Tool 27: Forms of Power

Aim of the tool

To help reflect on different expressions of power, and faces (visible, hidden, invisible) of power, in an MSP. The tool helps to give language to several common notions of power dynamics.

When to use it?

In the Divergence stage, when it is important to explore and include different perspectives from stakeholders about an issue. Often it works best when done with a specific group of stakeholders (such as civil society representatives).

Different forms of power – two frameworks

This tool is comprised of two frameworks which each help to understand power dynamics in MSPs in a different way. The first is called Expressions of power, the second Faces of power.

Expressions of power: Power over, Power to, power with, power within.

Power is often thought of in a negative and coercive manner ('power over' being seen as domination or control of one person, group or institution over another). However, there are alternative expressions of power that pave the way for more positive thinking and action.

Expression	What does it mean in practice?
'Power to': individual ability to act	This is rooted in the belief that every individual has the 'power to' make a difference (see sources of power framework).
'Power with': collective action, the ability to act together	'Power with' helps build bridges across different interests, experiences and knowledge and is about bringing together resources and strategies.
'Power within': individual or collective sense of self-worth, value, dignity	Enhancing the 'power within' individuals builds their capacities to imagine and raise aspirations about change.

Faces of power: visible, hidden, invisible.

Power analysis is not simple because most of the time power does not operate in visible and tangible ways.

Visible	Hidden	Invisible
Visible power includes the aspects of political power that we 'see'– formal rules, structures, institutions and procedures informing decision-making. In other words, it is about how those people with power use existing procedures and structures to control	Hidden power is exercised when powerful people and institutions maintain their influence by setting and manipulating agendas and marginalising the concerns and voices of less powerful groups. Those with power see and understand these rules of the game; others	Invisible power operates in ways in which people will adopt belief systems that are created by those with power. Problems and issues are kept away not only from the decision-making table but also from the minds and hearts of different people including those affected by these decisions. This is when powerlessness is

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the actions of others.	don't.	internalised.
Examples include: elections, political parties, budget, laws etc.	Examples include: quality of some consultation processes that exclude some voices; and setting the agenda behind the scene.	Examples include: negative stereotypes that limit the roles of certain groups.

It is often easier to engage with visible power holders such as policy makers than to engage with power that is exercised behind the scenes, or that is embedded in cultural and social norms and practices. However, ignoring hidden and invisible forms of power is likely to lead to a limited understanding of how change could happen, how alternative sources of power could be mobilized, and which change strategies should be developed.

Challenging the social and cultural boundaries that condition all actors (powerful or powerless) may require strategies other than challenging the "power–holders" alone, whether they are visible or hidden in the way they exercise power.
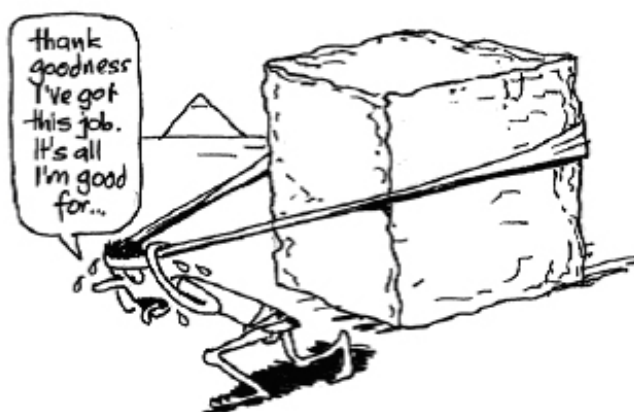
Discussion Questions

- Looking at the Expressions of Power framework, can you think of examples under each of the categories that are relevant to your work?
- Looking at the Faces of Power framework, can you think of institutions or people that exercise hidden power on the issues you are addressing?

Visible Power

Hidden Power

Invisible Power

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Learn more

Adapted from Hunjan, Raji and Jethro Pettit (2011). Power: A Practical Guide for Facilitating Social Change. Carnegie Trust/IDS, UK. http://tinyurl.com/q3lwbna

The special issue of IDS Bulletin (Vol 47, Issue 5, November 2016) on Power, Poverty and Inequality, edited by Marjoke Oosterom and Patta Scott Villiers, contains 11 articles which explore power issues in the context of development cooperation. Open access. http://bulletin.ids.ac.uk/idsbo/issue/view/219

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