

# Understanding politics and power

**Description** This section will help participants to understand the meanings of politics and power. It considers who has power in a given situation. An understanding of how and where decisions are made is vital in order to influence and bring change.

**Learning objectives**

By the end of the section, participants will:

- be able to define politics
- understand power and its different dimensions, and link this with advocacy
- understand uses and abuses of power
- know who has power in their particular situation.

**Links** This links closely with SECTION A2 (Understanding advocacy). It also links with SECTION A3 (Why advocacy?) and SECTION B4 (Options for involvement).

## EXERCISE 16 **Understanding politics**



**Aim** To understand what politics is and where it takes place.

**Methods** Flash cards, small groups, plenary discussion

When the word ‘politics’ is mentioned it will usually produce a wide variety of animated reactions. Some people will say that it should not be touched. Others will embrace it. This exercise helps people come to a common understanding of politics, and to see the variety of contexts in which it operates, and therefore the necessity of involvement in it.

Participants brainstorm, in pairs, the first things that come into their mind when they think about politics. They write these on flash cards. Lead a discussion based on the answers given. Then split participants into three groups. Give each group a definition of politics as shown below and ask them to answer the question ‘Who is involved in politics?’ based on the definition they have been given. Discuss this in plenary and then lead a discussion on why Christians should be involved in politics.

As this issue is controversial, it may be necessary to summarise the discussion and ensure everyone is happy before moving on.

**Definitions of politics**

- Politics (with a capital ‘P’): The governing of a state or country
- politics: the interaction of all forms of power
- politics: ‘the art of living together in a community’ (John Stott)

**Key points**

- Politics is the exercise of power and the interaction of people with power.
- The narrow definition of Politics (with a capital ‘P’) refers to the governing of a state or country and is limited to professional politicians.
- The broad definition of politics (with a small ‘p’) considers the interaction of all forms of power, which happens wherever there is a relationship. Everyone is therefore political and has the potential to influence what happens in their lives, their communities and their countries.
- Christians need to use politics to bring about change in society and be faithful to God’s calling.

EXERCISE 17 **Understanding power**



**Aim** To understand power and the different forms it takes.

**Methods** Role play, flash cards, small-group discussion, plenary discussion, presentation

**Handouts** The three faces or dimensions of power  
Case studies on power  
Types of power  
Abuse of power

Before the role play, ask participants if they have ever experienced abuse of power.

**Role play**

Pairs of participants act out a brief role play to show different types of people interacting with each other, and the power dynamics involved in the relationships. Possible roles to take would be:

- **Husband and wife** The wife wants to undertake some training but her husband is not keen. He controls the money and he also threatens her with violence.
- **Street seller and policeman** The policeman is trying to move the street seller away from selling goods outside an expensive hotel due to complaints by the manager, but the street seller refuses, knowing that he is legally allowed to be there.
- **Executive and secretary** The executive keeps the secretary waiting outside his office, asks to be called ‘sir’, asks her to stay late, etc.
- **Judge and defendant** The defendant is innocent of charges of theft, but the judge asks for a bribe to let him go, which the defendant is unwilling to pay.

After the role play, ask participants: ‘What types of power are shown in these role plays? Are there any other types of power?’ Write a list and then present the handouts ‘Types of power’ and ‘The three faces or dimensions of power’.

Present the case studies in the handout and ask participants to identify the dimensions and types of power displayed in each one.

**Key points**

- Power is the ability to get something done, even if you may be prevented from doing so by your circumstances.
- Power determines who makes decisions and what decisions are made.
- Power has three faces – open, closed and invisible (see handout), which roughly correspond to the three types of advocacy (**for**, **with** and **by** the poor or those affected by a situation).
- It is important to engage with all three faces of power, and not just the open face (advocacy **for** others).
- Everyone has power, but the three main types we often see are those displayed by public figures making decisions: economic power, authority and power of force, and these are often abused.
- There are many other, often hidden, forms of power, including information or expertise, organisation or connections, and having a legitimate voice. In this sense, everyone has power. Collectively we have more power than we do as individuals.
- Powerlessness may occur because people are in a position where they cannot use their power, or where others do not recognise the power they have.
- Advocacy is about using power and influence to persuade others, who usually have greater power and influence in terms of money, force and authority, to do what you want them to do. It involves understanding and making the most of the power you already have and using your power in a legitimate way (see SECTION A4).

Advocacy and power

Advocacy involves:

- holding people to account for their use of power
- trying to change the use of power
- gaining access to power for those who are excluded
- helping people to see what forms of power they have (the first step to empowerment).

## EXERCISE 18 **Understanding your own power and influence**



**Aim** For participants to understand their own sources of power and opportunities for influence.

**Methods** Worksheet, group work, plenary discussion

**Handouts** Types of power  
Abuse of power

Using the handout, participants identify the different forms of power that they, their communities or their organisations have, and consider how they can use this to influence others.

This exercise is done in small groups in two parts:

- An assessment of the power each person or organisation thinks they possess, grading each type of power from 1 to 5 (where 5 is a lot of power).
- An assessment of the influence they think they are given by decision-makers, on account of their power, grading each type of power from 1 to 5 according to the perception of a specific decision-maker, such as a local authority or government department.

### **Key points**

- Understanding our own sources of power is a vital step towards empowerment.
- Power should be used with integrity. We need to understand our identity, which ultimately comes from being children of God who have been set free to serve (John 8:36), and our power comes from God.
- Our influence depends partly on the power we have and partly on the perception by the decision-makers of the power we have. Much advocacy work is wasted because we do not recognise the influence that those in power allow us to have.
- There may be situations where we do not have much power over decision-makers but we have power to influence other people or organisations who, in turn, can influence those in power.

## EXERCISE 19 **Mapping power relations**



**Aim** To map the political landscape (location and distribution of power) within a country.

Handout Types of power

To be able to tackle any of the dimensions of power, it is necessary to understand who holds the power in your situation, both formally (who officially has the power) and informally (who actually has the power). A lot of time may be wasted if you focus on someone with official power if someone else is making all the decisions behind the scenes.

One method of mapping power relations in your local area or country is to ask participants to select the main groups. It is best to limit these groups to around 12 so that the exercise does not become too complicated. These could be:

- international business
- teachers / health workers
- overseas governments
- churches and other faiths
- communities
- political parties
- NGOs
- media
- police / military
- trade unions
- government
- local business.

Participants cut out a circle of paper for each of the groups with the size of the circle relating to their perceived level of influence. Arrange them according to their relationships with each other. If possible, participants should first identify the types of power and influence each group has, and then how participants may be in a position to influence them, either directly or through others.

HANDOUT

**The three faces or dimensions of power**

	<b>OPEN FACE</b>	<b>CLOSED FACE</b>	<b>INVISIBLE FACE</b>
<b>Power operates through</b>	Open political system Clear process of decision-making	A more closed political system where certain groups are excluded or discriminated against	Preventing conflict arising through secrecy and information control  Blaming others to legitimise inequality
<b>Powerlessness is due to</b>	Lack of resources to compete effectively  Non-participation due to choice	Barriers such as gender or race keeping certain groups away  Disorganisation  Lack of information	Lack of awareness of issues  Belief that poverty is one's own fault and that nothing can be done
<b>The aim of advocacy is</b>	Correct use of power  Accountability for use of power	Access to power  Change of power relations	Awareness of own power and ability to use it  Awareness of issue and causes
<b>Advocacy type</b>	<b>For, with or by</b> the people	<b>With or by</b> the people	<b>By</b> the people
<b>Characteristics of advocacy include</b>	Issue-based lobbying  Led by professionals  Play by the rules of the game  Going for winnable issues	Issues identified by community  Powerful grass roots organisations that challenge structures  Outside organisers building local capacity	Grass roots leadership  Education to develop political awareness, confidence and understanding  Learning by involvement
<b>Dangers and limitations</b>	May not build participation, organisation or awareness at grass roots  Does not challenge unjust systems and structures	Does not challenge the imbalance of power for the most marginalised  Relies on outside organiser  Little increase in awareness of broader power system	May fail to engage community in formal political change process  May overlook importance of organising selves  May fail to use links to other groups

An advocacy campaign can engage with all three dimensions of power. However, many advocacy campaigns assume that all power is open and visible. They aim just for policy change, speaking for those affected by a situation, and therefore fail to address issues of powerlessness and marginalisation.

**HANDOUT Case studies on power**

Forestry Law Reform, Honduras – **closed face of power**

The Association for a More Just Society (ASJ) is a social justice organisation working in Honduras. In 1999, the president of Honduras presented a proposal for reform of forestry legislation that would have allowed large sections of national forest to be sold to logging companies who could choose whether or not to reforest the land. The importance of Honduras’ national forests to poor farmers and indigenous groups living in these areas was ignored. Seeing the potentially devastating consequences, ASJ joined with representatives from various sectors (indigenous groups, co-operatives, an evangelical network, agricultural ecologists and farmers’ groups) to form an alliance called the Honduran Agroforestry Alliance (AHA) to try to amend the proposed legislation.

AHA hired consultants to analyse the proposal and present reasonable counterproposals to the government. They initiated a media campaign to educate the public about the problem and to pressure the government into negotiating. The media campaign included press conferences, forums on television and radio, press reports, and a web page with detailed analysis and reports.

The government agreed that no reform of the forestry legislation would be brought to Congress until it had been approved by a committee consisting of representatives from AHA, as well as the government and logging companies. For 18 months AHA was involved in negotiations within this committee and continued to use consultants to educate the public, the media and committee members about the counterproposals. Not only were all the proposals of AHA accepted, but marginal groups such as poor farmers, co-operatives and indigenous groups have been able to participate for the first time in the making of a law that affects them directly.

CORD Rwanda and UNICEF – **open face of power**

UNICEF devised a national programme for water development in Rwanda. It looked at the country’s water problems from a national perspective and gave a standard solution for every local area. Tearfund’s partner, CORD, was given a quota of materials and money by UNICEF in 1998 to protect 40 springs in the area it worked in.

However, the majority of the springs in that area were technically very difficult to protect. The government had encouraged people to move from the valley where the springs were situated to the hilltops. CORD did not want to carry out the UNICEF plan because they had found other springs to the west that would be easier to protect and provide cleaner water more easily. CORD wanted to convince UNICEF that it would be unwise and impractical to carry out its proposed solution, and that CORD should use the money and materials to protect springs elsewhere.

At first CORD visited UNICEF’s offices for meetings, made telephone calls and wrote letters. This did not work, so CORD changed its advocacy methods. CORD invited UNICEF representatives to visit the site of UNICEF’s proposed spring protection in the valley. They walked from the hilltops, where people were living, down to the valley where the springs were situated and then back up the hill again. This was the route the women would have to walk to obtain water from the protected springs. As they walked back up the hill there was a change of heart as UNICEF officials realised that their solution was impractical. By 1999, UNICEF agreed that CORD could use the materials to protect the springs in the other area instead.

HANDOUT **Case studies on power** (continued)

Pumwani, Kenya – **hidden face of power**

St John's Community Centre is a Christian Community Service Organisation working with the slum dwellers of Pumwani. One of its objectives is to work with the community to empower them with information on human rights issues, to enable them to take action against cases of Human Rights violations.

For a long time the community has been prone to police harassment and brutality. They had no confidence in the law enforcers, or confidence in themselves to be able to act. In 2000, Pumwani Arts Academy, a group involved in educating the community on issues of human rights, started to work with St John's Community Centre to address the issue of police harassment.

They informed the local police that they were going to have shows and invited them to attend. The performances involved a play and dances to inform the community about their rights and to encourage them to rise up against any form of police harassment. The audience was given an opportunity to ask questions about the issue. St John's liaised with an organisation dealing with human rights and democracy, which responded to questions and issues raised.

Unknown to the group, plain-clothed policemen watched the plays and reported what was going on to their seniors. The police brutality and harassment decreased drastically and the community is now safer.

Initially, many people were afraid that the play would make the relationship between the police and the community worse. However, due to the transparent way in which it was done, and the involvement of the whole community, relationships have improved. The community also discovered the potential of the individual and collective resources that it possesses, that had not yet been used.

HANDOUT **Types of power**

	<b>CHARACTERISTICS</b>	<b>EXAMPLES</b>
<b>Economic</b>	Money or assets	People buy or stop buying from a particular shop or company Donor threatens to reduce a grant Offer a bribe to get a favour
<b>Authority</b>	Official position to make decisions	A judge sentences a thief to pay a fine A local politician decides whether a school will be built A pastor evicts someone from the congregation
<b>Coercion / force</b>	Fear if you do not respond	The army threatens to burn down a village Gangs intimidate and hurt people during elections
<b>Privilege / connections</b>	Who you know	Persuade the government to give cheap land to your family Become a bishop because you know the archbishop
<b>Legitimacy</b>	Recognised as a valid voice by others	Elected representative of trade union Recognised elder of community
<b>Organisation / networking</b>	Organised to play to strengths	Community is mobilised to advocate for change Links with other organisations
<b>Institutional / reputation</b>	People respect or fear the institution	Organisation is respected, eg: church Organisation is feared, eg: government Person is a popular public figure
<b>Information / knowledge</b>	Understanding, information and expertise	Trained professional, eg: doctor Good research and understanding of problem and realistic proposals for solution New ideas that others have not thought of
<b>Spiritual / identity</b>	Relationship with God	Understanding of who you are before God Guidance from God Understanding of God's heart and desire for justice
<b>Culture / tradition</b>	Belief system and behaviour	Tradition against challenging authority Belief in fate and that one deserves one's lot in life Strong commitment to family and community
<b>Service / compassion</b>	Desire to help others	Motivated by interests of others not selfish gain Commitment to empowering others to speak for themselves Values that others respect, agree with or want
<b>Resource</b>	Having something that someone wants	Provide access to communities Provide access to churches in a particular area

Based on the different forms of power you have, you can persuade or influence those who are in a position to make the decisions to act in a more equitable way.

HANDOUT **Abuse of power**

- Many of the problems we try to address in advocacy work have arisen through abuse of power, such as bribery in local government or the use of force to remove people from their land.
- When trying to address problems it is vital that we do not abuse power ourselves. We are called to be servant leaders.
- If we want to undertake advocacy with integrity, types of power such as force and bribery should not be seen as an option.
- It is important not to seek power or influence for their own sake, but rather to transform power relations so that they are more just and fair and meet people’s needs.

**Dangers to avoid**

**EMPTY PROMISES** If you promise to do something, you need to ensure that you complete it. If not, people will lose their trust in you, and you are less likely to be listened to in the future.

**ABUSE OF PRIVILEGE** Avoiding democratic and official processes to get what you want may give you an immediate result, but risks reinforcing any imbalance of power. Also avoid seeking special privileges for the church, as you could be accused of abusing power.

**USE OF FORCE** should never be used to get what you want, as you are simply copying the abuses of the oppressors.

**FALSE CLAIMS OF LEGITIMACY AND REPRESENTATION** If you have access to decision-makers based on legitimacy, you should ensure that you really represent those you claim to represent.

**POOR RESEARCH AND MISINTERPRETATION OF DATA** You need to make sure you accurately represent your own facts and those of any opposing views, so that you maintain integrity and have good solutions. Good research is the basis of all advocacy.

**BRIBERY** should never be considered. It goes against principles of good development including accountability, openness and transparency. It may also mean that bad decisions are made because most people are excluded from decision-making.