

Invisible Power: 'Poor People' or 'People Living in Poverty'?



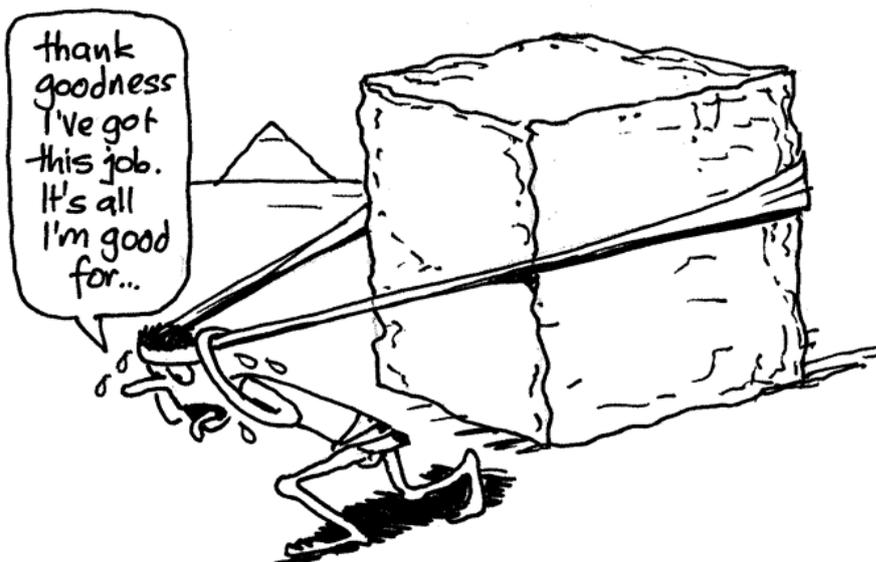
18.08.2017 / Kim Andreas Kessler, Quality Assurance and Poverty Reduction Section, SDC

Power analysis is well established in twenty-first century development work. Power operates at different levels (local, national, global) and appears in different forms. While most development practitioners are familiar with visible and hidden power, invisible power is much less known. This knowledge gap can be attributed to the nature of invisible power itself:

Many argue that 'invisible power' shapes the way people understand and act upon development issues.

What is Invisible Power?

People tend to adopt dominant language, values and behavioural norms through invisible power. For people living in poverty, invisible power can therefore lead to the acceptance of an unjust or unequal status quo as a 'normal' practice.



Source: <https://www.powercube.net/analyse-power/forms-of-power/invisible-power/>

In other words, the internalisation of language, values or norms can shape people's awareness and ultimate understanding of policies and legal rights. This may prevent

people living in poverty from realizing or fight for their rights. The same mechanism operates for powerful elites, who are able to reproduce certain norms, prejudices or ideologies through invisible power in order to maintain their powerful and favourable positions.

Examples

- In India, millions of lower caste Indians are denied access to wells and water sources frequented by so-called upper castes. This occurs despite caste discrimination being constitutionally illegal all over India.
- Invisible power operates behind the tendency of certain policy makers to accept that poverty and marginalisation are an inherent part of the contemporary world. They therefore naturalise unjust situations such as unequal access to water.
- However, invisible power is not invincible. Societal norms on the legality of slavery or the role of women, for example, have changed over time.

Invisible Power in the Water Domain

As part of the [Collaboration between the SDC QA/Poverty Reduction Section and the Institute of Development Studies](#), a session on invisible power was organised at the Water Team Days 2017 in Bern, Switzerland. The session introduced invisible power and reviewed different examples of water programmes/projects at global, regional, and local level from an invisible power perspective.

For more information on this session, please see:

- [Briefing Note](#)
- [Reflective Report of the Session on Invisible Power](#)
- [Blog on the Water Teams Days 2017 Sessions](#)

Conclusion

Invisible power can be translated into 'power of the unquestioned'. In other words, an invisible power lens can explain why certain issues are not on development agendas and remain unchanged for a long time.

Practical Implications

On the basis of the above, development agents should critically and constantly reflect how they contribute to the maintenance of the status quo and the perpetuation of

norms instead of fostering change for the betterment of people's lives. This can be realized by:

- Dedicating more programmes/projects to schooling and education which create awareness and inform people about their legal rights.
- Investing in participatory methodology which truly reveals and challenges internalised values and norms of both the powerful and people living in poverty. See for example [Participatory Poverty Assessment](#) or [Beneficiary Assessment](#).
- Careful selection of language. The SDC Poverty Focal Point, for example, uses the term 'people living in poverty' rather than 'the poor' in order to emphasise an alterable status rather than a static situation without prospect.
- Re-examining the categories applied for beneficiary targeting, theory of change and project/programme monitoring and evaluation. See also: [The Invisibility of People in Development Projects](#).

Sources:

- [IDS Bulletin 2016 on 'Power, Poverty and Inequality'](#)
- [IDS Powercube Net > Invisible Power](#)

Related Information:

- [The Invisibility of People in Development Projects](#)

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