

Power and social change

Summary

“Power is the ability to achieve a purpose. Whether or not it is good or bad depends upon the purpose.” Martin Luther King, Jr.

This is a summary of our the free pdf guide to **Power and Social Change** by Jim Coe and Ruth Mayne, which combines a mix of theory and practical examples to assist voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) to think strategically about how to bring about change and as Martin Luther King noted achieve a *good purpose* in this world.

In the context of a challenging funding environment and the workings of the new Coalition Government, it is ever-more crucial to understand the different sources of power and how we can use power to seek the changes we wish to see in the world.

We refer to **social change** here as shorthand for *positive and progressive change* – improvements in people’s lives or the environment we live in, whether political, social, economic or environmental. This could range from short-term measurable impacts or long-term transformations to address root causes of problems.

Achieving change is by no means straightforward and involves using **power** and affecting power relations. Whether we analyse it or not, power is fundamental to the work of VCOs be it campaigning, activism, advocacy, influencing, lobbying, policy work, research or protest.

But how do we understand power, and how to use power to affect change? Power and social change is divided into the following four stand-alone sections and a checklist tool, which are summarised below:

Power and change;
How change happens;
Routes to change;
Sector and government



Power and change

To achieve change you need to understand power. Typically defined negatively as 'the ability to get someone to do something they would not otherwise do' (or 'power over'), power in fact has multiple dimensions and is often "*at its most effective when least observable*".

As well as 'power over', types of 'positive' power have also been identified: **'power with'** collective strength when people work together through alliances; **'power to'** the capacity to shape your life and wider society; **'power within'** individuals' sense of self-worth, confidence and identity.

A further distinction can be made between coercive power (using force or the threat of it) and persuasive power or pressure which is more subtle.

As well as understanding power, to achieve change it is necessary to tackle power relations - its sources, how it is exercised and distributed. Power can be:

- **'Visible'**, operating at the level of laws, institutions and decision making; the correlation between economic and military might and effective power is an oft-cited example.
- **'Hidden'**, operating behind the scenes to influence decision makers and shape the political and public agenda; e.g. government departments inviting only those VCOs to the table who they think will not rock the boat.
- **'Invisible'**, operating to shape ideas, beliefs and behaviours - e.g. powerful interest groups seeking to distort public debate; systematic racism, sexism or poverty conceived of as 'natural'.

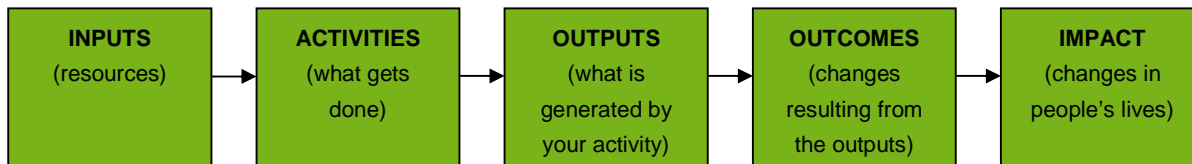
Key to any successful campaign is conducting regular power analyses to identify yours and your targets relative power and map out routes to Influence, such as PEST or PESTLE analysis.

How you understand power will play a large role in shaping how you make change happen. If you stick to the more traditional view you might overestimate the power of your opponents. Or, if you underestimate your own collective power, you might miss opportunities to empower marginalised groups or persuade decision makers to share power more widely.



How social change happens

Campaign plans often adopt linear models of change which can be summarised in the following *'impact chain'*:



Whether you are pragmatically focusing on short term or incremental change to advocating a more radical change to the whole system or regime your focus always needs to be on impact – the lasting changes made.

In stable conditions, change may occur through gradual incremental change but in other circumstances it may be more rapid and radical. When planning out your model of change you will also need to think about how to adopt flexible approaches and be able to react quickly to changes in circumstance.

Events can generate their own momentum, leading to the situation spiralling out of its previous state of control. For example shoppers were happily buying Genetically Modified tomato puree. However, when a group of scientists issued a statement in support of a colleague who had been fired after publishing research questioning the safety of GM foods, it led to questions in Parliament and helped trigger a frenzy in the mass media resulting in GM foods being labelled 'Frankenfood'. Soon after, supermarkets quickly distanced themselves from the technology, removing GM from their shelves and supply chains.

Fundamental shifts in ideas often occur over a period of time. You should try to be alert to early signs that dominant ideas are being challenged or that political and social forces are in flux, and be ready to offer new ideas when the moment arises. When analysing which factors are drivers and obstacles of change, you could also consider the role of:

- Individuals – e.g. Joanna Lumley and the Gurkhas campaign;
- Ideas – are shaped by society as well as shaping society, and usually need to be combined with pressure to achieve change
- Institutions – e.g. public authorities or other civil society organisations;
- Underlying structures – e.g. Britain's economic system, lack of basic socio-economic rights; culture norms

It's also crucial to think about how your issue is framed. Is it aligned with or contrary to public opinion? Does it appeal to people's emotions and values? One way to advance your issue is to reposition people's perceptions of it.

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Routes to change

As well as providing programmes and delivering services VCOs can secure change through a number of other channels including:

- **Influencing the policy and practice of key institutions**

You need good quality evidence but this is only one part of the mix of influences that policy makers take into account. Issues get onto the agenda when public opinion and interest groups put them, or when they are seen as a 'problem' that policy makers feel they must do something about. You therefore need to understand different ideologies, interests and how to frame your issue so it appeals to them. To ensure that the changes you have secured are making an impact you will also need to focus on how policy and practice is implemented on the ground.

- **Changing people's behaviour**

Information on its own is unlikely to change people's behaviour, even if you are successful in changing attitudes people do not consistently behave in line with their belief systems. Other factors that you need to consider and address include habit, capability, perceptions of costs and benefits, social contexts. The message you are telling and who is telling it is key. Try to identify – and then seek to communicate to – specific audiences and be consistent and persistent in your approach.

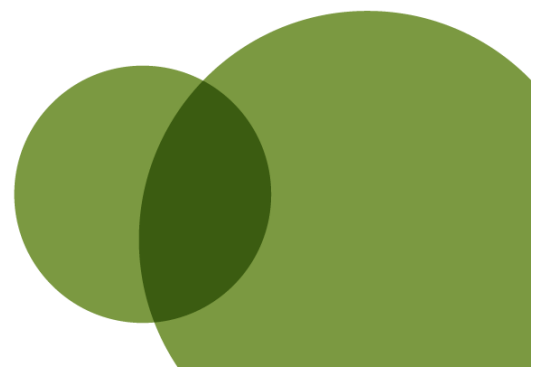
- **Strengthening civil society**

VCOs can play a major role helping groups and individuals to maximise their sources of power and make their voices heard and participating in decision making processes that affect their priorities and needs.

- **Making authorities more responsive to people's needs**

You may also need to work to ensure that decision making processes are more inclusive and decision makers more responsive bodies representing affected communities.

It is likely that your organisation will need to make progress in more than one of these areas in order to create sustainable change. For example, influencing policy and supporting and mobilising communities are often mutually reinforcing. To ensure that policy change addresses real needs and is sustained you often need to build strong community voices that can help shape policy and effectively hold decision makers to account.



Sector and government

A combination of globalisation and free market policies have changed the role and power of national government; in Britain evidence suggests that while government retains its potential power, decision making is more complex and policy autonomy and flexibility has been reduced in some areas (quangos, Public Private Partnerships, devolved government, local government, the European Union etc.).

Although this may make conducting a power analysis harder it does on the other hand create more opportunities to influence change. When mapping your power analysis as well as focusing efforts on the **visible power** of formal decision makers, it may also be necessary to target the **invisible power** of actors behind the scenes: e.g. interest groups and the increasing number of elite policy networks.

Given the large number of possible target institutions it becomes even more crucial to prioritise them according to how much influence they have over the issue, and whether they are supportive, opposed or neutral. You may, for example, find that a particular industry lobby is exerting powerful influence behind the scenes and therefore targeting a public campaign on them may be sufficient to bring change.

Over recent years there has also been clear signs of public disenchantment with formal political processes – decline in election turnouts and party membership. There is a strong sense amongst the voting public that politicians and political institutions are disconnected from them. New participatory forums have been set up by government to counter concerns over this ‘democratic malaise’ and encourage citizens to participate more directly in decision making – such as the Sustainable Communities Act, placing a duty on councils and governments to ‘inform, consult, involve and reach agreement’ with citizens on sustainability proposals and Local Government Act.

These initiatives have in turn prompted government and service providers to create a range of participatory initiatives that VCOs and communities are encouraged to engage with. But VCOs need to be strategic about how and when to engage in such forums; you need to ensure you have the skills to engage effectively, shape the terms of engagement and be accountable to your beneficiaries.

When deciding to engage in a particular forum it may be necessary to challenge and shape existing cultures and rules of engagement in order to make engagement in political processes meaningful, inclusive, simple, fun and less alienating to people. It is also important that groups have the skills to understand decision making processes, engage effectively and be accountable.

