

3.2

APPLYING POWER ANALYSIS: USING THE 'POWERCUBE' TO EXPLORE FORMS, LEVELS AND SPACES

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Introduction

In a complex, globalised and rapidly changing world, power dynamics are multi-dimensional, constantly evolving and full of complexity. The 'powercube' (Gaventa 2006) is an approach to power analysis which can be used to examine the multiple forms, levels and spaces of power, and their interactions. Building on earlier work on power – and elaborated and popularised in collaboration with other colleagues through the website powercube.net and numerous other resources – the powercube has been widely used around the world for analysis of power, education and awareness-building, context analysis, programme and strategy development, and monitoring and evaluation. This chapter briefly outlines the evolution of the powercube, and provides examples of the issue areas in which it has been used, and for what purposes. Drawing on these, we then offer eight lessons in how to apply the powercube framework for analysing and transforming power relations.

Background

Many years ago, as a fledging researcher and volunteer fresh out of university, I was working in a mining valley deep in the heart of the Appalachian Mountain chain in rural America. While the people were poor, the land was rich – full of coal, timber, water and natural beauty. Yet the vast majority of this was absentee owned by a secretive corporate empire based in London; and in the valley the social and economic effects of this unequal, extractive economy were seen everywhere: land and water destroyed through unsustainable mining practices; dilapidated housing, poor schools and local services due to a low tax base; a deep sense of disempowerment, yet also a strong and resilient local community bound together by culture and history. The situation here was but a microcosm of the profound

inequalities and its effects that we now see globally. And yet, at least as an outsider, I saw little visible protest. Why, I asked, in a situation of glaring inequality, did we not see more open resistance and challenge to the status quo? (Gaventa 1980).

To answer this question, I turned to the work of my then professor at Oxford University, Steven Lukes, who was about to publish his classic book, *Power: A Radical View* (1974/2005). In this book, Lukes argues that power can be seen in three dimensions, from the more visible to its hidden and invisible *forms*.¹ Over the years, as I continued to work in this field, I began to realise that these forms of power are a continuum, but reflect only one dimension of power (Gaventa 2006), and that a more complex approach was needed.

Influenced by the work of other colleagues in the Participation Team at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) – e.g. Brock et al. (2004), Cornwall (2002) – we began to realise that power manifests itself differently in different *spaces*, which ranged from the *closed* to *invited* to *claimed*, and that power was relative: those who were perceived by themselves or others as powerless in one space might be seen as more powerful in other spaces. Increasingly concerned also about how in a globalised world power becomes disconnected from territory, we were clear that it was also critical to move beyond the realm of ‘community power’ to examine the dynamics of power and citizen action across levels, from the *local* to the *national* to the more *global* (Gaventa 2007).

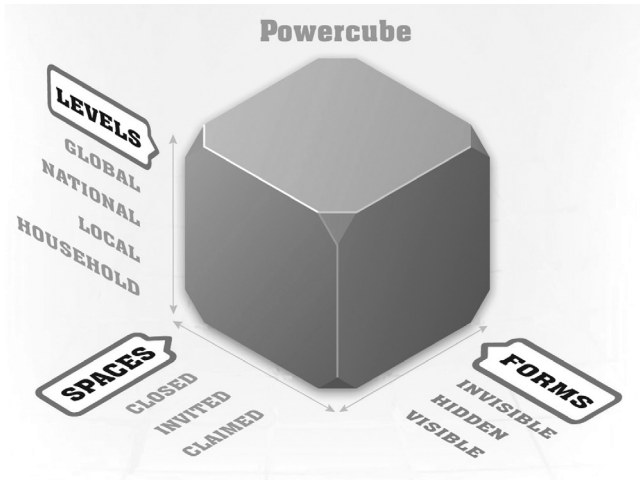
In a short paper for a workshop at IDS in 2002, and later for the *IDS Bulletin* (Gaventa 2006), I brought these ideas together in what I called the ‘powercube’ (see Box 3.2.1). Building on the dynamic metaphor of Rubik’s Cube, the powercube approach suggests that we must examine these three aspects of power (forms, spaces, levels) not only separately but also in their interactions. Moreover, each dimension of the cube also reflects a spectrum of possibilities that also interact with one another, opening and closing the entry points for influence and change. Power strategies which only focus on one element, or one dimension, often simply reproduce or strengthen power in another. Really transformative change happens when social actors (movements, civil society organisations, donors) work across all aspects of the cube, necessitating the emergence of coalitions and networks of actors, which themselves are affected by power dynamics.

BOX 3.2.1 THE POWERCUBE

Forms relate to how power manifests itself:

- *Visible*: focuses on who participates and predominates in observable decision-making
- *Hidden*: keeps certain issues, interests and voices out of the decision-making process or off the public agenda

1 To my knowledge, the terms *visible*, *hidden* and *invisible* to refer to Lukes’s three dimensions of power were first developed by Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller (2002) of Just Associates (JASS).



- *Invisible*: internalised beliefs and norms, or lack of awareness – which means that certain voices do not speak and certain issues and inequities go unquestioned

Spaces of power refer to potential arenas for participation and action:

- *Closed*: decisions are made behind closed doors without broad consultation or participation
- *Invited*: people are invited to participate in public arenas but within set boundaries
- *Claimed*: less powerful people or groups create their own spaces where they can shape their own agenda

Levels refer to the multiple layers or levels of power in a global world:

- *Global*: formal and informal sites of decision-making beyond the nation state
- *National*: governments, parliaments, political parties, coalitions or other forms of authority, usually linked to nation-states
- *Local*: sub-national governments, councils and associations at the local level
- *Household*: the micro-level, which may be outside of the public sphere but which helps shape what occurs within it (*Author's elaboration, powercube.net*)

While it was never our intent to turn the powercube into a widespread tool for analysis and action, it was quickly picked up by others. In one of the first substantial applications, Irene Guijt led a group of colleagues to use it to evaluate strategies of civil society participation as supported by four Dutch non-governmental organisations

(NGOs) in five countries (Guijt 2005, Guijt 2008). Oxfam and other NGOs, community-based organisations, IDS students and alumni from around the world, and government aid agencies began to apply it internally in their work, often supported through action learning journeys, trainings or accompaniment by Jethro Pettit from IDS and colleagues (Pettit 2013).² With growing take-up and refinement of the approach, in 2008 we brought together a number of users of the powercube for a workshop to share lessons and experiences. On the basis of this collective experience, in 2009 the web resource powercube.net was launched. Since that time, the approach has continued to spread, with hundreds of thousands of visits to the website, and hundreds of articles, manuals and background briefs drawing upon and developing the approach further.

This chapter briefly shares some of these applications and uses, and concludes with some lessons drawn from this experience. Given space considerations, this is necessarily an overview, and readers are encouraged to go to the references cited to understand further how the powercube was applied as well as the insights that were developed as a result.

Using the cube for power analysis in multiple fields and domains

One of the most important uses of the powercube is for the analysis of power dynamics across a range of fields and domains by a broad array of development actors, including international and local NGOs, social movements, think tanks, universities and donors.³ These include analysing power in relationship to participation, policy and governance issues (the areas from which the first applications emerged). But the powercube has proven itself to be highly versatile and relevant to other fields and issues as well, including digital inclusion, economic justice, environmental issues, trade (including fair trade), health, housing, humanitarian relief, human rights, hunger and nutrition, legal empowerment, mental health, peacebuilding, and water and other natural resources. Some selected examples of these, drawn from an extensive search of many more examples, may be found in Table 3.2.1.

- 2 International NGOs that hosted action learning, workshops and trainings in power analysis and the powercube during this period include the Swedish Cooperative Centre (Sweden, Latin America), Christian Aid (UK, Kenya, Colombia), PSO (Netherlands), Trócaire (Ireland, Cambodia), Oxfam GB (UK, Latin America), Oxfam International, Oxfam Novib (Netherlands) and Hivos (Netherlands, Latin America). Government aid agencies that have hosted workshops and trainings include the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). Training and accompaniment was provided by the author, the editors of this volume, Irene Guijt, Jo Rowlands and others, including staff of these organisations.
- 3 Google Scholar shows over 500 citations of the powercube, and we have found over 60 publicly available documents where the framework is used in a substantive way.

TABLE 3.2.1 Analytical applications of the powercube in various fields (selected)

<i>Field/issue</i>	<i>Selected references</i>	<i>Summary of approach</i>
Digital inclusion	Roberts and Hernandez (2017)	Employ the powercube to examine which forms, spaces and levels of power affect the use of citizen participation technologies in the Philippines.
Economic inequality	Gaventa and Martorano (2016)	Drawing on evidence from the 2016 World Social Science Report on inequality and social justice, the authors use the powercube to analyse how inequality shapes forms, spaces and levels of participation, and to suggest strategies for change.
Environment	Rodríguez de Francisco and Boelens (2014)	Analyses the dynamics and entwining of visible, hidden and invisible power mechanisms in shaping payment for environmental services in the Chamacah Watershed in Ecuador. The study argues that disregarding the political dimensions of these services management is likely to end up favouring the interests of the most powerful.
Fair trade	Brugger (2017)	Uses the powercube to analyse decision-making arenas and power relationships between producers (i.e. plantation workers or small farmers), traders (i.e. plantation owners), retailers and consumers in Fairtrade tea production from East Nepal and Darjeeling. Looking across local and global levels and across spaces in the bargaining process, the analysis shows how power relations limit both the power of workers and consumers in the chain.
Health	Kaim (2013)	Looking at participation, knowledge and power in health systems, the author suggests that in people-centred health systems, visible, hidden or invisible power do not always limit citizen engagement, but may be mobilised as strategies to challenge or transform existing power relations.
Housing	Muir and McMahon (2015)	Focusing on Northern Ireland, the authors use the powercube to assess who is excluded in housing policy, the barriers to improvement and how improvements might be made.
Humanitarian	Larkin and Clark (2017)	Work on how refugees in Kenya 'assert their agency' points to the importance of power analysis in situations of conflict or emergencies to illuminate threads of power that are not otherwise obvious.
Human rights	Andreassen and Crawford (2015)	Focuses on how local and national struggles for rights have been constrained by power relations, and how civic action has been able to challenge and change power structures, drawing on case studies in six countries and using the lens of the forms and spaces of power.

<i>Field/issue</i>	<i>Selected references</i>	<i>Summary of approach</i>
Hunger and nutrition	Blay-Palmer (2016)	Draws on the powercube to analyse power imbalance, food insecurity and children's rights in Canada, and shows how this analysis can help inform strategies to shift power imbalances, including building power at multiple levels.
	Harris (2017)	Uses the powercube to map the levels, forms and spaces of power that shape nutrition policy in Zambia, helping to identify entry points for change.
Legal empowerment	Feruglio (2017)	Examines how invisible, visible and hidden power shape access to services in legal empowerment initiatives in Kenya and South Africa, arguing that policy-level impacts are the result of long-term processes that rely on multi-pronged and multi-level actions (e. g. mass mobilisations, international mechanisms, national courts and parliamentary processes).
Mental health	Brosnan (2012)	Argues that power dynamics are primary obstacles to equitable involvement of mental health users. Analysis of the spaces and levels of power, as well as the hidden and invisible aspects, can help service users strategise around their potential to influence decision-making in mental health services.
Participation and governance	Rabé and Kamanzi (2012)	In Tanzania the powercube was used to analyse the quality of participation in decision-making at the village level. The forms of power are found in all of the spaces of participation, across levels.
	Lay Lee (2012)	In China, applications of the powercube show that the Party-state is the dominant visible power at local and national level, but the international level presents local NGOs with the opportunity to engage with global NGOs to strengthen their voice.
Peacebuilding	Idler et al. (2015)	Applies the powercube to explore how spaces, forms and levels of power interact in local peace initiatives, particularly in consultation forums in Guatemala. While these forums promoted the participation and empowerment of a variety of social sectors, they also reproduced structures of inequality and were prey to invisible power, which made them less effective in enabling marginalised social groups.
Policy processes	Sida (2013)	Examining attempts for more inclusive policy dialogues in Mozambique, work by donors and development agencies examines how power manifests itself in invited spaces for policy dialogue, arguing that these forums became spaces for manipulation and co-optation rather than for strengthening the voice of civil society.

<i>Field/issue</i>	<i>Selected references</i>	<i>Summary of approach</i>
Water	Whaley and Weatherhead (2015)	Examines power dynamics that exist among farmers, and between them and key stakeholders involved in water management in the UK. The work points to the barriers that preclude farmers from participating in water governance processes, including <i>power within</i> , the power that government water managers still exercise 'over' the farmers; and the relationship between lowland farming and environmental interests where the <i>power to act</i> has been historically opposed.

Emerging insights

Taken together, these applications of the powercube offer a number of useful insights into a range of issues and areas for power analysis. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider these in depth, a few of the important contributions are considered below.

Community power analysis

The genesis of much of the debate on the study of power that led to the work by Steven Lukes, as well as my earlier study, *Power and Powerlessness in an Appalachian Valley* (1980) arose from studies of power at the community level, particularly in North America – including the famous work by Robert Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (1961). Perhaps because many of us involved in developing the powercube worked in international development, the approach has been used in a number of places to help us understand community-level power in other countries as well. Of these, one of the most in-depth is the study by Rabé and Kamanzi which sought to uncover the 'character of power' in 15 villages in Tanzania using the powercube model. As outlined in Table 3.2.1, they found multiple crossovers and interlinkages between the dimensions: 'visible, hidden and invisible forms of power traverse all three spaces of participation, across multiple levels of decision making' (2012, p. 73). While they found the powercube to be useful for the Tanzania context, they also found it was not particularly helpful on the questions of livelihoods and economic empowerment, 'as a prerequisite for social and political empowerment (or at least, as a simultaneous development alongside social and political empowerment)'. They call for new categories of power involving livelihoods and resources, as well as 'shadow power', e.g. 'the omnipresence of bribery and corruption at the local level' (ibid.).

Markets, trade and value chains

The Tanzania study points to the importance of linking power analysis not only to the political domain, but also to the economic domain. Gaventa and

Martorano (2016) similarly argue for the need to link economic and political empowerment if we are to confront inequality. Several more recent studies have begun to apply the powercube to the market arena. The work by Bruggen (2017) sheds light on the ‘black box’ that exists between consumers and producers of Fairtrade Orthodox Himalayan Tea. The certification process is a buyer-driven and top-down process which recreates colonial dependencies in production and trade of agricultural products. The bargaining process over welfare for workers and small farmers takes away the power from the workers and small farmers to demand adequate welfare on local levels and in created spaces through such mobilisations as labour unions or political actions. Similar work on power in value chain governance in the Horticultural Ethical Business Initiative (HEBI) used the lenses of visible, hidden and invisible power to show how the excessive power of the retailers dominated value chain governance but also interacted with local context and place, in ways that led to the undermining of the HEBI initiative (Nelson et al. 2016). In both the tea and horticulture cases, power analysis linking local, national and global levels showed how power at one level can influence the manifestation of power at another level by either restricting or enabling opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Human and social services

While one strand of work takes us towards economic domain, a series of other applications have been more focused on power in the delivery of social services. The work on health, housing and mental health cited in Table 3.2.1 used the powercube frame to develop approaches for service users to participate in defining their own problems, overcome aspects of invisible, internalised power, and engage in dialogues with service providers. However, another author (Schutz, 2019) argues that within social services, ‘empowerment’ has largely been reduced to individual empowerment of users and clients, ignoring more collective and more confrontational approaches to challenging more systemic roots of power. Schutz builds on the ideas of spaces and forms of power, adding also the continua of ‘types’ of power (*power to, with, over*) and ‘amounts’ of power (from zero-sum to non-zero-sum). He then looks at five strategies of empowerment, ranging from the less to the more conflictual – including individual empowerment, collaborative empowerment, counterscript (e.g. symbolic protests), solidarity (e.g. community organising) and civil resistance.

Human rights

One of the most extensive analytical applications of the powercube has been that by Andreassen and Crawford in their book *Human Rights, Power and Civic Action* (2013; see also summary in Andreassen and Crawford 2015). As Schutz argues in relation to the idea of empowerment in human services, these authors argue that while much of the literature on human rights-based approaches emphasises the need for empowerment of rights-deprived groups, there has been a neglect of the power structures that

obstruct securing such rights. Looking at rights struggles in six countries, they use the visible, hidden and invisible continuum in the powercube to develop a more comprehensive power analysis of the obstacles that these struggles faced. Using this analysis, they argue for three more collective strategies for achieving rights, ranging from collaboration with public authorities as duty-bearers, confrontation with power-holders such as the state and alliance-building with other non-governmental actors. Which strategy or combination of strategies will work is affected by how power works in a given context. Drawing on the concepts of spaces discussed in the powercube, the authors analyse how civil society actors might participate with decision-makers in 'invited spaces' and seek to make 'closed spaces' more transparent. Yet they also warn of the risk of co-optation: 'to avoid engaging with powerful elite actors on highly unequal terms where officially invited, for instance, it would seem essential for civil society organizations to initially strengthen their own countervailing power in more autonomous spaces' (Andreassen and Crawford 2015, p. 688).

These few examples give insights into just a few ways in which the powercube has been used as a tool for analysis across many different issues and domains, in many different countries and contexts. While they point to the importance of understanding the workings of power in particular contexts, they also offer some common elements that seem to cut across these, including:

- the importance of invisible power in shaping or precluding citizen voice, participation and action
- the interactions of power across levels, from the local to the global, to create and close opportunities for engagement
- the risk that 'invited' spaces for participation become sites for co-optation if they are not also strengthened by popular forms of citizen action in claimed spaces, such as social movements.

Moreover, as several of the studies and follow-up interviews point out, the 'power of the powercube' is found when it is used to examine the dynamic interrelations across two or all three of its dimensions – forms, spaces and levels – in turn helping to break down binary, linear or simplistic understandings of how and where power manifests itself.

Applications of the powercube for learning and action⁴

Such conclusions not only offer analytical insights into how power works, across issues and contexts, but they also have enormous implications for action. It is perhaps because of these that we have seen the take-up of the powercube as a tool used (alongside others) by practitioners such as community activists and the staff of

4 This section draws upon and further updates the earlier very useful review by Pantazidou (2012).

NGOs and development agencies to build awareness, do context analysis, develop new programmes and strategies, and evaluate the impact of their work.

Education and awareness-building

The powercube has been widely used as a tool to help people build awareness of power and how it affects their work, strategies and actions. A number of civil society organisations, trade unions and development agencies have hosted learning processes on power analysis for their staff and partners. These have included workshops and trainings ranging from a few hours to a few days in duration, to longer action learning journeys conducted over a period of several months – supported by facilitators and by resources and case studies related to the participants' actual work, issues and contexts.

In one example, 15 staff and partners from Oxfam Novib (Netherlands) took part in a nine-month Learning Trajectory, working in small teams to understand how power was operating in five key programmes around the world. Intensive workshops were held every few months, alternating with practical application and inquiry by the participants in their day-to-day programme work, with occasional check-ins and distance coaching from the facilitators. The issues explored by the participants ranged from indigenous rights to extractive industries, to HIV/AIDS prevention to partnership dynamics, to campaigns for sustainable palm oil.

In a similar action learning process, the powercube was used with grassroots organisations in marginalised communities in the UK to explore power related to issues of racial justice, migrant rights, gender-based violence, female genital mutilation, unemployed youth and homelessness, among others (Hunjan and Pettit 2011). Participants were community leaders from the affected groups, and used the powercube and related frameworks to deepen their understanding of power dynamics and to explore implications for strategy and action. Staff from the charitable foundations supporting these leaders, and their groups also took part in the learning process to improve their grant-making and partnerships.

The framework has been used for teaching power in more formal classroom settings as well (see McGee, Pettit and Wegner, this volume), to build awareness of the power relationships involved in research partnerships between communities and university researchers (Ferreira et al. 2015), and to analyse power relationships within higher education (Boni and Walker 2016).

Context analysis

The dynamics of power vary enormously across context, and in a rapidly changing world, being able to assess power dynamics is critical for any type of action or intervention designed to change power relations. Many groups have used the powercube for this purpose, adding it to other approaches for context mapping. For instance, Pettit and Mejía Acosta (2014) argue for complementing more traditional forms of political economy analysis with power analysis using methods like the

powercube. Doing so, they argue, allows the analysis to go beyond the visible and more institutional analysis of actors and their networks to look at more invisible forms of power, internalised norms, and at how power operates in more informal and hidden spaces (see also Rowlands, this volume). Reviewing a number of examples of application of the powercube, Pantazidou provides examples of its use by NGOs, donors and social action groups to do context analysis for three purposes:

to analyse the local, national or international context in order to design a programme or to develop or refine action strategies; to explore the effects and potential of current organisational practices; and to understand the power dynamics that shaped a past event, policy change or decision making process. (Pantazidou 2012, p. 9)

Programme planning and organisational learning

Building on such context analysis, a number of NGOs, donors and other organisations have also used the powercube to design and implement programme interventions for development or social change. For instance, Oxfam GB developed a guide on ‘power and fragility’ to support governance programming in fragile contexts (Fooks 2012). In the UK Christian Aid (2016) has similarly developed a ‘practice paper’ to help to ‘reposition themselves, to create or enter new spaces ... to develop new ways of working’ and to ‘review the power in our own personal and professional relationships’. Donor agencies such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) have also developed the tool for internal planning. For instance, work for SDC on ‘operationalising empowerment’ examines how the powercube can ‘help identify entry points for change and to encourage self-reflection on the power which donors exercise’ (Luttrell et al. 2007, pp. 1–2). Pantazidou points out that the powercube can help identify or sharpen theories of change, highlight the need to develop alliances with others and develop new tactics or approaches in order to deal with the multiple forms of power and their inter-relationship (2012, pp. 14–18).

Advocacy strategies and campaigns

While the powercube can be used for mapping contexts and contributing to programme planning, it can similarly be used to contribute to movement building and advocacy campaigns for change. As Guijt pointed out in her study of power and participation, ‘Defining and recognizing the importance of different manifestations of power can ensure more consciously adopted, strategic action – and the identification of alternatives to current strategies – that can effectively transform power inequalities’ (2008, p. 169). For instance, as a result of the Learning Trajectory described above, Oxfam Novib very systematically

applied the tool to look for ways to build a campaign on the palm oil industry to improve the situation for smallholders and labourers in Colombia (Seeboldt and Salinas Abdala 2010). Action Aid International's Strategy 2028, 'Action for Global Justice', scales this idea up to develop a theory of change across the whole federation, affecting programming in 47 countries: 'Social justice, gender equality and poverty eradication are achieved through purposeful individual and collective action to shift unequal and unjust power, whether it is hidden, visible or invisible, from the household level to local, national and international levels' (Action Aid 2017). The Power Matrix developed by Just Associates is particularly helpful to think about what types of strategies need to be developed to address different forms of power in the context of movement building (Miller et al. 2006, p. 12; see also Bradley, this volume).

Protecting human rights

Other activists have elaborated on the powercube to develop strategies for dealing with violence and protecting human rights. Pearce (2007) used the concepts of the cube with activists in Colombia to map and assess the range of strategies that civil societies use to challenge power, but found that in this context, the cube did not explicitly address the role of violence. She developed a parallel 'violence cube' which like power, has its visible and invisible dimensions (Pearce 2009). More recently, work by Just Associates has further developed approaches of power analysis to identify strategies for human rights defenders, arguing that power can be a positive force as activists and communities organise to protect themselves against repercussions in hostile settings (Lopez with Bradley 2017, see also VeneKlasen, this volume). Amnesty International has used the approach widely, including in an action research programme on transitions to democracy in Egypt, where it was applied to map power relations and to strategize on actions for change.⁵

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

In addition to helping to map and plan new programmes and strategies for action, the powercube serves as a tool for evaluating and reflecting on the impact of these programmes. As referenced earlier, Guijt (2005) led a team of researchers to evaluate the impact of Dutch government-funded NGO programmes on shifting power and civil society participation in five countries. Macleod (2011) explored the powercube as a tool for evaluation in workshops with partners in an aid agency's women's rights programme in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala to examine shifts of power within women's movements. IDS applied the framework to evaluate Christian Aid's 'Power to the People' programme, using it to map the relationship of communities with

5 Interview with Maro Pantazidou, 22 December 2017.

authorities and to assess the nature of government responsiveness (McGee and Scott-Villiers 2011). As Pantazidou found, ‘using the Powercube as a basis for evaluation can be very helpful for looking beyond the outputs and outcomes of projects towards a recognition and assessment of the various levels of power shifts entailed in processes of change’ (2012, p. 20).

In support of all these applications, a wide array of resources have been developed that build upon, add to and popularise core concepts of the powercube, while also linking them to other resources and tools. For instance, the UK community work above led to the very useful publication *Power: A Practical Guide for Facilitating Social Change* (Hunjan and Pettit 2011). Just Associates has been at the forefront of developing resource materials on power analysis for activists and social movements, including their important book *A New Weave of People, Power and Politics* (VeneKlasen and Miller 2002), which pre-dated and contributed to the powercube, and more recent resources found in their online *Making Change Happen* series (e.g. Miller et al. 2006). Oxfam developed a short and very useable guide for its staff and partners, *A Quick Guide to Power Analysis* (2014). Danish NGO DanChurchAid’s Learning Lab has produced an animated online guide for practitioners in power analysis (ActAlliance 2017); and Sida published a power analysis guide for its staff and partners which includes an introduction to the powercube (Pettit 2013). Versions of the powercube have been translated into a number of languages, including Spanish, French and Arabic.

Reflections on how to apply the powercube⁶

The multiple applications of the powercube have given us numerous insights about the nature and dynamics of power, as well as how the powercube can be used to understand and illuminate them. Along the way there have been many helpful adaptations, as well as critiques, which have also deepened our learning about its applications. Eight key lessons have emerged: four related to how the cube is applied for power analysis and action, and four concerning how it is used in processes of learning and reflection.

Lessons for power analysis

Thinking dynamically: going beyond the checkbox

One of the problems with the ‘Rubik’s Cube’ visualisation is that it can appear as relatively static, with fixed categories and boxes. There is a risk that people will simply try to ‘fill in the boxes’ rather than analysing the relationships between

6 This section builds on lessons also from earlier work, including Gaventa (2005) and Pantazidou (2012). These have been supplemented by interviews with a number of users and an online survey conducted in 2017, led by Fiammetta Wegner.

them. In fact, each dimension should be seen as a spectrum, interacting with the other dimensions in a highly dynamic way. For instance, the possible spaces for action (closed, invited, claimed) open and close over time. Similarly, the levels of power (and which are most important) are far more complex than the ‘local, national or global’, and can range from the household to the village, county, state, national, regional, global and others, depending on the local context. Spaces and levels interact with forms of power, and shift over time. As Pantazidou writes, ‘power constellations change’, highlighting ‘the need for the power frameworks to encourage a dynamic and historical assessment of the conditions out of which any current context was born and not to see it as at “still picture”’ (2012, p. 10). In turn, as found by researchers using the cube in Guatemala, there was the need for social change organisations to have the “staying power” to move across spaces of engagement over time, to retain links with groups working with other spaces, and to have the different capacities for engagement demanded by different spaces in differing moments’ (Gaventa 2005, p. 20).

Contextualising the categories

While power needs to be seen as dynamic, how it is experienced and manifested is also very contextual. The terminology used – such as ‘visible, hidden and invisible’ – can sometimes be difficult to understand, and may be read quite differently based on differences in language, history and culture. What appears a space for action in one context, in another may be bounded by invisible forms of power, or historical experiences such as violence or reprisals, which limit its possibilities for change. Particularly challenging in some cases has been the idea of ‘hidden’ power, presented in the cube as forms of keeping certain issues and actors off the political agenda. But in Latin America, where there is a strong experience with military and paramilitary forces (often associated with drug cartels), discussions on hidden power can quickly elide into considerations of ‘shadow’ or ‘dark power’, referred to as *poder oculto*, or ‘co-optation of the state by violent and criminal interests’ (Pantazidou, 2012, p. 12, Pearce and Vela 2005; see also VeneKlasen and Bradley in this volume). In Tanzania, Rabé and Kamanzi (2012) also report that the forms of power in the cube didn’t take into account the extent of corruption, which they suggested be called ‘shadow power’, similar to Latin American colleagues. But in Egypt, the ‘secret’ police were found to be not hidden or secret at all, but very visible in their presence – to the extent that NGO activists found themselves ‘normalising’ this power (Tadros 2010 quoted by Pantazidou 2012, p. 13) One way of contextualising the concepts of the cube is by keeping them very open, asking participants to define the levels, spaces or forms that most affect their lives, without imposing the categories given in the cube. Taking this approach in Guatemala, Colombia and elsewhere, participants identified far more levels of power and spaces and strategies for engagement than implied by the ‘boxes’ in the cube (Gaventa 2005, drawing from Pearce and Vela 2005).

Highlighting gender

Aspects of the powercube approach resonate with and have drawn from feminist thinking on gender and power, especially the idea of invisible power, which focuses on norms and internalised forms of oppression, and which links closely to ideas of strengthening *power within* widely used in feminist analysis (Rowlands 1997). Using the powercube can highlight issues of violence against women often hidden from public spaces (Pearce and Vela 2005). The Swiss Peace Foundation has used the cube to focus on women's participation in peacebuilding, supplementing other forms of gender analysis, especially in conflict settings (Brank et al. n.d.). Others have used it to analyse women's participation in local governance, also combining gender and power analysis (Hossain and Akhter 2011).

However, some have found that the powercube framework is not easily applied to gender analysis as earlier versions did not explicitly introduce 'private' or 'intimate' spaces or 'household' levels, which have also been shown in the extensive work on gender and power to be critical realms. As a result, some later versions of the cube have extended the levels dimension to the 'household level' in order to make more explicit the link between power in domestic, private spaces and public spaces (see Box 3.2.1). To avoid the risk of understanding gender as confined to its 'box', others have argued for the need to bring gender analysis explicitly to every dimension of the cube. Edström (2015, p. 74) expands the powercube to the idea of 'power dice', in which one of the dice is based on the dimensions of the powercube, and another focuses on more material, cultural and ideological dimensions.

Looking at the interactions

What is most powerful about the cube is not to look at any one dimension, but to think about how each interacts with the others. This is important on at least two levels. First, one has to think about what happens inside any one of the 'boxes' as it is in turn affected by what is going on in the other dimensions. For instance, while 'invited spaces' may seem like opportunities for participation, if the quality of what goes on inside the space is inhibited by forms of invisible and hidden power, then the participation that occurs may simply mean that relatively powerless groups 'echo' what the relatively powerful want to hear, rather than using the space for more meaningful engagement. Similarly, Cornwall (2004, p. 78) reminds us that spaces are not firmly separable: 'what happens in one impinges on what happens in others, as relations of power within and across them are constantly reconfigured.'

Second, though, one must think about strategies for change that link across the dimensions, especially if the aim is to develop a more transformative agenda. In what some called the 'boomerang effect' (Keck and Sikkink 1999), challenging power at one level may open up spaces for action elsewhere. For instance, the demands for making a 'closed space' more transparent at the global level (e.g. World Bank) may provide information or pressure that can be taken up or claimed by actors at a local

level. Ultimately, we have argued, it is when strategies for understanding and shifting power connect across levels, spaces and forms that fundamental transformation happens. The powercube can be used to map and visualise these connections: to think about gaps in the ecology of strategies that are being used, and about how to build alliances that link social change actors across all the levels, spaces and forms. In this process, understanding the role of ‘intermediaries’ – those individuals, organisations or channels that link across the aspects of the cube – is particularly important.

Lessons for learning and reflection

Dealing with complexity

In training others to use the powercube, a number of users have found that it can be complicated for people to understand and to apply, and can be perceived as abstract from everyday experience. On the one hand, as observed earlier, the complexity of the cube is one of its strengths: by looking at interactions of forms, levels and spaces of power we move away from simplistic and binary understandings of power to a focus on the multiple ways and places in which it manifests itself. But, on the other hand, as a social change tool it needs to be accessible and useable by those who want to apply it to their everyday experience. A number of techniques have been found to help strengthen its application, including the following:

- Link to personal experience – rather than starting with analysis of power ‘out there’, start with asking people about their personal experiences. When have they felt powerful or powerless? What kinds of spaces do they enter? Where are decisions made that affect their lives?
- Break it down into parts – particularly when being used with groups to analyse their own experience, start with an understanding of one dimension at a time and then move to the others, asking how each builds on the previous. Where you start – through the lens of forms, spaces or levels – depends on what seems most appropriate to the context and the users. Some users of the powercube have observed that understanding power across levels can be most challenging, especially when starting at the local level, as national and global levels may be perceived to be out of the realm of everyday experience.
- Use visualisation – for many the ‘cube’ is not a useful visual representation. Many have found the use of cartoons, drawings or animations useful to illustrate the core ideas (ActAlliance 2017, Macleod 2011, powercube.net 2009).

Combining with other tools

The powercube is by no means meant to be the only tool for power analysis; nor should it be. Other tools for power analysis are also useful. For instance, the powercube does not explicitly focus on the actors who hold or wield power, though actors can be mapped against the various dimensions. It can be used with other approaches, which can

help focus more explicitly on actors – including network analysis, stakeholder influence mapping and tools such as Net-map (Pantazidou 2012, p. 9). Nor does the cube focus explicitly on power that grows from identities of race, gender, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation, where approaches based on intersectionality can be useful (Edström et al. 2016). The work by Just Associates – including the *The New Weave* (VeneKlasen and Miller 2002) and later publications in their *Making Change Happen* series (e.g. Miller et al. 2006, Lopez with Bradley 2017) – brings a strong feminist understanding to power analysis, including using approaches such as the ‘power flower’, which focuses more on how one’s various identities affect the possibilities of agency. In another project involving Action Aid’s programming on livelihoods and women’s rights, the powercube framework was combined with the Gender at Work Framework (which uses a quadrant to map individual vs systemic forms of power) to assess the shifts of power in favour of women (Delgado et al. 2016; see Rao and Sandler, this volume). Hunjan and Pettit’s *Practical Guide for Facilitating Social Change* (2011) also offers a variety of tools that may be combined with the powercube.

Being reflexive: putting oneself and one’s organisation in the picture

Oftentimes NGOs, donors, social movements and charismatic individuals play a role of critical mediator in processes of change; but in so doing they are themselves part of the power picture. By putting themselves within it they can reflect on their own roles, values and strategies for change. For instance, though doing an exercise known as ‘power twister’ (ForumSyd 2009) in which actors use their bodies to show at which levels and spaces they are spending their time and resources, some donors and NGOs have come to realise how disconnected their work in closed and invited spaces, at national and global levels, is from the spaces experienced by the grassroots communities they hope to support. The powercube has been useful in multiple ways to encourage such self-reflection, by both organisations and individuals. In an online survey of powercube users in early 2018, a number of respondents commented that the powercube helped them become more critical, encouraged them to go beyond binary thinking, to be reflexive about their own power, and to reflect and react in new ways. By reflecting on their own forms of power – such as their internalised norms of gender, race or class – users can also be more aware of their roles as actors for change.

Towards transformative power

The powercube is often introduced and used with another framework of forms of power – including *power within*, *power with*, *power to* and *power for*, as contrasted with *power over* (see Rowlands 1997, and Bradley in this volume). Much power analysis has traditionally focused on *power over* – the power of one actor (individual, group, institution) over another, which was the focus of the earlier theoretical work by Steven Lukes (1974/2005), whose work formed an important part of the powercube’s intellectual roots. Others emphasise that power can be seen in more positive and productive terms. In their study of

human rights struggles, for instance, Andreassen and Crawford conclude: ‘Our studies have emphasized that power is essentially dichotomous, both positive and negative, and not a zero-sum game but dynamic, relational, and potentially expansive (collaborative power or alliance power)’ (2013, p. 250). In my uses of the powercube, I see these types of power as highly interrelated. The *power within*, recognising one’s own agency and capacities, is closely linked to overcoming ‘invisible’ power. The *power with* has to do with the need to build alliances to work across all the spaces and levels of the cube, as it is difficult for any single actor to be able to do so alone. Both *power within* and *power with* are important for achieving the *power to* act, especially if our model of empowerment is one that emphasises collective forms of action.⁷ *Power within*, *power with* and *power to*, taken together, are necessary to challenge *power over* in a transformative way. Just Associates (Bradley, this volume) call this ‘transformative power’, and have added to the lexicon the term *power for*: the combined vision, values and agenda of change that motivate and orient the work we do. By encouraging the imagining and creation of other possible futures, *power for* encourages, gives meaning to and practically demands the sustained movement building efforts that generate *power to*, *with* and *within* – building blocks toward that changed future.

Ultimately, power analysis is not an end in itself, but a tool to leverage change. Yet, as we know, tools can be used for many purposes, both progressive and regressive. The powercube and other tools can be valuable starting points in which we can ground our work for change. But, equally important, we must complement the powercube analysis with this final question: what is the world that we wish to see? What is our vision of the norms, values and institutions that we hope to achieve through challenging existing power relations? With this compass, we are more likely to be able not only to analyse power, but also to use such analysis to contribute to a more just and sustainable world.

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7 Schultz (2019) argues that the *power to* has often been reduced to individual forms of empowerment, which can easily be co-opted unless they are linked to more collective forms of action.

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