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## POWER, POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

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# Inequality, Power and Participation – Revisiting the Links

John Gaventa and Bruno Martorano\*

**Abstract** Drawing on the contributions from the World Social Science Report 2016, *Challenging Inequalities: Pathways to a Just World*, this article examines the relationship between economic inequality and political participation. In particular, using the lens of the ‘power cube’ approach ([www.powercube.net](http://www.powercube.net)), we argue that understanding the impact of inequality on political participation requires moving beyond the study of its impact on more conventional forms of participation found in voting and ‘voice’ through established or formal democratic processes. Indeed, this relationship is also influenced by hidden and invisible forms of power, at multiple levels from the local to the global, which affect the rules of the game as well as individuals’ aspiration to participate, shaping whether, where and how citizens engage at all. Despite the power of inequality to shape its own consensus, recent evidence also points to the emergence of levels and forms of resistance to inequality outside of traditional channels of participation, which in turn help to expand and prefigure notions of what the new possibilities of change might be. Exploring these dynamics, the article concludes with a brief reflection on possible lessons for activists, policymakers and scholars working to understand, unravel and challenge the knotty intersections of inequality, power and participation.

**Keywords:** power, inequality, participation, power cube, democracy, citizenship.

## 1 Introduction

Many years ago, I (John Gaventa, one of the co-authors) found myself living and working in a mining valley in the rural United States (US). The situation was one of glaring inequality: one company owned 90 per cent of the land, through a secretive corporate empire, based in the UK, at the top of which sat a Lord Mayor of London, then one of Britain’s wealthiest men. Corporate wealth sat side-by-side with desperate poverty, poor schools, lack of health care, a degraded environment based on unchecked practices of fossil-fuel extraction, and a generally poor quality of life. In my PhD dissertation, later to become the book *Power and Powerlessness* (1980), I asked the question: in a situation of glaring inequality, why does challenge to that domination

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not occur? Under what conditions and against what obstacles does rebellion through citizen action begin to emerge?

In that study, I traced how concentration of economic wealth in the hands of a few was translated into political power, which allowed the rich absentee landlords, through their local elites, to shape decisions and the rules of the game to their advantage over a period of a hundred years. Building on the work of Steven Lukes on the three dimensions of power (Lukes 1974), I argued that power was exercised not just in the visible public sphere but also through hidden means, creating obstacles to participation of the powerless, and over time, contributing to their internalisation or acceptance of an unjust and unequal *status quo*.

Today, we find ourselves facing similar patterns of the concentrations of wealth and of growing inequality – only now at a global scale. By now the data are familiar to us all: 62 people own as much as the poorest half of the world population (Oxfam 2016). These disparities continue to grow: the top 1 per cent of the world's population has received 50 per cent of the total increase in global wealth since 2010, while the wealth of the poorest half of the world's population has fallen by nearly 40 per cent (*ibid.*). The World Social Science Report, *Challenging Inequality: Pathways to a Just World*, documents the impact of this trend on broad issues of poverty and growth, health, education, the environment and conflict, concluding that 'unchecked inequality could jeopardise the sustainability of economies, societies and other communities' (ISSC, IDS and UNESCO 2016).

Such patterns of rising inequality have generated significant global concern. Calls for reducing inequality or for creating a more equitable world have been at the forefront of statements by business leaders in Davos and by civil society leaders, and have fuelled a range of diverse political and social movements. Not only is 'reducing inequalities' a standalone goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; Goal 10), but also the cross-cutting commitment of the SDGs to 'leave no one behind' itself represents a cross-cutting ambition to address inequality in each of the SDGs.

But while the concern with inequality is rising, we see less recent empirical work that focuses on the question: how do changing patterns of inequality<sup>1</sup> affect patterns of power (Stewart 2011)? Understanding these relationships is critical not only for researchers but also for activists and policymakers. If inequality is linked to power, and if inequality is changing rapidly, are patterns of power and participation also changing? What is the relationship between economic inequality and civic and political inequalities; that is, inequalities of power that preclude those at the bottom from exercising voice and influence over their futures, and that enable those at the top to influence future scenarios in ways that benefit themselves? What are the implications of growing inequality for new forms of civic and political action? (For further discussion, see Gaventa 2016.)

In this article, we (a) briefly examine two contrasting views on the relationship of inequality and participation; (b) re-examine this relationship through the lens of the ‘power cube’ approach, outlined by Gaventa (2006) in the *IDS Bulletin* on power ten years ago; and (c) explore the implications of this analysis both for the study of power and for strategies of civic and political action.

## **2 Exploring two contrasting theses**

The debate on whether and how inequality affects participation is not a new one. However, very broadly speaking, there are two different views. On the one hand, there are those who argue that high inequality inhibits participation. On the other hand, there is the counter-argument that inequality can itself generate new forms of collective action.

### **2.1 High inequality inhibits participation**

For many decades, this argument has been the prevailing one, especially in American political science. In the US, the classic work, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (Verba and Nie 1987), argues that we face a participation paradox: those most likely to participate are those who are higher on the social economic scale, whereas those who might most need to participate, to challenge inequalities, are the least likely to do so. More recently, the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, in a report on the right to participation of the very poor, made a similar argument at a more global level: ‘Material deprivation and disempowerment create a vicious circle: the greater the inequality, the less the participation; the less the participation, the greater the inequality’ (Carmona 2013: 5, quoting Council of Europe 2013).

In academic studies, the main argument of this strand of the literature is that individual endowments in terms of time, money, and civic skills significantly influence the likelihood of political engagement (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995). As a result, rising economic disparities translate into uneven participation in political activities and so unequal involvement in the decision-making process. Inequality and rising disparities may also reduce trust in political institutions and promote a sense of powerlessness, which in turn may contribute to the acceptance of the *status quo*. In turn, economic inequalities are reinforced by other intersecting inequalities. As Kabeer writes, ‘social, economic and spatial inequalities in turn contribute to political exclusion: such groups are generally denied voice and influence in collective decisions that affect their lives’ (2010: 6).

### **2.2 High inequality increases political participation**

While the notion that inequality impedes participation has perhaps been the dominant one in political science, empirical evidence and recent studies give rise to a competing view. Despite the ability of elites to shape both political opportunities and outcomes, there are counter-narratives in the face of rising inequality, such as the Occupy movement, landless people’s movements, food riots and youth revolts. Around the world, the incidence of protests in the face of inequality is

rising (Ortiz and Burke 2016), and anti-austerity movements in Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and elsewhere appear to be bringing new actors and voices into the political process.

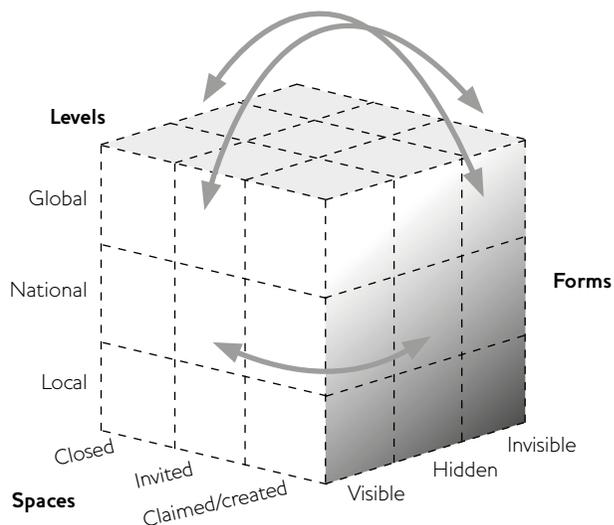
Just as in the first thesis, these empirical trends are also explained by a competing set of arguments. Rising or persistent disparities may result in feelings of relative deprivation (Runciman 1966) and an increase in anger about the *status quo*. Yet, unfulfilled expectations may lead to lower trust in political institutions, particularly when people blame the government for fuelling inequality or for failing to redistribute (Justino and Martorano 2016), which rather than lead to acceptance of the *status quo* may provide citizens – and especially the worse-off – with additional incentives to engage in politics (Filetti 2016), either through conventional means, such as participation in elections, in social movements or in protest activities (Gurr 1970; Flechtner 2014). In this setting, unconventional means of protest may be perceived as corrective mechanisms of democratic deficit as well as the most effective way to influence the political agenda (Justino and Martorano 2016) and to counterbalance the uneven distribution of power (Filetti 2016).

While both sets of arguments have evidence behind them, there is still no consensus on the complex interrelationships of inequality and political participation. Why does inequality in one context or for one group dampen participation, while in others it is met by mobilisation? How and when do changing patterns of inequality lead to changing patterns of political behaviour? A richer understanding of these relationships is revealed, we suggest, by bringing in a focus on the dynamics of power, and how power mediates between inequality and participation. Changing patterns of inequality are rapidly changing patterns of power. In turn, shifting patterns of power affect where and how citizens engage in political processes. Rather than a linear process, this relationship takes place dynamically, affected by and in ever shifting spaces, levels and forms of power. More understanding is needed of these relationships.

### **3 Looking at inequality through the power cube lens**

Ten years ago, in a previous *IDS Bulletin* on power, John Gaventa presented the power cube as one approach to understanding and analysing power. In that article, he argued for the 'need for activists, researchers, policymakers and donors who are concerned about development and change to turn our attention to how to analyse and understand the changing configurations of power. If we want to change power relations, e.g. to make them more inclusive, just or pro-poor, we must understand where and how to engage' (2006: 23).

Since that time, the power cube approach has been widely picked up and used (see, for instance, Hunjan and Pettit 2012; Pantazidou 2012). To our knowledge, however, very few studies have applied the power cube approach to an analysis of how changing inequalities at the local, national and global level relate to the changing configurations of power, and to the strategies and 'spaces of change' for challenging these inequalities.

**Figure 1 The power cube: the levels, spaces and forms of power**

Source Gaventa (2006). See also [www.powercube.net](http://www.powercube.net) for other presentations.

To do so completely would require far more specific empirical and contextual study than is possible to cover in this article. However, both authors were involved in publishing the World Social Science Report, *Challenging Inequalities: Pathways to a Just World* (ISSC *et al.* 2016), a compendium of over 70 articles on inequality from authors from some 40 countries across the world. Drawing from contributions in this report, as well as from other recent literature, we outline next some tentative suggestions for what utilising a power cube lens might tell us about the relationships of inequality and political participation.

One of the unique characteristics of the power cube approach is the interactivity of its various dimensions, where configurations of power are shaped by the interplay of the *forms*, *levels* and *spaces* of power. As argued previously: '[W]ith this more complex approach, the three dimensions of power elaborated by Lukes may be seen as three forms of power along a single dimension or continuum. By thinking of the levels of power and the spaces of power also as dimensions, or continua, each of which interacts with the other, we can visually understand power as a sort of Rubik's cube' (Gaventa 2007: 206), which we have called the power cube (see Figure 1).

### 3.1 Inequality and the forms of power

Drawing on the earlier work by Lukes, as well as by colleagues at Just Associates and others, the power cube approach distinguishes three forms of power: (1) *visible* power, which is what can be seen in the more open and observable aspects of the political process; (2) *hidden* power, through which certain key actors may exercise control through

shaping what issues and decisions enter the public arena in the first place; and (3) *invisible* power, which includes the psychological aspects of power, including how it affects people's perceptions of what constitutes a legitimate grievance or issue for action in the first place. The argument is that while some forms of power may be understood by observing who participates, and who wins or loses in debates on public issues, other perhaps more insidious forms of power shape what gets into the public arena by control of the agenda and through shaping what is considered to be a legitimate issue and who are considered the legitimate actors.

These three forms of power map easily onto the differing streams of literature on how inequality might shape participation. For many writers, the focus is on how inequality shapes the possibilities of political voice (Verba *et al.* 1995). Here the fundamental concern has been on such questions as who votes or otherwise participates in formal governmental processes, and how socioeconomic inequality affects such participation. As we have seen earlier, a fundamental tenet of much political science, especially in the US, has been that those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder are often the least able or willing to engage (Filetti 2016). Another variant of this same approach explores more formal processes of political representation, and asks questions about who holds public office, how those in office are affected by their economic status, as well as campaign contributions and lobbying processes, and how networks of economic elites shape their political behaviours (Bartels 2002). Here an argument is often that political representatives are either economic elites themselves (Gold, Lo and Wright 1975), or are affected by 'political capture' of those elites (Oxfam 2014).

If one focuses on *hidden* forms of power, however, the focus is less on participation and representation in formal political processes, and more on how economic power shapes the agendas and rules of the game of these processes from the outset. As Robert Reich, former US Secretary of Labour, puts it, growing inequality is shaped less by the behaviour of ordinary citizens, and more by 'the increasing concentration of political power in a corporate and financial elite that has been able to influence the rules by which the economy runs' (Reich 2015: 27). Such a view also builds strongly on ideas of power as the 'mobilisation of bias', where 'some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out' (Schattschneider 1960: 71), leading to the conclusion (in reference to US democracy) that 'the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent' (*ibid.*: 34–5).

Taking this argument more broadly, post-apartheid South Africa may be seen as a further example of where the formal political process has been opened up to greater participation, yet both old and new elites have been able to maintain and gain power through economic decision-making, often behind the scenes (Gaventa and Runciman 2016). In Russia, the rich oligarchy was able to influence the policymaking process through establishing corrupt relations and manipulating regulation and the legal system to work in their favour during the transition to a market economy

(Glaeser, Scheinkman and Shleifer 2003). In Latin America, *fazendeiros* and *latifundistas* have been historically able to resist redistributive forms of taxation thanks to their strong ties with the political elites. Engerman and Sokoloff argue that in this society ‘the elites were both inclined and able to establish a basic legal framework that ensured them a disproportionate share of political power and to use that influence to establish rules, laws, and other government policies that gave them greater access to economic opportunities than the rest of the population, thereby contributing to the persistence of the high degree of inequality’ (2002: 17–18).

The third form of power – *invisible* power – what Lukes (1974) argued was the most insidious, deals with the shaping of norms and beliefs of legitimacy, for example what constitutes an issue or subject for contention to begin with. If those at the bottom of the inequality ladder accept the legitimacy – or at least the inevitability – of their position within it, then other forms of power will not be necessary to preserve the *status quo*, no matter how unjust it may be.

Again, we see evidence of how inequality affects and is shaped by *invisible* power. Social norms and beliefs may affect aspirations and expectations of the less equal to challenge or move out of inequality. Some research has argued that people who are marginalised or living in poverty tend to be more pessimistic about their future since they have less opportunities to learn about their abilities and talent (Appadurai 2004; Moreira 2003). In a context of rising disparities, other research also suggests that poor people may be inclined to think that outcomes or positions achieved by rich people are unattainable to them, thus curbing their aspirations and expectations (Ray 2006). In a study of Peruvian children, Pasquier-Doumer (2016) shows that socioeconomic status predicts the level of aspiration, a finding that is echoed in studies in Europe as well (Baillergeau and Duyvendak 2016). These processes could in turn lead to inequality traps, with ‘individuals at the bottom of the distribution internalising their inability to climb the ladder and, as a result, assuming behaviours that keep them at the bottom’ (Justino and Moore 2015: 18). However, this process is by no means given. In other cases, growing inequalities and shifting social justice norms appear to contribute to greater resistance to inequality (Fukuda-Parr 2016).

### 3.2 Inequality and levels of power

A second aspect of power has to do with the levels at which it is experienced, ranging from the very micro household level, to the subnational, national and global levels. Understanding how inequality shapes power at each scale and across scales is critical for also understanding where the entry points are for change. Here the globalisation literature tends to emphasise the role of global forces versus the national state. In particular, powerful global institutions are able to influence the rules of the game at different levels, thus reducing the power of the national state authorities (Wood 2002). In contrast, an alternative strand of the literature postulates that the weakening of national states is producing new and transnational spaces and policy

actors, such as transnational social movements (Sassen 2008). Others argue that power is affected more by what occurs within nations, between particular social groups, or at the household and personal levels.

This more general debate is reflected in our understanding of how inequality interacts with power across scales. For many analysts, changing patterns of inequality are both a product of and contribute to changing patterns of global power. Studies in this regard focus therefore on issues of global trade (Caselli 2014), financial flows and international taxation. The recent financial crisis left many with the impression that financial markets are beyond the control of nation states and that the lack of proper financial market regulation has increased economic instability, which in turn has fuelled economic inequalities (Galbraith 2012). At this level, political strategies for tackling inequality also focus on the importance of the global or international arena: through the development of global social policies (Deacon 2016), new financial controls (Griffith-Jones and Brett 2016), or new tax agreements (Moore 2016), and through new forms of transnational and anti-globalisation movements, such as Occupy (Branch and Mampilly 2016).

While global factors are clearly important, others have argued that national policies are a critical space for shaping and mediating inequality. While arguably many nation states have been affected by somewhat similar global forces, it is clear that some nations have been able to pass national policies that can curb inequality, while others have failed to do so (Leach 2016; Green 2016). For instance, in the 2000s, Latin American countries have shown that it is still possible to reduce inequality in a context of open economies adopting more progressive policies in the fields of taxation, public expenditure and labour markets (Cornia 2016). Others have argued for strategies that promote more inclusive governance (Nazneen 2016), or which use legal rights as instruments for challenging inequality (Musambi 2016). For activism, the focus here is on how to put more progressive regimes in power through progressive parties and alliances, such as the Indignados in Spain and the Kínima Aganaktisménon-Politón in Greece, or progressive social movements that argue for more inclusive and equitable national policies, such as in Brazil, Bolivia and other parts of Latin America (Vergara-Camus 2016), recognising that pressure from below and political will from above are often necessary for sustainable national change to occur (Leach 2016).

Yet, others would argue that change can equally emerge from smaller more localised actions through which citizens are attempting to create alternative, more equitable economies (Mathie and Gaventa 2015; Mathie *et al.* 2016). Across the world, the rise of the solidarity economy and similar movements are leading to efforts to scale up from the local to the global and in so doing offer an important counter-narrative to that of the dominant model. As Speth argues, examples such as these help us to envision a 'new operating system', based on 'new economic thinking and driven forward by a new politics' (2012: 9–10). Initiatives that may seem small and local can be starter-wedges that lead to larger

changes and ‘provide inspirational models for how things might work in a new political economy devoted to sustaining human and natural communities’ (*ibid.*: xi).

While such public spaces are important sites of action on inequality, others argue that change must start with challenging social and cultural norms on gender, race and caste, and these are often learned and reinforced at the household level. In turn, asymmetrical power relations in patriarchal societies result in an unequal intra-household distribution of resources between females and males (Kabeer 2016). To challenge them means going beyond ‘only socioeconomic disadvantage or re-distributive concerns’, and also entails looking at ‘claims of (mis) recognition, stereotyping and violence’ that affect voice agency and participation (Razavi 2016).

#### **4 Inequality and the spaces of change**

The power cube approach suggests that the forms and levels of power interact finally with the ‘spaces’ for action and participation. How then do changing patterns of inequality affect the opening and closing of these spaces?

*Closed spaces.* While over the last few years there has been a growing call for transparency and accountability, it is clear that many decisions affecting the shaping of inequality remain hidden from public view, taken behind the closed doors of bureaucrats or economic elites. The proliferation of tax havens based on financial secrecy offer one such example. The occasional peeks into these closed, non-transparent spaces – such as we saw with the release of the Panama Papers – reminds us of the extent to which the rich will go to hide and protect their wealth, as well as the extent to which economic privilege and political power are interconnected (Green 2016). But there are many other examples of such closed spaces as well. For instance, while hundreds of thousands of protestors ‘claimed’ their spaces in protests around austerity in Greece, and participated in a national referendum to express their voices, it was ultimately the behind-the-scenes workings of the unelected ‘troika’ of the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund where the most significant decisions were made (Armingeon and Baccaro 2012).

Against such secrecy, new strategies for greater transparency and accountability increasingly focus on making more visible the economic transactions that benefit elites. In the extractives sector, civil society has started to promote new mechanisms including the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) or the Publish What You Pay initiative (Mejía Acosta 2013; Heller *et al.* 2016). Similarly in the area of taxation, moves are afoot to clamp down on tax havens through new forms of collaboration, such as the Automatic Exchange of Information (AEOI) initiative, which aims at increasing and facilitating the exchange of information among national tax authorities on the tax positions of people and companies (Moore 2016). For those seeking more

democratic participation, such strategies follow the argument of Piketty (2014: 570): 'Without real accounting and financial transparency and sharing of information, there can be no economic democracy'.

*Invited spaces.* While making closed spaces visible and transparent represents a new entry point for action on inequality, another space connected by the power cube approach has to do with 'invited spaces' – those spaces where the public and policymakers come together for consultation and public dialogue. While there is now a great deal of work on 'invited participation' in relationship to social and democratic issues, there are perhaps fewer examples of such engagement on economic policies and programmes. Citizens may often be 'invited' to engage with issues such as health, education or the environment, but are less likely to be so regarding issues related to economic policy, taxation or trade. On the other hand, one of the most important initiatives for citizen engagement on economic issues related to inequality has been the movements in many parts of the world related to 'participatory budgeting' – to make the allocation of public resources both more transparent and more democratic. Recent work by Baiocchi and Ganuza (2014) has shown how activists in the US view participatory budgeting as one way to fight inequality, not only as a way of gaining democratic participation.

*Claimed spaces.* Finally, the power cube framework suggests that people may engage not only in institutionalised spaces, but also in their own 'claimed' spaces, whether they be in small-scale acts of resistance or larger scale protests and social movements. Perhaps related to the lack of meaningful invited spaces on issues of inequality, across the world we have seen a surge of social movements and protest activities, many of which have dissatisfaction with issues of inequality at their core. For instance, one analysis of 843 recent world protests (Ortiz and Burke 2016) reflects a steady increase in the overall number of protests every year, with the major increase beginning in 2010 (parallel with the adoption of austerity measures in all world regions). In fact, the largest number of protests during this time were connected to issues of economic justice and austerity, followed secondly by protests linked to political representation and thirdly by those linked with rights (*ibid.*).

Europe is an emblematic case where people's participation has moved from conventional to unconventional channels. Indeed, people have started to consider these alternative spaces as the most effective way to influence the policymaking process (see the case of Iceland, Box 1). On the other hand, Latin American countries are currently experiencing an interesting paradox. Despite substantial and persistent reductions in the Gini<sup>2</sup> coefficient (Cornia 2016), most countries in Latin America have experienced increases in protests and civil instability in the last few years (Justino and Martorano 2016). However, it seems that 'the grievance is not just against the distribution of income and wealth *per se*, but the perception that it is driven by policies and institutions that are unfair, pitted in favour of the wealthy, and perpetuating a vicious circle of ever increasing inequality' (Fukuda-Parr 2016).

**Box 1 Power, participation and inequality – the case of Iceland**

Iceland provides an interesting case study of the relationship between power, participation and inequality. From the nineteenth to the twentieth century, power in Iceland was mainly shared between two groups, popularly known as the Octopus (constituted by a bloc of 14 families) and the Squid (a rural-based business elite) (Wade and Sigurgeirsdottir 2012). They controlled the political system through the two major parties – the Independence Party and the Progressive Party – as well as via media and economic activities, with quasi-feudal power structures, which can be characterised as *‘closed spaces’*. During the 1970s, a new group created by law and business administration students at the University of Iceland – known as the Locomotive Group – started to challenge the old established elite, gradually gaining power over the years and taking senior positions in politics and other institutions. Davíð Oddsson, one of the most important members of this group, took the leadership of the Independence Party and led it to election victory in 1991. Holding office for 14 years, Oddsson promoted Iceland’s neoliberal transformation under the implicit consensus of the old established elite. One of the most emblematic examples of this new system of power was the privatisation of the banking sector in the late 1990s through which banks were sold at low prices to national and politicised actors, excluding foreign competitors. Other neoliberal reforms contributed to generate an illusory economic boom while the benefits were not shared by all.

The lack of stringent supervision and the easy access to international markets allowed the three biggest banks, Glitnir, Kaupthing and Landsbanki, to fuel a speculative bubble. Before the crisis, these three banks recorded an asset value about nine times higher than the country’s gross domestic product (GDP). However, the arrival of the global financial crisis in 2008 pushed Iceland towards a severe recession. International turmoil and the strong depreciation of the *krona* in 2008 forced these banks into insolvency. The Central Bank could not operate as lender of last resort. While the deposits of Icelanders were fully guaranteed, the international deposits were not – provoking strong reactions from the British and Dutch governments, who demanded repayment of their citizens’ deposits, in the Icesave branch of Landsbanki, an online saving bank collecting deposits in Britain and the Netherlands. In order to satisfy these requests, Iceland’s Parliament issued a public guarantee, first in March 2010 and then in December of the same year. Yet, people strongly rejected the public guarantee through two national referenda, which can be characterised as *invited spaces*.

On 28 January 2013, the European Free Trade Association Court made the decision that Iceland (and its population) was not responsible for any obligations related to Icesave.

The crisis led to weighty protests against the government in late October 2008. Thousands of people armed with pots and pans gathered at Reykjavik's main square (*a claimed space*), calling for the resignation of the prime minister. The 2009 parliamentary election recorded a historical political result marked by the steady shift in preferences towards the left-wing coalition consisting of the Social Democratic Alliance and the Left-Green Movement. Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir became the first female prime minister in the history of the country. People demanded a new society free from corruption and 'based on fairer values' (Thorsdottir 2014: 26). The new government implemented a stabilisation package based on a set of heterodox policies such as capital controls and a severe devaluation of the national currency. The most emblematic measure was the replacement of the flat tax system with a progressive scheme, which heavily contributed to promote a 'fairer process of adjustment' (Martorano 2015). The new policies, shaped and influenced by new forms of popular participation, led to dramatic results. Indeed, Iceland was not only the country which recovered from the economic crisis faster and better than other economies in similar conditions; it also made strides towards reducing inequality, with a drop in the Gini coefficient of seven points between 2009 and 2014.

## 5 Implications

A strong champion of the idea that 'inequality is not inevitable', Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz reminds us: '[I]nequality is cause and consequence of the failure of the political system, and it contributes to the instability of our economic system, which in turn contributes to increased inequality – a vicious downward spiral into which we have descended, and from which we can emerge only through concerted policies' (2012: xxxix–xl). What does this rapid review of recent evidence on inequality tell us further about this relationship of inequality and politics, and how we might break this 'downward spiral'?

First, the power cube lens points to the dynamic and multifaceted aspects of the relationship between inequality, power and political action, and therefore how its dynamics may take differing forms at different moments and settings. This broader lens helps us to realise that we cannot understand the links between inequality and political behaviour by only looking at public participation through traditional mechanisms of voting and representation. This latter finding may help to explain the two competing understandings of the links between inequality and participation, which we discussed at the beginning of this article. If one understands participation in narrow terms, then our lens may focus on engagement in the political institutions and processes which are

most affected by inequality, and therefore from which those concerned about inequality may be most disengaged. Alternatively, if we look more broadly at movements to expose hidden and invisible power, and participation in peoples' own claimed spaces rather than those to which they have been invited, then we may have a different view, and realise that there are many forms of resistance to inequality which are in fact emerging outside of traditional channels of participation.

For activists and policymakers concerned about how we construct and widen these pathways to a more equal world, the power cube lens challenges us to think about the multiple entry points for doing so, and the need to simultaneously address the forms, spaces and levels of power that produce and protect inequality. For instance, using the power lens helps us to see that the relationship of economic inequality to political inequality is not just about policy change alone or about shaping who participates in formal political processes, as important as these may be. Rather, the relationship also shapes – and is shaped by – more hidden forms of power, which define the rules of the game, and in turn affects aspirations to engage in the first place. As such, the strategies for countering inequality are also about changing norms and values, challenging and exposing hidden power, and creating alternatives which help to expand and prefigure notions of what the possibilities of change might be.

Growing movements to expose and make more transparent the ways in which economic inequality is shaped, and which demonstrate alternatives, in turn create greater awareness about how the actions of elites in previously closed spaces shape the rules and benefits to their advantage. The surge of activities in new 'claimed spaces' through protests, new social movements and political party formations, and localised, alternative economies attest perhaps to a new politics of inequality, one which offers some hope that the vicious circle of inequality, power and non-participation can be broken.

The power cube lens also reminds us that the power–inequality axis is shaped at every level, from the global to the local, to the very micro. While some work has been done on the strategies and entry points for action to challenge inequalities at each level separately, our power analysis would suggest that work needs to happen not only at each level, but also be linked across them. Yet, we need more empirical analysis of how the rapidly changing patterns of global inequality affect power relationships locally, and of how to form new political alliances and formations that link and synergise actions across the levels and spaces for change.

While the power cube analysis suggests multiple entry points and pathways towards a more equal world, the task is not an easy one. Every new opening for action is also an opportunity for those benefiting from the unequal *status quo* to resist the efforts of those with less money, less recognition, less space, and less access to multiple levels to wrest more economic and political power at the same time. And yet there are also tipping points – the points at which internalised acceptance of the *status*

*quo* shifts to new forms and realisations of economic and political agency, and new forms of action begin to emerge simultaneously across spaces, forms and levels of change. Where these tipping points are, why and when they occur, is also an area about which we need more understanding.

Finally, for activists, policymakers and scholars alike, inequality–power–participation relationships suggest that we cannot remain in our disciplinary, strategic and policy silos. Scholars of political power need to engage far more with economic power, not only through the broad frame of political economy analysis but with a more precise understanding of how power relations work across both spheres. Those who have promoted policies of social and political empowerment need to pay more attention to economic empowerment as well, and the relationships of one to the other. And those who support policies of political inclusion need to recognise that these may not occur as long as the political landscape is so intertwined with economic inequality, and those who seek more equitable economies, may not get there without new forms of political engagement. While Goal 10 of the SDGs calls for reducing inequality, our analysis would suggest that unless we challenge inequality and its grip on power, then it is hard to imagine that we will gain the political will to reach the broader goals of ‘leaving no one behind’ in the other social and sustainability goals as well.

### Notes

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- 1 While we understand inequality to be multidimensional, in this article we refer mainly to economic inequality, and its relationship to political inequality.
- 2 The Gini index is a measure of dispersion, and is the most frequently used measure of inequality which varies between 0 (perfect equality) and 100 (perfect inequality).

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