

LAB EVALUATION, RESEARCH, AND LEARNING PLAN

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT DEEP DIVE

SUMMER 2019 UPDATE



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QUESTION 2

Thinking & Working Politically (TWP)



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This Evidence Deep Dive is a companion to the Question 2 Evidence Brief, produced as an output of the U.S. Global Development Lab's Evaluation, Research, and Learning (ERL) Plan - a utilization-focused learning agenda supporting evidence-informed decision making in Lab operations and science, technology, innovation, and partnerships (STIP) programming. A process and set of products, the ERL Plan facilitated Lab learning and adaptation around four bureau-wide areas of inquiry: uptake of products, services, and approaches; adaptive management tools and practices; support to awardees and partners; and sustainability of results.

Insights from the ERL Plan are shared here as a record of emerging opportunities for evidence-based adaptation that could be acted on by USAID and other development actors. This work also contributes to the evidence base for the Agency-wide Self-Reliance Learning Agenda - an effort to support USAID as it reorients its strategies, partnership models, and program practices to achieve greater development outcomes and foster self-reliance with host country governments and our partners.

INTRODUCTION

Known barriers to adaptation can be divided into three categories:

- **Information Barriers** (e.g., not having the right information at the right time)
- **Structural/Process Barriers** (e.g., our own procurement policies and contract management practices)
- **Internal and External Value Barriers** (e.g., our own organizational culture and tolerance for risk, the organizational culture of our partners, or misalignment of our values to those of the beneficiaries)

This deep dive expands on the material presented in the *Question 2 Evidence Brief*, providing more robust findings, conclusions, and recommendations for specific approaches that can be used to overcome barriers to adaptive management. It answers “what”, “so what”, and “how what” questions for each approach:

- **How can the Lab/STIP best support Agency programming to adapt** within shifting environments?
- **What does this mean for us** (in the Lab/at USAID/as development practitioners more broadly)?
- Given this information, **what should we do going forward?**

APPROACH: THINKING & WORKING POLITICALLY (TWP)

Thinking and working politically (TWP) encourages active understanding of context in an ongoing way. It promotes programs that align with domestic momentum to generate reform and are willing to work with partners to help navigate political obstacles. Practitioners build coalitions,

frame issues, and shift incentives so that actors change their behavior in ways that unblock or enhance development results. They keep their finger on the pulse of how the politics around a result are shifting and adjust their programming to new opportunities and knowledge.

TWP FINDINGS – WHAT DO WE KNOW?

PROCESS: How Interventions are Implemented

- Well-connected, knowledgeable team: High-quality, locally based staff who are well connected and knowledgeable about the target sector.
- Adaptability and learning: Flexible program design that does not lock staff into working with particular institutions or organizations offers broad scope for TWP.
- Balancing robust management and adaptability—formality versus swift response: It can be challenging to

maintain robust management alongside a responsive, politically savvy approach and risk mitigation. In a fast-moving, adaptive program, the steps required for staff to fully document learning can be difficult and might actually diminish positive results usually expected from learning and evaluation.

- Demand-driven interventions: TWP programs have most success when their interventions are driven by local partners.

PROCESS: How Interventions are Implemented

- Connecting stakeholders and enhancing their capacities: Playing a convening role, like through strengthening relations between CSOs and the media and investing significantly in building the capacity of local partners. Discretion, such as a lack of project or donor branding, can be an important factor in facilitating change.
- Co-planning and sharing accessible research findings and information: Improving the quality of public debate by making impartial evidence more accessible and involving stakeholders in setting research agendas.

Unbranded research and simplified technical information can be viewed as a neutral resource for a range of local actors who wished to shape the public debate.

- Clarity of vision: Clarity of vision is key to flexible programming. Donors and local partners are more likely to be able to think and work politically if they have a shared view of what success looks like, what support a program can and cannot provide, and when and under what conditions support for an ineffective initiative will be phased out.

POLITICS OF INTERVENTIONS

- Understanding and adapting to the political context: Quarterly political economy analysis (PEA) facilitated the approach in at least one case. Staff, partners, and stakeholders sense-checked the PEA reports and discussed their findings and implications at quarterly workshops. Informal political assessments by staff and issue-specific PEAs also contributed to the program's culture of regular critical reflection and workplan review. Formal PEA was underpinned by a staff team able to work in a politically smart way day-by-day. However, given that broad PEAs can lack the nuance

needed to drill down deeply into specific issues, the successor program is conducting PEAs on thematic clusters of interventions.

- Likewise, one exemplar had an overarching theory of change, but clusters of interventions could have used their own specific theories of change, to be revisited during implementation. Goals can be specified while pathways to achieving them need not be. It is important to embed ways of recognizing when new results or changing context necessitate an adjustment to a theory of change.

- Risk management: Tolerance of risk to results enables programs to experiment with what does and doesn't work, but it can be challenging to balance such experimentation with avoidance of reputational risk for donors.
- Further, when programs work with both demand- and supply-side actors, care is needed to manage the risk that the activities of program-supported civil society actors could damage the program's relationships with government actors. Having a relatively high tolerance for risk throughout a program can be seen to be a key factor in its success. However, in some cases this diminishes over the life of the program; in one case this was perceived to be linked to the use of payment by results. This suggests a tension between flexible, adaptive design and accountability mechanisms.
- To address these tensions, there has been a push to re-envision accountability processes - not as an ability to "define down" results to outputs against which a partner can be held accountable - but rather, whether a partner can successfully show process fidelity and high-quality delivery.

TWP CONCLUSIONS – SO WHAT?

Thinking and working politically is neither a silver bullet nor a passing fad. It reflects a new resolve to learn from years of well-intentioned but often unsatisfactory aid practice, grounded in mistaken assumptions about the ability of external actors to drive complex processes of change by supplying finance and technical advice.

- Domestic political factors are usually much more important in determining developmental impact than the scale of aid funding or the technical quality of programming. Although international development organizations have made extensive efforts to improve the technical quality of programs, in many cases, these improvements have not led to greater impact during implementation. Successful implementation usually happens when programs are aligned with a domestic support base that is influential enough to generate reform momentum and overcome the resistance of those benefiting from the status quo.
- An understanding of political dynamics is frequently the critical missing ingredient in project design and implementation. Admittedly, this conclusion does not necessarily help to predict how developmental change will unfold in different contexts, and it directly confronts the notion that some institutional models will always work better than others.
- Progressive change usually involves local political processes of contestation and bargaining among interest groups, and development programs can significantly improve their impact by understanding and responding to these dynamics.
- Reform-oriented leaders can find ways to make progress by facilitating local problem-solving and collaboration among wide-ranging interest groups.
- "Politically smart" development assistance combines political economy knowledge with more responsive, adaptable, and contextually relevant operations. There is less reliance on aid conditionality and comprehensive institutional reform, and more emphasis on the need to build on local motivation and capacity, responding flexibly to events and opportunities as they arise. This includes removing any design "straight-jacket" stemming from program design tools that encourage prescriptive approaches.
- Changing aid practices has proven much more difficult than raising levels of knowledge and awareness among donor staff, undertaking "set-piece" PEA, and drafting more nuanced policy statements. The dramatic expansion of PEA over the past decade has not transformed the delivery of development programs and has had a limited effect on development impact. This is probably due to the fact that much aid remains predominantly technocratic, inflexible, and averse to the types of operating approaches that could translate political economy findings into more effective development practice. The practice of conducting assessments to understand political economy - without translating findings, and using them to adapt - may also play a role.

TWP approach to strengthen oversight and accountability in Nigeria's oil sector

PROBLEM: Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI) is a global standard to promote open and accountable management of natural resources. Its main task is the production of regular audit reports that assess, review, and reconcile all revenue and investment flows in the oil and gas sector to and from government. NEITI's work has been criticized for its limited impact and its uncomfortable position as a government agency, as established by the NEITI Act 2007. Indeed, the governing board of NEITI, the National Stakeholders Working Group (NSWG), is nominated by the Nigerian president, which limits the amount of pressure the NEITI Executive Secretariat can put on the government to act on the audit's findings.

SOLUTION: In this context, the DFID funded Facility for Oil Sector Transparency and Reform (FOSTER) program designed a cluster of interventions to support NEITI's mission through its engagement with all relevant stakeholders. This cluster included a mix of capacity-building, technical support, training, advice, and dissemination of information. A deliberate TWP approach was employed, including:

- 1) Undertaking deep, regular PEA to identify policy failures ripe for action and shifts in context that might create opportunities for reform or block previously promising avenues,
- 2) Using this insight to nurture relationships with sympathetic stakeholders, both in government and outside, and with them develop contextually relevant interventions,
- 3) Working discreetly to minimize risks to DFID and program staff

OUTCOME: The NEITI cluster of interventions was successful. The program's engagement with the right stakeholders did improve NEITI's mission to promote open and accountable management of oil and gas. The capacity of the NEITI executive secretary was strengthened, and new CSO representatives in the NSWG were empowered. The focus on information simplification and dissemination and support to advocacy initiatives raised public awareness on NEITI audit reports and contributed to the remediation process.

CHALLENGES/CAVEATS: Support to NEITI's website was less successful than developing a strong relationship with NEITI's former chair and gaining the trust of NEITI Executive Secretariat staff and did not result in its restructuring so as to further transparency and publicize more information: resistance to this area of reform was greater than anticipated.

For more details on this case, see [Lessons from Nigeria for improved thinking and working politically in the extractives sector](#).

TWP RECOMMENDATIONS – NOW WHAT?

Our review of the evidence suggests that the Agency and other development actors should consider the following:

ANALYSIS: Political Insight and Understanding

- Interrogate the project and the sector with a relentless focus on power dynamics, interests, incentives, and institutions.
- Be frank about where power resides and for whose benefit.
- Move away from idealized models of development change and start with contextual realities.
- Recognize the multiple and potentially contradictory nature of interests at play.

- Focus on problems identified and articulated by local actors, not outsiders.
- Ensure, as far as possible, that locally-defined problems and proposed solutions are accepted as legitimate by all relevant stakeholders, thereby ensuring ownership.

DESIGN: Flexibility & Adaptability in Design and Implementation

- Be guided by the program goal, and do not be overly prescriptive in how to achieve it. Strategy should set clear goals, allowing for significant flexibility and iteration in the day-to-day efforts to make progress towards these goals. Clear goals should not translate into rigid project frameworks — they represent an understanding of what changes are hoped to be promoted.
- Recognize that politics are not static — continue to assess the local context, test original assumptions, and adapt programs based on new information and opportunities.
- Merge design and implementation with a focus on a series of small “experimental” or “incremental” steps and monitoring those results. In this way, implementation and M&E become one concurrent process.
- Periodically engage in “review and reflection” exercises to critique and understand what is working and what is not — and stop doing what does not work.
- Understand your own agency’s political economy — which issues can be negotiated and which ones cannot.

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