



## SDC-IDS Collaboration on Poverty, Politics and Participatory Methodologies

# A REFLECTIVE REPORT OF THE SESSION ON INVISIBLE POWER

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SDC seeks to create a water-secure world and its new water strategy is committed to ensuring universal, equitable and adequate access to water and sanitation based on the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation (HRTWS) Convention and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework. It is also committed to sustainable water resources management leading to a healthy environment, economic prosperity, resilience against climate change and to promoting international and intersectoral cooperation on shared water for peace and political stability.

At a session at the Water Team Days (WTD) 2017, I facilitated reflection on current SDC practice in relation to power and inequality within the SDC water domain. In particular, this session focused on the need to focus on 'invisible power' within different stages of the project cycle in relation to water programming (for more details see [Briefing on invisible power](#)). This event was organised as part of the ongoing IDS-SDC Collaboration which serves as a mirror to SDC activities in both headquarters (HQ) and country offices (SCOs) to ask critical questions regarding the persistent nature of poverty, vulnerability and exclusion in achieving sustainable development and how to take it up in SDC programming. It drew on a special issue of the [IDS Bulletin on Power, Poverty and Inequality](#) funded through the collaboration and linked to this mirror activity. This short note reports on the discussions and also includes some of my own reflections as presenter and facilitator of the session.

My presentation focused on how tackling invisible power is of vital importance for dealing with the persistence of material poverty and social inequality in the water domain. As Stephen Lukes<sup>1</sup> has argued, power does not just concern what is visible and how decisions are made and why or why not. Instead, it is important to focus on the 'silence' of powerless groups who are invisible and whose voices are never heard. Building on the work of Lukes and other theorists, the presentation distinguished between visible, hidden and invisible forms of power. Hidden power refers to issues which lie beneath the surface, but which are prevented from entry into the decision process by, for example, framings, manipulation, or the creation of structural barriers. It often operates from 'behind the scenes', as when elites keep certain issues off the agenda. In the example of Ukraine below, hidden power is at play when politicians concentrate services in urban areas to attract votes, thus purposefully neglecting the rural areas. Invisible power is the most insidious form because it operates at the level of norms, discourses and ideologies that sustain structural inequalities and exclusion. It shapes consciousness and beliefs that lead both elites and marginalised people to accept the *status quo*. For instance, norms about a gendered division of labour and female roles in the household are factors that sustain gender inequality, and forms of

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<sup>1</sup> Steven, Lukes. "Power: A radical view." *London and New York: Macmillan* (1974).

invisible power often operate in a context of structural violence. This refers to structures and arrangements in the political and economic aspects of daily life that cause harm to certain populations and groups.

Thus, it is important to be aware of the norms, discourses and structures that allow invisible power to persist. While donor agencies are often well-equipped to address visible power, for instance when supporting the drafting of new legislation, and are knowledgeable of hidden power as they are aware of elite interests, invisible power is just as important to tackle. Power analysis helps to articulate – and thus make visible – forms of invisible power; the reasons for and mechanisms by which certain groups of people are excluded.

Group work then attempted to tease out these issues in SDC funded work at the global, regional and country level. Each group worked on identifying dominant norms and structures that sustain inequalities, how invisible power might perpetuate them and what is done or needs to be done in the programme.

## **1 GLOBAL: WATERLEX**

The example at **global level** focussed on WaterLex, a Geneva based organisation committed to secure the HRTWS through law and policy reform, national action plans as well as disaggregated indicators. The presentation by director Amanda Loeffen highlighted that WaterLex works in 35 countries across the global South which are committed to realising HRWS.

WaterLex emphasizes the importance of focusing on the rights of poor, marginalised and vulnerable groups such as women and girls, peri-urban residents as well as cultural minorities and those disadvantaged due to conflict. Despite growing endorsement to HRWS at both the global and national level, these rights are far from being realised universally. Structural barriers include the lack of political will on the part of government actors and parliamentarians, many of whom do not want or see the necessity to embrace human rights; the convening power of big businesses and water operators who may not take rights seriously; as well as macroeconomic policies that can often prevent the realisation of HRWS. Market forces and corporate lobbies wield strong influence and may not prioritise poor and inaccessible areas or may also promote policies and programmes that violate poor people's HRWS. Water and sanitation may not receive high priority by the Treasury and finance ministries who do not appreciate the economic value of human rights and many national actors often do not understand what it means to provide the HRWS and the various nuances associated with these rights. Decentralisation processes can devolve responsibility but often they lack adequate finances to help realise HRWS. Finally, many marginalised groups may lack awareness of their rights and often rarely fight for their rights. Governments may not prioritise educating the public about their rights.

This invisible power allows rights to be both violated and not implemented. Furthermore, powerful actors are not always made accountable (e.g. industries polluting water are rarely punished). Traditional leaders can also reinforce the invisible power of certain groups and local cultural norms go against global and universal definitions of rights. It is thus important to raise awareness about the importance of human rights and what is required to realise them; furthermore, those advocating rights need to keep highlighting the structural constraints and norms that prevent the realisation of HRWS across global, national and local scales. Finally, it is important to include pro-active inclusion of checks and processes at the early stages of a project, ensuring that all considerations have been accounted for in the methodology to ensure that HRWS can be realised.

## **2 REGIONAL: CEWAS MIDDLE EAST**

A second group focused on a **regional programme** in the Middle East, the most water scarce region of the world which is also confronted by war and conflicts. "Cewas Middle East" seeks to increase the resilience of vulnerable populations (such as refugees, internally displaced persons, underserved and communities in occupied areas) in the region by helping to promote sustainable sanitation and water management solutions as well as start-up businesses in water and sanitation.

Michael Kropac's presentation highlighted that about 45 start-ups and small and medium enterprises as well as 120 employment opportunities have been created in Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan around water and sanitation. Despite this success, several challenges persist. Structural constraints include the sometimes conflicting logics and expectations between humanitarian aid, development cooperation and business as well as a very limited pool of entrepreneurs across this war and displacement affected region. These challenges coupled with the existence of weak governance structures make implementation challenging. Nepotism is a form of hidden power as the transparent policies for procurement and acquisition are not adhered to (e.g. in Lebanon), hence service delivery has only been outsourced to three companies. Given that the programme largely works with educated entrepreneurs, it has perhaps not adequately challenged how this educated class might establish norms that are exclusive of certain ethnic groups, marginalised people, and women.

Since only very qualified (and perhaps privileged) individuals are likely to be involved in such start-up enterprises, and hire from their own networks, people from less privileged backgrounds may be excluded from the ripple-effects of a new enterprise. Since the programme has limited resources it cannot realise reforms in an educational system that perpetuates inequality and exclusion. But still efforts could be made to ensure that the beneficiaries selected come from diverse backgrounds including those not usually benefitting from entrepreneurship and development programmes.

Finally, the programme is operating in a context of conflict and occupation. While it supports innovation in a context of occupation (e.g. support to Palestinian entrepreneurs involved in recycling waste) it probably cannot go far enough in challenging both visible and invisible forms of power and structural inequalities arising due to the occupation. However, despite these constraints it still may be possible to identify where people themselves, both privileged and less privileged, have started challenging exclusive norms and have started collaborating in new and innovative ways. Taking their actions as a starting point, such initiatives can be supported and made visible at a larger scale as part of a longer-term process to counter invisible power.

### **3 NATIONAL: DESPRO UKRAINE**

The **local/national example** called DESPRO (Decentralization Support in Ukraine) was presented by Viacheslaw Sorokovskiy. Amongst other projects, in the period between 2007 and 2013 DESPRO supported the implementation of around 139 rural water supply projects with 80,000 beneficiaries in Ukraine. With the introduction of borehole, network and house connections, coverage increased from 0-15% to 92-96%. Despite community efforts towards equity and inclusion, about 4-8% of the households in the community remained disconnected from the water connection and could not/or would not make financial contributions.

As a result, the *social cases* approach was introduced and implemented in 20 partner villages in five regions of Ukraine. This entailed deciding on social cases, which are the households in need of support to connect to the water system. Social cases are identified by community members together with the village council (local government), largely relying on common notions and knowledge within the community of the real situation of each household including the poor ones. The approach also includes selecting the solution for each social case, which can be financial support from the local government or other solutions, such as payment in rates.

The **social case** approach goes to the heart of the success of the project and has helped address issues concerning equity, access and universality. In the case of DESPRO, this approach allowed all interested households in the project villages get connected to the water systems. However, the community-led approach introduced by DESPRO may not work equally well in all contexts. A community-led, participatory decision-making process is not necessarily a just or power neutral process. Indeed such processes have been critiqued for being power-blind: it cannot be assumed that all forms of exclusion are considered.

Applying power analysis to this process would mean being extra attentive to whether some voices were being heard over others; whether some individuals were deemed to be more deserving than others and if so, which norms underpinned this view. Is it possible that more 'powerful' and better-off individuals had a greater chance of obtaining the subsidies? There are also several households with elderly and disabled members, and single-

member households and it would be useful to consider whether special efforts are required to address their needs and interests.

Finally, as with any participatory process it is useful to consider whether, and if so which gendered approaches have been normalised and have remained undiscussed and whether there are different gendered impacts of the project, especially where water connections are not inside the house.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the final session, Isabella Pagotto and Christian Eggs offered some concluding remarks and the session ended with some observations from the floor and the facilitator. Invisible power is difficult to analyse and it is easy to get bogged down in classical challenges of project implementation rather than power relations. It might be difficult to pin down whether programme challenges are a result of programme design, implementation challenges, or power dynamics, calling for systematic probing and power analysis at all stages.

SDC and partners are also under pressure to produce results, especially in an environment where development cooperation is questioned in parliament and by the wider public. One way to ensure that power dynamics are addressed is to be more modest about the final result, i.e. reduce the level of ambition in order to address on-the-ground social and power imbalances. Since SDC is a government agency working with governments in the global South, it is important to secure the buy in of governments to take risks in project design. This could thus help in formulating objectives that are not just target oriented but also aim to bring about social and political change.

To meet targets and goals, it is often easier to focus on already privileged groups or communities or easy to reach areas. To avoid this it is important for SDC to work with local and regional governments to reach inaccessible areas and neglected communities. Human rights also need to be mainstreamed in project and national plans of action and if necessary, honest discussions need to be held with national and local governments about the need for strong political will to realise these and also to take existing power and inequalities dynamics seriously.

Much could also be done around project design. SDC staff and local partners could also be more attentive to understanding poverty, power and politics in the context they work in. When SDC staff does context analysis at the beginning of a project, systematic power analysis could be built in during the design and lifespan of the project.

While it may be difficult for bilateral agencies like SDC to challenge wider structures that they operate in, it may be possible to work with and empower so called non-classical actors such as journalists to challenge these. Support to independent researchers, and vocal civil society actors can enable them to 'speak truth to power' and articulate how certain norms and discourses that exclude certain groups are perpetuated, and help hold governing elites to account. It is often a fine balance to tread between confronting and challenging local norms and politics that allow invisible power to persist, versus respecting them as an external donor agency. However, if they remain unchallenged they will impede project success and all project intentions concerning universality.

Thus, donor agencies need to consider such trade-offs, addressing the ways in which inequalities are sustained in their ongoing work by powerful actors, while working simultaneously with those local partners who are best placed to tread this fine balance in ways that promote the interests and needs of the most marginalised and powerless people.