

ACTIVITY 5:

Unpacking and upending systemic power

How does systemic power operate and show up in our context? What bold ideas can we use to expose their logic? How can we shape and amplify alternative ways of being and models?

Materials: Tcards or sticky notes (four colours), markers, handout: *Forms of systemic power*.

Before the activity, create a blank matrix on the wall or share copies.

Download *Analysing the four arenas of power* to copy and share.

Step 1: Our contexts

Plenary: Introduce the activity with a brief overview of systemic power. To reach a basic, shared understanding of the logics, nature, and interconnectedness of the dominant systems of power, review and discuss the definitions in the handout.

Small groups: Break into four groups, each taking one of the dominant forms of systemic power: patriarchy, structural racism/white supremacy, capitalism, or colonialism–imperialism. Discuss these questions, noting key examples on stickies.

- How does this form of systemic power show up concretely in our context and lives? Identify specific examples of how it is reinforced by visible, hidden, and invisible power.
- How has this changed over time? For example, how did colonialism present itself in earlier eras, and how does it present itself today? How has systemic power morphed over time?

Note that it can be easy to confuse contemporary trends and systemic power. Trends such as rising authoritarianism or white nationalism are indeed global and do influence power dynamics. However, these trends are shorter-term political projects, financed and organised by key actors to gain political and economic power. They are the product of these larger systems and tap into the logic, beliefs, and structures of patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy.

Plenary: Each group in turn posts their cards in the matrix on the wall. After each group presents, pause to discuss the questions.

- How does each system show up in our context in relation to each arena of power?
- How and where do these systems overlap and reinforce each other?
- How does systemic power make change more difficult?
- What are some of the ways these deeper systemic logics are contested? What alternative ideas, ideologies, and alternative economic and political models have emerged over time?
- What ideas or systemic power do we expose or tap into in our change strategies?

Step 2: Our issues

Plenary: Identify one issue or problem that everyone knows in their lives or faces in their activism. Examples could be extractive 'development' that threatens land, water, and environmental defenders, or gender-based violence. Form four groups, each tackling a different system: patriarchy, capitalism, structural racism/white supremacy, or colonialism–imperialism.

Small groups: Read the handout Forms of systemic power. Discuss how the system (for example, patriarchy) impacts your issue. Write two or three specific examples for each element listed below, using a separate card for each example:

- What are the key elements or structures of this system? (systemic power – green)
- What norms, values, and beliefs underlie the system? (invisible power – orange)
- How are powerful interests and agendas mobilised? (hidden power – grey)
- How are rules and decisions set and enforced? (visible power – blue)

Plenary: When all groups have shared their cards, invite everyone to look across each of the arenas of power (visible, hidden, invisible, systemic).

- How do capitalism and patriarchy reinforce each other? How do colonialism and white supremacy reinforce each other?
- How do these systems interact with and influence visible, hidden, and invisible power?
- How do we expose and challenge these systems? Give examples from your work. Can we create alternatives through the ways we organise and live?
- How does this analysis sharpen our strategies? How might we think differently about building and mobilising power through alliances?
- What systems – social, political, economic, ecological – do we imagine, aspire to, and centre in our agendas, organising, lives, and activism?

Further discussion:

How does the logic of capitalism prevent people from considering certain economic, environmental, or climate policy solutions? How do patriarchy and structural racism shape beliefs and politics in society particularly in relation to LGBTQI+ rights, marriage, migration, and employment? How does this overarching system shape our economic, political, and social lives and aspirations? What are the key features of each system's 'genetic codes' with regard to power? For example:

One of the codes of patriarchy is to define 'family' as a man, a woman, and children, and treat all non-conforming behaviour as a threat.

A capitalist code treats nature as merely an exploitable resource and source of profit.