Guide to Power Analysis in Community Organising

What is a Power Analysis?

In the context of community organising, a Power Analysis is a tool that helps us begin to understand where power currently sits within a community. By investigating the individuals and organisations who have power, we can get a sense of the current power balance and begin to devise strategies for how to shift it. We can also learn the strengths and weaknesses of both allies and opponents, as well as reflecting on our own base of power and how ready we are to engage with others. Finally, on a practical note, knowing who the powerful people in the community are is a good idea before we start engaging with people and potentially bump into them!

How to create a power analysis

Step 1 – Identify your community

Identify the area, neighbourhood or community you are going analyse. What are the boundaries of the community and therefore who is included in it? Bear in mind that people in the community will have their own sense of where it is – for example, not many people will define their neighbourhood by where the Ward boundaries are. You may have external power holders with areas of influence that overlap your community so bear that in mind too.

Step 2 – Create a list of organisations and individuals who hold power

The best place to start is just to make a long list or mind map of everyone you can think of who has power in and over the community. Who are the institutions, organisations and people who come to mind? Don't worry about detail at this stage – that will come later. If you don't know an individual's name then just put their position for now. For example, if you do not know who the MP is at the moment then make sure to put them down to analyse further.

Step 3 – Categorise your list

Create a way of grouping the individuals and organisations in your list to help you refer back to them
more easily. This will also help you see which areas are lacking and think about connections both
between and within groups. For example, for a community of place you might use categories such as Politicians, Civil Servants, Businesses, Voluntary Sector, Media, Residents, etc.

Step 4 – Fill in the gaps

Now is a good time to reflect on who is missing from your top-level power analysis. Who else has power that you haven't thought of already? As you listen to more people in the community, you will be able to revisit your analysis and add in new power holders. For now, you could present you list to those you work with to get their thoughts on who else should be added in. Where possible, try and consider those with hidden power who are influencing things behind the scenes.

Step 5 – Put names to positions

Get into the detail and research who the key individuals are in the various positions of power you have identified. For example, instead of just putting 'the council', find out who the chief executive of the council is and who the heads of relevant departments are too. This is the time to get specific and personalise some of the organisations and institutions you have listed. Every organisation and institution will be made up of people with different backgrounds, interests and levels of power.

Step 6 – Research key individuals

Find out everything you can about some of the key individuals you have identified. Who are they? How long have they been in their current role? What were they doing before? Where were they educated and to what level? Who do they know both personally and professionally? If an elected official, how many votes did they win and what was the turnout at the last election? What portfolios do they / have they held? What are their interests and what causes do they support? An internet search is a great place to start, but also look at local media coverage, social media, organisational websites, press announcements, etc.

Step 7 – Investigate organisations

As well as doing detailed research on individuals, start to gather information on organisations as well. The crucial question to reflect on is what do they care about? Look at their websites, annual reports, social media accounts, press releases, etc. What strengths do they have in terms of people, resources, funding and reputation? What weaknesses do they have – where are they vulnerable? What are the key metrics they report against and who are they accountable to? Bear in mind that each organisation will have its own internal power structure as well.

Step 8 – Identify potential allies

Linking into your wider strategy, ask yourself which of these people and organisations are naturally inclined to support your campaign and / or goals. Consider the gaps in your own power and who can help fill them in a mutually beneficial relationship. Think about approaching potential allies directly as part of a listening conversation. Try and put yourself in their shoes – how does allying with you help them achieve what they need to and meet the targets they are accountable for? Speak in their language as much as possible and be clear with what you are asking them to do.

Step 9 – Analyse potential opponents

As part of an effective community organising strategy, you should also have a clear understanding of who your potential opponents are. This is true whether you are adopting a conflict model to challenge them or a consensus-building model to win them over. Think about who on your list has goals that conflict with your own, and who benefits from the status quo that you want to change. Before you take action against your opponents, you need to have a very clear understanding of the sources and extent of their power, what resources they can draw upon and who else they can organise against you. Compare their relative strength against your own and determine how many more people you need to tilt the scales in your favour. Only fight the battles you have already won. Until you are ready, stay below their radar and work to build a power base that undermines their own.

Step 10 – Update and protect your Power Analysis

You will constantly receive new information about the movements of power in the community through listening conversations, media reports, election results etc. Keep adding to and amending your Power Analysis to make sure it is current and only share it with those you can trust to maintain confidentiality. Remember that a comprehensive Power Analysis is itself a crucial source of the community's power!

Power Analysis Templates

It is entirely up to you how to present your Power Analysis. Use a format that works for you and the people you work with. You might want to develop something visual like a mind map or diagram, or create a written document that analyses each power holder in turn. On the following pages, you will find some templates you could choose to use. These will also help you consider power holders you may have overlooked. Whatever you do, make sure the format you choose is accessible to the community and understandable by someone other than yourself!

Power Analysis Templates

Elected Representatives

Consider MPs, Members of Devolved Governments (e.g. MSPs), Councillors, Regional Mayors, Police and Crime Commissioners, etc.

Name	Role	Constituency	Political Party	Majority at Last Election	Turnout at Last Election	Date of Next Election

Detailed Analysis

Name	Background	Key Interests	Connected To

Public Sector

Consider Council Leaders & Officers, Civil Servants, Police Officers, Health Service Leaders, etc.

Name	Job Title	Organisation	Goals & Responsibilities	Accountable To

Detailed Analysis

Name	Background	Key Interests	Connected To

Economic Leaders

Consider business owners, social enterprise founders, members of Chambers of Commerce, networking group leaders, etc.

Name	Job Title	Business Name	Type of Business	Number of Employees	Annual Turnover	Annual Profit

Detailed Analysis

Name	Background	Key Interests	Connected To

Voluntary Sector Leaders

Consider leaders and employees of charities, campaign groups, mutual aid groups, community centres, faith groups etc.

Name	Job Title	Organisation	Size of Organisation	Aims / Objectives	Funding Sources

Detailed Analysis

Name	Background	Key Interests	Connected To

Media & Social Media Leaders

Consider leaders and employees of local newspapers, radio, TV, Twitter campaigns, Facebook groups, etc.

Name	Position	Organisation / Group	Reach (people)	Aims / Objectives	Funding Sources

Detailed Analysis

Name	Background	Key Interests	Connected To

Residents / Others

Consider those without formal positions who are powerful e.g. family leaders, well-connected individuals, etc.

Name	Background	Key Interests	Connected To