



Empowerment Note 3

# The Power Cube Explained

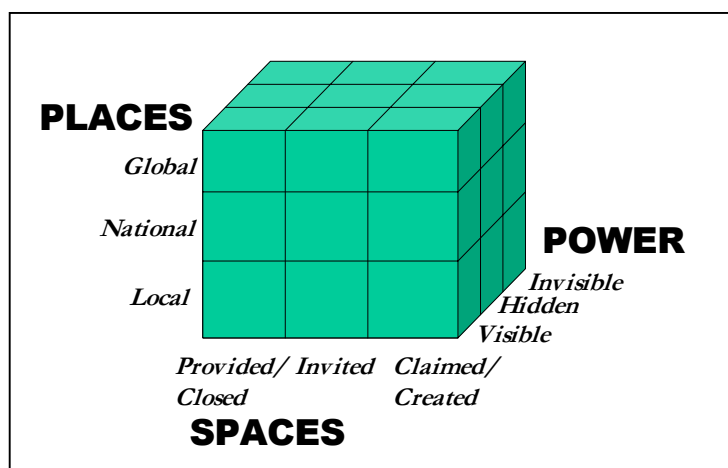
Cecilia Luttrell, Kate Bird, Sarah Byrne, Jane Carter and Devanshu Chakravarti

November 2007

This note discusses the use of the Power Cube as a means of expanding further on the ideas of power raised in the paper on 'Understanding and Operationalising Empowerment' (Luttrell and Quiroz, 2007). Gaventa's (2003; 2005) Power Cube (see Figure 1) presents a dynamic understanding of how power operates, how different interests can be marginalised from decision making, and the strategies needed to increase inclusion. It describes how power is used by the powerful across three continuums of:

1. **Spaces:** how arenas of power are created;
2. **Power:** the degree of visibility of power;
3. **Places:** the levels and places of engagement.

Figure 1: The Power Cube



(Source: Gaventa, 2003)

1. By the term 'space', Gaventa refers to the different arenas in which decision making takes place, in which power operates and how these spaces are created (See Table 1). He distinguishes between three types:

- a) 'Provided' or 'closed' spaces: spaces which are controlled by an elite group.
- b) 'Invited' spaces: with external pressure, or in an attempt to increase legitimacy, some policymakers

may create 'invited' spaces for outsiders to share their opinions.

- c) 'Claimed' spaces: these can provide the less powerful with a chance to develop their agendas and create solidarity without control from power-holders.

'Spaces' are fora for discussion or areas where interactions take place. They can be virtual (e.g. a web-based discussion) or an actual physical place (e.g. a parliamentary consultation meeting). The Power Cube helps us to understand these different forms of space and therefore how to use provided spaces better, how to create more invited space and how to facilitate the claiming of space through negotiation.

2. The Power Cube also distinguishes the degree of visibility of **power** (see Table 2):

- a) Visible power: this is the conventional understanding of power that is negotiated through formal rules and structures, institutions and procedures
- b) Hidden power: this focuses on the **actual** controls over decision making, and the way certain powerful people and institutions maintain their influence over the process and often exclude and devalue concerns and agendas of less powerful groups.
- c) Invisible (internalised) power: this operates by influencing how individuals think of their place in society and explains why some are prevented from questioning existing power relations.

The Power Cube helps to make the distinction between different dimensions of power and therefore move beyond certain assumptions, such as 'the enforcers of rules are oppressors'. This may enable us to explore the way in which laws and institutions may be perpetuating repressive social norms and values.

3. The Power Cube emphasises the importance of understanding interaction between levels of power and the 'places of engagement' (see Table 3) and particularly distinguishes between the international,

national and local levels or 'places'. In so doing, the Power Cube helps us to understand how global forces can be both enhancing and marginalising of livelihoods, depending on the circumstances. By emphasising the various levels, the Power Cube helps us to understand the way in which the local is intimately embedded in national and global 'places'.

## References

Gaventa, J. (2003) 'Towards Participatory Local Governance: Assessing the Transformative Possibilities', Paper prepared for Conference on Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation, Manchester, 27-28 February.

Gaventa, J. (2005) 'Reflections of the Uses of the 'Power Cube' Approach for Analyzing the Spaces, Places and Dynamics of Civil Society Participation and Engagement', CFP Evaluation Series No 4.

ISPWDK (2005) 'Empowering the People: Experience with Village Development Societies in Promoting Local Governance', <http://www.intercooperation.ch/offers/download/ic-india/ispwdk-1.pdf/view>.

Jana, S., P.V. Sharma, S. Vinita and Dr Amrender (2006) 'Understanding Power and Creating Spaces: Sex Workers' Voices in HIV Prevention', Saksham Approach Paper No 2.

Luttrell, C. and S. Quiroz (2007) 'Understanding and Operationalising Empowerment', Paper prepared by ODI for the SDC Poverty-Wellbeing Platform.

**Table 1: The Power Cube explained: spaces where power is expressed**

'Spaces' are fora for discussion or areas where interactions take place. They can be virtual (e.g. a web-based discussion) or an actual physical place (e.g. a parliamentary consultation meeting). The Power Cube helps us to understand these different forms of space and therefore how to use provided spaces better, how to create more invited space and how to facilitate the claiming of space through negotiation.

Type of space	What does this mean?	Example 1: Commercial sex workers <sup>1</sup>	Example 2: Experience of the Indo-Swiss Participative Watershed Development Project (ISPWDK) <sup>2</sup>
<b>Provided/closed spaces</b>	Official or unofficial arenas controlled by an elite group (bureaucrats, experts or elected representatives) to which certain people or interest groups are invited, and from which others are excluded. This group identifies which issues they wish to discuss and controls the decision-making process without broader consultation or involvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The design of policies relevant to the sex trade that involve only selected stakeholders such as employers, religious leaders, NGOs and officials and exclude sex workers from the process.</li> <li>If a sex worker has a grievance s/he will seldom approach official authorities but restricts the articulation of grievances to those voiced at 'provided' spaces permitted by their employers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gram Panchayat (GP), a unit of local government in rural India, is an elected body but is perceived as a 'closed' or 'provided' space by the community. One reason for this is that the fund allocation by the GP is guided more by demographic considerations and the influence of powerful leaders in the GP rather than by needs-based considerations – a village with a higher number of voters gets proportionately higher funds allocation.</li> <li>In ISPWDK, a team comprising members from different stakeholders – SDC, Intercooperation (IC), local NGO partners and select community members – carried out the initial project design. Other community members and NGO staff were informed later.</li> </ul>
<b>Invited spaces</b>	This arena is also controlled by an elite group but efforts are made to invite others to join them to discuss issues of mutual interest. However, they frame the nature of the engagement. They chose <b>if</b> to call a meeting, <b>whom</b> to invite to the meeting and the <b>agenda</b> for the meeting. They also ensure that the meeting is reported in a way that reflects their interests (e.g. minutes, press release etc).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If a health organisation wishes to work with sex workers and invites them to share opinions, this engagement takes places within an 'invited' space.</li> <li>Sex workers are given the opportunity to visit a local hospital, where they can meet specialised health staff. Discussions focus on prevention and use of reproductive health services.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Programme Steering Committee (PSC), the highest decision-making body in ISPWDK, comprised members from all stakeholders – SDC, IC, NGO partners and community members. The Programme Coordinator convened the meetings every six months and took the lead in preparation of agenda and in organising the minutes.</li> <li>In the 'Village Development Societies' (VDSs), there was insistence on due representation of all sexes and sections of community. In the beginning, the VDS was clearly an 'invited space' for women and <i>dalits</i>. The elites were initially hesitant to accept these groups as equals.</li> </ul>
<b>Claimed/created spaces</b>	A group, normally excluded by elites, opens up a new space for exercising power (e.g. by lobbying to influence national policy) and pursuing their own agenda of concern. These spaces often emerge out of sets of common concerns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A network of sex workers intervenes on behalf of a worker to claim their right to unionise, seeking to improve their legal rights.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In the VDS, the women slowly started commanding respect for their punctuality, discipline and sincerity. Later, all VDS formalised 50% women's representation (although the VDSs bylaw stipulated 33%).</li> <li>Women, unaccustomed to public life, initially organised themselves into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), primarily for savings and credit activities. Later, they led successful movements against illicit arrack production. SHGs led to women claiming a greater say in the 'invited spaces' such as VDSs and in 'provided spaces' such as the GP.</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Jana et al (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Based on ISPWDK (2005).

**Table 2: The Power Cube explained: dimensions of power**

The Power Cube helps to make the distinction between different dimensions of power and therefore move beyond certain assumptions, such as ‘the enforcers of rules are oppressors’. This may enable us to explore the way in which laws and institutions may be perpetuating repressive social norms and values.

Type of power	What does this mean?	Example 1: Commercial sex workers	Example 2: Experience of the ISPWDK
<b>Invisible power</b>	We internalise the norms and values of our society. This may lead to individuals unconsciously controlling their own behaviour to meet social expectations. This might involve not being able to act or not feeling that it is legitimate for them to act.	The social norms and values that are attached to sex, sexuality and the sex trade may result in sex workers feeling shame, preventing them from being able to raise their voices against exploitative practices.	In rural India, caste and gender play an important role in shaping people’s understandings of their needs, roles and possibilities for action. A sense of powerlessness is internalised through socialisation. For example, during the project self-reflection exercises, while recounting experiences of the pre-project scenario, the women in one watershed said: ‘Women were scared of everything, even to say that we were sick. Even when we were sick, we never went to hospital, but suffered if men did not take us. We did not send our daughters to school. If a girl spoke to any man, we would suspect that her character was not good.’
<b>Hidden power</b>	Powerful people may exert their power even when they are not physically present. This may influence the behaviour of others. This acts as a means of excluding the others or maintaining privileged entry by certain people to decision making and public spaces.	<p>The manager of a brothel may not be present but may have an important role in decision making. Therefore, her/his power is present even when s/he is absent.</p> <p>The sex workers may not be legal immigrants and may therefore simultaneously be dependent on the brothel owner for protection as well as vulnerable to his/her ability to denounce them.</p>	Powerful people, both within and outside the project area, have an important influence. For example, many poor people depend on seasonal migration. Each season they tend to work in the same place and develop patron-client relationships with the same employer. Poor people may not risk losing this long-term relationship by participating in short-term project activities that are available in their village and may be better paid.
<b>Visible power</b>	Formal laws, rules, structures, institutions and procedures of decision making and the people who ensure that the rules are kept (e.g. police, bureaucrats).	These <b>definable</b> aspects of power include the legislation which controls the sex trade, the police and administration who control ‘entry’ into the trade and the power of local ‘pimps’ who dictate the terms of the trade.	In rural India, visible power remains mostly with government officials/elected representatives at different levels – the GP secretary, the Junior Engineer, the GP President, or the policeman.

**Table 3: The Power Cube explained: places where power is expressed**

Type of place	Example	Examples related to the ISPWDK
<b>Global</b>	<p>Global fora might include the UN, the WTO, the worldwide web, satellite TV channels with global reach (e.g. CNN, BBC World, Sky), the Roman Catholic Church, and international criminal courts.</p> <p>In some respects, power is shifting to more globalised 'places' and local actors (such as the Narmada Dam and Chiapas campaigns) and may use global forums as arenas for action more effectively than they can appeal to institutions of local 'places'.</p>	<p>Bilateral and multilateral agencies working on natural resource management and water like SDC, DFID, the World Bank, the EC, and UNDP.</p> <p>Foundations promoted or endowed by rich businessmen for social purposes like the Ford Foundation, the Bill &amp; Melinda Gates Foundation, the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, and the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust,</p> <p>Global Fora like World Water Forum.</p> <p>The ideas and influence of international consultants.</p>
<b>National</b>	<p>National fora might include parliament, national media, networked organisations (e.g. local branches of civil society organisations, churches, national trade unions, chambers of commerce), and national criminal courts.</p> <p>The interrelation between local and national 'places' is seen clearly in the debates over decentralisation and the extent to which power is officially shared with the locality.</p>	<p>The Planning Commission in India and the different ministries from which funding for watershed programmes is sourced, such as the Department of Land Resources under the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of Agriculture.</p> <p>Committees set up for the review of the guidelines for watersheds funded by different government programmes, like the recent Parthasarthy Committee.</p> <p>At the State level, government agencies funding watershed programmes including the Drought Prone Area Programme (DPAP), the Integrated Watershed Development Programme (IWDP), the Agriculture Department, and the State Watershed Department.</p>
<b>Local</b>	<p>Local fora might include local government, local civil society organisations, community-based organisations, clubs, local media, local courts. In addition private arenas such as the household, which play an important role but outside of the 'public sphere'.</p>	<p>The GP and village-level agencies such as the VDSs and the local governance units at district and sub-district levels (the Zila and Taluka Panchayat).</p>