

Quick Guide to Power Analysis

What is power?

Oxfam's work is based on the understanding that unequal power relations are one of the main underlying causes of poverty and suffering. One of Oxfam's aims is to transform power relations, so that poor men and women have greater influence over the policies, structures and social norms that affect their lives. However, unequal power relations manifest themselves in many different ways: from unfair trade regulations that disproportionately benefit rich countries, to the social norms that cause young girls to suffer malnutrition because they are only allowed to eat after their brothers have had their fill.

Power takes different **forms**

- Visible: observable decision-making mechanisms
- Hidden: shaping or influencing the political agenda behind the scenes
- Invisible: norms and beliefs, socialisation, ideology

Power is acted out in different **spaces**

- Closed: decisions made by closed groups
- Invited: people asked to participate but within set boundaries
- Created: less powerful actors claim a space where they can set their own agenda

Power occurs at different **levels**

- Household
- Local
- National
- Global

We usually think of power as control over others or the ability to carry out one's will, but power can also be more subtle. For example, power can be the strength and capacity that we gain through joining with others towards a common goal, our own self-belief that we can achieve our aims or the courage to adopt a certain course of action. Power can be:

- **Power over:** the power of the strong over the weak, including the power to exclude others.
- **Power to:** the capability to decide actions and carry them out: knowledge, skills, tools.
- **Power with:** collective power, through organisation, solidarity and joint action.
- **Power within:** personal self-confidence, often linked to culture, religion or other aspects of identity, which influences the thoughts and actions that appear legitimate or acceptable.
- **Power for:** the power of a clear vision and sense of purpose.
- **Power under:** passing on mistreatment to others through fear, humiliation, anger, resentment, superiority, arrogance.



What is a power analysis?

Doing a power analysis helps us identify and explore the multiple power dimensions that affect a given situation, so as to better understand the different factors that interact to reinforce poverty. As power is not static, it will often cut across the different forms, spaces and levels, and show itself in more than one way. Having a more complete understanding of the power relations at play will help us to imagine and identify appropriate strategies, alliances and entry points for our programmes. The complexity of power means that there is no 'one size fits all' solution to transforming power relations. Often we will need to act at more than one level, and address more than one dimension of power simultaneously to bring about lasting change. For example, civil society actors may successfully influence national government policy, but this will not automatically translate into improvements in the lives of poor men and women if steps aren't also taken to ensure implementation of the new legislation, which may include addressing the ideas, beliefs and structures that sustain the practice.

Quick Guide to Power Analysis

Some key questions to ask

1. **WHO? Actors, Organisations, Institutions**

Whose voice is trying to be heard? Who is directly helping these voices to be heard? With indirect support from whom? To be heard by whom?

2. **WHERE? Context, Levels, Spaces**

In what context? At what levels are voices trying to be heard? In what kinds of “spaces” are voices trying to be heard? (e.g. formal/closed, invited, created/claimed from below)

3. **WHAT? Sectors, Issues, Power**

Which aspects of poverty and marginalisation are being addressed? What change is Oxfam GB and its partners trying to affect? Which kinds of power relations are relevant to the right to be heard? (e.g. visible, hidden, invisible/internalised). What are the gender dimensions of these power relations?

4. **WHY? Motivations**

What are the interests motivating actors and organisations for or against change?

5. **HOW? Strategies, Methods, Models**

What strategic approaches are used for responding to the above? What is the logic behind the choice of partners, allies and actors? What is Oxfam GB’s and/or its partners’ role and strategy in the work they support or carry out? What are the models of change and understandings of power relations?

In Colombia, Oxfam is transforming power relations through its livelihoods work by supporting small-scale producers, especially women, to become influential actors in the rural economy. The project’s complementary strategies address power relations at different levels, from reducing the power that global and national institutions have over small-scale producers, to building producers’ ‘power within’ to speak out and demand their rights. The project seeks to:

- Lobby the European Union and joining with other NGOs to demand fairer terms of trade at a global level;
- Build the capacity of national alliances of small-scale farmers’ associations to make the Ministry of Agriculture aware of the needs and issues of rural men and women, and to influence national policy;
- Raise awareness of, and demand implementation of, the Rural Women’s Law;
- Convince rural mayors’ offices to support the development of rural economies and the strengthening of farmers’ organisations;
- Establish farmers’ markets in urban areas, and raise awareness among urban consumers to increase their demand for locally produced food;
- Promote and support women’s participation in farmers’ organisations and in public spaces, especially by informing women of their rights.

Tools and resources

- Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis, J Gaventa: <http://www.gsdrc.org/go/display&type=Document&id=2677>
- Power: Elite Capture and Hidden Influence, ActionAid Denmark: <http://www.actionaid.org/what-we-do/democratic-governance>
- Making Change Happen: Power, Just Associates: <http://www.justassociates.org/makingchange happen.htm>
- Using Power Analysis in Programme Design in Guatemala: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/improving-programme-design-with-power-analysis-tools-practical-application-of-t-621160/>
- Power Under: trauma and non-violent social change. Steven Wineman: <http://traumaandnonviolence.com/>

Quick Guide to Power Analysis

© Oxfam GB February 2014, updated February 2021

The text may be used free of charge for the purposes of education and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged. E-mail policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please go to www.oxfam.org.uk/policyandpractice

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.
Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

Oxfam is a registered charity in England and Wales (no 202918) and Scotland (SC039042).

Oxfam GB is a member of Oxfam International.