

Power Analysis in the Context of Rights-Based Programming¹

Power and Local Democratization Processes!

Development interventions that work through a 'rights based approach' seek to build human capabilities, enable people to have greater choices, and contribute to a more enabling environment so that poor and marginalized women and men can purposefully participate in the public sphere. It involves processes through which people can create the conditions in which they themselves take action that takes them out of poverty. Such a development approach works at multiple levels to facilitate, support, and foster new forms of engagement within and between communities and between state and society. Essentially, a rights-based approach works to alter the processes of 'inclusion and exclusion' which govern opportunities – or the lack thereof – in multiple arenas of day to day life. In particular, such work requires engagement with the ways in which the local state operates to identify opportunities and to overcome barriers that perpetuate inequality and poverty.

'Legitimate' power to govern rural areas in South Asia lies with local government, a body that is tasked with the administration of the locality (unions, *panchayats*).² During the past few decades, decentralization – the transfer of authority to plan, make decisions and manage public funds and functions – has meant that locally elected government has become an important conduit through which public sector rural development efforts are carried out. A rights-based approach then has the potential to develop processes through which poor and marginalized members of society are included in local government decision making forums to decide upon resource distribution, dispute resolution, and social development strategies (education, family planning, etc).

In South Asia, however, decentralization, has been characterized by elite capture, including undemocratic practices in decision making, biased resource distribution, and dispute adjudication. Development interventions that aim to work with economically and socially marginalized groups to claim and assert their rights should begin work through analyses that explore the local dimensions of governance institutions. Of particular importance are an understanding of the actors involved, the power dynamics between various groups, and the connections between local government, state-funded development programs, law and order and constituency-building. "Power analysis" is an important starting point to examine how social and political networks and alliances between powerful actors are fostered and used to gain access to public resources and how elites use these resources and benefits to build support within local constituencies.

The process of power analysis³ also enables field teams to build upon their existing practical understanding and to arrive at a broader conceptual framework that highlights the causes of and conditions that perpetuate poverty and social marginalization.⁴ Such an understanding allows

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² Although there are differences in terms of the extent of devolution of power to local governments in various South Asian countries, most states, the most recent being Pakistan (2001 Local Government Ordinance), are increasingly working to strengthen 'grass roots democracy'.

³ The research process involves the design of research questions and methods, field work, and analysis of findings.

⁴ This is not to say that the causes of poverty are 'local'. Yet a grounded understanding of the local political and economic dynamics provides a useful starting point to consider the impact of various policies and laws, practices, trade regimes, etc., in the localities that development initiatives are situated.

field teams to begin to integrate analysis and the ability to discern social, economic, and political patterns into their day to day work and develop methods and techniques through which power dynamics in other localities can be understood.⁵ Power analysis in few carefully selected localities enables program teams to create an integrated body of knowledge in terms of how economic, social and political power operate and can provide important insights to develop programming strategies and implementation approaches.

Where To Start

A first step in power analysis is to determine ‘the unit of analysis’. A useful starting point is to consider the (historical) evolution of the local state, and, in particular, the institutional arrangements through which the state aims to govern localities politically and economically to work towards democracy. In South Asian societies, where decentralization has occurred during the past few decades, local governance is characterized by the intersection of formal and informal institutions. The formal realm – locally elected government and its associated forums – reflects notions of representation, participation, transparency and accountability and presents a space in which democratic practices can be fostered. Development organizations’ engagement with locally elected government is thereby inseparable from the larger development objective that seeks to assist the poor and marginalized to purposefully participate in public decision making. At the same time, it is important to recognize and study informal institutions. These are practices which are rooted in historical patterns of social organization, such as clan, tribe, religious congregations, and denote the hierarchical and patriarchal nature of family structure and the authority of local leaders. These two spheres (the formal and informal), are not isolated from each other, rather they operate together and a focus on this relationship illustrates how local configurations of power operate. For instance, both formal and informal institutions employ various forms of social control, including the denial of legally or socially recognized entitlements, biased dispute resolution, as well as brute force, and constitute key sites at which power resides.

Given the democratization processes in South Asia, the lowest administrative unit (locally elected government) provides a useful starting point to study power dynamics and explore the relationship between formal and informal forms of power. The findings from research at this level provide a backdrop around which power dynamics within spatially smaller units in the same locality such as individual villages, hamlets, and households can be explored. The discussion in this paper focuses on how to study power dynamics at this broader administrative level, whilst a study of community dynamics through social analysis, including key categories of structured power relations, will be discussed in a subsequent brief.

Choosing a Location

The decision about which locality to study should consider several factors. Most importantly, the locality to be studied should be representative of local society. This is best done by mapping the program area with local staff to highlight political, social and ecological factors, such as levels of corruption and extra-judicial force, religious / ethnic composition, landholding structure, agro-ecology, etc. This map can be used to engage staff from various locations in discussion around the similarities and differences of various localities. The map should also indicate CARE’s or

⁵ In Bangladesh, examples of such patterns include Hindu / Muslim power sharing strategies in Hindu majority localities, as opposed to Muslim majority localities, or equal representation of Hindus and Muslims; the intersection of agro-ecology (flood / favorable / drought prone), landholding structure (concentrated or dominated by small holders), land tenure arrangements (sharecropping, leasing, etc), and forms of exploitation (contracts); access to state funded development resources by local government that is aligned with the ruling party, as opposed to a locally elected government aligned to opposition parties; similarly a locality that voted for the present member of parliament, as opposed to a locality in which the incumbent received the majority of votes.

PNGO's program activities and length of engagement to find research sites in which there are existing forms of rapport with local residents and locally elected government. Finally, there are practical considerations, such as distance from the field office (to reduce travel time) and the experience and skill of the staff working in the locality to be studied.

Assessing Existing Knowledge and Devising a Research Plan

Once a research site has been agreed upon, the research team, which ideally includes field staff who have been working in the selected locality, are brought together in a workshop setting. The purpose of such a meeting is to brief the staff on the nature and purpose of the study, and to elicit the field staff's understanding of key influential actors and their relations with other elites and socially marginalized groups. A good starting point is to list the names of locally elected members and informal leaders, their party affiliation, their kinship relations to each other and / or powerful people outside the locality, as well as their economic activities.⁶ This is followed by a discussion of the characteristics of elites: position in formal / informal institutions (committees / clan hierarchy), political affiliation, economic assets, income earning strategies, etc. This process provides an assessment of the field staff's knowledge of the locality and its (formal and informal) leaders, and helps to consider 'what needs to be done'.

Power Analysis through 'Participatory Research Methods'

The analysis process takes an iterative approach using participatory methods as well as semi-structured interviews through which field staff explore key issues with different members from local society (elected representatives, elites, marginalized women and men, local NGO workers, etc.). Each exercise (e.g. mapping, reconstructing events, time-lines) can be structured in such a way that the participant(s) gain(s) new insights through reflecting on existing social and political practices, enabling them to consider future strategies. Power Analysis at this level (a larger locality) is not participatory in the research design phases, rather it builds upon the understanding of the staff who have been working in the area and in communities. It is, however, participatory in the ways in which methods are used to allow for open-ended questions that generate knowledge from the perspective of different actors and therefore allow for divergent views to emerge. The extent to which the methods used can engage different actors in ways that assist them in analysis, reflection, leading to social action that may question, or even challenge existing power structures depends largely on the researching organization's understanding of the sensitivity of key issues and the organization's relationship (trust) with different actors in the communities. Further, given that power analysis of a locality tends to cover spatially scattered actors and involves sensitive issues that cannot always be shared across various communities, the work cannot possibly begin to work towards a collective understanding.

The various methods employed engage different actors (elected members, informal leaders, marginalized women and men) separately to explore power dynamics from different perspectives and locations, this is largely to allow for triangulation of the information and risk reduction, as sensitive information about key individuals and /or events emerges through numerous discussions, the findings of which cannot be attributed to just one or two persons, but emerges from a process of analysis that involves many individuals. Ultimately, it is these triangulated findings that will enable the researching organization and its partners to make informed choices about where to locate its activities (in terms of the poorest communities) and have a grounded understanding of the local political culture and widely accepted forms of exploitation and marginalization, enabling organizations to design appropriate intervention strategies and implementation tactics.

⁶ This may include: cultivating crops, rice milling, money lending, teaching, government service employment, etc.

Finding a Way in: Mapping Centers of Power with Formal Leaders

The process of uncovering and analyzing forms of power begins with locating concrete expressions of power, i.e. resources and wealth. It begins with the creation of a map that captures the physical location of resources: schools (public, private, religious), paved roads and concrete / brick houses, deep tube wells, electricity lines, and so on, as well as formal and informal powerful actors. This map can be created in a relatively short period of time by working with locally elected leaders. The mapping process serves multiple purposes: a) to introduce and explain the study of local resources and opportunities to locally elected representatives, and to seek their assistance, support and interest in the study; b) to obtain basic statistics: population of the administrative unit, the ratio of ethnic / tribal and religious groups, etc. c) to efficiently map resources and key actors with those who have a 'grounded understanding' of each geographic area within the administrative unit; and d) to observe the interactions between the chairperson and elected members to gain a sense of the political and social dynamics within the council.

Mapping begins by outlining the main features of the administrative unit: its boundary, main roads and water channels, villages, and their names, as well as ethnic / religious composition.⁷ The members of the elected council each representing a cluster of villages then note specific resources for each of their respective constituencies: schools, health facilities, electricity, mosques / temples with large congregations, major bazaars, and NGO activities. Finally, the members then indicate the village from which former and presently elected representatives and chairmen have been elected and the villages of key informal leaders (heads of clans / tribes, largest landowners or businessmen, etc.) This working map creates a visual of power centers (villages in which there is a concentration of resources, elected members, and other elites) and marginalized communities lacking basic resources (schools, electricity, access to water, etc) and political representation (an absence of elected leaders).⁸

This map can then be used to indicate CARE's or its PNGO's program activities. This helps to provide a picture of where our activities are located in relation to power centers and a sense of where interviews around power may be easier, given our engagement in the communities. This working map should then be used to strategize which geographic area (power centers, marginalized areas, etc.) and key individuals should be explored in more detail. All information collected should be verified by interviewing residents from within the locality and NGO workers from other organization in selected communities (throughout the locality).

The creation of a map that indicates power centers and the sites of CARE's, Partner NGO's, or other NGO's interventions is important to reduce risk. In the communities that CARE and other NGOs have been working for some time, it is much easier to discuss sensitive issues. Residents of these communities are used to seeing the staff and visits to individual households, or meetings with key individuals or a group of individuals, can easily be arranged. ***Beginning the work by meeting with local government officials to explain the research (to better understand processes of marginalization) and engaging them in the process also***

⁷ In South Asia, land offices have elaborate mapping systems that have been inherited from former colonial administrations – Mughal and British). These maps can be obtained from district / sub-district government offices (land survey) and used to outline the administrative unit under study, draw the main roads, water ways, and other key infrastructure.

⁸ Elected members generally enjoy the mapping process and the final map can be redrawn and presented to the council to use for their own purposes.

ensures their support for the study. If any problems arise, the elected council can be informed and asked for advice and help.⁹

Creating a History of Locally Elected Government and Exploring Voting Practices

A useful method to explore political power is to create a historical time line of locally elected chairmen with the council members. This provides a sense of which families / clans have been able to capture local government. In South Asia, it is not unusual to find that few families have controlled the political process for decades. In such circumstances, the research should focus on the relationship between these powerful families and their relations to other informal and formal elites. For instance, in many South Asian countries, funds are distributed to poor households in return for a vote. In some cases, powerful families who control the chairmanship and want to secure partisan council provide monetary resources to their 'cronies' to run for member election. These monies are recovered through kickbacks by the poor in return for access to entitlement schemes, payment from the parties involved in dispute arbitration, or siphoning funds from development projects (roads, schools, etc).

Constructing a "Power Net"

For each formal and informal powerful actor that has been identified (by name and village) a card is created that indicates ownership of key resources and how these were accumulated (inheritance, business, land grabbing, etc), number of laborers / sharecroppers employed, party affiliation, committee membership and position (this may include mosque, *madrassah*, temple, schools, informal dispute arbitration, governance forums, etc), as well as relationships with other powerful actors within and beyond the locality (this can include kin, business, or friendship relations) and adversaries (e.g. political opponents, resource conflict, etc).

These cards can then be used to divide influential persons into their spheres of influence – e.g. administrative unit and beyond, ward level, and village level. To understand the dynamics of local level government and its interaction with informal institutions (mosque committees, clan / tribe structure, etc.) it is best to focus inquiries on the most powerful actors to gain a sense of the political culture of the locality, how state-funded entitlement and development schemes are implemented and to whom they are channeled, how access to and control over public resources (e.g. forests and water bodies) is determined (patron-client and/or kin relations, and political affiliation), how dispute arbitration operates, and overall to ascertain how entrenched the positions of elites are.

Research Strategies

In many cases, it is not possible to discuss elites and their characteristics directly. This is particularly so when questions are asked in elite's home communities, where many households may depend on powerful actors through labor or sharecropping contracts. Further, CARE's project participants are often socially, politically, and economically marginalized within local

⁹ For instance, in Bangladesh, CARE staff was cornered by a group of young political party workers and asked to explain why they were asking questions about powerful actors and key incidents. The team decided to suspend all field visits until the matter had been discussed and resolved with the elected council. During these discussions, the chairman of the locality re-emphasized his commitment to CARE in general, and for this study in particular. He assured us that we could continue the research and that he would 'contain' any political groups from intimidating our staff. Because the elected council had given their (informal) approval of the research, it was now up to council to 'control' the situation, a task which they took pride in doing to illustrate their power over the locality.

society, making it difficult for them to be entirely aware of the networks of powerful people that influence or control local political processes. In any event, the information collected through mapping and informal discussions needs to be double-checked (triangulated) with other sources (informants). The following strategies that minimize risk can be used:

- 1) visit villages in which powerful actors reside and inquire about *critical incidents* and ask people to recount a time line of the events and the actors involved;
- 2) visit some of the powerful people (elected or non-elected) that have been identified and introduce a discussion about the key problems that the locality faces and the resources that are provided by the state to address these problems. Hold a discussion about how local governance works by asking about the ways in which the higher level state representatives serve the locality, or how local governance committees operate, who sits on them and how they make decisions can yield important information. If strategically interviewed, elites may discuss their own strategies within the larger power structure as well as their opponents and the strategies they take;
- 3) engage local residents in informal discussions in tea shops, restaurants, bazaar stalls, or during a rickshaw ride (with the rickshaw puller) to discuss key events and ascertain their views of the positions that elites have taken.

Critical Incident Analysis

Discussions of critical incidents can yield insights into the positions that particular persons have taken, but also elucidate the factions within the locality. Critical incidents can be explored by looking at:

- 1) key historical events (e.g. liberation struggles and who fought on whose side) can explain present alliances and factions or point to a conflict that has shaped relations between key actors for decades or even a life-time. This helps to understand the present relationships between elites and how strong their ties / or divisions are;
- 2) conflict over key resources: reconstructing events around a valuable resource (e.g. common property resources) can shed light on the position of elected and informal leaders in relation to certain individuals and groups and can help to understand existing tensions / alliances / factions. Equally important it helps to see how fluid alliances are;
- 3) an additional dimension to securing control over resources are investments in public institutions: mosques, temples and *madrassahs* (religious schools). These institutions require that land be donated and placed into a religious trust (*waqf*). The person who makes this donation (even if they held just temporary control over the resource) will generally hold a key position on the managing committee and thereby have the ability to control public funds (in many cases, mosques and temples, as well as schools receive monies from local taxation schemes).
- 4) significant informal dispute arbitration cases: with the assistance of local residents create a list of the 5 most important cases in the past few years and investigate the initial event that led to the arbitration, the position that various elites took on this issue, the actors who were dispute arbitrators, and the verdict that was given can yield information about alliances and factions. In South Asia, a large number of dispute arbitration deals with sexual transgressions (not infrequently involving elite men and women/widows from marginalized households). The pattern of verdicts in such cases (i.e. whether or not women from marginal households obtain compensation) tells a story about the 'moral economy' or notions of social justice that operate within the locality. Such events and their outcomes can create discord between elites as well as among elites and marginalized groups. Dispute arbitration in which the parties consist of powerful and powerless are a good way to

understand the extent to which powerless actors are able to challenge the practices of elites.

Managing the Research

Team work

Each team member needs to be aware of the knowledge of all other team members. It is therefore important for all staff involved in the research to have frequent (daily) debriefing sessions in which work output is shared and discussed. Such debriefing sessions take several hours and are followed by a common planning process in terms of what has to be done next. These debriefing sessions also provide an opportunity to discuss which methods work and which do not; in other words methods design should be an iterative process, based on the research teams' experiences. The study coordinator has to think strategically about the various tasks that need to be done and the staff involved. Some team members have a particular skill, (mapping, interviewing), advantage (good relation with UP member or a certain elite, etc), or interest in a certain activity. It is important that the person best suited for a task is assigned to ensure good output. In the early stages it is important for staff to gain confidence in doing this kind of work and feel productive. Each staff needs to be aware what each team member is doing and know the location of their work. The research tries to establish the network of powerful people that 'govern' the union. Thus a powerful person from one part of the union may have kinship ties (through marriage) with another powerful person in another part of the union and through this alliance gains access to resources that are geographically distant from his residence or influences events in the other locality. In order to create an accurate account of the power dynamics, these kind of strategies (marriage arrangements between powerful actors; purchases of land and possibly donations of part of such land for mosques, *madrassahs*, or schools in other parts of the union allowing influence through serving on the management committees of these institutions) can only be uncovered if the field team works together and shares its findings.

Confidentiality

Good research practice demands that sources (the identity of informants) should **never** be revealed to local residents (e.g. project participants, elected or non-elected elites). In other words, what has been said by whom about an incident or another person must be confidential. If information needs to be verified it is best to say: "I have heard that.." or "I overheard a discussion while eating lunch that..."

Documentation

Field teams should record information about powerful actors on cards and store these, as well as maps, notes and any other data, in such a manner that all team members have access and can view these at any time.

Synthesis of Findings

Following the data collection and daily processing of information, the research team should spend at least two days to work through the materials to come up with analytical categories that would be helpful for staff across the project to make sense of their working areas. Such categories may include: resource distribution; political history of the administrative unit and the connection to larger national politics; voting practices; connection between informal institutions (e.g.. mosque, temple, *madrassah*, school committees) and formal bodies (local government); etc.

The key findings can then be presented in a series of workshops with different audiences, depending on their interests and the sensitivity of the information. It is important to carefully

consider what to present to whom: the idea is to share findings to those who participated, obtain feed back on the accuracy of the information and analysis, and provide information that will be useful in the future to consider development strategies. For example, the elected council will be keen to discuss the resource map, the identification of the poorest and richest communities (and why pockets of poverty exist), the history of local government and the link to national politics; whilst project participants may be more interested to discuss what the findings indicate about their particular community; CARE and PNGO staff from the region may wish to have more discussion around research methods and analysis; whereas senior staff at the country headquarters, donor representatives, and academics may be more curious to discuss the findings in the context of program strategies, beneficiary groups, and intervention activities.

Helpful Resources:

Bode, B. 2002. In Pursuit of Power. Dhaka: CARE Bangladesh.

Bode, B. 2003. Analyzing Power Structures in Rural Bangladesh. Dhaka: CARE Bangladesh

Bode, B. and M. Howes. 2002. The Northwest Institutional Analysis. Dhaka: CARE Bangladesh.

Bode, B. and Syed Mohammad Ali. 2007. The State, Feudal Lords, and Poverty in Pakistan. Islamabad: CARE International.

CARE Social Development Unit. 2004. Access to Water Bodies. Dhaka: CARE Bangladesh