Getting real about politics

From thinking politically to working differently

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Key messages

- One of the most important lessons to emerge in international development over the past two decades is that institutions matter, and that behind institutions lie politics. But making this operational has proven much more difficult.

- What is needed is a shift not only to think *politically* but also to work *differently*. This means asking hard-hitting questions about how change happens; the role external actors play in supporting that change; and what sorts of programme approaches, funding and staffing are needed as a result.

- There are encouraging signs that suggest that progress is possible – as long as development actors are willing to radically rethink the way they work.

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1 Why politics matter

Perhaps the single most important lesson to emerge in international development thinking and practice over the past two decades is that institutions matter for development, and that behind institutions lie politics. Despite vast amounts of support from the international assistance community, increased resourcing and improved policies and/or formal systems (Foresti et al., 2013), many states and governments across the developing world have remained unable to provide adequately for the well-being of their populations at large. This has helped crystallise the fact that the challenge of development lies not so much in what needs to be done (be this building schools or providing vaccinations) and identifying the right 'technical fix', but rather, more fundamentally, in *how* it is done (processes that facilitate or obstruct change). Getting to the 'how' requires a solid understanding of the institutional dynamics at work, both formal and informal, and the kinds of incentives they generate (Fritz et al., 2014).

At least conceptually, the (gradual) evolution that different international development actors have undergone to come to grips with the politics of development and the institutional dynamics of change has been remarkable – what Carothers and de Gramont (2013) have described as an 'almost revolution'. As the myriad of donor statements, policy guidance notes, joint documents, forums and principles of engagement reflects, starting with context and tailoring policies and strategies accordingly is the new mantra of development assistance.

However, as Carothers and de Gramont (2013) suggest, the revolution is not yet complete. How to make the concept 'politics matter' operational remains hard. There is a growing acceptance of the importance of taking context into account, and a growing acknowledgement of the need to work in more iterative, adaptive and flexible ways. Yet making a jump from more technical approaches, based on standardised one-size-fits-all models of change, to more politically aware programming, grounded in local realities, has proven considerably more challenging in practice. What is needed now is to shift the focus of the debate – from arguments over analytical frameworks and their relative effectiveness in helping understand the institutional dynamics and politics at play to a much bigger agenda on ways of working for development. This will mean turning the lens back onto donors and other development actors and asking the hard-headed questions of whether and how they can become fit for the purpose of working with and through the politics in (day-to-day) practice.

2 What does taking politics seriously mean?

At one level, working more politically can involve focusing on goals and objectives that are explicitly political in nature – for example efforts to improve governance or promote democracy, both of which have increased considerably since the end of the Cold War and donors' (re)discovery of the state as central to the fight against poverty (Fritz and Rocha Menocal, 2007). However, these examples also illustrate that it is possible, and also rather common among donors, to pursue these aims through technical approaches that are often normative, based on idealised models of change that do not take politics and the local context into account. This is one of the key insights that has emerged from sustained donor engagement with the good governance agenda and different forms of democracy assistance (including elections, citizens, voice and accountability and support to parliaments and political parties) over the past two decades (Grindle, 2007; Rakner et al., 2007; Rocha Menocal and O'Neil, 2012; Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2009; Wild et al., 2011).

At a more fundamental level, then, taking politics seriously needs to be about thinking and working differently in ways that are politically aware/savvy, whether the objective is to pursue more explicitly political goals (like state building) or more traditional socioeconomic ones (like health and education). This has been the focus of a programme of work at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) that has explicitly sought to understand how politics and governance shape the delivery of public goods and services. It asks, why do some chronic bottlenecks persist, despite greater funding and better systems? Where and how have political strategies and networks constrained and enabled better service provision? How can relationships between users, service providers and policymakers be strengthened?

3 Getting better at 'thinking' politically

Over the past decade, development actors have developed a number of tools and activities in an attempt to support programming that works with politics. One of the most significant areas of engagement has entailed efforts to improve the analysis of institutional and political dynamics on the ground (supporting what some have termed 'thinking politically'), including the development of different tools and frameworks of political economy analysis (PEA) (see Box 1). This has been accompanied by increased interest in (governance and political economy) training, not only within particular donor agencies but also, for example, of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the media.

Box 1: Evolution of political economy analysis within the international community

Political economy is a discipline with a long tradition in the social sciences. It is relatively newer in international development circles, but was still first pioneered by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) over 10 years ago with its Drivers of Change (DoCs). PEA has since proliferated as one of the leading instruments used by donors to better understand contextual realities and to try to identify opportunities for leveraging policy change and supporting reforms that benefit the poor more effectively (see, for example, Bjuremalm, 2006; DEVCO, 2011; DFID, 2009; Leftwich, 2006; Fritz et al., 2009).

As applied in the development field, PEA tools and methods have evolved considerably over the past decade. Earlier frameworks, like DFID's DoCs and the Dutch Strategic Governance and Corruption Analyses (SGACA), focused on the systemic level and were considerably broad in scope; they tended to aim for breadth rather than depth of analysis (Unsworth, 2008). These first-generation studies lost favour as concerns grew within different agencies that the analysis tended to be overly focused on underlying constraints (e.g. patronage or deeply rooted patterns of inequality), while being considerably less helpful in tackling more operational 'so what?' questions (Carothers and de Gramont, 2013; Fisher and Marquette, 2013; Wild et al., 2013).

Partly in response to these concerns, newer generations of PEA seek to 'drill down' and focus on specific questions or problems – often, but not exclusively, at the sectoral or local level. The logic behind this 'problem-driven' approach is that, to be of practical use, PEA – whether applied to the country or the sector level – needs to start with a diagnosis of a particular, unresolved development challenge or the assessment of a specific opportunity to be seized. This type of approach is seen as more likely to lead to specific implications of the ways political and governance constraints affect development outcomes and of the political risks and dynamics within and between different sectors, to help identify actionable recommendations (Fritz et al., 2014; Harris and Wild, 2013; Harris et al., 2013).

These kinds of activities have made important contributions to the advancement of 'thinking politically', and they represent an important step forward. A series of interesting research and case studies illustrating the kind of difference this kind of approach can make is emerging (e.g. Booth, 2014; Fritz et al., 2014; The Asia Foundation, 2011; Wild et al., 2013).

Yet, while PEA is a useful tool of analysis that can offer a different angle on a problem or issue, it is not meant to be more or less than that. It is not a magic bullet and cannot provide quick fixes or readymade answers to what are essentially complex development problems. Moreover, there is no uniformity here – and the validity and utility of different approaches and forms of PEA are an on-going subject of debate (see Fisher and Marquette, 2013).

More fundamentally, after more than 10 years of experimentation with PEA among a growing number of international development agencies, it has become increasingly clear that taking politics seriously involves more than doing a good piece of PEA. And while (at least some) donor agencies are investing significant resources in frameworks tailored to their own specificities, there seems to be much less investment in understanding how such analysis can be put to use, and whether and how different forms of applied analysis can make a difference to policy processes in different countries.

Indeed, PEA has developed into a veritable cottage industry, and there have been growing concerns about some of the ways PEA has come to be practised. In some instances, there has been a problematic tendency to view PEA as a comfort blanket – a bounded activity donors carry out to tick a box and move on – rather than as an on-going process of thinking and reflection. In this sense, there is a real danger of depoliticising (Hout, 2012) or 'fetishising' PEA, stripping it of its very purpose. As Wild et al. (2013) have put it, 'rather than being understood as a […] way of thinking, or an analytical approach capable of helping development practitioners to understand complex issues of power, incentives and relationships when engaging seriously with the politics of development, it has increasingly been interpreted in a more limited way, as another tool to help donors achieve their programming goals.'

This is emblematic of a deeper issue. While there is a broad acceptance that politics matter, this is not an agenda that has been embraced evenly or broadly within and across different development agencies and organisations (including NGOs), but rather one that has remained confined to a 'vanguard' (Wild and Foresti, 2011). Even within governance cadres there is still considerable scepticism about how useful and valuable a move towards more politically aware approaches can be. As some observers have suggested, the notion of thinking of development as a technical problem that requires a (relatively) straightforward technical solution is deeply engrained in the way many development actors work. While donors may be paying more attention to politics, in many cases insisting they have internalised the importance of thinking politically and are working accordingly, 'the default position is still technocratic' (Unsworth, 2009).

4 From thinking politically to working differently?

Frustration with some of these efforts to think in a more politically aware manner has led to a greater acknowledgement that there is a need to connect this much more explicitly to understandings of (new) ways of working. This entails asking more searching questions about how decisions are taken; how projects and programmes are funded; what kinds of modalities are used; how success is monitored and evaluated; and what sorts of relationships and networks are needed to deliver on this.

Moving away from a focus on reports and specific tools towards a more organic engaged culture of analysis, understanding and, crucially, action seems essential to give real substance not only to the 'thinking politically' but also, critically, to the 'working differently' side of this agenda (Slotin et al., 2010; Williams and Copestake, 2011). Among other things, 'thinking politically' and 'working differently'[1] calls for:

- Developing in-depth knowledge of the context and the multiple dynamics at work;
- Approaching an issue or challenge from a different perspective – one that recognises that development is a complex and inherently political process in which multiple contending actors seek to assert their interests in diverse societal arenas;
- Engaging with a diverse array of relevant actors (including those that may be outside donors' more traditional comfort zone), trying to reconcile them into shared positive outcomes;
- Focusing on more strategic policy formulation and programming grounded in contextual realities (shifting from 'best practice' to 'best fit' – though what this actually looks like needs to become much more fully specified);
- Moving beyond being purveyors of funds towards enhancing policy dialogue and facilitating/brokering domestic processes of change;
- Identifying entry points to support reform efforts, even 'against the odds'.

Part of this effort should also entail further reflection on how operating in a manner that is politically savvy relates to other on-going ideas, discussions and ways of working that are gaining purchase, including, for example, complexity and complex systems (see Ramalingam, 2013). The imperative to think politically and work differently can also be productively combined with other efforts to reshape development approaches to achieve better outcomes. For example, the growing interest in impact assessments can be helpful in identifying missing links related to political economy drivers (Fritz et al., 2014).

Clearly, donors agencies and other development actors are likely to have limited power to influence the fundamental politics of a country, and, as has by now been amply discussed, the momentum for change and reform must be driven from within. However, whether international actors behave in a politically smart way or not can make an important difference (Bird, 2008).

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[1] To add a twist to the 'thinking and working politically' phrase from a community of practice that has recently come together under the leadership of and with support from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Developmental Leadership Programme (DLP) and The Asia Foundation (TAF).

5 How can the thinking politically and working differently agenda be scaled up?

Efforts to take politics seriously also need to engage with the political economy of the aid architecture and the incentive structures that govern the funding, commissioning, design and implementation of development assistance (see Box 2). These suggest that what is needed to get traction on the agenda on thinking politically and working differently is not only or even principally about building more evidence or generating more analysis as to why it is important to take politics seriously. Rather, it is about altering the way international development actors engage in developing settings, in some cases quite fundamentally.

Box 2: Constraints to thinking politically and working differently in donor policy and practice

Bureaucratic and organisational incentives within agencies can mitigate their abilities to think politically and work differently. Pressure to disburse aid and a narrow concern for quick and visible results (which development actors tend to emphasise so they can be accountable to their home publics) do not always provide the foundations to engage with contextual realities and institutional dynamics of change, and instead tend to encourage a focus on (short-term) outcomes that are least transformational or substantive (e.g. holding x number of workshops in a year without concern as to their actual effect) (Natsios, 2010). In addition, expectations that development assistance will prove its value by generating consistently high returns may not be in line with how improved practice is actually achieved. As some have argued, innovation – which inevitably entails risk – cannot happen without allowing for (some) failure, and some investments may not pay off (at least not immediately or directly) (Rocha Menocal, 2013).

Moreover, standard procedures are often slow and inflexible, and may be becoming more so. Among other things, the complex and elaborate bureaucratic procedures and reporting requirements – presumably to avoid wastefulness and corruption and enhance upward accountability – can dampen innovation and, eventually, enhanced effectiveness (Natsios, 2010). Staff may be spending too much time meeting such bureaucratic and operational requirements, whereas more encouragement, trust and, crucially, authority to work in a more politically aware manner are needed. Staff may also be reluctant to take risks because this can affect career prospects, while continuous staff fluctuation and rapid turnover rates, especially in terms of presence in the field, pose considerable challenges to building and sustaining long-term relationships with in-country partners and the maintenance of institutional memory (see Ostrom et al., 2002; Rocha Menocal and O'Neil, 2012).

How can this be done? Despite the different challenges outlined, over the past decade there has been on-going engagement from a variety of stakeholders, including donor representatives, policymakers, development experts and consultants and civil society actors (including NGOs, activists and academics) on how to advance the task of taking politics more seriously into account in both thinking and practice. Dedicated communities of practice have emerged to refine understandings of what not only 'thinking politically' but also 'working differently' might mean and how the potential embedded in this kind of approach might be realised.[2] This is also an on-going and expanding area of engagement within the ODI, in collaboration with other partners. While, as

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[2] Like the 'Thinking and Working Politically' community of practice mentioned earlier spearheaded by DFAT, DLP and TAF, as well as one housed within the World Bank, and another led by The Policy Practice, among others.

discussed, a great deal of work remains to be done, there have been important areas of progress, and very meaningful insights and lessons have emerged that may yet help further this agenda.

5.1 'Thinking politically and working differently' needs to move beyond governance advisors and teams

Until very recently, engagement with the agenda to think politically and work differently has been confined within a like-minded set of stakeholders. There is also a perception that there is limited overlap between high-level thinking about politics and on-the-ground renditions. Those who see the importance of taking politics seriously are still mostly talking to one another. This has resulted in siloed thinking and a lack of shared knowledge and lessons.

This means it is essential to reach out to others from different traditions and perspectives, including sector specialists, other government departments, domestic policymakers and organisations outside the state. In particular, the need to create demand for engaging with politics more fully from sectors and for building bridges across more technical and politically aware approaches between and within sectors has begun to be explored – the ODI, for example, has started to do some interesting work on this in countries like Malawi and Nepal with support from DFID (Wild et al., 2013). The World Bank is also exploring ways of combining sectoral and country approaches and knowledge in a more systematic manner (Fritz et al., 2014).

Interestingly, given this kind of environment, questions arise as to whether projects or programmes that have a political agenda should be explicitly labelled as such, or whether the task of thinking and working in a more politically aware manner is better done under the radar. Clearly, the answer to this will depend on the context and the issue at hand (Green, 2014). But, as some developmental practitioners have suggested in different forums and conversations, openly stating that an initiative is intended to be politically smart or to grapple with political dynamics may be counterproductive, given the sensitivities or resistance likely to be involved in proposed processes of change. Instead, a project or programme that is 'technical', at least on the surface, can provide cover for more politically aware activities. Indeed, recent research suggests a wholesale separation of technical from political approaches is too artificial. Rather, 'the technical is political', in that technical decisions will have implications for incentives, behaviour and power relationships. Thus, changes on the technical side might also help shift the politics (Harris et al., 2013).

5.2 There is a need to open up and share the use of PEA

Another important concern surrounding PEA centres on who does the analysis and how widely it is shared. Opinions vary on the extent to which international experts/consultants should be involved in undertaking PEAs. Certainly, they can play an important role – at the very least in terms of providing the analysis with needed distance and autonomy from the commissioning agency, which is essential to give it credibility (Harris and Booth, 2013).

On the other hand, experience suggests that, in order to get traction, it is beneficial if staff on the ground take part in the analysis, creating a sense of ownership and responsibility in terms of seeing through its implications. The DFID-supported State Accountability and Voice Project (SAVI) in Nigeria takes this approach, with operational staff directly involved in carrying out and acting on PEA (DFID, 2013). The European Union (EU) recently announced that it would no longer commission PEAs from international experts and would instead carry them out in-house. This is a positive development – but only in the measure that staff in-country are supported and given sufficient time and resources to be able to do it.

5.3 Some shared characteristics of 'what works' when working politically are emerging

There is a growing interest among different stakeholders (especially within the different communities of practice that have emerged) in building up the existing body of evidence of more/less successful efforts to think politically and work differently. This is still in early stages. However, there is a range of ideas and plans to identify case studies (both historical and on-going, although methodologies for case selection still need to be thought through) that can help identify more robustly links between the quality of understanding that development actors have of political contexts, and their ability to make a positive contribution to development

outcomes. Building this kind of knowledge is important to increase the acceptance and uptake of changed approaches – ant there are already some emerging insights into 'what works' in this respect (see, for example, Fritz et al., 2014, Power and Coleman, 2011, Rocha Menocal et al., 2008, Rocha Menocal and O'Neil, 2012, The Asia Foundation, 2011, and Wild et al., 2013, among others).

Developing a compelling narrative

Given the constraints identified and some on-going scepticism about embracing politics, it is essential to develop a compelling narrative on how engaging in a more politically aware manner enables the development community to do its work differently or better (or both), and, conversely, how neglecting the politics can lead to failure. The language used is important: it needs to be more user-friendly and accessible, and to resonate across different audiences. As one commentator has put it, the terminology of 'thinking and working in a more politically aware manner' (as well as other terms that have become increasingly popular in the development community, like 'isomorphic mimicry' and 'problem-driven iterative adaptation', might be off-putting and can complicate rather than enlighten (Green, 2014).

While this suggests a need to simplify language, it does not mean the underlying messages about the challenges of promoting development should be simplified too. In effect, it is high time for a more mature engagement with the public, especially in donor countries, about development as a complex and deeply political process, and the implications this has for more effective support. More and better public communication and discussion is needed to bring public opinion progressively towards a more realistic understanding of development and the ways aid can contribute to it. This may involve some risk to the breadth of the public commitment to aid spending, but with compensating gains in terms of depth of commitment (Wild and Foresti, 2011). As recent research from the ODI and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) suggests, in the case of the UK, the public may have a greater tolerance with regard to risk than is commonly thought (Glennie et al., 2012).

Adopting flexible and adaptable approaches

Engaging in a more politically aware way implies tailoring, adaptation and informed experimentation. As Andrews et al. (2012) have argued, an important implication of this is the need to create an authorising environment for decision making that encourages 'positive deviance' and creative innovation (as opposed to designing projects and programmes and then requiring agents to implement them exactly as designed). As a variety of emerging case studies on successful approaches to thinking politically and working differently suggest, including that of SAVI in Nigeria and the multi-donor programme to support democratic deepening in Uganda (Power and Coleman, 2011), traditional logframe approaches with detailed output and outcome indicators set in advance do not lend themselves so easily to this agenda, which is more about flexibility, iteration and on-going learning.

On the other hand, the relationship between flexibility and accountability needs to be managed and monitored. Feedback loops that facilitate rapid experiential learning and the assessment of intermediate milestones or incremental changes (as opposed to enduring long lag times in learning from *ex-post* 'evaluation') can be important in this respect (Andrews et al., 2012). This should enable greater emphasis on innovation and piloting of new approaches where tried and tested models have had only limited impact. The ODI is undertaking new work with The Asia Foundation to explore these types of approaches. This will include closely accompanying a number of country programmes that are intended to work in 'politically smart' and adaptive ways, over an 18-month period, as part of an action research approach to document and learn from evolving practice. Other cases in Africa will be explored too, where 'business as usual' approaches have been rejected in favour of more responsive and adaptive programming.

Developing greater risk tolerance

Working in a smarter and more politically aware manner calls for developing a higher appetite for risk (including contextual, institutional and programmatic risk) (OECD, 2012). It requires being willing to innovate and risk untested and uncertain new approaches, rather than the standard repertoire of development responses, even when it is unclear whether the investment will bear fruit. For example, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is currently working in Latin America on a project to protect politics from drug trafficking, the seeds for which were planted over 10 years ago without yielding results for some time (Rocha Menocal and O'Neil, 2012). Taking appropriate risks also requires appropriate organisational backing, the right incentive structures, sufficient staff capacity and appropriate institutional

processes and control measures. It means striking a balance between different tensions and dilemmas, and being flexible and adaptable in order to take advantage of sometimes narrow windows of opportunity (Rocha Menocal, 2013).

Identifying and supporting the right staff

A running theme in discussions about thinking politically and working differently is that engaging with politics and the local context effectively may call for a particular kind of person – someone who is comfortable with the uncertainty and ambiguity of political processes and the dilemmas and trade-offs they may present. These have been variously called 'champions', 'entrepreneurs', 'mavericks' and even 'big men' (Green, 2014) and are seen as being able to spot opportunities as they open up, to think on their feet, to build relationships. Whether being politically savvy is something that is innate or something that can be taught remains an open question. What is clear is that there is a need for skilled and experienced staff, that have operated on the ground for long periods of time and that can act as brokers and coalition builders. This was certainly one of the central elements in the success of, for example, DFID's work to support more accountable and representative political systems in the Andean region in Latin America (Rocha Menocal et al., 2008). However, the focus should not be only on individuals or agents, but also on improving the systems within which they operate, through, among other things, adequate capacity development, hands-on engagement and, crucially, incentive structures.

Brokering spaces for enhanced collaboration

It is now becoming increasingly clear that some of the biggest constraints to improving development practice at all levels, from bottom to top, take the form of unresolved processes of contestation and (failed) collaboration. Often, cooperation proves impossible because there is a lack of trust or because incentives are not aligned. For instance, the short-termism that electoral politics generate among would-be developmental leaders in poor countries – especially those that are ethnically fragmented and have weak and ineffective institutions – tends to contribute to a focus on narrow interests (e.g. winning elections), rather than to greater accountability or a concern for the broader public good over the long term. This requires those providing support to act not simply as providers of funds or implementers, but also as facilitators and conveners – bringing together domestic stakeholders, supporting them in identifying problems and encouraging them to work collaboratively in finding potential solutions (Power and Coleman, 2011; Rocha Menocal and O'Neil, 2012; Rocha Menocal et al., 2008; Tavakoli et al., 2013).

6 Where to from here? Changing understandings of what 'development assistance' can mean

The acknowledgement that 'politics matter' has become so widespread as to seem (almost) self-evident, at least at the level of high rhetoric and commitment. No international development actor today would argue that understanding the domestic context is not an absolute precondition for engagement. Yet grappling with the politics at play in actual practice remains a much harder and even contested matter.

The response from the international community thus far has been largely to try to work around the politics. But to borrow from former ODI Director Alison Evans' twist on Michael Rosen's children's classic 'We are going on a bear hunt' in relation to politics, 'We can't go around it, we can't go over it […] we'll have to go through it'. Going through or working with the politics will mean asking some hard-hitting questions about i) how change happens; ii) the role external actors can play in supporting that change; and iii) what sorts of programme approaches, funding and staffing will be needed to get there. A central message emerging from more than a decade of experimentation is that a radical rethinking of the way much of the aid system currently works is needed. While there are no easy or ready-made answers to this, there are some encouraging signs – as long as development actors are willing to take on the challenge.

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