

# ❧ The Role of Power in Direct Action Processes ❧

“But you must realize that power is a constant in this world. Either you shape your perceptions or someone else shapes them for you. In this world, you do what you plan for yourself or you follow someone else’s plan for you. Power is the ability to create the results you desire while simultaneously adding value to the lives of others. Ultimate power is the ability to shape and control your own life. It is the ability to direct your own thought processes, your own behavior, so you take hold of the steering mechanism of your life and determine your own destiny.” —Joseph McElendon III

So who’s afraid of the big bad wolf?

Do you cringe when you hear the word power? Does it evoke visions of greedy monsters and evil-doers? Often, we talk about power negatively—likely because as marginalized people we are used to having power used against us to control us and in ways that harm us.

If you’re afraid of power, then you won’t get very far with a direct action program. Direct action is a show of power.

Power is defined in many ways, and it may also take different forms (e.g., political power, economic power, cultural power). We are not talking only about individual power. Individuals find their personal power in many different ways—through professional positions, religion, money, etc. For our purposes, we are talking specifically about collective power—power that is only accessible when a community works together to achieve a common goal.

Consider this definition of power:

*The ability to force decision makers to do what they otherwise would not do.* (Thomas Dye)

That's the power we seek through organizing and activism.

Now, consider some other ways to think about power:

- "Power refers to the ability to do, the ability to be, the ability to prevail."
- Power is "the ability a person or group has to 'produce intended effects upon the world around them, to realize their purposes within it, whatever these purposes happen to be.'"
- "A power relationship and the inequality between the parties in such a relationship presupposes that the weaker party either lacks appropriate power resources, or relatively fewer of them, or if he possesses them does not possess the will and/or the ability to employ them effectively in his interest."
- "Effective, working power—the essence of social power—requires the coordinated organization of power resources."
- "Hence, human social organization, not mere individual self-interested behavior, is central to the generation and application of power.... 'Power is invariably organized and transmitted through institutions.' Social organization refers to the interactive uniting of a number of persons into a group, who through structured use of their aggregate resources, act to achieve the group's purposes and goals."

### Some Common Sources of Power Include:

- Ability to apply force and violence
- Resources (human, social, financial, and cultural)
- Skills, Information, and Applied Knowledge
- Institutions
- Organization
- Solidarity

In the context of organizing and activism, power can be developed by:

- Recruiting
- Building Relationships
- Developing Strong Leaders
- Mobilizing Resources
- Collective Action



### *Stop and Think*

What does power mean to you? Do you feel powerful? Why or why not? Do you feel your community is powerful? Why or why not? In what ways do you think your community could become more powerful?

# ❧ Sharp's Consent Theory of Power ❧

Gene sharp is a leading theorist in nonviolent action. He proposed a theory of power that helps activists and organizers understand what is necessary to remove power from a ruler. His basic premises are below:

1. Societies are divided into two groups: the rulers and the subjects
2. Rulers have power that stems from various types of sources, including authority, human resources, skills and knowledge, intangible factors, material resources, and sanctions
3. Rulers are able to maintain this power because the subjects do not contest it. In other words, subjects consent through obedience, cooperation, and submission
4. Why do subjects consent to the rulers' power? Reasons vary. Among them are habit, fear of sanctions, moral obligation, self-interest, psychological identification with the rulers, indifference, and absence of self-confidence
5. Nonviolent action is a process of withdrawing consent, thus removing power from the rulers.

## Other Theories of Power:

The Power Elite theory holds that society is organized as a hierarchy, with powerful elites at the top of the hierarchy and the relatively powerless masses are at the bottom of it. The elites, through institutions, laws, myths, traditions, social norms, and sometimes force and violence maintain the hierarchy to the disadvantage of non-elites. Power flows top-down. Since people are relatively powerless in a power elite system, social change is very difficult. It can be achieved only by appealing to the elites and their interests and by persuading them to change. And, power can only be achieved through channels laid out by the elite, such as electoral process and participation in the economic system.

The Pluralist theory holds that power is distributed among the many individuals and organizations in a society. Special interests compete for power and control of the public's agenda. Groups tend to neutralize each other, which makes compromise and negotiation necessary and desirable. However, individuals and groups and build power through cooperation, pooling resources, and pursuing common interests.

## Analyzing Power:

Before we act, we must analyze the power that we have and the power that our opponent has. We do a power analysis to examine the multiple dimensions that affect our situation and also understand the factors that are likely to affect whether we win or lose our battle. Our analysis focuses on four questions:

- Who are the power players?
- How does each player intend to use its power?
- How can we gain enough power to force the change we want to see?
- How do we show our opponents the power that we have?

# POWER ANALYSTS MODEL #1

(This Process is from *The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond*)

[www.pisab.org](http://www.pisab.org)

## Step 1:

Diagram the community. What makes up the whole community? *Draw all the specific things you would see in your community inside the circle.*

Ex. High school, local businesses, Main Street, etc.

## Step 2:

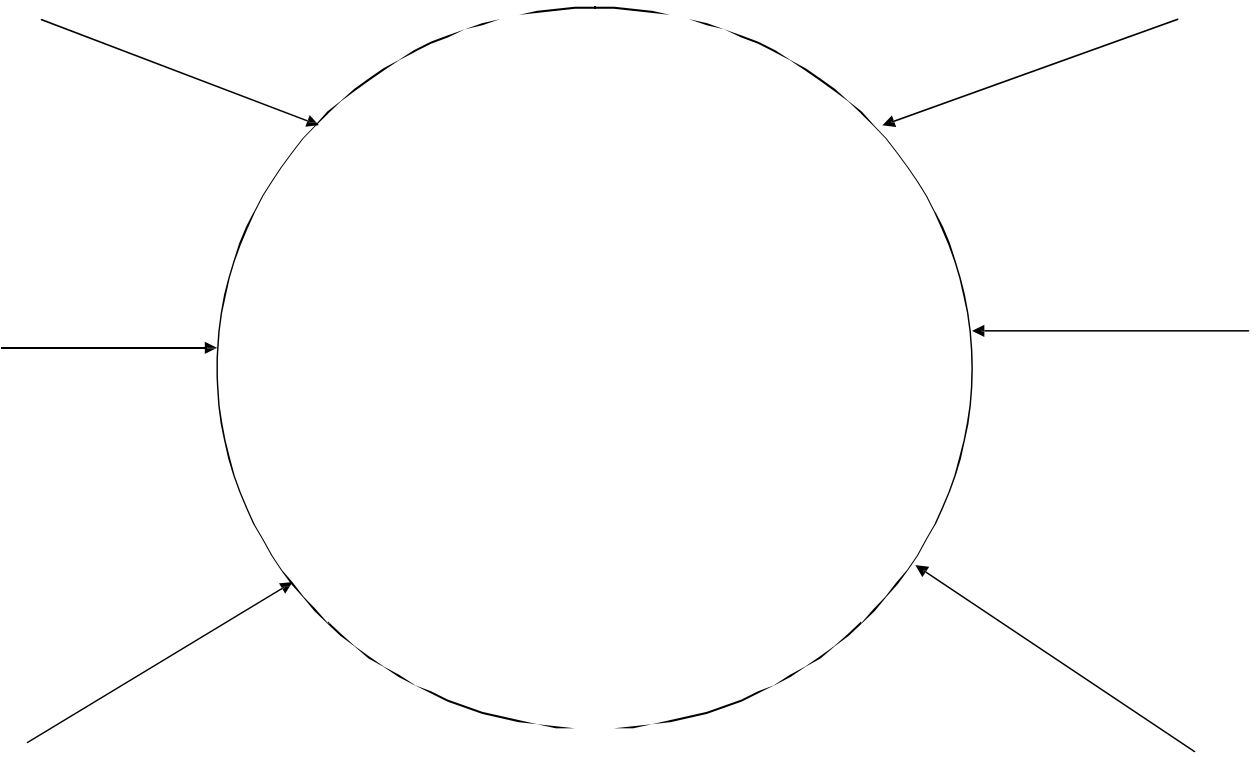
Which elements of the community contribute to the impact of tobacco use on Latinos? Look at the drawing of the community and highlight or circle the different entities that influence and/or increase the exposure to tobacco within that same community.

## Step 3:

- a)** There are larger systems that affect our communities. In the previous step, specific features that contribute to the exposure to tobacco have been identified within our community. Identify the larger systems at play that have a direct influence on the community and place them on the arrowed lines around the circle (community).
- b)** What is the relationship between those services within our community and the larger systems at play? List those relationships below the diagram to refer back to later.

## Step 4:

Now that the systems have been identified, what is the relationship between those systems? How do they affect each other? Indicate this on the diagram by drawing an arrow connecting the systems.



To further distinguish who has the power and who is the target fill in the chart below.

<u>WHO HAS THE POWER?</u> From the Power Analysis list who has the "power" in this particular community.	<u>WHAT IS THAT POWER?</u> From the Power Analysis list what kind of power they hold.	<u>POTENTIAL TARGET</u> Of those who have the "power" identify potential "targets" who are necessary in building relationships with in order to achieve the desired outcome? Be specific.

# POWER ANALYSIS MODEL #2

(This Process is from *The Powercube Model for Understanding Power for Social Change*,  
*Institute of Development Studies*)

[www.powercube.net](http://www.powercube.net)

What is power? Oxfam's work is based on the understanding that unequal power relations are one of the main underlying causes of poverty and suffering. One of Oxfam's aims is to transform power relations, so that poor men and women have greater influence over the policies, structures and social norms that affect their lives. However, unequal power relations manifest themselves in many different ways: from unfair trade regulations that disproportionately benefit rich countries, to the social norms that cause young girls to suffer malnutrition because they are only allowed to eat after their brothers have had their fill.

Power takes different forms:

- Visible: observable decision-making mechanisms
- Hidden: shaping or influencing the political agenda behind the scenes
- Invisible: norms and beliefs, socialization, ideology

Power is acted out in different spaces:

- Closed: decisions made by closed groups
- Invited: people asked to participate but within set boundaries
- Created: less powerful actors claim a space where they can set their own agenda

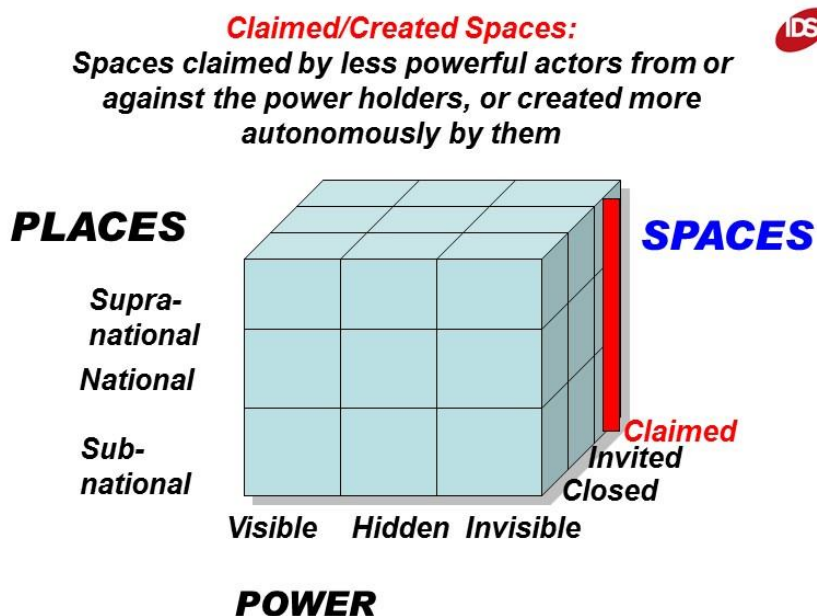
Power occurs at different levels:

- Household
- Local
- National
- Global

We usually think of power as control over others or the ability to carry out one's will, but power can also be more subtle. For example, power can be the strength and capacity

that we gain through joining with others towards a common goal, our own self-belief that we can achieve our aims or the courage to adopt a certain course of action. Power can be:

- Power over: the power of the strong over the weak, including the power to exclude others.
- Power to: the capability to decide actions and carry them out.
- Power with: collective power, through organization, solidarity and joint action.
- Power within: personal self-confidence, often linked to culture, religion or other aspects of identity, which influences the thoughts and actions that appear legitimate or acceptable.



**What goes on inside the spaces?**  
---Pearce and Vela, Colombia

- Decision-making
- Debate
- Building agreements
- Influence
- Interlocution
- Lobbying
- Protest
- Accountability
- Making visible
- Pressure
- Articulation
- Follow-up
- Formation of public opinion
- Scrutiny and recommendation
- Resistance
- Proposal
- Negotiation
- Peace-building
- Complaint
- Encounter
- Mobilization

# POWER GRID

OUR ORGANIZATION	OUR OPPONENT
<p>What is our vision? What are our goals? What are our demands?</p>	<p>Who are our opponents? (be sure to list specific people and/or organizations such as Ferguson Police Department, City of Richmond, the Coalition to End Affirmative Action, etc.)</p> <p>For each opponent, identify their vision, their goals, and their demands.</p> <p>Why are those whom you have identified likely to oppose you?</p>
<p>Who are our potential allies? Why would these potential allies want to be on our side? What would it take to get them to join our effort?</p> <p>How large and how solid is our support base?</p> <p>How might we bring an opponent's ally over to our side?</p>	<p>Who is likely to be an ally of our opponents? Why? How large and how solid is the opponent's support base?</p>
<p>What are our organizational strengths? What are our organizational weaknesses?</p>	<p>What are our opponents' organizational strengths and weaknesses?</p>
<p>What is our demonstrated record? How many wins versus losses have we gained? What was our most recent win?</p>	<p>What is our opponent's record? How many wins versus losses have they gained? What was their most recent win?</p>

What resources do we have available? Resources can include finances, information, people, access to media, voting numbers, and insiders who can make decisions in our favor.	What resources do our opponents have available? Resources can include finances, people, access to media, voting numbers, and insiders who can make decisions in their favor.
<b>Who is the decision maker? Name the specific person or group of people who have the authority to give us what we want. What is the decision maker's vested interest in the decision? Is there any indication that the decision maker favors one side over the other?</b>	
How can we influence the decision maker?	How can our opponents influence the decision maker?
Do we have anything that the decision maker wants or needs immediately? Do we have anything that the decision maker may want or need in the future? Are there any consequences that we can bestow upon the decision maker if he or she does not make the decision we want made?	Does our opponent have anything that the decision maker wants or needs immediately? Does our opponent have anything that the decision maker may want or need in the future? Are there any consequences that the opponent can bestow upon the decision maker if he or she does not make the decision they want made?
<b>Given the side-by-side comparison of the information above, how does our organization's power compare to the opponent's power? Who is more powerful—our organization or one of our opponents?</b>	