armed conflict - overt strategies that challenge power relations may be too risky to attempt at all.

### **Internal power relations**

Power relations are everywhere including within groups of poor and excluded people, and within NGOs and social movements. It is easy to forget this as we tend to think about power relations (particularly their negative aspects) as something external. As a result, we do not always reflect on how we might be reproducing structures that run counter to our values and our ethical, theoretical and political concepts.

Although we see civil society as the potential arena for solidarity and social transformation - particularly for impoverished and excluded people - we also know that it contains a great

diversity of interests, priorities, values, political views and practices. Hence, we find hierarchies and conflicts within civil society that we need to be aware of in our work and actions. People-centred advocacy itself, can become an arena for building power, both in positive ways (increasing *power with* and *power to*) and negative ones (*exerting power over* other organisations or people).

### **Participation**

Another key element in the work of civil society organisations is our investment in participatory processes. However, participation is frequently implemented in a problematic and narrow way within development work. We need more critical thinking about the links between *Participation - Power - Rights* that can help us understand and use participatory approaches in ways that are consequent with our desire to support and promote the leadership and rights of the marginalised. In order to overcome poverty and social inequalities it is fundamental to affirm, guarantee and expand their primary roles as change agents and advocates.

Consequently, when talking about participation, we are talking about power - power of speech, power to make decisions, power to act and to take on leadership positions. We must be careful to avoid common confusion over the nature of participatory processes and methods since participation is often used to describe processes that do not include decision making, agenda-setting or political action. For us, participation is both a process and strategy for transforming power relations.

### **A VALUE-BASED CONCEPT OF POWER**

As power has different meanings and may have positive or negative dimensions, it is useful for social change and justice groups to qualify how they understand and use power as a core component of their struggle for rights.

There are at least five underlying notions related to our values and principles that can be integrated into our conceptualisation and use of power:



Young community leaders in Heliopolis, Brazil use music to mobilise the community to attend meetings to debate the struggle for housing rights



*If you think you're too small to have an impact, try going to sleep with a mosquito.*

African proverb

**Rights** – Human rights and related values of social justice are the guiding principles that shape our vision and exercise of power. They provide the basis to energise and mobilise people, especially the poor and excluded, so they can advance and exercise their rights in all dimensions of their lives with integrity.

**Democracy** – By tapping positive forms of power (especially *power to/within/with*) and collaborating with groups who have been excluded, we can work to develop more democratic and inclusive structures and processes for public debate and governance. Civil society organisations should challenge themselves to demonstrate alternative forms of power and leadership that do not reproduce authoritarian and hierarchical models.

**Social justice** – Gaining power is not an end in itself, but a means to fight for social justice and, by so doing, develop more equitable, caring and supportive human relationships. It is not enough to become powerful if we cannot contribute to overcoming poverty, social inequalities and oppressive relationships that are at the core of injustice.

**Solidarity** – Our reflections on power should encourage us to develop a perspective and agenda that goes beyond our own specific advocacy issues. It is important to increase our sense of solidarity with others who are facing discrimination and abuse and form common cause with them to confront injustice in its many forms.

**Respect for difference** – A just and democratic society will only be possible with recognition and respect for our diversity as human beings. No matter how powerful we are, or how much we reduce poverty, if we continue to

discriminate against and exclude people who are different we will continue to fail in our struggle for social justice. Respect for differences based on gender, race, caste, sexual orientation, class, religion and age among others needs to be at the forefront of the changes we promote.

**Caution:** Our analysis of power should highlight stories of resistance and alternative strategies and sources of power. We believe that identifying how power operates in its many different forms can be liberating since it allows people to name more systematically the forces that they confront in their daily lives. By naming them and seeing how they are connected, people can design more effective strategies. Yet, this naming and reflection process needs to be carried out with certain skill and care if it is to lead to the desired energy and action necessary for transformation and empowerment.

Sometimes during power analyses people can feel overwhelmed by the forces aligned against them. It is crucial to examine and celebrate both the big and small ways that people have resisted and worked to confront and transform these oppressive forms of power. Chronicling stories of resistance and change are key to this work. Seeing how cracks in the system open up unexpectedly or how someone who was thought of as an opponent becomes an ally are examples that can help show people the dynamism present in all situations and the unexpected turns that power can take. Highlighting different strategies that people use and identifying and tapping the many sources of positive power available to them are absolutely key in such discussions.

In this chapter, we present two cases, one from Brazil and one from South

Africa that illustrate the positive and negative dynamics of power and the many strategies that people use to confront and transform the inequities and discrimination they face in their daily lives. Further case studies can be found in Section 4.

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<sup>i</sup> This chapter draws on VeneKlasen with Miller, 2002 A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation, World Neighbors.

<sup>ii</sup> Large, all the same, and unwilling or unable to be changed.

<sup>iii</sup> Even within CSOs fundamentalism rooted in faith-based values and concepts continues to be a barrier to the development of more democratic and effective work around issues such as gender, sexuality and caste.

<sup>iv</sup> John Samuel, workshop presentation for AAI HIV/AIDS campaign staff, Bangkok, March 2004.