

Peeling the onion



To uncover and facilitate a process of deeper analysis about different forms of power related to specific issue.

Visible power: observable decision making

Relates particularly to the public or political sphere where formal decisions are taken - and involves the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions and procedures of decision making. This may concern local, district or national government – or the governance and decision-making processes of any organisation.

Changes related to visible power may include arguing for more democratic and transparent processes, looking at how we are represented by decision makers and who influences the decisions taken - and how women and excluded group can use these formal spaces more effectively.

Visible power can be influenced by lobbying, by monitoring, by doing shadow reports, by demonstrating, by using our vote strategically or by standing for office.

Hidden power: setting the political agenda

Power is sometimes maintained by elite individuals or institutions by controlling who gets to the decision-making table and what gets on the agenda. Vested interests can control the backstage – whether in politics or inside organisations – excluding or devaluing the concerns of women or people living in poverty.

Changes related to hidden power may be to empower organisations and movements of people living in poverty, democratising their leadership,

improving accountability, increasing the visibility and legitimacy of their issues and demands.

Strategies may be to expose manipulation behind the scenes; argue for a re-framing of rules or an alternative framing of debates or demand respect for visible processes.

Invisible power: shaping meaning and what is acceptable

Invisible power shapes the way in which issues are seen, including by ourselves according to how we all internalise certain assumptions or accept certain constraints that are usually ideological in nature - but that we don't see as don't name or address. This is about how certain "norms" are established that shape our beliefs and our sense of self, how we are socialised in ways that define roles for us and reinforce the status quo.

Changes related to invisible power may be to deepen conscientisation processes – to transform the way in which people see themselves and the world, recognising that certain deeply embedded attitudes and beliefs block change.

Strategies may be to focus on raising critical consciousness using reflection-action processes at different levels, we may build people's confidence to speak out, do strategic research to expose the ideological basis of things that are present as universal truths and we should of course put forward credible alternatives.

Steps

1. Introduce each other, the purpose of exercise and required time to the group. When discussing the purpose of the exercise the facilitator should be clear how the information gathered will be used (for example for community reflection, to feed into monitoring and reporting processes, to inform PRRPs, to develop new strategies for action as a group). Groups should be clear how they can use the information they will generate and how Action Aid intends to use it.
2. Introduce the group to the concept of an onion and its layers where we can see the outer layer of an onion, but we can't see those underneath. Using the brief above, explain to the group that these layers are similar to when power relationships are in play.
3. Draw the three layer onion with:

- The outer layer of onion contains the visible power that can be seen publically for all to see and hear.
 - Underlying these there is often hidden power, power to influence political agendas and decisions that are difficult to see and influence.
 - Finally deep within is the invisible power, this most often operates at the personal level and can limit one's ability to challenge the other types of power.
4. Ask the group to take some time, think and reflect individually what changes (shifts in power) they have seen or experienced as individuals or in groups related to the three forms of power described above.
 5. Distribute cards and markers among participants and ask them to think of and write or draw the symbols for the changes they have seen or experienced in different forms. To get the conversation started and guide the group the facilitator can draw symbols based on responses by the group.
 6. Once the cards are written or symbols are drawn by the group, ask them to place on the large onion diagram according to the forms of power identified.
 7. Use the guiding questions for discussions to deepen the analysis of change and process.
 8. Once the onion is populated, ask group to have a look and if they want to add anything further.
 9. Photograph the onion, conclude the discussion by thanking the group and discussing with them how they plan to use this information at community level and briefly explain to them again how this information and analysis will be used.

Guiding questions

During the group discussion and mapping of the changes (shifts in power) they have seen or experienced in different forms of power, use the following guiding questions to deepen the analysis of change and process. These questions are just for guidance and can always be adapted or new questions added according to the context and purpose in which the tool is being used.

To probe around visible power:

- What are the most important decision making spaces in both the public and private spheres?

- Which actors have the power to make decisions or influence how decisions are made in those spaces?
- What strategies have we used to influence this visible power? What have we learnt from using these strategies? What other strategies can we think of?
- What shifts in power have we experienced?

To probe around hidden power:

These questions are difficult to answer; as the nature of this type of power is that it is hidden so reflection around this space may be limited.

- Do we have a sense that there are types of power that cannot be seen? What examples can we think of?
- What sort of groups are able to use hidden power to further their own agendas?
- Are there any strategies to influence this hidden power? Have we used any strategies to influence hidden power? What did n we learn from using these strategies?
- Have we seen any power shifts at this level?

To probe around invisible power:

- What factors influence how we understand our own power? Are there forces influencing how we see our own power that may not be obvious to us, for example our culture or family background?
- What strategies have we used to address the invisible forces that limit our power? What have we learnt from using these strategies? What other strategies can we think of?
- What shifts in power have we experienced?

General questions to probe across different forms of power:

- What kind of shifts in power have happened? At what level and why?
- How have these shifts in power enabled people to claim their rights from duty bearers? What rights? What was achieved? How this has impacted on the lives of women?
- How do shifts in power at one level affect our ability to influence power at other levels?

Documenting and reporting

The discussions and response can be gathered and documented as people find most convenient and easy, but making sure that the critical words, example, metaphors, testimonies are captured and brought into the analysis. Further tips for qualitative data analysis can be found [here](#).

The following simple template can be used to facilitate reporting and further analysis. This can be adapted based on the focus of analysis and discussions.

	Changes (Shifts in Power)
Visible	Types of power identified: Strategies used to influence power: Lessons learned: Shifts in power experienced:
Hidden	Types of power identified: Strategies used to influence power: Lessons learned: Shifts in power experienced:
Invisible	Types of power identified: Strategies used to influence power: Lessons learned: Shifts in power experienced:
What have we learnt to improve in future?	

Alternative uses

This tool can be adapted and used for exploring different spaces and levels of power. The names of these levels can also be adapted depending on the context and who is involved and for what purpose the analysis is carried out for example:

- Spaces of power - closed, invited, created

- Levels of power – local, national, global

Further resources

- [Power - Elite Capture and Hidden Influence](#), HRBA Governance Resources, ActionAid, 2012.
- [Critical webs of power and change](#), ActionAid International, 2005.
- www.powercube.net