

## **Introducing power analysis as a tool to promote local democratic accountability in the Democratic Republic of Congo**

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This workshop took place during a research visit I made to Kinshasa to gather information on the ways that civil society organisations promote local democratic accountability in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo). Before studying at IDS I worked with civil society organisations in the DR Congo as the coordinator of a 'Peace and Democracy' programme for an international NGO and I therefore wanted to see how some of the concepts acquired during the course be used to analyse the power dynamics involved in such accountability work. The workshop brought together staff from 23 Congolese civil society organisations; including national civic education networks, local NGOs and grassroots citizen groups. The objective of the workshop was to introduce and discuss methods of power analysis that might help to improve the strategies of these organisations for promoting accountable governance at local level. In this way I hoped to both facilitate reflection on the way that power shapes the accountability relationship between citizens and the state at local level in the DR Congo, as well as to examine the extent to which the power cube concepts connected with the experience of civil society organisations in this country.

### **Process**

The workshop used elements taken from the [Sample Learning Events](#) in the 'Applications section' of the Power Pack together with resources available in French, including the 'Guide global à l'analyse du pouvoir' (Oxfam) and a French translation of 'Making Change Happen: Citizen Engagement and Global Economic Power' (Just Associates, 2006). Due to time constraints the workshop took place over a period of only one day, although feedback from participants indicated that two days would have been preferable to allow more time for applying the concepts to the local context.

The main elements of the workshop were:

- **Introduction of participating organisations.** Participants presented a brief summary (prepared in advance) of the goals of their work, the context and issues they were facing, the changes they wanted to see happen and the factors enabling or preventing such a change from happening. This set the context for the following discussions on power.
- **Brainstorming on understandings of power.** Participants discussed in 'Buzz groups' (a 5 – 10 minute discussion with their immediate neighbours) about one of the following questions:
  - Is power negative or positive?
  - If someone wins power, does this mean that someone else has to lose power?
  - Is power held by people or does it reside in social systems?
  - Are 'power' and 'authority' the same thing?

This led in to a general discussion about the 'essentially contested' nature of the concept of power.

- **Four ways of understanding power** - 'Power over', 'power to', 'power with' and 'power within'- were introduced and participants invited to give examples of these types of power within their own work.
- **Three forms of power** - visible, hidden and invisible - were presented together with examples of strategies to address these forms of power. Some

of the Power Cartoons were then used to initiate discussion of the concepts before the plenary divided into small groups to share their own experiences of different forms of power encountered in their work. A French translation of the Power matrix was provided as an aide-memoire.

- **The spaces and the levels where power is exercised** were then added to the three forms of power to construct the 'power cube'. This was followed by a discussion of the strategies that civil society organisations could use to more effectively promote accountable governance in the DR Congo.
- Finally, participants were invited to **evaluate the workshop** and state the concepts that appeared to be most relevant to their work.

### **Reflections on the Process**

All of the concepts about power presented in the workshop were seen as useful by the participants. Focusing on the power dynamics of state/citizen relations encouraged participants to talk about the actual way in which citizens attempt to call the state to account, rather than ways in which accountability 'should' work. This differs from the more usual 'civic education' approach, which tends to present a list of institutions that 'should' exist in a democratic state in order for citizens to be able to call the state to account. Such an idealised approach can promote a sense of powerlessness and frustration in a country such as the DR Congo where it is not clear when (or even if) such institutions will ever be effectively in operation. In such a situation using a power lens to examine the forms of power within current citizen/state relationships appears to lead naturally to ideas for strategies that civil society organisations can carry out in order to promote increased democratic accountability. For example:

- The examination of hidden and invisible forms of power enabled a discussion of the importance of personal relationships within the political system and the extent to which decisions are made outside of the formal political institutions. Indeed participants were unable to identify any examples of purely visible power where there were no hidden elements! This led to a wider discussion of where power resides in the DR Congo and the extent to which it is contained within political or bureaucratic structures or is held by individuals.
- A discussion of the spaces in which Congolese citizens attempt to hold local government to account helped participants to reflect on their role as civil society organisations in opening or closing down such spaces and even to propose the concept of 'facilitated spaces' (seen as being situated between created and invited spaces) to describe their work of bringing together local authorities and citizens in 'Town Hall meetings' to discuss local concerns.
- A reflection by participants on the extent to which local citizen/state relationships are affected by power dynamics at higher levels underlined the importance of increased coordination by civil society organisations at city-wide and national levels as well as highlighting the influence of global actors such as international donors and governments on local accountability in the DR Congo.

The workshop was held in French and I had some difficulties in finding the correct translation of terms into French which were easy to understand and 'self-explanatory'. For example the French translations of 'invisible power' and 'hidden power' appear to be used interchangeably in the DR Congo to refer to the way in which power is manipulated by people in a hidden way outside of the visible structures. Other terminology might therefore need to be used in this context to

describe the aspect of conditioning and 'normalisation' of 'invisible power'. This problem draws attention to a wider need to ensure that concepts are correctly 'translated' so that they connect with ideas within a local culture. Using the 'Power cartoons' as a discussion starter could be one way of finding out the extent to which participants have a shared understanding of the concepts of power analysis (and whether this is the same understanding as the facilitator!) before starting with more detailed discussions in small groups of participants' own experience and strategies.

As already described, participants requested further time to explore the concepts covered in the workshop and the addition of a second day would have had the advantage of providing more time to use the materials in Sample Learning Event 1 to further explore meanings and experiences of power. In this way the workshop could have finished on day 1 with the three forms of power (Sample Learning Event 1) and started day 2 with an introduction to the power cube leading to a discussion of CSO strategies (Sample Learning Event 2).

Before holding this workshop I was not sure to what extent the concepts associated with the Power Cube would be seen as useful by civil society organisations in the DR Congo. I was therefore struck by the extent to which they appeared helpful in opening up avenues for discussion and identifying strategies for changing the power balance between citizens and the state. By focusing on the actual situation within the country through a power lens, rather than trying to fit it into an accountability framework, the approach helped to highlight actions that *could* be taken by civil society organisations rather than those which *should* eventually be taken, once certain democratic institutions are in place. I am therefore excited by the potential of the Power Cube approach to assist civil society organisations to develop their own strategies for engaging with power and power holders, so that they can contribute more effectively to the construction of state/citizen accountability within their own context and culture.

This case study can be downloaded from the resource pages of [www.powercube.net](http://www.powercube.net)