

Notes to self for my first overseas visit!

The Country: Some background from my economics colleagues

Lucy
(Graham Teskey)

I know that the country where I am going is poor by international standards, with over 50% of its population living on less than USD 1.25 a day. It is expected to meet only four of the eight MDGs by the end of 2015. Fortunately, the country has abundant onshore mineral resources, and borders a major emerging economy with significant funds to invest. Parts of the country are subject to sporadic outbursts of violence and organised resistance, but it's nothing the state's competent, well-armed and well-paid military forces cannot handle.

Economic growth is now trundling along solidly at just over 5% per annum (I am told this is largely thanks to an IMF staff-administered programme following the country's somewhat reluctant embrace of a major economic reform programme a few years ago). However, this is only 1 percentage point above the rate of population growth, which means that per capita income growth is negligible – certainly the bulk of the population do not feel any better off. Jobs are scarce – except for the burgeoning public sector, which accounts for an increasing unsustainable share of GDP. From the very little survey data that is available, it seems that the general view “on the street” is that jobs are going to the government's supporters, and literally hundreds of new appointments are made each year without due process.

Much Embassy reporting I have read over the past 18 months has focused on the extremely poor service delivery performance of the education, health, and water and sanitation line ministries. Maternal and child health data are appalling and the quality of educational attainment is very low. Telecommunications are in the hands of a government-owned subsidiary, with no major international players, mobile coverage is extremely low. It's hard to come by reliable budget data; much revenue and expenditure is off budget.

Fortunately the President is well aware of these popular grumbles, and has promised to address them if he is re-elected next year. Having persuaded Parliament to change the constitution allowing him to stand for a third term, he ensures he gets his message across to his fellow citizens by regular speeches broadcast live on state television, as well as through the two national newspapers owned by his twin sons.

The President’s main message to his people to date has been that the bureaucracy is underperforming and unresponsive to his demands as endorsed by the Council of Ministers. In response to claims by the public service unions that they are poorly paid, he is often heard to say that pay rises can only be justified in response to productivity gains. I am sure this is very gratifying to the IMF advisory team in situ in the office inside the Presidential Palace!

So what are my thoughts on the governance issues facing the country before I head out there? Having now spent two weeks studying as many country documents as anyone can reasonably be expected,¹ I feel I have now got a structured set of questions to be answered. This is my initial framing of the task:

Five dimensions of governance in descending order of “bigness”	What do I think the issues are?	Breaking it down	My questions:
The big historical sweep	How does a strong, effective and accountable state come into being over the longer-term? Does this state fit any “typology”?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who controls the use of violence? Nature of the recent democratic transition? What could influence the transition from patrimonialism to the public good? 	<p>What should I prioritise as the core foundations of an effective state?</p> <p>How should I sequence interventions?</p> <p>What trade-offs may I have to make, and how do I decide?</p> <p>Can I design programmes that simultaneously promote economic and political transformation?</p>
State of the state	Why is it considered fragile? How can I understand and assess the institutions and interests that make up this state? Just how much governance is “good enough”? Which bits?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collective action problems How can I recognise the nature of the political settlement? What is the pattern of elite incentive? Rents and rent-seeking? Structure and functioning of the executive? 	<p>How can I know what sort of elite bargains or political settlement is in place, and how can I tell when it is changing?</p> <p>Can I ever hope to influence these deals to make them pro-poor?</p> <p>Where do rents come from and to what extent do they drive the political economy?</p> <p>How much development can I expect in a patrimonial state?</p> <p>Do I focus on bureaucratic capacity and forget voice and accountability?</p>
Constraints to growth	What do I think are the major governance and institutional constraints to growth, development and poverty reduction?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are political constraints more binding than the economic/resource ones? Leadership, agency? Identifying the right institutions? Is the leadership embedded in a strong institutionalised party structure – and if so of what sort? 	<p>Should I design interventions around individuals or coalitions of reformers?</p> <p>Does the regime face any internal or external threats that cannot be assuaged by aid or domestic resource rents?</p>

Five dimensions of governance in descending order of “bigness”	What do I think the issues are?	Breaking it down	My questions:
Characteristics of the public sector and the services to be delivered	What are the major determining characteristics of the issues faced in the public sector? What is the difference between the public service and the public sector? Are particular sectors easier to deal with than others?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public v private goods • Discretion and specificity • Institutional development vis-à-vis organisational development • Understanding how change happens in the public sector 	<p>Do the services I want to improve require simple organisational change, or will it require more complex institutional change?</p> <p>Should I bother with upstream, centre of government reforms, or just go with incremental change sector by sector?</p> <p>Do I go all out for capacity – and if so how – or do I need to think about autonomy and accountability too?</p>
The individual intervention, or project	How can I identify and design projects that are flexible and which respond and adapt to the changing institutional and political environment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PDIA • TWP • Good fit • All this other stuff that the Harvard people talk about... 	<p>Do we start with a problem or an objective?</p> <p>How can I work my way around the tyranny of the project framework?</p> <p>What does it mean to be a searcher not a planner?</p> <p>What alternative modalities are at my disposal?</p> <p>How can I recognise development entrepreneurs and what do I do if I spot one?</p>

Reflections on some of the big governance issues underpinning my report.

Step 1: The big historical sweep: Fukuyama argues that there are three core sets of institutions needed for effective development: the rule of law, state capacity and democratic accountability. But his fantastic two-volume history shows that countries that he considers now “developed” established these institutions in very different orders. What am I to make of this? China created a very strong bureaucracy over two thousand years ago but it fell into disrepute. FF worries that the US established democratic accountability and the rule of law *too early* – and still today suffers from weak state capacity. He worries that US political institutions are in decline. What does all this mean for sequencing institutions in my country? Do we need an “effective state” programme in all three sets of institutions? We don’t have enough money for this, so on what basis can I prioritise? I think I will email the GSDRC Help Desk when I get home.

In my preparatory reading I saw the Asian Development Bank’s 2013 Asian Outlook report on the public sector and governance. It was very clear. It says that there is evidence that focusing on developing state capacity (i.e. the executive) and the quality of the regulatory environment will have the biggest impact on growth, jobs and poverty reduction. If I recommend this during the visit then I can at least be

sure that all the economists back home will agree with me! But I know too that we have an influential Law and Justice section (and our minister is a lawyer) – if I don't recommend a programme in this area they may criticise everything else that I recommend.

I know I will be asked about the democratisation process too. What do I think of it? Heaven alone knows. Emails from the team in-country suggest that I can say fairly firmly that the President's bid for a third term is not encouraging. It undermines the rule of law (that might win me back some support from the L and J people). But the Ambassador's reports also tell me that the President is not overly corrupt and sincerely wants the best for his country. He enjoys considerable support, I can see that. And he controls the army and makes sure they don't run riot. I suspect the President will get re-elected with a significant majority – and the EU and UN election monitors no doubt will declare it free and fair.

Does this mean I can ignore the voice and accountability side of governance? Can I leave parliamentary work to other donors? Surely the US will pick it up? If DFAID is primarily interested in growth, then we should focus on institutions for growth, surely? But if people vote on a client-patron basis (hmmm not sure everyone understood me when I used this phrase at the Embassy wrap-up meeting on Friday afternoon. Is there a way to express this more simply? I must ask our senior governance adviser when I arrive – if he will see me that is. He is always so busy writing papers) this won't help establish very strong incentives for improved public service performance, as MPs will buy their votes (this is called money politics I now know) and get re-elected anyway! This is not how it is supposed to work.

When all is said and done we are about poverty reduction. So I think I am justified in focusing on helping put in place an effective public sector – one that can articulate sensible policies and help implement them effectively and efficiently. This means a focus on institutions (I will weave in references to Douglass North to show I know what I am talking about) and making sure they are accountable (but to whom?) and transparent (who will keep an eye on them? The audit office does not function. And there is no legislative oversight. Maybe I should recommend a programme here too?).

And then there is the Brian Levy question. His latest book is great but my goodness it made my head spin a bit. Should I include an annex when it comes to writing my report arguing that the system here is what he calls “personalized competitive”, where “politics is competitive, but the rules of the game governing both the polity and the economy remain personalized”. This is definitely right. But I am still not sure what the implications of this are? It's ok to say “go with the grain” of what is possible but I am not really sure just what the “grain” is. In practice does it mean just going with the few scattered but still sensible reforms that the President supports? What about the ones we think are appropriate but he doesn't, like meritocracy in appointments? Do we just forget it?

I wonder whether I am right in inferring from Dr Levy's book that competitive regimes are more likely to make the democratic transformation through institutions, rather than directly through growth? If so this leads me to a different conclusion – that our programme should focus on the check and balance institutions, not just the growth institutions. Oh dear; now I have contradicted myself. Maybe I just ignore this typology – will anyone listen to me anyway if I start talking about “dominant party” politics and “competitive clientelism”?

Anyway I can argue what I want. A Developmental Leadership Program paper on democracy and development by Tim Kelsall says that the relationship between democracy and development is contested. So I am pretty safe whichever way I jump.

OK summarising what I think I need to bounce off people while I am there:

Should our immediate priority be state capacity? If so then what is our theory of change? And if I do ask this in meetings with local colleagues will they put me on the spot and ask how we know that capacity will be used for the public good? Will it necessarily help the transition away from patrimonialism? Maybe in the medium term the middle classes will demand more democratic accountability. Maybe give this five years, so try to co-ordinate with other donors (Paris! Accra! Busan!) to persuade one of them to do something here.

Better move on. I am rambling.

Step 2: State of the state: Why do we call this place a fragile state? When I asked staff at the WB they said because its CPIA score is 3.1. What's CPIA I asked? It's the Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment they said. I asked for a copy but was told it's confidential to the Bank. Difficult to explain to my minister. So we consider it “fragile” because of a formula not many people understand that is used by one of the big development organisations like the World Bank? From a practical perspective the country does seem fragile – small shocks can knock it off course and after my two weeks there it is clear that while the most senior public servants are indeed very competent, the vast majority are under-skilled, poorly organised and unmotivated (wow – there's a generalisation for you!).

My list of fragilities:

- Bureaucratically: very limited capacity to do stuff i.e. make policy, discipline the system for implementation, collect and use data, monitor progress, and adjust course.
- Economically: country dependent on one or two (what I now know are called) “single-point resources” which can be taxed by the state and offer great sources of rents to be used for private gain and not the public good.
- Politically: system very much revolves around the Pres. If he were to go no knowing what would happen. Political parties more a collection

of individuals jostling for power than a group of people with a shared program and vision. MPs constantly “cross the floor”.

- Socially: as income distribution worsens, the poorer groups in society seem to be increasingly frustrated. There is the potential for some demonstrations against the government as a result of the extent of poverty, the of lack jobs and the lousy public service, but I don’t think civil war will break out (am I actually going to say this?). But for me the biggest fragility is...
- Institutionally. Few institutions in the country seem to function as they should. This is called isomorphic mimicry – but I won’t put this in my BTOR as the office hates development jargon. These institutions all look sensible from the outside but even after only two weeks I can see that most of them don’t perform at all. The Ministry of Public service provides no services and is not open to the public. It just takes bribes to give jobs, promote and post people.

So I think I am secure on the question of fragility.

I know too that I will be asked about the overall quality of governance. I have looked at the Governance at a Glance data and it is pretty awful, as are the World Bank’s World Governance Indicators. The six WGI’s are all in the bottom quintile: government effectiveness, regulatory quality, voice and accountability, political stability and the absence of violence, the rule of law, and anti-corruption.

So if we are going to prosecute certain bits of the governance agenda – which ones? Which bits are supposed to give us good enough governance? I googled this and found a brill article by Merilee Grindle (another eminence grise at the Harvard School) on what she actually calls “good enough” governance. However, just as I thought I was getting to understand Dr Levy’s formulation, I find Dr Grindle uses yet another typology – one by Prof Moore at the University of Sussex in the UK. Prof Moore talks about five sorts of states: collapsed, personal rule, minimally institutionalised, institutionalised non-competitive and institutionalised competitive states. This is pretty close to the Levy version I think. The two key things seem to be the extent of political competition and the extent to which things are “institutionalised”. I am not sure whether I should say the country is personalised or minimally institutionalised. It’s both. Maybe stick with Dr Levy’s personalised competitive.

Anyway, I will refer heavily to Prof Grindle in my article, including her hierarchy of governance priorities which still seems to be the best available guide on this issue. Her ranking would support my proposal that we should focus on the executive.

My senior governance adviser tells me that before I arrive and start engaging with those who are really familiar with context I need to make sure I understand the

nature of the state. When I asked him what he meant he talked about the political settlement and what he called the “patterning of elite incentives”. To be honest I must admit I did not really understand him. I could not find any documents describing the political settlement in the country and when I asked a few people nobody said they had seen one let alone signed it. I think it must be what is called a tacit agreement among the elite. If so I am not sure how I can describe this settlement when it comes to my eventual Back to Office Report. I think I will focus on the background of the president and his most trusted ministers, their economic interests and who their supporters are. This should be enough. We have lots of good information on this from our diplomatic staff. Interestingly, none of my aid colleagues were aware of it.

So I need to verify with local colleagues, but I am pretty certain that of the three branches of the state (the executive the legislature and the judiciary) the executive – despite being weak – is the strongest of the three. The judiciary seems to me to be ineffective at best or bought and compromised at worst. The legislature does the President’s bidding and certainly does not hold the executive to account. So is strengthening the executive enough in and of itself? Could this make things worse? Maybe I will have to revisit my conclusion from step one that the executive is the place to focus on. I will sleep on it.

I have been struggling with the problem of collective action. It’s just that there does not seem to be much of it. Everyone seems to be in it for themselves and their families or cronies. There seem to be few mechanisms for agreeing on a course of action – and where there is there are few mechanisms to implement and enforce that decision. I think I will just not discuss collective action in my BTOR.

Step 3: The constraints to growth. I feel on much firmer ground on this question. Good job we have the economists’ report to go on. I won’t repeat that. I will just talk about three things:

- The institutions which are supposed to set, monitor and regulate the business environment are ineffective. It is not that they are weak – in fact the opposite. They are quite strong in incentivising rent seeking – but not in providing a consistent and predictable environment in which to do business. We know there are lots of rents to be had from the issue of business licenses, from the oversight of customs, from the tax affairs of businesses and individuals etc. We suspect too that senior officials and even the Minister is involved. This is why there has been so little action here since the Business Environment Review we did three years ago. Matt Andrews on institutions is my mentor here!
- There is insufficient leadership. In the ODI papers on development patrimonialism in Africa (David Booth I think – very good stuff) I read before coming here, it said that if there was a visionary leader supported

by a determined and technically competent economic technocracy – then development was possible. Well here we have neither.

- There are few nascent groups agitating for change among the local population. I cannot see a Jaime Faustino-type “coalitions for change” programme emerging here, more’s the pity.

So my answer to the question whether the political constraints to growth are greater than the economic – is well, yes, they undoubtedly are. It’s all well and good for the economists to go on about the potential scale of natural resource extraction and the export potential of the country – all the evidence to date is pointing us in the direction of the natural resource curse: no accountability institutions, no demanding civil society and a rent-seeking elite. (Does this mean maybe that we *should* focus on the demand side and social accountability first? If we just strengthen the bureaucracy then we may just make the rent seeking even more embedded and sustainable? How can I know?). Must talk to colleagues at the university when I get back home; they may have studied other countries.

The big question here is leadership. I think it’s really interesting that over the last decade a consensus has emerged that institutions and policies really do matter: Acemoglu and Robinson have made that clear at last! From what I learned in university the impact of the “new institutional economics” led to donors paying *more* attention to the formal and informal rules of the game that influence individual and collective behaviour, but arguably at the cost of neglecting the role of leadership. This I think is a shame, given the daily experience of the overwhelming significance of leadership in political, corporate and public life. Acres of press coverage are given over to considering the respective merits of potential national political leaders and who is lobbying for which top post in the private sector and in international institutions.

So it does strike me as strange that the development community seems to have downplayed the potential difference that individuals can make in addressing poverty. Until recently anyway. The Asia Foundation’s work on leadership is really interesting – as is the Philippines experience which just everyone in the world seems to know about. I need to read some of Jaime Faustino’s blogs on the relationship between politics and reform.

I am still unsure though what to recommend as far as leadership goes. Should I suggest some sort of coalition building among the middle class? But there is no middle class! Most influential groups are co-opted (good word to use) in some way into the ruling elite? Maybe I’ll suggest a brown-bag lunch to discuss this issue? I am at a bit of a loss here I must admit.

Step 4: Characteristics of the public sector and the services to be delivered: This is where the report should get easier. I have read the papers from the ESID research group based at Manchester University and those of Richard Batley, as well as Arturo Israel

and Lant Pritchett on specificity and discretion. I learned a huge amount from this literature. I am surprised it is not more widely discussed. Prof Batley's papers were excellent at describing the different characteristics of certain goods and services (using public-private goods distinctions) and suggesting what may be appropriate organisational arrangements for delivering each. I will certainly discuss this with my sector colleagues, although I may be at risk of sounding too academic. At least I now am perfectly clear on the distinction between the public *sector* and the public *service*. I also now know that the public service has a number of different definitions, dependent on whether or not you include teachers, medical staff and the police for example. If local colleagues agree then my eventual report may focus wholeheartedly on the narrow definition of the public service; i.e. core public servants (what the Brits call the civil service). Not sure though whether employees of the seven local governments should be included? I know they are appointed by the central government and paid by them – so I guess they are included (reminder to self: check when back home).

OK public service reform, or better still management, can be framed in four different ways:

- role of the state
- management of central government – upstream core functions
- improvement in civil service systems service – for downstream delivery
- accountability and oversight

Where should we focus? Where should our programme be set? I did think at first that it should be about restructuring the role of the state (point one above) but at the end of the two weeks I have concluded that the “political will” (I hate this term but as long as I emphasise to my senior governance adviser that I am using it as shorthand for a long list of incentives, disincentives and perverse institutional practices he will understand and I will get away with it) was not there to achieve this. So then I thought just focus on the upstream stuff. Clearly the heart of government is in a mess. But would changes there trickle down to improve service delivery? Hmm. Not at all sure about this. And the fourth one is that accountability issue again. Goodness this is so tricky. They did not teach me this in grad school.

Let's see what I learned from studying the capacity development literature. From what I can see “capacity development” remains one of the most slippery concepts in development. Nobody agrees its definition, it has no formal body of knowledge and there are no university courses teaching it. In the private sector it is called business management. In our business some writers even like to argue over the distinction between capacity building and capacity development. How ridiculous! My senior governance adviser goes on about how most discussions of capacity development are limited to calls for more individuals to be trained, or for more

technical people from developed countries “to help out”. He thinks that in many cases this is a waste of time.

In fragile and conflict-affected states (called FCSs for short) we all know that capacity is even scarcer than in LICs. There are few, if any, trained and/or experienced staff, organisations have collapsed and the institutional rules of the game are informal and geared towards personal and professional survival.

So is there any good news? It seems to me that at least there is now increasing agreement on terms and definitions: capacity is now broadly recognised as the ability of organisations (not individuals) to carry out, effectively and efficiently, programmes of coordinated action in pursuit of formal agreed goals. I think three elements are important:

- It is organisations that have capacity. Individuals have skills and competencies.
- Organisations also have particular and specific capabilities to do things such as manage people, carry out customer research, account for the use of monies etc. Capabilities are thus the building blocks of any organisations overall capacity to perform.
- Organisations operate in a wider institutional environment that may either support or circumvent the organisation’s ability to carry out its formal collective goals.

In short, we have learnt that translating improved individual competence into organisational capacity requires institutional-level change. I love this phrase. I will repeat it as many times as I can.

Second, we know that organisations and institutions are different: Appreciating the difference between organisations and institutions will lead to different interventions and activities. Organisational development can be likened to coaching a soccer team. Which players should play in which position? What should be the team’s tactics? At what point should we bring on a substitute? Should the team play a sweeper? By contrast institutional development would focus on the rules of the game. Should the offside law be changed? Are the goalposts too small? Should we allow 13 players instead of 11? And perhaps most importantly of all, should the team give up playing soccer and take up rugby instead?

And third we need to understand the notion of “specificity”. This is where Arturo Israel comes in. Arturo Israel was an economist working at the World Bank. He argued that the more specific, the more monitorable and the more limited the task to be performed, the easier will it be to develop organisational capacity to do it. The key idea is “specificity”: the ability to monitor an output. The more an output can be monitored the greater the likelihood of ensuring its quality and timeliness. The classic case is a jet engine maintenance engineer for an airline. The work to be

done can be easily and quickly monitored, and will have major (visible, immediate) consequences if not done properly. The opposite case is a career-guidance counsellor. Here the “quality” of guidance provided can hardly be measured at all. It will be years before the impact is known, and probably not even then.

The implication of this is that capacity development will be easier to achieve in organisations where there are a few specific (and clearly monitorable) decisions to make. Conversely, it is much more difficult to achieve in organisations where there are many thousands of unspecific ones. This explains why it is relatively straightforward to improve the capacity of a central bank whose responsibility it is to manage the exchange rate, and why it is much harder to improve the nationwide quality of primary school education: the former relies on the judgement of a handful of highly trained economists (who could be parachuted in on contract for two or three months), while the latter relies on the performance of thousands of (probably) partially trained teachers whose performance is rarely monitored or assessed. By the time any assessment is made, it is too late for the children concerned.

This concept of specificity indicates just how ambitious and difficult to achieve the primary health and education MDGs are. System-wide improvements in education will require the consistent application of higher standards of teaching, marking, reporting, recording and examining by thousands of individuals, mainly working in systems that have few incentives for performance and quality. How hard is that!

I find all this very helpful, and will use it for some of my recommendations about building some public-service capacity. My basic thrust will be that we need a public-service strengthening programme that focuses on both upstream and downstream issues. Upstream stuff should try to streamline decision making and the way money and people are deployed and managed. The downstream stuff should focus on specific problems in service delivery.

What is certain is that I will recommend a full political economy analysis of the public services, especially the sectors where we will focus.

Step 5: How to design an individual project. This is where my attendance at all those “thinking and working politically” workshops will prove really useful. I know that change produces winners and losers and as our project moves through implementation the context will change – the “rich swirl of incentives and informal institutions” as my senior governance adviser likes to say. So I will recommend a flexible and adaptive approach. Indeed, rather like “process” projects that I understand were popular in the late 1980s, according to my post-grad guest lecturer from DFID. I will start with the problem and work from there. We know what many of the problems are in the public service, as the local team “workshopped” them last week with all their government counterparts. We also know what sort of an outcome we are seeking but none of us are quite sure how to get there – what our “theory of change” is. So I will jiggle with the project framework and make it far less

prescriptive than usual. I am worried though that our Quality Control branch will say that it needs to be much more precise and I need to specify precisely the vertical chain. I will have to ask my senior governance adviser how to get around this.

My briefing makes clear that the key characteristics of politically smart programming may seem like common sense, but they are not the norm in current aid operations. I will emphasise that in any new programme we need three things:

- *Avoid preconceptions and straitjackets* – avoid the naïve belief that merely because of one initial agreement our project will succeed. We know that politics are not static – our approach must be flexible!
- *Set a clear goal* – where “stuff happens” (i.e. politics) we need to have a clear goal but be flexible on the way to achieve it.
- *Constant interrogation of context* – thinking and working politically. Those involved must be willing to engage continually with their environment.

I think this is what Bill Easterly is talking about when he goes on about searchers and not planners. Makes sense to me. Same with Matt Andrews and his “change space” model. Go for what is politically feasible.

Conclusion

I expect this mission to be tough, energising and rewarding. I have tried to prepare rigorously but I need to avoid preconceptions – I may need to change my mind radically when I am actually there. Hopefully all my reading has helped, but it cannot in any way unequivocally answer all my questions and point to one clear way forward. If nothing else I already know from all the papers and advice just how important and defining local context is. I also know that all the reading and knowledge in the world will only help you make your own decisions and reach your own conclusions.

Note

1. Key ones including 2014 IMF Staff Consultations; 2014 UNDP Human Development Report; 2013 McKinsey Country Study; 2014 World Bank Interim Strategy Note; 2013 Oxfam Report on Food Shortages; 2012-2014 DFAID Ambassadorial notes, reflections and cables; 2014 Freedom Watch report on Human Rights Violations; and the 2014 World Bank “Doing Business” indicators report.

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