

7. Power Analysis (Sida)

An approach to understanding context which focuses on the nature and distribution of power

What is Power Analysis?

The Power Analysis approach has been developed by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). It is based on the understanding that issues of power asymmetries, access to resources and influence over politics must be addressed if poverty is to be reduced. Power analysis seeks to map the informal political landscape, including its rules and structures. It seeks to understand how development cooperation and donor activities are influenced by this landscape, and how the landscape of power shapes their activities (DFID/World Bank, 2005; Hyden, 2005). The Power Analysis approach is informed by a commitment to working towards ‘justice, equity, and organised redistribution of access to the welfare among the world’s people’ (Sida, 2005: 30).

How does Power Analysis work?

This is an approach based on understanding power. It does not work to a fixed definition of power: each power analysis study works with its own understanding of the concept. In a power analysis of Tanzania, the focus was on three questions (Hyden, 2005). First, who sets the policy agenda; whose ideas and values dominate policy? Secondly, who gets what, when and how, and how do formal institutions shape the distribution of costs and benefits. Thirdly, who knows whom, why and where; how do informal social networks shape the policy process? In a power analysis of Ethiopia, knowledge as power was the central organising theme (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003). In short, there is much scope for the user to adapt power analysis to his/her own purposes.

Power analysis studies are initiated by country offices and carried out by country experts. There is much scope for the analysts to adapt the approach and define the areas of focus. The analysis is centred on desk reviews and secondary research, but it is often complemented by interviews and questionnaires. The level of resources and time required varies, but with an emphasis on desk research, interviews and qualitative analysis, the costs are limited largely to person-time.

A recent review of power analysis in its experimental phase suggested that the abstract nature of the concepts concerned and the broad scope for consultants to interpret the Terms of Reference for each analysis may produce results that are hard to compare and not necessarily as distinctive as had been hoped (Moore, in Sida, 2005). This may be problematic, but it is important to recognise the utility of country-specific knowledge, which is of great value even if not easily comparable between countries.

Elements of Power Analysis

Conceptual approach and indicators

- Conceptualising power as being central to poverty reduction is an obvious but nevertheless important insight that CSOs might take away from Power Analysis. However, if they are tempted to employ the concept of power, they should ensure that they think carefully about what it means, and how they intend to map it. Otherwise, putting power at the centre of analysis may be problematic (see Moore, in Sida, 2005).
- The emphasis of Power Analysis on understanding the formal and informal political landscape is a useful corrective to approaches that focus largely on formal political rules and institutions. Its acknowledgement of aspects of context, such as culture, convention, and systems of shared belief, might also be taken up by CSOs seeking to map their own contexts (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003).

Data

- Power Analysis provides little guidance in terms of data collection, sources and methods. Analysts can make use of existing data sources, or collect their own data.
- Ways of collecting data about power – its constitution, distribution, exercise and control – might include panels of independent experts, surveys of well informed people, public opinion polls, and focus group discussions.

Analysis, presentation and recommendations

- The information produced by a Power Analysis is largely of a qualitative nature. It does not lend itself to cross-country comparison, but rather to comparison over time in a single country (Hyden, 2005).
- Power Analysis is able to generate deep and wide-ranging knowledge; as such, it is a good complement to other approaches to mapping context, like measures of governance.
- Power Analysis can map various levels or dimensions of context, as well as providing a framework for understanding how history has shaped the present-day distribution of power. Depending on how and where it is employed, a power analysis can inform actions at a macro level (country strategy), or at a micro level (whether a project is likely to be successful).

Key references

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