POWER, POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

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Why Invisible Power and Structural Violence Persist in the Water Domain[*]

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Abstract This article argues that inequality in access to water and sanitation is largely caused and legitimised by different forms of invisible power that prevent universal access. It shows how invisible power combined with structural violence and experiences of unequal citizenship result in dismal access to water that cause systematic harm to poor and marginalised women and men. The article also argues that invisible power and other forms of power imbalance have ended up naturalising water inequalities around the world. While the inalienable universality of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their focus on inequality must be celebrated, unless the power imbalances that perpetuate inequality are tackled head on by both policymakers and activists, the SDGs will not achieve social justice. It is thus important for both the sufferers of water injustices as well as water justice advocates to challenge structural violence and invisible power in the water domain.

Keywords: power, invisible power, water, sanitation, citizenship, inequality, SDGs, policy.

1 Introduction

May 2015 – 10.30am Tigray, Ethiopia. I am in a car with other researchers and we are doing fieldwork on the productive uses of roads. We see about 15 women and ten children sitting by two water points surrounded by about 25 canisters. It is an arresting and depressing sight. We stop to talk to them. They tell us that they have been sitting there since 6.30am, that the water in the storage tank is finished and that they are waiting for more water to come. At the moment, there is only a trickle. The tap needs to be turned on by the supervisor who is not around and even when he is around, there is no guarantee that the supply will be enough for all the residents. If the water does not come soon, they will go to the river which is two hours' walk away. River water can be contaminated and polluted and lead to illness, so they try to avoid using it; but sometimes there is no choice. This is why they prefer this source and do not mind paying 15 Birr (about 50 pence) per

canister of water. There are many girls present who should probably be in school. What is striking is that they are sitting patiently and are not complaining. They are used to this situation. They say that sometimes they can spend six hours a day collecting water, even if, like today, it is mostly waiting.

Let me now give you another example from fieldwork, this time from the peri-urban fringe of Delhi, India (see Mehta *et al.* 2014 for more details). Residents in so-called unauthorised colonies of Ghaziabad completely lack any official water provision and often put themselves at great risk to meet their basic needs. This includes crossing a high-speed railway line to access water and it is not unusual that someone is killed every month – so they virtually end up paying for water with their lives. The state supplies water to the largely elite and middle-class housing colonies, leaving poor residents in the villages and informal colonies ignored and bypassed. The little water provided by the state is often of poor quality. Drinking water provided by state handpump is so chemically contaminated that it is said to turn yellow overnight and slum dwellers say that the water is so acidic and yellow that it leads to premature hair loss and skin rashes.

Both these vignettes highlight that there are serious problems regarding access to water for the world's poor and marginalised women and men. Indeed, this is a situation that we have known about for some time. In this article, I argue that inequality in access to water and sanitation is unacceptable and largely caused and legitimised by different forms of unequal and invisible power that prevent universal access. In the case of the women and children waiting patiently for water in Tigray, I intend to show that it is structural violence and the undiscussed that have naturalised the gendered nature of water collection that has knock-on effects on women and girls' health, education and life chances. In the case of peri-urban residents, it is their quasi-non-citizen/semi-illegal status that excludes them from state-sponsored water. The article discusses these issues conceptually before analysing how invisible power and other forms of power imbalances have ended up naturalising water inequalities around the world.

2 Understanding invisible power and its intersection with structural violence and political society

Lukes (1974) made a lasting contribution to power analysis through his elaboration of three dimensions of power, showing that focus must not just be on the factual aspects of power regarding what is decided and why or why not, but instead highlighted that it is important to look at the 'mutedness' of powerless groups who are invisible and whose voices are never heard. Building on this, VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) and Gaventa (2006) have distinguished between visible, hidden and invisible forms of power. As with other articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, I am concerned with invisible power, which is the most insidious form because this level shapes marginalised people's consciousness and beliefs, which lead them to accept the *status quo* (see VeneKlasen and

Miller 2002). Here cultural and ideological issues as well as socialisation perpetuate inequality and exclusion (*ibid.*; Gaventa 2006). This is because invisible power operates in a context of structural violence. Building on Johan Galtung (1969) and liberation theory, Paul Farmer and colleagues see structural violence as 'social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way' (Farmer *et al.* 2006 *cf.* Farmer 1996; 2004). These arrangements are structural because they are embedded in the political and economic aspects of daily life; they are violent because they cause harm, though not to those directly or indirectly responsible for perpetuating them. Hegemonic control of water provision is normalised in most societies (*cf.* Sneddon 2013), allowing aspects of water governance (such as prescribing market-based solutions to water scarcity) to emerge as universally applicable and merely technical water challenges rather than the specific outcome of particular forms of structure and power. Lack of access is exacerbated by unequal experiences of citizenship: millions of disenfranchised and semi-legal citizens living in urban areas are only able to access services through quasi-'illegal' means (Chatterjee 2004).

3 A global overview of inequalities in access

I now turn to provide a brief global overview of the inequalities in access before focusing on the power imbalances that justify water inequalities around the world. Inequality in access to water and sanitation is probably one of the greatest crimes of the twenty-first century. As the 2006 Human Development Report has argued (UNDP 2006), no act of terrorism generates devastation on a daily basis on the scale of the crisis in water and sanitation. But it would be fair to say that this is a 'silent' crisis. We are aware of it and much action has been taken; yet it still persists. Perhaps the crisis has not been sufficiently questioned by those who bear the brunt of unequal access to water. In 2015, 663 million people around the globe lacked access to safe drinking water and 2.4 billion people lacked access to improved sanitation with about 946 million people defecating in the open (UNICEF and WHO 2015). This situation undermines good health, nutrition and human dignity. Accessing water can be particularly challenging for smallholders, vulnerable and marginalised populations, and women. Women and girls are often responsible for water collection and may spend between 30 minutes and six hours per day collecting water, undermining their health, educational and life chances. Poor water quality affects human health and ecosystems' functioning. Climate change will add irregularity and uncertainty to the availability of water in many regions (see HLPE 2015).

While these issues are well known and water has been a focus of development interventions and international action since the 1977 Mar del Plata UN World Water Conference and the subsequent International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (IDWSSD) (see Nicol, Mehta and Allouche 2011), the invisible power that maintains the problem is as yet poorly understood. There is no dearth of ideas, fora and meetings on how to deal with water challenges. Yet

much of the debate and most of the policies and interventions fail to address water problems in ways that are sustainable and socially just in order to address the interests of poorer and marginalised people (see Mehta and Movik 2014). In March 2012, the world had met the water Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water, well in advance of the MDG 2015 deadline (UNICEF and WHO 2012). But the water MDG was flawed on many counts. It failed to address universality and left almost 800 million people using poor sources of drinking water, with 40 per cent of this population living in sub-Saharan Africa. Rural dwellers and the poorest of the poor were bypassed in the achievement of this goal. Achieving gender equality, social equity and sustainability in relation to water was also often overlooked. Sanitation figures were even more seriously off track. There were several problems around equity, water safety and sustainability due to the focus on the quasi-low-hanging fruit and areas in which it is easy to extend coverage (UNICEF and WHO 2011). Regional variations and variations between socioeconomic groups or by gender were not adequately captured in peri-urban and slum areas, which are some of the fastest growing areas in the world. These areas were not included in the MDG statistics. It is important to note that the original MDG formulation took place before global commitments to rights to water and sanitation were in place (see Mehta and Movik 2014).

The SDG on water and sanitation (SDG 6) has a different emphasis. For example, it seeks by 2030 to achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all; achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all; and end open defecation. It also acknowledges the importance of paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations. In addition, water quality concerns that were missing from the MDGs are addressed. It also includes a commitment to reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity and support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management (see UN 2015). Like the other SDGs, there is a large number of indicators and hence a risk that there will be problems with monitoring and tracking, and an unhelpful formation of SDG industries in each country. Like with the MDGs, there is also a lack of clear mechanisms of accountability and similarly what each goal and target will mean in every country, district, etc. will always be different and will need to be locally defined. Also generalised, globalised arguments that underpin policy debates tend to remain disconnected from the everyday experiences of local people. For example, SDG 6 is far more nuanced than the MDG in stating what constitutes an 'improved' water source by creating a 'service ladder' from 'safely managed' down through 'basic', 'unimproved' and 'surface water' sources (WHO 2016). As Katharina Welle's (2013) research in Ethiopia has demonstrated, however, there is a big gap between the ways global agencies, national agencies as well as local people understand, define and measure water access and inequality.

It is also somewhat disappointing that this SDG, like all the others, fails to explicitly protect and fulfil human *rights for all*. There is an absence of an explicit recognition of the human rights to water and sanitation, rights that are now globally recognised and also enjoy constitutional recognition in many countries. An explicit recognition of rights would help build in issues of responsibility and accountability. There is also an explicit lack of recognition to the power imbalances that create water and sanitation crises in the first place. As the Women's Major Group says, 'Concentration of power and wealth imbalances that deepen poverty and inequalities within and between countries are not sufficiently addressed, and the agenda lacks targets to reverse this trend. For the SDGs to be transformative they need to acknowledge that the current development model based on growth has failed to address concentrations of wealth that are deepening poverty, inequalities, and environmental degradation' (2014: 2). Thus, it would be fair to say that the SDGs tend to focus on symptoms and outcomes, not the root cause of the problem.

Poverty, concentration of wealth and unquestioned gender and social inequalities are created by, and lead to power imbalances that promote and justify water-related inequalities. Many of these are obvious, visible and brutal. For example, Palestinians face profound water-related inequalities when compared with Israeli citizens. They have access to a third the amount of water than Israelis. Ramallah has the same amount of rainfall as Berlin or London but there is still a 'water crisis' in Palestine emanating from strict policies and a long history of illegal settlements. Due to military and other rulings, Palestinians are not allowed to drill wells and collect water from their rooftops. By contrast, settlers in the West Bank enjoy abundant water (Messerschmid 2012). Discourses such as 'making the desert bloom' and creating 'abundance amidst scarcity' have justified historical land and water grabs that disadvantage Palestinians (see Gasteyer *et al.* 2012).

There are also obvious inequalities in water consumption worldwide. For example, the per capita average consumption of water in California is unsustainable given the local climate and topography and can add up to several hundred litres per day per person.[1] Villagers in drylands in South Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, by contrast, must often survive on less than 20 litres of water a day. These are, however, the visible forms of inequality. There are also more sinister forms of inequality that are unnoticed, unchallenged and legitimised. Unless these are addressed upfront, SDG 6 may fail to address universality and achieve social justice, just like the water and sanitation MDG. In particular, the danger is high for people that could be termed 'quasi-non-citizens': those who are systematically excluded and left to fend for themselves. These include, for example, millions who live in 'informal settlements' or slums, whose occupation of land, use of services and thus position as citizens is often semi-legal. According to Partha Chatterjee, the means by which people in this position achieve rights and services is through 'political society', since their rights are not guaranteed by law or

achieved by civil society, but agitated for through their political potential as masses of voters or protestors (Chatterjee 2004).

4 Structural violence and invisible power go hand in hand

Johan Galtung (1969) refers to the violence through which a social structure or social institutions can harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Paul Farmer (1996 and 2004) develops Galtung's concept to suggest that usually neither culture nor individuals are at fault, rather it is historically and economically driven processes that tend to constrain individual agency and deny certain social groups access to the fruits of scientific and social progress. These constraints operate through the norms and expectations that make up invisible power as well as through the visible and hidden powers contained in formal institutional processes. Farmer argues that it is the poor of the world who are largely the victims of structural violence and it is the poor whose lives are largely at the behest of bureaucrats, politicians and pernicious policies and programmes such as structural adjustment. The poor's suffering tends to be silenced and they often lack voice, let alone rights (*ibid.*). A good case in point is the fact that daily about 2,000 children die around the world due to largely preventable waterborne diseases. These appear as regular statistics in reports by UNICEF, the Joint Monitoring Programme and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) but do not seem to spark global outrage.

By virtue of *caste*, in India about 1–2 million people are engaged in manual scavenging despite legislation prohibiting this practice (Mander 2016). These individuals stem from the lowest castes (traditionally known as 'untouchables') who encounter daily discrimination and stigmatisation, not to speak of the daily exposure to pathogens and hazardous excreta due to the unhygienic practice associated with manual scavenging. Structural violence has also denied millions of lower caste Indians access to wells and water sources frequented by so-called higher castes. Even though caste discrimination is constitutionally illegal it still abounds all over India. While caste discrimination is cultural, its historical persistence and acceptance has led to its naturalisation, which prompts me to see it as structural violence.

By virtue of *race*, structural violence allowed apartheid South Africa to deny 12 million largely black South Africans access to water (see Movik 2012). By contrast, the white minority enjoyed the benefits of the apartheid state regarding water infrastructure. While post-apartheid South Africa has introduced many impressive policies to reverse these historical legacies, most poor households in South Africa do not enjoy a 'healthy environment' on the basis of the water provided by the state (see Flynn and Chirwa 2005). This is complicated by the fact that South Africa, like many other countries in the global South, has adopted market-friendly positions in its water sector with increasing commercialisation and privatisation of water services, which have undermined the country's commitments to a human right to free basic water (see McDonald and Ruiters 2005; Loftus 2005; Mehta and Ntshona 2004; Harris, Goldin and Sneddon 2013).

By virtue of *gender*, structural violence persists, as I elaborated in the first vignette from Tigray. Why is it that the women were just waiting patiently for water, which took up almost six hours of their day? Universally, it seems to be that no matter how backbreaking and difficult women's water-related tasks may be, these remain unchallenged by both women and men in many societies. The naturalness of women's role in water-related tasks comprises the taken-for-granted aspects of the social world that Bourdieu calls 'doxa' (1977: 167f). Doxa comprises 'the universe of the undiscussed' (*ibid.*: 168). It refers to those aspects of the social world and tradition that are silent, not least about themselves, and remain unformulated and implicit. This doxa is in some ways internalised and reinforced by photojournalists, government officials and researchers, and has romantic appeal. After all, isn't the sight of rural women with water pots on their heads part of the 'village imagery' of life in rural Asia and Africa? The ideological construction of gender and nature happens within a certain political economic context. In the summer months when water sources dry up, the trudge gets longer and it is invariably the women who bear the brunt of coping with dwindling water levels in the village wells. Another realm of the undiscussed tends to be how access to basic services such as water is linked to the issue of legality and illegality and unequal manifestations of citizenship. Peri-urban spaces embody these dynamics to which I now turn.

5 Invisible power and political society in the peri-urban fringe
Urbanisation and peri-urbanism in the global South have challenged the model of universal water and sanitation provision – usually public – that followed on from the water and sanitation reforms of nineteenth century Europe (see Mehta *et al.* 2014). The peri-urban locality is characterised by administrative and jurisdictional overlaps and ambiguities, environmental degradation, marginalisation, lack of services and regulation, informality, illegality and political marginality. Peri-urban areas are often (fallaciously) viewed as temporary and thus completely bypassed by policymakers. The insecurity of land tenure, housing rights and dense housing create very difficult conditions in which to build sustainable water and sanitation systems. How do people access water and how are rights to water realised in such dynamic and largely 'ungoverned' spaces? As pointed out by Partha Chatterjee (2004) in most parts of the post-colonial world, there are limits to the ideal of universal citizenship premised on the notion of equal citizens as bearers of rights. Due to technologies of governmentality (*cf.* Foucault 1991) the modern state has created a distinction between citizens who are rights bearers and populations who are the targets of government policies, laws and interventions.[2] As pointed out by Chatterjee, poorer people in most countries of the global South are considered to be members of social groups that 'transgress the strict lines of legality in struggling to live and work' (2004: 40). Here the distinction between 'civil society' and 'political society' is important. The former comprises the middle and upper classes who are the focus of policies and state attention. By contrast, political society – often comprising so-called 'illegal' and disenfranchised citizens – meet governmental agencies by wit and

stealth, and usually access services via informal means and through patronage. Their livelihoods or residence may often be considered 'illegal'. The majority of peri-urban dwellers who live in so-called informal or illegal colonies and who access basic services through informal means would fall within this category according to Chatterjee.[3]

At the heart of Chatterjee's analysis is the current disconnect between the legal order and social practices in many developing contexts. On the one hand, the nation state founded on popular sovereignty grants equal rights to certain citizens. By contrast, many populations are connected to governmental agencies pursuing multiple policies of security and welfare (Chatterjee 2004: 37). It is through these welfare activities that different demographic categories of governmentality and groups emerge (e.g. the poor, illegal, informal localities, etc.). It is also through these categories that claims are exercised and services are accessed. This is particularly true for water. In keeping with Chatterjee's analysis, the vast majority of peri-urban residents and so-called 'informal settlements' colonies remain unserved in most parts of the world and excluded from the formal water system (see Allen, Dávila and Hofmann 2006; Graham and Marvin 2001). These structures are rarely questioned or challenged adequately. They remain invisible and the power dynamics that reinforce them contribute to the precarity of poor residents. It is thus a challenge for most citizens to access water that is safe and secure (see Allen *et al.* 2006 and Mehta *et al.* 2014). In many cases, they also opt out of the formal system, devise their own strategies and do not hope for any benefits from the state. Still, the state plays a key role as an arbiter in delivering or not delivering their rights.

Hidden and unofficial pathways to accessing water are deployed by the migrants, the poor, the so-called squatters and 'invisible' citizens. These range from stealing water from official pipelines to digging one's own borewell. In Ambedkar bastee, an informal colony near New Delhi, residents managed to get a small informal pipeline connected to the main pipeline taking water to middle-class localities. They did this by approaching officials and political leaders in keeping with Chatterjee's analysis. However, unlike the strict distinction put forward by Chatterjee between the strategies pursued by political society and the so-called 'bourgeois civil society', it is also not uncommon for the latter to resort to informal and 'illegal' means to gain more water (i.e. bribes and drawing on political contacts). There is a strong elite bias in the implementation of government policies. Most of the treated water is supplied to the largely elite and middle-class housing colonies, leaving poor residents in the villages and informal colonies completely ignored and bypassed. This is due to the power of categorisation that the state uses to classify people and their settlements as either 'informal' or 'illegal' or both.

Even though poor and informal neighbourhoods exist alongside the elite and middle-class colonies in the region, provision to improve their situation is usually wholly inadequate. While the poor exercise agency

on a daily basis to find ways to access water, there is very little formal mobilisation around the right to water and most poor people are not aware that as Indian citizens they have the right to water. In sum, in peri-urban and slum localities in most countries, there is a continuum between legality and illegality which epitomises how the urban vision is marked by structural inequalities, structural violence and unequal and unsustainable resource use, all of which are sustained in part by insidious forms of invisible power.

6 What scope for justice?

The persistence of water inequalities across the world should be a cause for outrage. These inequalities exist because power imbalances prevent universal access. How does this work? Invisible power goes hand in hand with structural violence to allow undiscussed political, social and cultural arrangements to persist in disadvantaging and causing harm to marginalised social groups. These arrangements are embedded in a system that they reproduce, not least due to the local level impacts of historical legacies, global political economy, unequal citizenship, as well as diverse axes of social difference such as race, class, gender and caste. This structural violence in particular disadvantages members of political society, who by virtue of their 'illegal' status, experience citizenship and access to services in contradictory ways. Most poor people who are denied access to water and sanitation are, as Chatterjee says, 'only tenuously, and even then ambiguously and contextually, rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution' (2004: 38). Elite biases, democratic deficits (and distortions), jurisdictional ambiguities and market-based mechanisms compound the structural violence that leads to such groups largely bearing the brunt of environmental degradation, pollution and water-related injustices. While they are creative and assert agency on a daily basis to informally access water, there is little formal recourse to the legal human right to water. Their vulnerabilities often prevent them from adopting social justice discourses.

To conclude, while the inalienable universality of the SDGs and their focus in inequality must be celebrated, unless the power imbalances that perpetuate structural violence and unequal experiences of citizenship are tackled head on by both policymakers and activists, the SDGs will not achieve social justice. To make real progress on the SDGs, it is important for those in a position to, to bring the invisible out into the open and challenge gender, race and caste injustice, engage in struggles to realise the human rights to water and sanitation for all, including for so-called 'illegal citizens', as well as challenge the power of state and financial institutions that perpetuate injustice. To break the silence of the excluded and disadvantaged, those concerned with social and water justice now need to focus on naming and shaming the powerful actors that benefit from and are immune to growing inequalities as well as marginalised people's suffering.

Notes

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1 See http://www.swrcb.ca.gov/press_room/press_releases/2015/pr040715_rgcpd_febconservation.pdf (accessed September 2016).

2 Governmentality according to Foucault (1991) is an ensemble formed by institutions, tactics, procedures that allow for the exercise of complex forms of power that empower some and silence others (see Gordon 2001). It has a long history and in many cases predates the modern nation state where the colonial state considered populations as subjects, not citizens. These trends continue to be endorsed by the post-colonial state (Chatterjee 2004).

3 Chatterjee has been criticised for not recognising the blurriness between civil and political society (see Baviskar and Sundar 2008). In fact, in peri-urban areas bourgeois civil society also transgress recognised norms and resort to informal means and patronage to access services.

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