

Mirror Event on Water and Power

Introduction

Inequality in access to water and sanitation is one of the biggest development challenges of the twenty-first century. 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 and is a global outrage. Accessing water can be particularly challenging for smallholders, vulnerable and marginalised populations, and women. There is no dearth of ideas, fora and meetings regarding how to deal with water challenges. Yet the key challenge remains of how to address water problems in ways that are sustainable, socially just and which consistently address the interests of poorer and marginalised people.

Invisible Power in the Water Domain

The Mirror Event on Power and Water on June 23, 2017 addressed why such inequalities persist. The starting point was that the persistence of water inequalities globally can be attributed in part to various power imbalances that prevent universal access. As Stephen Lukes (1974; 2005) has argued, power does not just concern who participates and how decisions are made in visible processes, such as consultations, legislative or government bodies. Instead, it is also important to focus on who does not participate, and why, and what issues never reach the public arenas in the first place.

In explaining this, theorists have distinguished between visible, hidden and invisible forms of power (Gaventa 2006). Hidden power refers to issues which lie beneath the surface, but which are prevented from entry into the decision process by framings, structural barriers, or fear. While these are of concern, many argue that even more insidious is 'invisible power', which shapes whether and how people understand that an issue exists at all (Oosterom and Scott-Villiers 2016). For those living in poverty, 'invisible power' can lead to the internalisation and acceptance of an unjust or unequal status quo, as a 'normal' practice, or at least one which is not possible to challenge. For elites, such internalisation can support the reproduction of certain norms, prejudice and ideologies that justify maintaining the status quo.

From this perspective, cultural and ideological issues as well as existing structures and decision making processes perpetuate inequality and exclusion. Invisible power often

operates in a context of structural violence (Mehta 2016). This refers to structures and arrangements in the political and economic aspects of daily life that cause harm to certain populations and groups. It is persons living in poverty who are largely affected by structural violence, and who must learn to tolerate the unjust status quo or to devise coping strategies to organise access to basic needs like access to water. Even where there are formal policies or legal rights in place, the internalisation or acceptance of the status quo, through invisible power, may keep these policies and rights from being realised.

In the water domain, many citizens across the global South are denied their basic citizenship rights to water for a variety of reasons. Invisible power allows discrimination and exclusion to persist by virtue of an individual's gender, race, caste, ethnicity or due to top-down labels that deem their status to be 'illegal'. By virtue of gender, women and young girls across the global South spend between one and four hours a day on water-related tasks (Mehta 2016). These can undermine the health, educational and life chances of women and girls and also in some cases lead to increasing vulnerability to sexual violence. By virtue of caste, millions of lower caste Indians are denied access to wells and water sources frequented by so-called upper castes, even though caste discrimination is constitutionally illegal all over India. The implicit acceptance of caste relations across Indian society is a clear manifestation of invisible power.

In informal settlements and growing peri-urban areas of the global South, many local people are also denied their basic citizenship rights. These spaces are characterised by administrative and jurisdictional ambiguities, environmental degradation, marginalisation, lack of services and regulation, informality, illegality and political marginality. Groups living in such areas often comprise of 'illegal' and disenfranchised citizens who access basic services like water via informal means and patronage. Invisible power – the internalised acceptance of this status quo – ensures that their quasi-illegal status is not sufficiently challenged, or that people are not aware of their rights, or that they lack the means to fight for them.

Established norms exert a force that sustains internalised acceptance among the powerful and powerless alike. Despite the high number of diarrhoeal deaths, ill health, time poverty, exhaustion for millions of poor rural women and millions in slums and peri-urban areas, many policy makers working in government bodies around the world tend to accept that poverty and marginalisation are part of life and thus naturalise unequal access to water. Invisible power assists in reproducing the exclusions of millions (almost a billion of humanity) for whom water should be a universal right.

At the same time, rarely in societies is 'invisible power' itself unchangeable, or does it completely close down the capacity to challenge, propose alternatives and to challenge the existing norms of the status quo. One only needs to imagine, for instance, how norms on the legality of slavery, apartheid, or the place of women have changed in many societies. At a smaller scale, slum dwellers have at times mobilised in protests against state neglect of access to water as in Mumbai in 2016, and in 2009 women from slums initiated 'rasta roko' protests¹.

¹[The Hindustan times](#): '2000 Mumbai slum dwellers to protest against lack of clean water'. 14 November 2016; [The Indian Express](#): 'Water crisis in Shivaji Nagar slum; women protest in Juhu'. 2 November 2009.

The question is: What are the entry points in policy and practice, through which the 'invisible power' surrounding debates and realities of access to water may be challenged and changed? Furthermore, how can knowledge about invisible power be used to come up with better strategies for claiming access to safe water, for instance by the better framing of messages to governing elites?

Practical Implications

Given the discussion above, it is important that all those committed to realising SDG 6 explicitly recognise power imbalances that create water and sanitation crises in the first place. In order to address these power imbalances, SDC can consider:

At programmatic level:

- To introduce invisible power and political economy analysis at every stage in the project cycle management.
- To identify the actors that remain indifferent to existing poverty and marginalisation and unequal access to water, and the norms, values and discourses that sustain their position. The analysis needs to explicitly address norms and ideologies that influence the relationship between the marginalised and the elites.
- To support public campaigns to start shifting norms and discourses in society that justify indifference to marginalised populations.
- To identify places where marginalised groups are beginning to challenge for themselves issues of access to water, and to develop empowerment strategies that support these, relevant to the context and situation.
- To facilitate discussions among marginalised people about the effects of invisible power, including (gendered) norms that create inequalities within a population

At policy dialogue level:

- To carefully and where appropriate bring the issue of norms and discourses that inhibit equal access to water into bilateral dialogues to contribute to building awareness among government actors.

At organisational level:

- To involve representatives from marginalised populations in learning activities in order to make visible and discuss which norms and ideologies in particular are sustaining unequal access to water and how different groups within marginalised populations are affected based on different, intersecting characteristics such as gender, ethnic/religious identity, and age.

Key Documents

- Farmer, P. (2004) 'An Anthropology of Structural Violence', *Current Anthropology* 45.3: 305–25.
- Galtung, J. (1969) 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research* 6.3: 167–91.
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- Mehta, L. (2016) 'Why Invisible Power and Structural Violence Persist in the Water Domain', *IDS Bulletin* 47.5: 31–42.
- Lukes, S. (1974, reprinted 2005) 'Power: A Radical View' London: Macmillan.
- Oosterom, M. and P. Scott-Villiers (eds). *Power, Poverty and Inequality*. *IDS Bulletin* 47.5 (2016).
- UNICEF and WHO (2015) [Progress on Sanitation and Drinking Water: 2015 Update and MDG Assessment](#)

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This Collaboration between SDC and the Institute of Development Studies explores how poverty relates to politics and power. It is supporting SDC staff in improving the quality and effectiveness of SDC processes and operations focused on poverty. The Collaboration uses an 'organisational learning and change' approach to accompanying SDC activities, which is reflective, demand-based and rooted in the realities of SDC's work. It runs until December 2017.

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