

# Power Unpacked: Domination, Empowerment and Participation in Local Guatemalan Peace Forums<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*This article focuses on the various manifestations of power at play in a local peace initiative, the Guatemalan mesas de concertación – forums for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements in English, or mesas in short. With this we hope to fill a void in the field of peace and conflict studies: the lack of a framework to systematically analyse the different dimensions of power in local peace initiatives. Drawing on qualitative data collected between 2002 and 2012, we use John Gaventa's 'power cube' approach to explore spaces, forms and levels of power and how these interact.<sup>5</sup> This includes how power shaped the establishment and evolution of the mesas, and how the mesas simultaneously sought to challenge unequal power structures, as well as to enable underrepresented social sectors to voice their concerns over peace implementation. We argue that the mesas were not only used by different stakeholders to contest and project power. They also reproduced structures of inequality and were prey to invisible power, which made it difficult for them to effectively enable marginalised social groups to achieve empowerment. Still, raising awareness about the significance that support across different levels of society has for the successful implementation of the Guatemalan peace agreements, the mesas promoted the participation and empowerment of a variety of social sectors, contributing to a more inclusive and locally grounded peace, and therefore a more sustainable one.*

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<sup>5</sup> Gaventa, John (2006). Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis. *IDS Bulletin* No. 6. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

## Introduction

In this article we explore the various manifestations of power at play in a local peace initiative, the Guatemalan *mesas de concertación* – forums for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements in English, or *mesas* in short. Drawing on the framework of power analysis put forward by local development researcher John Gaventa, we explore spaces, forms and levels of power and how these interact.<sup>6</sup> This includes, on the one hand, how power shaped the establishment and evolution of the *mesas*, and, on the other hand, how the *mesas* sought to challenge unequal power structures and to enable underrepresented social sectors to voice their concerns over peace implementation. In so doing, we hope to fill a void in the field of peace and conflict studies: the lack of a framework to systematically analyse the different dimensions of power in local peace initiatives.

We chose the Guatemalan *mesas* as a case study to shed light on three key challenges faced by local peace initiatives. Firstly, what offers the best prospects for peacebuilding: “informal peace initiatives that are more attuned to their environment but lack critical links with state and international institutions, or formal ones that are more estranged from communities but have access to, and work with, state and international institutions” and are thus able to directly influence policymaking?<sup>7</sup> This dilemma will be discussed in the light of the ‘spaces’ dimension of power in Gaventa’s framework. Secondly, the most visible

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<sup>6</sup> Gaventa, John (2006). Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis. *IDS Bulletin* No. 6. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

<sup>7</sup> Idler, Annette & Mouly, Cécile. (2013). 'Peace Constituency' or 'Peace Infrastructure': Yeast or Cobweb? Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, USA. .

forms of power, embedded in the rules, observable structures and procedures of local peace initiatives, unequivocally impinge on their ability to contribute to peacebuilding. Yet how do hidden and invisible forms of power influence peacebuilding? This is relevant, in particular, with regard to forms of cultural and structural violence that underlie many internal armed conflicts and continue to permeate the state and society long after a negotiated settlement, undermining the potential for local peace initiatives to meaningfully contribute to peacebuilding.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, how does power flow between levels of society and beyond in peacebuilding processes? The traditional view emphasises power trickling down from the international to the national and the national to the local. Yet, more and more attention is now being paid to power flowing the other way around, as demonstrated, for instance, by the growing literature on hybrid peace.<sup>9</sup> We will look at this issue when tackling the ‘levels’ dimension of power in Gaventa’s framework. Additionally, because of their diversity within the context of post-conflict peacebuilding in Guatemala, the *mesas* enable us to compare, and assess the success of, different strategies to open spaces for the participation of marginalised social groups, as well as grasp the complex array of factors that may impinge on the potential for local peace initiatives to contribute to positive peace.

Methodologically, we draw on qualitative data gathered mainly by ethnographic means. Such data were obtained through interviews, observation

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of structural and cultural violence, see, for example, Galtung, Johan (1990). Cultural Violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 291-305 or Galtung, Johan (2010). Direct, Structural, and Cultural Violence. In: Young, Nigel (ed.) *The Oxford International Encyclopedia of Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 312-316.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Mac Ginty, Roger (2011). *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Richmond, Oliver (2011). *A Post-Liberal Peace*. London: Routledge.

and the collection of documents from and about the *mesas* during several periods of fieldwork between 2002 and 2012, covering 19 out of 20 Guatemalan departments (administrative units corresponding to states or provinces in other countries) where *mesas* existed, in addition to the capital city. The only department not covered (Jalapa) corresponded to an incipient *mesa*, that had been reactivated in 2003, and with whose members contact was established during meetings in Guatemala city and Sololá.

The *mesas* appeared in Guatemala in the aftermath of the civil war that officially ended in 1996, as local forums made up of representatives of different sectors of society were established across the country to follow up on, and contribute to, the implementation of the peace agreements. Originally, the *mesas* were the result of spontaneous initiatives, generally under the leadership of civil society, but also, at times, the private sector or the state. The UN Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA), deployed in the country to oversee peace implementation, and its national counterpart, the Commission of Follow-Up to the Implementation of the Peace Agreements (CAAP), an official body with a similar mandate, quickly considered the *mesas* as useful spaces to convey the perspective of local actors in the process of application of the peace agreements. Both institutions thus promoted the creation of *mesas* in all 22 departments of Guatemala, except the capital, and sought their institutionalisation. *Mesas* were then established in 20 departments by the beginning of the years 2000, moving from being spaces claimed by actors who resented their lack of representation in peace negotiations and wished to take part in the peacebuilding process to becoming more formal spaces belonging to

the institutional architecture in charge of supporting peace implementation. The only two exceptions were Baja Verapaz, where civil society was particularly weak in the aftermath of the war, and the capital city where such a space was considered to be redundant.

The *mesas* offered great promise to decentralise peace implementation and enhance public participation in the process by being spaces open to all social sectors of their locality and seeking to open other spaces for the participation of civil society, particularly marginalised social groups. But, while the *mesas* did fulfil this promise to a certain extent, as will be discussed below, they varied in terms of organisation, activity and influence, and were not exempt of the influence of powerful actors from inside and outside, who sought to influence their composition, agenda and decision-making. Various *mesas* did resist such interference and challenged prevailing power structures. However, like the post-conflict peacebuilding process in general, they overall fell short of expectations by being unable to overcome some of the most ingrained forms of cultural and structural violence.

The article is structured as follows. It begins with an introduction to the concept of 'power' and to the 'power cube', a conceptual tool developed by John Gaventa.<sup>10</sup> Following modern social theorists, we adopt a plural view of power and focus on 'power to', 'power over' and 'power everywhere'.<sup>11</sup> From this viewpoint, the power cube is a useful model to grasp power in its various interrelated dimensions, because it includes spaces, forms and levels of power.

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<sup>10</sup> Gaventa (2006).

<sup>11</sup> Haugaard, Mark (2010). Power: A "Family Resemblance" Concept. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4, pp. 419-438, p. 419.

We subsequently use this tool to analyse the ways in which power shaped the Guatemalan *mesas*. Finally, we conclude by pointing to the various aspects of power revealed by employing this analytical framework in our case study. We find that the tool contributes to enhancing our understanding of how power, in its manifold dimensions, is exerted in local peace initiatives. As we argue, the Guatemalan consultation forums opened spaces for the participation of diverse social groups from different parts of Guatemala in the peacebuilding process, yet they also reproduced some of the structural and cultural violence at the root of the armed conflict and were used by various actors to pursue their own agendas.

### **The concept of ‘power’ and the ‘power cube’ approach**

“Power is the notion of the bringing about of consequences”.<sup>12</sup> Even in such a broad sense, the definition of power is contested because the concept can be understood in many ways. While recognising the “plurality of forms of power”, some authors have synthesised power into one comprehensive theory.<sup>13</sup> Thomas Wartenberg, for example, defines power as “a set of distinct social phenomena that play essentially different but nonetheless related roles in the constitution both of individual social agents and of society as a whole.”<sup>14</sup> Others, including Mark Haugaard, maintain that there is no single definition of power because its meaning is contingent on the context.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lukes, Steven (1978). Power and Authority. In: Bottomore, Tom B. & Nisbet, Robert A. (eds.) *A History of Sociological Analysis*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 633-676, p. 634.

<sup>13</sup> Pearce, Jenny (2012). Power in Community: A Research and Social Action Scoping Review. Bradford: University of Bradford, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Wartenberg, Thomas (1990). *The Forms of Power: from Domination to Transformation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Haugaard, Mark (2002). *Power: A Reader*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

In this article we follow social theorists in their approach to power. According to Haugaard, social theorists “construct empirical models of how society works and, depending upon their theory, define power in a manner which best suits their model.”<sup>16</sup> The concept of power within postmodern social theory can be traced back to Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince*.<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault tends to be considered the most influential scholar of the 20th century of this strand of thought.<sup>18</sup> Modern social theorists often use as a starting point Karl Marx or Max Weber. They conceptualise power as a capacity which can be used to sustain the status quo or enable social change.<sup>19</sup> Steven Lukes, Pierre Bourdieu and Mark Haugaard are among the modern social theorists.<sup>20</sup>

In line with their approach, we conceive power in terms of ‘power over’, ‘power to’, and ‘power everywhere’.<sup>21</sup> While analytical political theorists, such as Robert Dahl, conceptualise power as “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do”,<sup>22</sup> in our approach domination is just one form of power. In our case study, multiple dimensions of power are exerted by actors from within and without the *mesas* and through the deeply unequal structures of Guatemalan society that permeated the *mesas*.

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<sup>16</sup> Haugaard (2002), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Machiavelli, Niccolò (1935). *The Prince*. London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Foucault, Michel (1979). *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. Foucault, Michel (1990). *The History of Sexuality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Weber, Max (1978). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>20</sup> Lukes (1978). Bourdieu, Pierre (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Haugaard, Mark (1997). *The Constitution of Power: a Theoretical Analysis of Power, Knowledge and Structure*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Nelson, Nici & Wright, Susan (1995). *Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice*. London: ITDG. Haugaard (1997).

<sup>22</sup> Dahl, Robert A. (1957). The Concept of Power. *Behavioral Science*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 201-215, p. 202.

A particularly important form of power in local peace initiatives is empowerment, which is linked to participation. As Nici Nelson and Susan Wright claim, participation allows power shifts within groups, institutions and society as a whole.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, while some of the existing power structures were perpetuated within and through the Guatemalan *mesas*, the participation of civil society stakeholders in the *mesas* produced such power shifts, particularly within groups and institutions.

‘Power over’ is what can be broadly considered “a social relation between two agents, who may be called the ‘principal’ and the ‘subaltern’”, in which the first one dominates the other.<sup>24</sup> Lukes notes that power needs to be considered against the backdrop of possible resistance against it.<sup>25</sup> This is also how Hannah Arendt cites Voltaire’s view on power as “making others act as I choose” and Weber’s view as the opportunity “to assert my own will against the resistance”.<sup>26</sup> Thus John Scott summarises that social power “involves the socially significant affecting of one agent by another in the face of possible resistance”.<sup>27</sup> The author compares ‘power over’ with the French ‘*pouvoir*’ and the sovereign power of the Weberian state.<sup>28</sup> Nelson and Wright also emphasise that power is a description of a relation, not a possession.<sup>29</sup> With regard to participation, the authors state that through ‘power over’ one can gain

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<sup>23</sup> Nelson & Wright (1995).

<sup>24</sup> Scott, John (2001). *Power*. Cambridge: Polity, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Lukes, Steven (1974). *Power: A Radical View*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

<sup>26</sup> Arendt, Hannah (2002). Reflections on Violence. In: Besteman, Catherine (ed.) *Violence: A Reader*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 19-34, p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> Scott (2001), pp. 3-7.

<sup>28</sup> Scott (2001).

<sup>29</sup> Nelson & Wright (1995), p. 8.



access to decision-making, often in public spaces.<sup>30</sup>

‘Power to’ focuses on individuals instead of relations. In this context power would no longer be translated into French as ‘*pouvoir*’, but ‘*puissance*’. Hence it is “the ability that actors have to facilitate certain things that lies at the centre of attention”.<sup>31</sup> ‘Power to’ is crucial for understanding human development in which power is not a finite resource but can grow by being used. Thus, “to be ‘participants’ people have to be able to use their ‘power to’ to negotiate and transform those hopefully willing partners who have institutional and structural ‘power over’”.<sup>32</sup> This is exemplified by civil society groups, such as the *mesas*, who in the absence of ‘power over’ can still exert pressure on policymakers in order to bring about change.

‘Power everywhere’ sees power as constitutive of reality and “diffused throughout a society”.<sup>33</sup> As Foucault argues, power goes beyond structure and agency: it is omnipresent. In his words, “[p]ower is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere”.<sup>34</sup> This perspective is useful to reflect upon the ways in which processes and activities can be transformative and contribute to increase options for people to fulfil their ideas. In a way, it also resonates with Hannah Arendt’s view on power shaped by thinking about the constitution of society.<sup>35</sup>

The omnipresence of power suggested by Foucault is important to

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<sup>30</sup> Nelson & Wright (1995).

<sup>31</sup> Scott (2001), p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Nelson & Wright (1995).

<sup>33</sup> Scott (2001), p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault (1990).

<sup>35</sup> Arendt, Hannah (1970). *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

empowerment. According to Jane Parpart, Shirin Rai and Kathleen Staudt, “empowerment cannot transcend power relations; it is enmeshed in relations of power at all levels of society”.<sup>36</sup> In this view, structure and agency are equally important because empowerment can occur both at an individual level and at a collective one. It includes ‘power within’, that is the individual consciousness of such a power, and ‘power with’, that is the power that arises from collective action. Ultimately, both are related, since collective action, which can be achieved through collective ‘power within’, can generate transformative power through the “building of common ground among different interests, the development of shared values and strategies and the creation of collective strength through organisation”.<sup>37</sup> Such an empowerment is usually both a process and an outcome or, in line with Amartya Sen, both means and end.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, it is embedded in the specific experiences, aspirations and cultural context. Where community and collective action is more valued than individualism, as is the case in many rural areas of Guatemala, the relationships among people as empowerment can be more important than individual choices.<sup>39</sup> Empowerment then is a means to uphold collective action, and an end to strengthen the community.

The ‘power cube’ developed by John Gaventa and the Institute of

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<sup>36</sup> Parpart, Jane L.; Rai, Shirin & Staudt, Kathleen (2002). *Rethinking Empowerment: Gender and Development in a Global/local World*. London: Routledge, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Eybent, Rosalind; Harris, Colette & Pettit, Jethro (2006). Introduction: Exploring Power for Change. *IDS Bulletin* No. 6. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Sen, Amartya (1999). *Commodities and Capabilities*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, Sen, Amartya (2001). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>39</sup> Alkire, Sabina; Meinzen-Dick, Ruth; Peterman, Amber, *et al.* (2013). The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index. *World Development*, Vol. 52, pp. 71-91, p. 73.

Development Studies (IDS) integrates these different types of power.<sup>40</sup> It thus constitutes a useful analytical tool to unravel the distinct manifestations of power in the Guatemalan *mesas*. It follows social theorists' conception of power, in particular Lukes's seminal work *Power: a Radical View*.<sup>41</sup> The 'power cube' approach rests on the analysis of three interrelated dimensions of power – spaces, forms and levels –, which take into account 'power over', 'power to', 'power with' and 'power within', and thus embrace the complexity of power.<sup>42</sup>

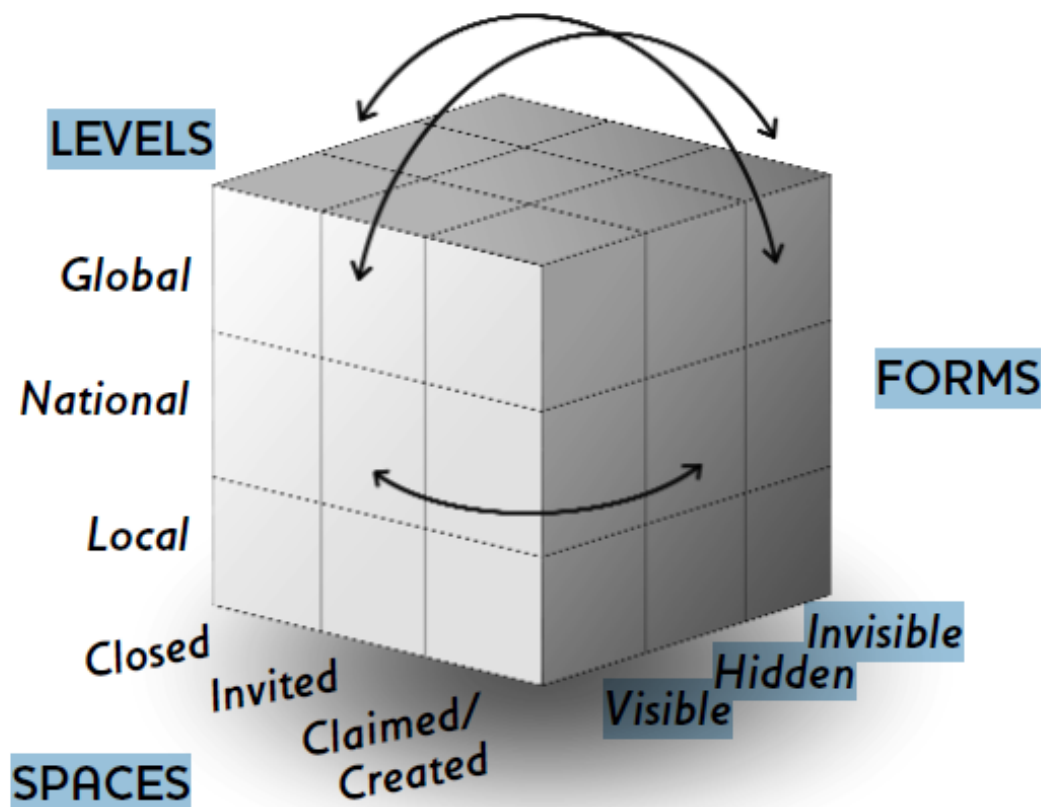


Figure 1. The 'power cube': the levels, spaces and forms of power. Source: Gaventa, John (2006). *Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis*. *IDS Bulletin* No. 6. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex (reproduced with author's permission, see also [www.powercube.net](http://www.powercube.net)).

<sup>40</sup> Gaventa (2006).

<sup>41</sup> Lukes (1974).

<sup>42</sup> Gaventa (2006).

The 'spaces' dimension speaks to Foucault's and other postmodernists' work because it reflects the diffusion of power throughout certain spaces. It allows us to explore who is entitled to participation within certain boundaries. According to Gaventa, spaces are "opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests."<sup>43</sup> Three types of spaces stand out: closed, invited and claimed (or created) ones. Closed spaces are those where only certain actors can participate and make decisions. The latter are taken behind closed doors, without consultation or participation of the population. Key issues are often debated in this kind of spaces, for instance macroeconomic and security policies. These spaces work under the premise that decision-makers are experts in the area under discussion and that they represent the interests of the population. Invited spaces are regularised or institutionalised arenas, where participation is relatively more open than in closed spaces. In these arenas people can take part in the decision-making process as long as authorities permit it. At last, claimed spaces refer to alternative, non-official spaces opened by less powerful groups in order to have a say in decisions that affect them and challenge decisions made exclusively by power holders.<sup>44</sup> These three kinds of spaces have to be understood as ideal types. They lie on a continuum of manifold types of spaces, which may be hybrid to some extent and are therefore not always easy to discern.<sup>45</sup> This continuum depends on the context in which the spaces are embedded, which is

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<sup>43</sup> Gaventa (2006), p. 26.

<sup>44</sup> Gaventa (2006), p. 25.

<sup>45</sup> Gaventa (2006), p. 26.

why the power cube should be considered as a flexible tool, the categories of which may vary from one case to another.<sup>46</sup>

‘Forms’, which include visible, hidden and invisible power, stem from Lukes’s three dimensions of power. Visible power is found in formal rules, observable structures and procedures that specify who participates or not and takes decision in a given space. This form of power places emphasis on those whose interests predominate in a given space, that is, those who can shape decision-making. Hidden power works by creating limits to the participation of specific groups or leaving key issues out of discussion in a given space, owing to the influence of powerful actors or inequitable structures. Hidden power can thus reduce the possibilities for certain groups to exert ‘power to’.<sup>47</sup> Finally, invisible power is “probably the most insidious of the three dimensions of power, [it] shapes the psychological and ideological boundaries of participation”.<sup>48</sup> By making people see their subjugation as natural and unquestionable, it constitutes a barrier to their participation in public affairs. It can generate a state of ‘false consciousness’, where its subjects are not aware of their genuine interests. Invisible violence resonates with Galtung’s concept of cultural violence, which legitimises structural and direct violence, making them “look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong”.<sup>49</sup>

‘Levels’ refer to the levels of incidence of power from the local to the national and then the global. Since local, national and global spheres are

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<sup>46</sup> Gaventa (2006), p. 27-28.

<sup>47</sup> Gaventa (2006), pp. 28-30.

<sup>48</sup> Gaventa (2006), p. 29.

<sup>49</sup> Galtung (1990), p. 291.

interconnected, power can work throughout the three levels.<sup>50</sup> The importance of public participation at different levels in peacebuilding processes has been highlighted by scholars, such as John Paul Lederach, with a view to building sustainable peace.<sup>51</sup> In particular, local arenas, such as the *mesas*, have gained importance, owing to the growing recognition that peacebuilding processes can only be sustainable and legitimate if local actors take part in them. The national level continues to play a predominant role and is the level at which peace agreements are usually signed. As for the global level, it refers to forms of power that transcend national borders. This level is acquiring more importance under the accelerated process of globalisation and is key to many peace negotiation and implementation processes, since international actors are often involved in them and influence their course. As the other dimensions, the distinct levels are neither fixed, nor isolated categories, but points on a fluid continuum.

The power cube helps visualise the linkages and interrelations between the different dimensions of power. It offers a dynamic perspective of power, where each side (spaces, forms and levels) of the cube is linked to each other, permitting analyses from multiple angles.<sup>52</sup> These aspects will now be considered in the case of the Guatemalan *mesas*, beginning with an analysis of the evolution of the *mesas* from claimed to invited spaces, and subsequently examining how they opened other spaces. It shows the challenges that local peace initiatives face when becoming more institutionalised and when multiple

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<sup>50</sup> Gaventa (2006), pp. 27-28.

<sup>51</sup> E.g. Lederach, John Paul (2000). Journey from Resolution to Transformative Peacebuilding. In: Lederach, John Paul & Cynthia Sampson (eds.) *From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contributions to International Peacebuilding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 45-55.

<sup>52</sup> Gaventa (2006), pp. 25, 30-31.

power players on different levels start to have a stake and seek to impose their own agendas.

### **The Guatemalan Forums for Consultation and Follow-Up of the Peace Agreements<sup>53</sup>**

As mentioned in the introduction, the *mesas* were established in Guatemala in the years following the signing of peace in 1996. The agreements, which put an end to a 36-year-long civil war that opposed the government to the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (URNG) umbrella guerrilla group, covered a wide range of issues aimed at addressing some of the root causes of the armed conflict, including socio-economic and political exclusion, and ethnic discrimination. In so doing, they opened spaces for civil society, and particularly traditionally marginalised sectors, to participate in public affairs. In this context the *mesas* emerged out of the will of various social groups to have their voices heard and contribute to peace implementation.

#### ***From Claimed to Invited Spaces***

Originally, the *mesas* were claimed spaces, opened by social actors who had little possibility to channel their concerns through institutional policymaking arenas and wished to have a say in the implementation of the peace agreements. By coming together to overcome their exclusion, these actors used the power diffused in society, even though with limitations, as a collective

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<sup>53</sup> Some of the data used in this section stem from the previous work of one of the authors. See Mouly, Cécile (2004). *The Role of Peace Constituencies in Building Peace in Nicaragua and Guatemala*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, Cambridge. Mouly, Cécile (2008). *Peace Constituencies in Peacebuilding: the Mesas de Concertación in Guatemala*. In: Pugh, Michael; Neil Cooper & Mandy Turner (eds.) *Whose Peace? Critical Perspectives on the Political Economy of Peacebuilding*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 302-317.

property and got organised into informal forums, which adopted the name of *mesas*. They transformed and bundled this power into a means of challenging the formal power structures of Guatemalan society.<sup>54</sup> The *mesas* ('roundtables' in Spanish) initially referred to a diversity of forums, which sought to bring together representatives of different sectors of Guatemalan society, some of which had the specific objective of supporting peace implementation. Such spaces were diverse in their compositions, functions and even names, reflecting the different contexts in which they were immersed. In general, all civil society organisations based in a department were invited to join their respective *mesa*. In many cases, representatives of the state and the private sector were also invited. However, not all invited groups agreed to participate, and the *mesas'* composition varied in each department.

Civil society organisations commonly included women's organisations, peasant organisations and development nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) among others, while the state was typically represented by departmental governors and departmental representatives of national state institutions. Meanwhile, the private sector was either represented by the chamber of commerce or professional associations. In departments in which the population was in majority indigenous, indigenous people usually made up the majority of *mesa* members. Table I provides two examples of the makeup of the *mesas*.

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<sup>54</sup> See Scott (2001), p. 9. Foucault (1979).

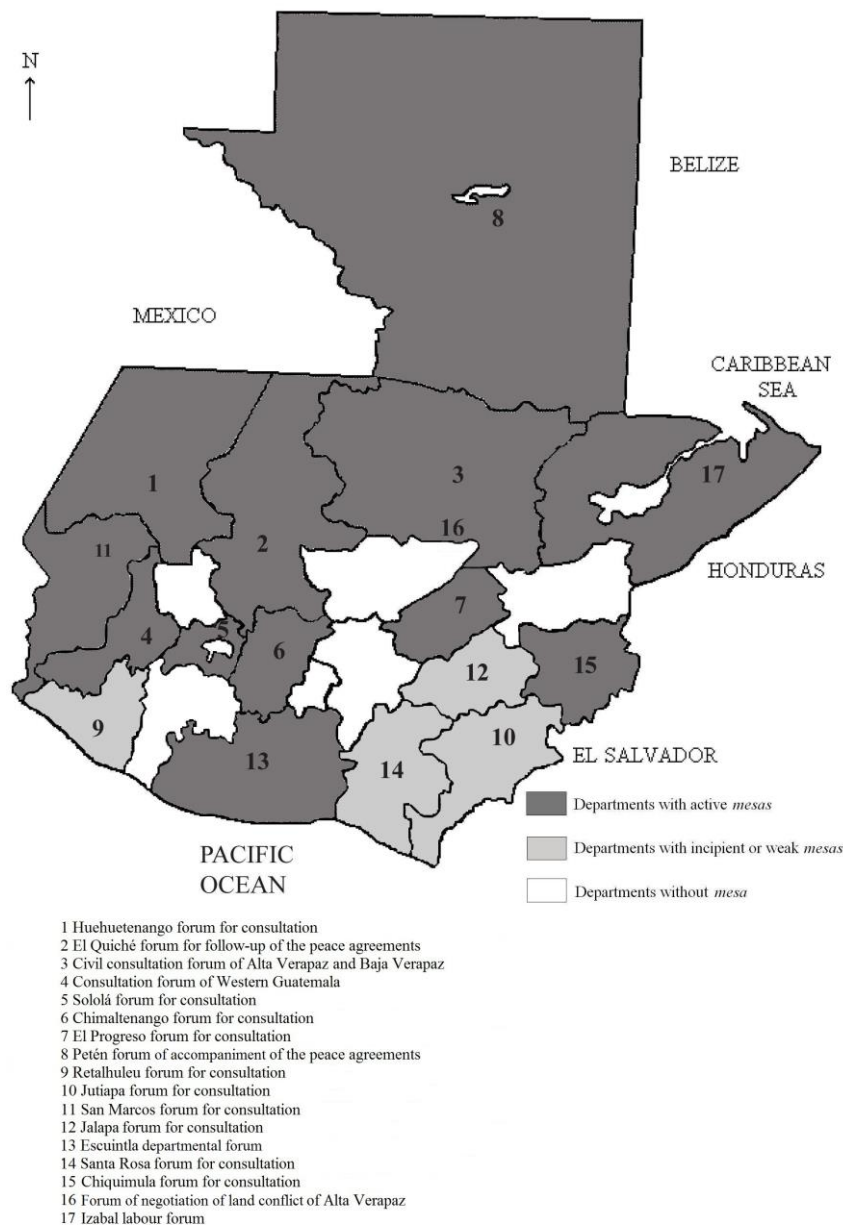


Table I. Organizations represented in the assemblies of the departmental *mesa* of Sololá on 23 May 2002 and the departmental *mesa* of Jutiapa on 11 June 2002 (based on Mouly, Cécile (2004) *The Role of Peace Constituencies in Building Peace in Nicaragua and Guatemala*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Cambridge: University of Cambridge, p.237)

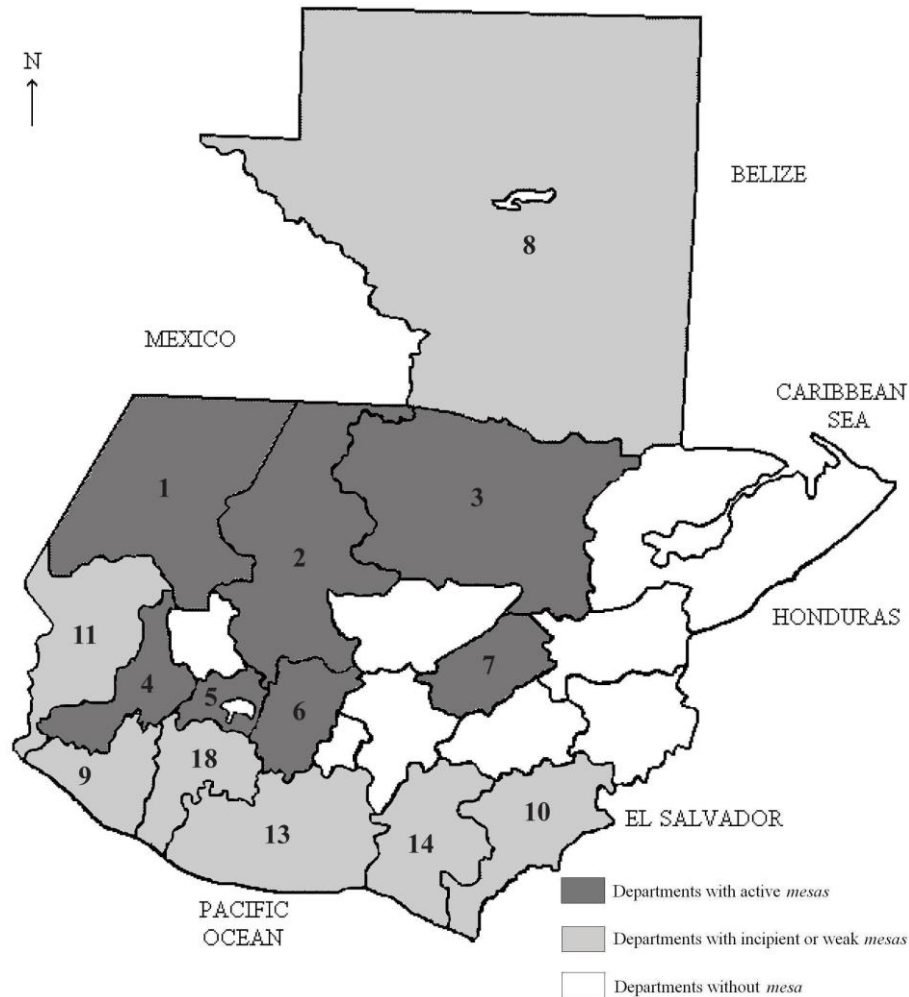
<i>Departmental mesa of Sololá</i>	<i>Departmental mesa of Jutiapa</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● local state institutions (including the departmental government and the departmental offices of the Presidential Commission for Human Rights, the Human Rights Ombudsman, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and the National Council of Protected Areas)</li> <li>● women's organizations</li> <li>● peasant organizations</li> <li>● indigenous organizations, (including councils of elders (<i>principales</i>) and Mayan spiritual guides, the local office of the Indigenous Ombudsman and the indigenous municipality of Sololá)</li> <li>● trade unions</li> <li>● the Academy of Mayan Languages and other cultural and education institutions</li> <li>● the media (local television channel)</li> <li>● local development organizations</li> <li>● one youth organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● local state institutions (including the departmental office of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources and the army)</li> <li>● women's organizations</li> <li>● peasant organizations</li> <li>● indigenous organizations</li> <li>● trade unions</li> <li>● the University Rafael Landivar</li> <li>● the House of Culture</li> <li>● the departmental association of journalists</li> </ul>

It is only when the two main institutions in charge of overseeing peace implementation, MINUGUA and the CAAP, began to support such spaces at the end of the 1990s that the *mesas* adopted common standards and became more precisely defined. Such a process prompted the conversion of the *mesas* from claimed to invited spaces. The support of the two institutions gave much impetus to the *mesas* and led to the constitution of several additional ones to the point that *mesas* existed in almost all Guatemalan departments in the early

years 2000, except the capital. A comparison of the *mesas* in early 2001 and mid-2002 illustrates this evolving process and shows that the definition of the *mesas* was still in progress (see maps 1 and 2). Indeed, some of the spaces initially considered as *mesas* in early 2001, such as the labour forum of Izabal, were no longer considered as such one year later, after the term “*mesa*” became restricted to only those *mesas* which had the explicit aim of contributing to peace implementation.



Map 1. Map of the main departmental *mesas* in January 2001 (based on MINUGUA (2001) 'Cobertura de las mesas de concertación departamentales'. *Crónicas de MINUGUA*. No. 8, 31 January and Mouly, Cécile (2004) *The Role of Peace Constituencies in Building Peace in Nicaragua and Guatemala*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Cambridge: University of Cambridge, p. 234)



- 1 Huehuetenango forum for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements
- 2 El Quiché forum for follow-up of the peace agreements
- 3 Civil consultation forum of Alta Verapaz
- 4 Consultation forum of Western Guatemala
- 5 Sololá forum for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements
- 6 Chimaltenango forum for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements
- 7 El Progreso forum for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements
- 8 Petén forum for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements
- 9 Retalhuleu forum for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements
- 10 Jutiapa forum for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements
- 11 San Marcos forum for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements
- 13 Escuintla forum for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements
- 14 Santa Rosa forum for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements
- 18 Suchitepéquez forum for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements

Map 2. Map of the main departmental mesas in June 2002 (based on Mouly, Cécile (2004) *The Role of Peace Constituencies in Building Peace in Nicaragua and Guatemala*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Cambridge: University of Cambridge, p.232)

Some criteria for distinguishing between the *mesas* and similar spaces gradually arose from joint discussions under the auspices of MINUGUA, the CAAP and the Guatemalan Secretariat of Peace (SEPAZ), which was the government institution in charge of monitoring the compliance of public policies with the peace agreements and acted as the CAAP secretariat. In 2001 the

*mesas* finally adopted a common name: ‘*mesas de concertación y seguimiento de los Acuerdos de Paz*’ (or ‘forums for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements’ in English). In the same year the *mesas* jointly agreed on their own definition during a national meeting. Such a definition was refined two years later when the *mesas* adopted legal statutes. Accordingly, a *mesa* was:

a space of dialogue, consultation, and consensus within civil society, which is autonomous and democratic; which fosters the public participation of all social sectors, respecting multiethnic, pluricultural, multilingual, gender, political and socio-economic diversity; and which makes proposals regarding the issues of peace and development at community, municipal, departmental, and national levels.<sup>55</sup>

In parallel, the CAAP offered the *mesas* the opportunity to join the peace institutions (*institucionalidad de la paz*), a set of *ad hoc* institutions designed as a space for the joint participation of civil society and state representatives in the formulation of proposals for the implementation of the peace agreements. The CAAP was at the apex of this institutional architecture and oversaw the work of other peace institutions. Many *mesas* accepted the CAAP’s offer and agreed to enter a common framework under the leadership of the commission, as it gave them ‘power to’ have a say in public policies affecting the social sectors that they represented and made them active participants in the design of peace. This turning point marked the beginning of the functioning of the *mesas* as invited spaces – a transformation that granted them more access to

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<sup>55</sup> Mesa departamental de concertación de Jutiapa et al. (2003). Estatutos de la Asamblea Nacional de Mesas de Concertación, ANAMEC; coordinadora nacional de mesas de concertación, CONAMEC y Mesas Departamentales de Concertación, MDC y Seguimiento de los Acuerdos de Paz. Translations from Spanish to English are by the authors. The word “*concertación*” is translated here into “consultation”, in accordance with the translation by the United Nations of the term “*mesa de concertación y seguimiento de los acuerdos de paz*” into “forums for consultation and follow-up of the peace agreements”. However, its meaning is closer to “consensus-building”.

policymakers, but also raised several concerns. Henceforth, the *mesas* were requested to contribute proposals for the implementation of peace agreements from the perspective of their localities, and were consulted on relevant aspects of implementation. They also began to participate in key institutional forums nationally, such as the commission of follow-up to the so-called ‘fiscal pact’ (an agreement between the government, the private sector and various sectors of Guatemalan society in order to make effective the fiscal reforms contemplated in the peace agreements), and even internationally in the meetings of the Consultative Group for Guatemala.<sup>56</sup>

Most *mesas* appeared at the departmental level. When they adopted common standards and joined the peace institutions, they became articulated around that level and established a national coordination mechanism, the National Coordinating Committee of Forums for Consultation and Follow-up of the Peace Process (CONAMEC), made up of representatives of departmental *mesas*. The infrastructure constituted by the *mesas* was also supposed to reach down to the municipal level. Nevertheless, only few municipal *mesas* were formed or gained significance.<sup>57</sup>

In order to enter the more formal realm of peace institutions, the *mesas*

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<sup>56</sup> The Consultative Group for Guatemala was a multilateral mechanism aimed at coordinating donor support to the country during the post-conflict period. The Guatemalan government, donor countries, the international financial institutions, MINUGUA and civil society representatives attended the yearly meetings of the Group. Donors usually pledged funds to the Guatemalan government under the condition that it complied with specific aspects of the peace agreements.

<sup>57</sup> This could be due to the creation of the municipal development councils, multisectoral forums in charge of discussing development policies at the municipal level, which had a more permanent and institutional character. These were established, following the approval of a legislative decree in 2002, in compliance with the peace agreements. This happened at a time when the *mesas* started to consolidate their infrastructure and reach out more to the municipalities.

thus moved from informal forums with horizontal links to standardised organisations within a hierarchical structure with CONAMEC at the top, the departmental *mesas* in the middle and municipal *mesas* at the bottom. According to Lederach, institutionalisation of local peace initiatives into formal peace infrastructures brings about opportunities, but also challenges. In particular, the ensuing bureaucratisation of these initiatives makes them more responsive to rules and regulations imposed by the powerful than to the concerns of those whom they are deemed to represent.<sup>58</sup> Several *mesas*, for instance, hired permanent staff to prepare minutes of meetings and funding proposals, and deal with accountancy, which increased the *mesas*' effectiveness. The downside was that, for the sake of efficiency, the number of assembly meetings and outreach activities was reduced, as *mesa* matters became handled by a few. As a consequence, several of the *mesas* lost touch with their social bases and saw their freedom of action curtailed. However, other *mesas* continued to give precedence to internal democracy and accountability to their social bases.

The establishment of the local development councils in 2002 to allow the discussion of development policies among state and civil society representatives compelled various *mesas* to abandon their initial role as spaces where state and civil society would come together to discuss peace implementation and henceforth adopt a role of coordination of civil society to strengthen its stance in relation to the state in local development councils. Several *mesas* were thus directly represented in the councils or pushed for the

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<sup>58</sup> Lederach, John Paul (2013). The Origins and Evolution of Infrastructures for Peace: A Personal Reflection. *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 8-13.

representation of key social sectors. The *mesa* of Huehuetenango, for instance, successfully lobbied for the inclusion of representatives of each of the nine Mayan ethno-linguistic groups present in the department – instead of one indigenous representative, as contemplated in the law – in the departmental development council.<sup>59</sup> Such empowerment of civil society actors through the *mesas* illustrates the potential highlighted by Nelson and Wright for ‘power to’ to evolve into ‘power over’ and allow actors to have a voice in decision-making.<sup>60</sup>

Whatever the means, the *mesas* generally sought to constitute themselves into open spaces, and simultaneously open other spaces for the different social sectors represented in their locality to participate in public affairs and have a say in the implementation of the peace agreements. They thereby aimed to thwart the centralised way in which much of the peace process – and politics in general – had been conducted and convey the interests of diverse social sectors, particularly those traditionally unheard.<sup>61</sup> Further, they conceived of peacebuilding as a means to address longstanding social injustices in order to achieve positive peace and struggled for the implementation of the structural reforms envisioned in the peace agreements. With hindsight, their efforts were insufficient, since the implementation of the most far-reaching reforms lagged behind. Yet, their limited contributions to opening spaces that had hitherto been closed should not be overlooked.

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with *mesa* members, Huehuetenango, 11 February 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Nelson & Wright (1995).

<sup>61</sup> The peace negotiations were essentially held at the top level, involving the two main contenders of the armed conflict, the government and the URNG, as well as the UN acting as a mediator. Civil society did participate to a certain extent in the process, including by submitting proposals to the negotiating parties through the Assembly of Civil Society, but it only had a consultative role.



### ***Visible, Hidden and Invisible Power***

Throughout the process of moving from claimed to invited spaces, the *mesas* were surrounded by power and permeated by it. Power consequently impinged on who took part or not in the *mesas* and shaped decision-making, as well as the ability of the *mesas* to open other spaces. At the national level visible power manifested itself in various ways in the *mesas* as spaces, hindering their ability to be open and, at times, generating resistance. In particular, in accepting to become part of the peace institutions, the *mesas* became subject to the influence of the CAAP. The CAAP hence persuaded them to form a coordinating body, CONAMEC, to serve as an interlocutor for them and other top-level actors. But CONAMEC quickly ceased to be a simple coordinating body and adopted its own *modus operandi*, beginning to speak on behalf of the *mesas* and to arrogate funds directed at the strengthening of the *mesas*. As Lukes and Scott state, the exercise of power as domination often brings forth resistance.<sup>62</sup> In effect, the most representative and democratic *mesas* resisted such interference and pushed for stricter rules to ensure CONAMEC representativeness and accountability. Yet, their efforts were largely unsuccessful, prompting several of them to disregard the authority of CONAMEC.<sup>63</sup>

At the departmental level, most *mesas* sought to provide their members equal opportunities to participate in decision-making and could be credited for the transparency in which they took decisions – often in general assembly with

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<sup>62</sup> Lukes (1974). Scott (2001).

<sup>63</sup> These included the departmental *mesas* of Quetzaltenango, Huehuetenango and Sololá. See, for instance, fieldnotes from the national encounter of peace institutions that took place in Guatemala City on 26 April 2002.



the participation of representatives from a broad spectrum of social sectors. Yet, sometimes one or two people dominated decision-making and represented their *mesa vis-à-vis* external actors, leaving little space for others to meaningfully participate. Hence, although the *mesas* were a means of empowerment of civil society which aimed to address the ‘power over’ of the powerful, this empowerment turned out to be unequal, with some actors acquiring ‘power over’ rather than redressing the power of powerful ones. In a similar vein, the fact that the leadership of some *mesas* had not changed over a ten-year period illustrates the difficulty for some leaders to hand over power to others.<sup>64</sup>

Some *mesas* themselves also drew on visible power to raise barriers to the participation of certain groups or people to protect themselves from the interference of powerful actors. Paradoxically, their ‘power to’ then became a form of ‘power over’ the powerful despite being, at least relatively, the powerless. Hence, rather than constituting an act of exclusion through domination, such a decision could be considered as a form of empowerment.<sup>65</sup> This was the case of the *mesas* of Alta Verapaz and Sololá, which prohibited the participation of political party affiliates in order to avoid politicisation, and had this prohibition explicitly mentioned in their statutes.<sup>66</sup> Likewise, several *mesas* intentionally excluded the state in order to serve as spaces of coordination of local civil society, thereby contributing to the strengthening of the

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<sup>64</sup> This observation stems from a comparison between the leadership of several *mesas* (including those of El Progreso, Petén and Jutiapa) in 2002 and in 2012. A former employee of a national NGO that partnered with the *mesas* in several projects also observed in his eight-year experience of work with the *mesas* (from 2000 to 2007) that several leaders clung to power (interview with former NGO member, Guatemala City, 17 February 2012).

<sup>65</sup> Nelson & Wright (1995), p. 10.

<sup>66</sup> Discussion with members of the departmental *mesa* of Alta Verapaz, Cobán, 4 October 2003. See also the articles 1 and 25 of the legal statutes of the departmental *mesa* of Alta Verapaz, adopted in Cobán in 2001, and the legal statutes of the departmental *mesa* of Sololá, adopted in Sololá in 2002.

position of civil society in relation to the state. This enabled civil society to develop joint strategies to render the state accountable, demand its compliance of the provisions of the peace agreements, and, more generally, have its voice heard. These *mesas* usually conceived of the state as a closed space that they sought to open through a mix of collaborative and confrontational tactics, including protests.

Other *mesas* preferred engaging with the state and other powerful actors, and adopted more collaborative strategies. Several of them, for instance, regularly invited state representatives to present advances in the implementation of key peace policies to the population and interact with the public. Such an interaction contributed to making state institutions more accountable and enabled the public to exert pressure on these institutions to abide by their commitments. The *mesas* usually referred to this endeavour as '*auditoria social*' (social auditing in English). With hindsight it is probably in this regard that the *mesas* had the greatest impact on the state, trying to make it more open, though such an impact is difficult to assess.

Visible power was also exercised at the local level from the bottom up by traditionally marginalised groups, such as women and indigenous people, who were formally offered representation in the *mesas* and contributed to their opening. The participation of such groups enabled them to voice their concerns and have a say in peace implementation. For instance, several *mesas*, at the instigation of their indigenous members, advocated for the implementation of the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which contemplated reforms aimed at putting an end to ethnic discrimination and

inequalities between indigenous and non-indigenous people. By means of collective action or ‘power with’, these groups thus achieved transformative power.

Meanwhile, hidden power was commonly used by external and internal actors to influence the *mesas* at different levels. One such actor was the URNG, which took advantage of the *mesas* to promote its political agenda by involving party members or supporters as representatives of different social sectors. For example, according to a *mesa* member linked to the Church, at one point five out of the seven committee members of the *Mesa de Concertación de Occidente* had some relation with the URNG; so the *mesa*, despite claims of openness, was a relatively closed space at the time.<sup>67</sup> In some instances this relation was obvious, as in the case of one member who belonged to a civil society organisation founded by former URNG combatants. In others it was more subtle, such as in the cases of trade unionists or activists who did not militate openly for the URNG but had collaborated with it in the past and sympathised with its ideas. The *mesas* were an important space for URNG members in their new role as civil actors. The peace agreements indeed contemplated the “integration of URNG members into the legal, political, social, economic and cultural life of the country”, and recognised the transformation of the URNG into a political party as a step towards greater democracy.<sup>68</sup> The weakness of the URNG as a political party and the still limited openness of the

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Úrsula Roldán, Quetzaltenango, 14 June 2002, cited in Mouly (2004).

<sup>68</sup> *Agreement on the Basis for the Legal Integration of the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*, signed by the government of Guatemala, the URNG and the United Nations in 1996. Available at the website of the United States Institute of Peace, Peace Agreements Digital Collection:

[http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/collections/peace\\_agreements/guat\\_961212.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/collections/peace_agreements/guat_961212.pdf) [accessed 24 June 2014].

political space to left-wing politics at the time may explain its decision to carve itself a space within civil society rather than political society (understanding the two as distinct, though not entirely separate spheres). In this context the newly created *mesas* constituted a space of choice in which former combatants and sympathisers could pursue their struggle for social change. Further, the representation of the URNG in the CAAP made it easier for the organisation to place members and sympathisers in the *mesas* and its national coordinating body, CONAMEC.

The URNG was not the only internal actor to exert hidden power in the *mesas*. Others too took advantage of the *mesas* mainly at the local level. This was the case, for example, of a Mayan priest, who managed to get elected as coordinator of the *mesa* of Huehuetenango and allegedly used his position to pursue personal interests.<sup>69</sup> This eventually led to the collapse of the *mesa*, which had henceforth been one of the strongest and most democratic ones. At times, members also used the *mesas* to promote their image with a view to present their candidacy in future elections or gain access to sought-after positions. Various *mesa* members or former members run for mayor or for a seat in parliament in the 2003 elections, including the coordinator of the *mesa* of Izabal, and members of the *mesas* of Suchitepéquez, Retalhuleu, Alta Verapaz and Quetzaltenango.

As for external actors, they exercised hidden power over the *mesas* in a number of ways, including by influencing their agenda, decisions and

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with former members of the departmental *mesa* of Huehuetenango, Huehuetenango, 11 February 2012.

composition, and having a critical say in which spaces were to be considered as *mesas* and which not. For instance, as part of its mandate, MINUGUA sought to foster public participation in accordance with the spirit of the peace agreements, and paved the way for the formation of various *mesas*. Additionally, by entrusting its field officers to provide continuous support to the *mesas*, it often influenced their decision-making at the local level. The *mesas* were usually eager to receive advice and other kinds of assistance from the mission.<sup>70</sup> At the national level, in its quality of guest in the country, MINUGUA usually preferred to maintain a low profile, such as during the national encounter of peace institutions of April 2002, when its representatives sat at the table of the delegates of the more democratic and representative *mesas*, but did not openly support their criticisms against CONAMEC.<sup>71</sup>

SEPAZ often tried to impose its agenda on the *mesas* and co-opt them. When the *mesas* became part of the peace institutions, SEPAZ was in charge of convening national events of *mesas* and decided whom to invite. As a result, SEPAZ convened those departmental *mesas* that were more supportive of its agenda rather than the more critical ones, which tended to be those that functioned in a more democratic manner, representing the interests of the various social sectors in their department. This fuelled many *mesas'* criticism of SEPAZ and rejection of its interference.

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<sup>70</sup> These appreciations are based on direct observation of the work of MINUGUA in support of the *mesas* and *mesas'* reaction to it, as well as conversations with *mesa* members and MINUGUA officials.

<sup>71</sup> See fieldnotes from the national encounter of peace institutions that took place in Guatemala City on 26 April 2002.

While the power cube emphasises the role of agents in the exercise of power, it is the duality of agency and structure, as put forward by Anthony Giddens, which rather underlies power.<sup>72</sup> Accordingly, hidden power also manifested itself in the *mesas* as a result of dominant structures that unavoidably permeated the latter. For instance, although the *mesas* were intended to be open to the participation of people from any municipality of their department, in practice people from departmental capitals tended to dominate these spaces because of the imbalance between centre and periphery: by organising most of their meetings in departmental capitals, the *mesas* unintentionally excluded people from other municipalities and contributed to furthering the gap between rural and urban areas. Likewise, rural organisations, though invited to participate, ended up having limited representation because of their lack of resources to cover travel expenses to attend meetings generally held in departmental capitals.

Some *mesas* were conscious of this situation and used their agency to try to redress it. The departmental *mesa* of Huehuetenango, for instance, was remarkable for its inclusiveness. In spite of the difficulty to reach out to the population of the more than 30 municipalities of the department, it did its utmost to allow people from different municipalities, ethno-linguistic groups and social sectors to participate in the *mesa* or its activities. For instance, it tried to establish *mesas* in the different ethno-linguistic areas of the department, used the radio to broadcast information in all municipalities, and received support

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<sup>72</sup> Giddens, Anthony (1984). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity.

from other organisations to transport members from their place of origin to the capital in order to attend monthly assemblies.<sup>73</sup> In some cases members themselves overcame structural obstacles, spending time and resources to participate in the *mesa*, for they believed that it could make a difference. Yet in other cases, cultural violence made them blind to social injustices and led them to consider their situation as normal. In this way, hidden power converted into invisible power, as those excluded took for granted their subaltern status in society.

Like the geographical factors that shaped participation, language was a hidden, but crucial factor in defining or perpetuating who fitted in the roles of the powerful and the powerless. While the official definition of the *mesas* stressed the “public participation of all sectors, respecting multiethnic, pluricultural, multilingual, gender, political and socio-economic diversity”, this was not always reflected in practice.<sup>74</sup> The use of the Spanish language during committee meetings and general assemblies, for instance, contributed to the exclusion of non-Spanish speakers. The decision to use Spanish as the main means of communication was due to a variety of reasons, but a key one was that only few non-indigenous people spoke or understood a Mayan language.<sup>75</sup> Should the *mesas* decide to conduct meetings or events in a Mayan language, they would exclude many local or national authorities and members of organisations that supported the *mesas*, who were in majority non indigenous. In one meeting of the *mesa* of Sololá, one of the *mesas* made up of a majority

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with *mesa* member, Huehuetenango, 17 June 2002, cited in Mouly (2004).

<sup>74</sup> Mesa departamental de concertación de Jutiapa et al. (2003).

<sup>75</sup> Only in Alta Verapaz did non-indigenous people frequently speak or understand Q'eqchi, the dominant Mayan language in that department, yet this *mesa* was no exception in making use of mostly Spanish in its internal and external communications.

of indigenous people, a member asked whether it would be possible to hold the following general assembly in Spanish with instant translation into K'aqchikel, the Mayan language most spoken in the department, so that the public at large could meaningfully participate. Some members opined that, should the event be translated into K'aqchikel, it should also be translated into the two other Mayan languages spoken in the department, Quiché and Tz'utujil, which would be time consuming.<sup>76</sup>

The dominance of the Spanish language is not only the result of Spanish speakers' ability to impose what is in their favour and perpetuate their power position. It is also the consequence of old patterns of ethnic discrimination, which have shaped the consciousness of many indigenous people of Guatemala. In this sense, it is a form of invisible power, which works through the internalisation of dominant ways of thinking and impinged on the ability of the *mesas* to equitably represent all social sectors based in their respective department.<sup>77</sup> Many indigenous people did not question the *mesas* for using Spanish, as this was considered to be 'normal' or 'necessary' in that socio-political context. They simply agreed with their non-indigenous fellows that conducting meetings and events in Spanish was the most pragmatic thing to do, and that, though efforts could be made to redress longstanding injustices with regards to the use of Mayan languages, changes could not happen from one day to another. Further, they considered that the participation of non-indigenous people and internationals in *mesa* activities was important to discuss structural

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<sup>76</sup> Meeting of the departmental *mesa* of Sololá, held in Sololá on 22 May 2002, observed by one author.

<sup>77</sup> Lukes (1974).



reforms in compliance with the peace agreements. Devoid of self-consciousness, of the will to claim the *mesas* as a space in which the voices of all indigenous people – not only the more educated ones – could be heard, they consented to their own exclusion. As argued by Parpart, Rai and Staudt, such a form of invisible power can hinder the efforts of marginalised groups to achieve ‘power within’ and exercise ‘power with’.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, by not assuming agency and instead falling back in historic structures of power because they were socialised to not challenge,<sup>79</sup> many non-Spanish-speaking indigenous people lacked ‘power within’ to challenge their subordinate position in the *mesas*.

### ***Bridging the Local, the National and the Global***

The third dimension of the ‘power cube’ approach refers to the levels of power, including local, national and global. The interconnection between these levels and their interplay with the ‘spaces’ dimension allow us to grasp the scope of the *mesas*’ endeavour to open spaces for public participation. As will be argued, the *mesas* acted as bridges between the local and the national, and even the global, promoting what Lederach has termed ‘vertical integration’.<sup>80</sup> Further, while exerting power mainly at the local level, they had some influence on national processes and, in a limited way, international ones. And, reciprocally, they were influenced by such processes.

At first, the *mesas*’ sphere of influence was restricted to the departmental (local) level. The *mesas* initially appeared in the departments most affected by

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<sup>78</sup> Parpart; Rai & Staudt (2002).

<sup>79</sup> See Eybent; Harris & Pettit (2006), p. 6.

<sup>80</sup> E.g. Lederach (2000).

the armed conflict, and centred their action on the implementation of peace in their department. This limited scope permitted the participation of diverse sectors of civil society that had been excluded historically, and, to a certain extent, helped the *mesas* maintain their autonomy. When the *mesas* joined the peace institutions, they broadened their scope of action and started to participate in national arenas, either in their own representation or represented by CONAMEC, where they conveyed the views from their locality. In so doing they promoted the interconnection between peacebuilding at the grassroots level and at the top level – two complementary, but often disjointed endeavours. Similarly, the exercise of ‘social auditing’ helped bridge the traditional divide between central authorities and the population at large. The impact of the *mesas* even went as far as the global level, though in a limited way, as their participation in meetings of the Consultative Group for Guatemala demonstrated.

Access to the national and global levels was facilitated by external actors who supported the *mesas*. This support was essential in the light of the scant resources of the *mesas*. MINUGUA, in particular, often provided them a space to meet, transportation and advice. This may explain why the most active period of the *mesas* was from 2001 to 2004, at the end of which MINUGUA and the CAAP both concluded their mandates. During this period, the *mesas* engaged in a variety of activities, including: i) the organisation of forums to disseminate the content of the peace agreements and discuss implementation, ii) advocacy for the implementation of the peace agreements, iii) oversight of the actions of public institutions and their compliance with the terms of the peace agreements,

iv) formulation of proposals for the implementation of the peace agreements, and v) mediation in local conflicts.

While MINUGUA withdrew from Guatemala at the end of 2004, the CAAP was replaced by the National Council for the Compliance of the Peace Agreements (CNAP) in accordance with the Framework Law for Compliance of the Peace Agreements adopted in 2005.<sup>81</sup> The CNAP, made up of representatives of political parties and civil society, as well as of each of the three state branches, was expected to give continuity to the work of its predecessor and seek inputs from civil society actors in its efforts to advance peace implementation. Yet, in practice, though civil society was represented in the CNAP, key spaces for its participation in peace implementation, such as the *mesas*, lost their linkage with the newly established council. This did not impede several *mesas* from continuing to contribute to the public debate regarding peace implementation, but formally reduced their space for doing so at the national level.

The reliance of various *mesas* on external support made them vulnerable to outside influence and explains why some of them collapsed. It also often alienated them from their social bases, which, in turn, had consequences on their openness. Hence “the *mesas* [we]re caught between the need to abide by the rules of external organisations in order to increase their impact on the peacebuilding process, and the need to conform to certain normative

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<sup>81</sup> Guatemalan Congress (n.d.), *Ley Marco para el Cumplimiento de los Acuerdos de Paz* [Framework Law for the Compliance of the Peace Agreements]. Decree No.52-2005 adopted on 3 August 2005 by the Congress of the Republic of Guatemala.

standards”.<sup>82</sup> Further, the greater the *mesas*’ scope of influence, the more internal and external actors sought to take advantage of them for their own purposes.

More generally, the strength or weakness of the *mesas* depended on the evolving local, national and even global contexts. Locally, for instance, the strength of the *mesas* often reflected that of civil society. Hence in Baja Verapaz, Jalapa and Santa Rosa, where civil society was weak, *mesas* were either nonexistent or incipient, while in Quetzaltenango, where civil society was thriving, the *mesa* played a prominent role.<sup>83</sup> Nationally, when peace implementation encountered setbacks, such as the negative results of the 1999 referendum, various *mesas* slacked off. Likewise, during the second half of the years 2000, several *mesas* collapsed because they had lost relevance, owing to the creation of the more permanent local development councils, which had taken over some of their functions. In 2012 a few *mesas* still existed, but had significantly reduced their activities. They were essentially active at the local level, coordinating the inputs of civil society in the councils and putting forward lists of candidates for the post of departmental governor. Some had turned almost into local NGOs, participating in projects sponsored by other organisations in representation of their department.

Global dynamics too had an impact on the *mesas*. For example, the fading interest of international cooperation actors in financing post-conflict

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<sup>82</sup> Mouly (2004).

<sup>83</sup> According to the UN Development Programme (UNDP), for example, 39 nonprofit organizations were registered in Quetzaltenango between 1996 and February 1998, while only four were registered in Baja Verapaz, Jalapa and Santa Rosa during the same period PNUD (1999). *Guatemala: El Rostro Rural del Desarrollo Humano*. Informe nacional de desarrollo humano 1999, Guatemala City: PNUD, p. 251.

peacebuilding in Guatemala at the beginning of the years 2000 impinged on the scarce resources, with which the *mesas* had to work and which, ultimately, contributed to the exclusion of some actors because they were not provided support to travel to meetings or translations into their own language. MINUGUA was the international actor that probably most supported the *mesas*, yet it left the country in 2004 and had already closed several of its departmental offices years before.

## **Conclusions**

As the case of the Guatemalan *mesas* illustrated, one can only properly understand the achievements and limitations of local peace initiatives in the context of multiple power manifestations. The use of the ‘power cube’ approach to analyse the *mesas* enabled us to systematically take into account the ‘spaces’, ‘forms’ and ‘levels’ dimensions of power that impinge on the ability of such initiatives to contribute to peacebuilding. Exploring the ‘spaces’ dimension showed how such initiatives can open strategic spaces for civil society to participate in public affairs and therewith produce power shifts in existing structures. Such spaces transcended the local level, reaching out to the national and even international levels, though in a limited way in the latter case. It also shed light on the challenges raised by the institutionalization of informal spaces, such as the *mesas*, which can open opportunities to have greater impact on peacebuilding by providing more access to decision-makers, but can also reduce internal democracy and distance such spaces from the grassroots.

Examining the dimension of ‘forms’ revealed that through empowerment,

the *mesas* themselves became able to exert visible power by deciding who could take part and who not, and in which way. Yet it also demonstrated that both visible and hidden forms of power placed boundaries on participation and shaped decision-making, and that the lack of self-consciousness of certain marginalised groups contributed to perpetuate unequal power structures in society. Thus the *mesas* were not only used to contest and project power of the many different stakeholders involved. They also allowed powerful actors to perpetuate their position in the societal power constellation, and, by reproducing roles of inferiority and structures of inequality, deprived marginalised social groups from the means to achieve empowerment: their own self-consciousness as capable actors.

In this way, like the most far-reaching peace agreements continued to lag behind more than 15 years after the signing of peace, the *mesas* overall failed to alter the most deep-rooted kinds of structural and cultural violence. They nevertheless succeeded in raising awareness about the significance that support across different levels of society has for the successful implementation of the peace agreements. And many did promote the empowerment and participation of a variety of social sectors, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and locally grounded peace, and therefore a more sustainable one.

In this sense, one of the greatest strengths of the power cube is its provision of a comprehensive framework that enables us to grasp the manifold expressions of power at play in a local peace initiative, not only power as domination but also power as empowerment, participation and resistance in the face of domination. It therefore does justice to Haugaard's call for a "family

resemblance concept” of power that is determined by the specific context.<sup>84</sup> Hence, the cube allows us to systematically examine power according to the ‘spaces’, ‘forms’ and ‘levels’ dimensions, while drawing our attention to the interaction between these dimensions, unravelling how each one cuts across the others. Another important characteristic of this approach is the absence of a dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless, allowing us to understand the ways in which power manifests itself across those who are usually portrayed as principals and those as subalterns.

Nevertheless, caution should be exercised regarding the structural factors that might not receive sufficient attention in this approach, despite their inseparable relation with agency. The ‘forms’ dimension does speak to the importance of structure: invisible power is entrenched in unequal power structures (structural violence) legitimated by dominant discourses (cultural violence). Similarly, the levels of power are related to structural factors. Yet structure is not clearly captured in the “agency-oriented” division between closed, claimed and invited spaces. This is misleading since factors, such as the ethnic composition of a department or the distribution of rural and urban population, too had an impact on the extent to which the *mesas* were empowered to transform themselves from claimed into invited spaces.

Finally, we encourage other researchers to use the ‘power cube’ approach to explore power in similar peace initiatives. Such studies would not only contribute to refining the proposed framework, but would also proffer useful insights into understanding and appraising the contributions of this kind of

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<sup>84</sup> Haugaard (2010).

initiatives to peacebuilding in different contexts. This is all the more important since one of the main criticisms of mainstream peace and conflict studies has been its failure to adequately consider power. The use of a comprehensive and flexible tool, such as the power cube, to systematically analyse power in local peace initiatives could help remedy this shortcoming. Additionally, it would be valuable for practitioners, who could use it to design strategies that can ensure that, rather than being hostages of power, local peace initiatives contribute to building positive peace.