

Four arenas of power

Visible power

Making and enforcing the rules

Formal decision-making – including laws, courts, policies, budgets, enforcement, policing, regulations, and institutional rules and procedures at all levels, local to global. This includes elections, appointments, and enforcement, from police and judges to Members of Parliament, bureaucracies, services, and local authorities. Visible power – formal decision-making – also exists in most institutions from churches and mosques to corporations, unions, and NGOs. Depicted as neutral, decision-making and implementation/ enforcement often discriminates by race, gender, class, location, and other factors. Exclusion is perpetuated by unrepresentative, closed, and discriminatory processes and structures. People, organisations and movements work to open decision making, change decisions and who makes decisions, and ensure fair enforcement and accountability.

Hidden power

Influencing and setting the agenda

Organised social, political, and economic interests – both legal and illegal – seek to influence and control formal visible power and shape what is prioritised and decided, and how decisions are enforced. For example, corporations, religious, and political groups operate parallel to or in collusion with state actors (visible power) to define priorities, policies, and budgets to serve their economic interests and political power. We call this ‘hidden power’ because, even though we can sometimes see the interests involved, they work behind the scenes to exercise influence with formal governance structures to control what is decided and whose interests matter. At times, they resort to lawsuits, surveillance, and violence to silence dissent and delegitimise alternatives. People, organisations, and movements expose and challenge these entrenched interests, but also influence visible power across the political spectrum, as do right-wing groups and illegal ‘shadow’ actors such as organised crime.

Invisible power

Shaping norms and beliefs

Beliefs, ideology, social norms, and culture that shape people’s sense of what is right, normal, and real. This includes deeply held, often unconscious prejudices based on gender, race, class, sexuality, location, age, and ability. The media, education, religion, and social rituals help to socialise particular beliefs, values, and narratives that legitimise and normalise injustice, discrimination, and violence. Manipulating invisible power through information and distorted narratives can turn people against each other and generate fear and distrust, often without people being aware of it. People, organisations and movements work to challenge and transform social norms and values through awareness raising, political education, narratives, and communications strategies.

Systemic power

Defining the logic of all structures and relationships

Deeply embedded logics work like operating systems to shape and structure all social and economic arrangements. Dominant ones include patriarchy, structural racism and white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism-imperialism. Together, these logics naturalise a dehumanising dominant-subordinate hierarchy based on violence and the exploitation of each other and nature. These logics are like the genetic codes that determine economic, political and social relationships and permeate institutions, which in turn shape our lives. Marxism, liberation theology, feminisms, decolonialism, and abolitionism are all ideologies that seek to replace these logics with more equitable, sustainable, and inclusive economic and social relationships. People, organisations, and movements who successfully contest power in the other three arenas can also challenge and transform power at the systemic level..