

Mind the gaps: What's missing in political economy analysis and why it matters

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Why, despite over a decade of sustained and high quality political economy analysis, does it seem that we aren't getting any closer to politically informed programming being the norm rather than the (notable) exception? Most donor staff, regardless of sector or specialism, seem to accept the importance of thinking and working politically, with some buy-in at the top (though this may be limited, in reality, to the small "p" of delivering aid projects rather than the big "P" of understanding and working with power relationships and structures). A flurry of political economy analysis (PEA) tools over the last ten years has been backed by interesting and engaging PEA training. Yet uptake and impact – both achieving *and* demonstrating impact – are proving challenging. In this article we argue that there are four key reasons, or gaps, that undercut the practical impact of PEA; in ascending order of importance they are: 1) conceptual, 2) operational, 3) evidential, and 4) organisational.

First, there are serious conceptual gaps *within* PEA tools and studies. More specifically, most PEA tools seriously underplay the role of ideas and the complexity of power. In our view this is the least important of the four gaps in explaining the limited impact of politically informed programming, but it is worth noting, and we'll explain why.

Second, there is a gap between PEA and frontline working, programming and implementing. For too many staff PEA is something that is done by outside specialists and exists in long and detailed analytical documents; it is not a living and breathing process woven into everyday practice. Analysis is rarely linked into strategy and is not always aimed at the right level.

Third, despite lots and lots of evidence that ignoring politics can be disastrous for aid effectiveness, if we're really honest, we don't have a very good evidence *base* for what works, when and why. This matters for good programme design as much as anything else. Understanding *how* and which bits of thinking and working politically are necessary and sufficient

conditions for success is crucial. Is it design, analysis, reporting requirements, the theory of change, how programmes are staffed or trained, the enabling environment, time frames, size, resources, a particular mindset, high level support, cover or leadership and so on? We have some pointers, but no systematic tests of these.

Fourth, there is a gap between individuals' desires to design and implement politically informed programmes and the support and opportunities that their organisation provides. Conflicting institutional logic such as the imperative to spend, organisational silos, the results-based agenda, political and taxpayer intolerance of failure, and so forth, make it extremely difficult to do development differently in any straightforward sense. We need to take these organisational challenges more seriously and not simply exhort colleagues to work politically. This last challenge is the most serious but, if we can get around it, represents a seriously big win for a "thinking and working politically" agenda.

1. Conceptual gaps: the idea of politics and the politics of ideas

Most PEA is commissioned as an add-on activity, and there's little evidence that it's changing the way staff think. This is a shame, because when PEA was first conceived it was seen much more as a process whereby staff learned a new way to think about the ways in which politics affected their work (or how their work affected local politics) (Bjuremalm, 2006; Fisher and Marquette, 2014). It was intended as a "revolution", a reversal of the increasingly naive, apolitical approach to development programming that started with the ascendancy of economics in the early 1980s (Carothers and de Gramont, 2013; Marquette, 2003).

PEA involves plenty of economics, but not much in the way of politics. Ben Fine has argued that economics "has long sought to colonise the other social sciences on the basis of its method by universalising what Gary Becker and his followers call 'the economic approach' to any area of non-economic life" (Fine, 1999). PEA itself has become increasingly apolitical, choosing to work with the language of economics more than the language of politics. Hudson and Leftwich (2014) find that most PEA relies too much on economic assumptions and is really the "economics of politics", not political economy at all. Of course there is a politics to this, given that economists tend to be the most respected and influential cadres in most development agencies. Nevertheless, there are consequences to adopting the language of economics. Economistic PEA overlooks the real political action – the negotiations, deals, coalition building, battles over ideas and the operation of power.

For example, the focus on incentives is useful, but only up to a point. PEA tends to view incentives such as wealth and power as universal motivators, whereas in fact multiple incentives and the formal and informal "rules of the game" overlap. This means that if we change the incentives, we're unlikely

to get uniform or predictable results. Individuals do not bend simultaneously and uniformly like reeds in the water when the wind changes direction (Hudson and Leftwich, 2014).

PEA tends to make tidy analytical distinctions between interests, incentives and institutions. In real life it's far more complex. When a politician seeks election is it because it's in their interest? Or is there is an *incentive* to stand for election because of the opportunities once in political office to increase a politician's *interests* of wealth and power? These are questions of political analysis, the type of question that PEA frequently misses.

Politics is the battle of ideas, but ideas are often missing from PEA. Ideas include collectively held beliefs that shape the social world, such as religion or political ideologies. They can be normative ideas about what is right and wrong – such as opinions on same-sex marriage – or beliefs about how the world works. Ideas are more than “informal institutions” such as norms, beliefs and values. They matter to formal institutions, such as constitutions. To relegate ideas to the “soft” end of politics would be a mistake. Joseph Stalin – hardly someone to adopt academic affectations – understood this well when he said: “Ideas are more powerful than guns. We would not let our enemies have guns, why should we let them have ideas?” Paying attention to ideas is part and parcel of being a political realist. Taking ideas more seriously also helps to explain why actors often act against their own obvious economic self-interest. Actors are not always driven by greed, and they are not “actors”. They are *people*, with all the messy complexity that implies.

Crucially, ideas motivate and guide interests. They shape how problems are understood, and underpin legitimate forms of rule and systems of accountability. Ideas help form coalitions around a collective interest. They can help frame interests and incentives to bring about transformative change. Ideas are contested – even ones that are considered to be doctrine. For example, in the struggle to pass the Reproductive Health Law in the Philippines that made contraception more widely available, 159 prominent Catholic academics spoke out in its favour. They argued that a true Catholic, part of the Church of the Poor, would support any bill designed to alleviate the suffering and poverty of women and children (Ateneo Professors, 2008).

Political leaders are often driven by their experience and their ideas. Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah was strongly influenced by Pan-Africanist ideas, Tanzania's Julius Nyerere by a belief in what he called *ujamaa* (“unity” or “familyhood”), Senegal's Léopold Senghor by “African socialism” and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew by a mix of social-democratic beliefs and “soft authoritarianism” that is often summed up as “Asian values”. The same goes for all individuals and organisations at all levels of politics (Hudson and Leftwich, 2014). Understanding elite attitudes towards poverty in Malawi can help to explain why there's little support for cash transfers, despite clear

evidence that they are effective in alleviating poverty. Future cash transfer programmes that take this into account could lead to better buy-in and more sustainable programmes by linking cash transfers to concepts Malawi's elite do approve of, such as public works programmes or education (Kalebe-Nyamongo and Marquette, 2014).

And – very practically – understanding what motivates people opens up political opportunities to work politically. It widens the spectrum of what's politically possible. In Jordan, for example, a coalition that successfully campaigned for a new law against domestic violence framed the issue as protecting the whole family. To reduce political opposition, the campaign did not focus on women's rights, but argued that the new law would also protect children and the elderly (Tadros, 2011: pp. 22-23). Seeing what is politically possible – not just feasible – makes the opportunities to work politically more visible. And, we hope, makes politics less scary and more recognisable.

This isn't just an academic discussion about language, discourse etc.; it's about an ongoing fear of politics in development agencies and a fear of not being seen as relevant to economists who continue to dominate many development agencies (though not all). Talking about “political economy analysis” rather than “political analysis” matters, just as trying to find another way to say “thinking and working politically” does. Hiding politics behind apolitical language, and taking politics out of PEA, means we'll never get to grips with politics. So much for the revolution.

In our ideal world, we would stop talking about PEA, which is in many ways an increasingly discredited “brand”, and we would talk instead about *political analysis* (Hudson and Leftwich, 2014). There are many, many ways to think about politics beyond the current framing of PEA. This may end up with a messier analytical landscape, but messy isn't necessarily a bad thing. It could open up more space for country specialisms and local knowledge, framed the way local actors want to frame analysis, not the way that PEA specialists believe it should be framed. Local voices drawing on feminist theory or Marxist theory or behaviouralist theory, or whichever theories for political analysis help them to understand their world and explain it to external actors, not the other way around. Now *that* would be revolutionary.

2. Operational gaps: the frontline challenge of thinking politically

The next gap is one of practicality. There is too wide a gap between the analysis PEA produces and frontline working. Can we include politics, power and ideas in PEA without creating ever-more complex frameworks that are too time-consuming to be useful? How can we get political analysis into our strategies? Do we even have strategies for thinking and working politically?

Most PEA frameworks and training are written by governance people for governance people. They often lack a language that non-governance staff can relate to (What are “institutions”? How about “open access orders”? “PDIA”, anyone?). Sometimes the same words are used to describe very different things. We have found this with our research on higher education and developmental leadership. “Institutions”, to higher education specialists, mean higher education institutions, such as universities and colleges. So when we collaborate on research, we – the governance/politics specialists – need to find different language to explain what we mean (and not the other way around).

More fundamentally, donor staff are pressed for time, and PEA frameworks are often complex. This has led to a heavy reliance on external consultants – who may have helped design those complicated frameworks in the first place (Fisher and Marquette, 2014). Training courses sensitise staff, but don’t necessarily create the incentives, time or skills to do political analysis in-house. After all, we have seen plenty of governance specialists who know the language but don’t really “think politically”.

As Duncan and Williams (2012) point out, PEA has often become a “dismal science of constraints”. PEA studies tend to focus on risks and the limited scope for donor engagement rather than on possibilities. That’s not helpful for staff who want to minimise risk and spend funds,² and, it has to be said, this can create incentives for consultants to “massage” findings into something more appealing. This could be damaging, particularly where staff depend on PEA consultants as “translators” of what local people really want. None of this is likely to bring about behavioural change among donor staff. “Thinking politically” needs to be internalised to be effective, and reliance on consultants is hardly “flexible” or “adaptive”.

Having said this, there will always be the need for “big” political analysis: when a new country director or manager comes in and needs to understand the lie of the land, when a country strategy needs to be drawn up or when there’s a change of government or outbreak of violence or some other critical juncture. And there’s likely to always be need for some sort of “problem-driven” political analysis, when projects and programmes hit a wall, and staff know that there may be a political issue at play that they don’t quite understand. But what about the everyday working – checking the political temperature, so to speak? Something that can be done by anyone, at their desk or in conversations with partners and colleagues. We are missing a frontline, everyday political analysis tool that sets out a small number of questions in a way that drops governance jargon of interests, incentives, institutions and so forth. The sorts of relatively straightforward questions that try to cut to the heart of what politics means and how it can affect development programmes at the micro-, as well as the meso- and

macro-levels. We are working on an Everyday Political Analysis (EPA) tool that we hope fills this gap, but would welcome efforts to do this from others.

Of course, there's a risk that even an "everyday" political analysis tool could become yet another tick-box exercise, as PEA has all too often become. Craig Valters has written about theories of change (ToC) recently, finding that ToC approaches can create space for critical reflection and learning, but that this can also be "an illusory process" (Valters, 2014: p. 18). We have all seen theories of change that are clearly based on fantasy, a box-ticking exercise to secure funding rather than an exercise grounded in solid analysis, learning and communication. Valters quotes a participant in a ToC workshop as saying, "Like any tool, Theories of Change can be good or bad, useful or not; it needs to be used critically" (Valters, 2014: p. 15).

The same goes for political analysis at any level. Political analysis should be about interpreting and understanding the political context of that country/region/municipality, but it should be a *critical process*. In many fragile contexts, in particular, a great deal of informal everyday political analysis already goes on, because formal PEA studies are time-consuming and costly. But how much of this "analysis" is based on a systematic process of validation and learning? How much of it goes through an internal challenge function and feeds into learning strategies? Whatever level we're talking about, seeing political analysis as a process whereby programme actors are given space to debate and challenge interpretations of what's going on on the ground, is vital. This should, in the end, make programming easier and more effective, and it should lead to a change in learning culture and to better strategies.

At the end of the day, political analysis needs to feed into strategy in order to be worthwhile. This could be high-level strategy, such as 5-year country strategies, but it could also be "low-level" strategy. A theory of change with realistic and well-informed assumptions. An approach to monitoring and evaluation that allows for adaptation and learning. A strategy, after all, is just a fancy way of saying, "we have an action plan". We know what the overall aims and goals are, and we have a plan for achieving that. The strategy should be flexible and adaptive, and a good process of political analysis, at the right level, should be a fundamental input in the development of realistic and achievable plans. The opportunities for strategy formulation and adjustment may, in reality, be quite rare, and programme managers will often inherit strategies from their predecessors or a design team, and so may have limited opportunities for massive adjustment. But a regularised process of critical reflection through political analysis could provide a way to (re)shape strategies and even, if necessary, shame poorly designed projects.³ Getting this right is where its greatest (untapped) potential lies.

3. Evidential gaps: do we know if PEA really works?

Is most PEA robust enough to justify the way it's used? Does it lead to improved results? Does it create its own unintended consequences? We just don't know. Common sense tells us that high-quality, relevant, useful political analysis *must* be essential for getting better results from our aid, but we don't yet have proof. No wonder uptake is difficult; we've not yet proven the case.

What we do have are a few interesting compilations of cases where PEA has been used to good effect – see the excellent collections from Verena Fritz and colleagues (2014) and David Booth and Sue Unsworth's eloquent paper on “politically smart, locally led” aid (2014). There are widely cited cases where political analysis has been at the heart of a politically informed programme design – such as the Coalitions for Change programme funded by the Australian Aid Program and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in the Philippines or the State, Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) in Nigeria (Sidel, 2014; Booth, 2014; Derbyshire and Mwamba, 2013). These are great efforts that make for very interesting reading, but selective, single country case studies written up by programme actors themselves don't constitute an evidence base. There have been no independent large evaluations of PEA itself, either within donor agencies or across them.

We *need* an evidence base. Proponents of working politically, doing development differently and so on call on donors to dramatically change the way they work: end the imperative to spend, get rid of log frames, work more flexibly and adaptively (even if it means not having a measurable – and thus, accountable – plan). But these are “big P” political challenges that are extremely unlikely to change, certainly not without the sort of compelling evidence base that could convince heads of development agencies, and in the case of bilaterals, their parliaments and their public, to exclude aid agencies from the rules that govern the rest of the civil service. Those of us in this thinking and working politically “space” make a lot of claims and demand a lot of changes without knowing for sure that we're right, or even that we're right *in the right way*.

We need a systematic comparative analysis of PEA and different kinds of politically informed programmes, where the case selection is clearly specified and justified. There needs to be variation in outcomes from success to failure. We won't learn much (or convince many) by just cherry picking successful cases. We need a rigorous evidence base, rather than self-referential narrative case studies. For sure, stories, anecdotes and vignettes convince some people and even key people at key times; they are compelling, relatable and, above all, memorable. We need these stories, but they are worthless without a solid evidence base behind them.⁴ There are many possible ways to do this, of

course, including as a minimal first step, expecting case studies – whether written up by project/programme actors or others – to discuss their case-selection criteria, to make clear their approach to analysis and to be honest about limitations and any caveats that their study raises.

And finally, we need to understand the *mechanisms* better. What is it about a particular programme that makes it successful? Disaggregating such processes requires either in-depth longitudinal or comparative analysis, or both in order to rule different factors in or out. Most likely we will find that it is different combinations of factors that matter, and so if one ingredient is missing overall effectiveness is undercut. Moreover, it is likely that certain ingredients only work in a particular environment – whether that is because of cultural norms, power structures or the viability of the state – and so what works here, doesn't necessarily work there (Cartwright, 2012). Too narrow an evidence base will miss these different combinations and variations in success and failure. This is not just about convincing others about the importance of thinking and working politically, it is about us being able to design and implement politically informed programmes more successfully.

Measuring politics and governance is hard. When it comes to the types of activities and progress that are aimed at (politically) transformative change, these aren't easily monitored or evaluated. It's not simply a case of counting the number of people inoculated, or girls attending school, or embankments and sluice gates built. Building coalitions, successful advocacy, civic strengthening, winning hearts and minds, power, and legitimacy are all difficult to quantify, as with any fluid and social things.

A further problem is that alternative institutional measures – that track more formal governance changes – are very slow-moving and long-term processes. There will very rarely be any meaningful change in a three or five-year period (Fukuyama, 2011). For example, the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGIs) time-series data shows a relatively static picture since 1996 with the global averages showing no clear pattern of systematic improvements or declines (Kaufmann et al., 2010). Typically, the most that can be seen is that over a decade or so around 8% of countries show a significant improvement or decline.

But not all “politically informed programmes” will be about this sort of transformative change. Some will be much more typical aid programmes, just done in a way that is more politically savvy and well informed. A colleague in the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice has talked about this in terms of a spectrum:⁵ at one end there is the “evolutionary uptake” where traditional, often large, programmes remain chiefly technical, but are informed by analysis in order to lead to greater political awareness. At the other end, where there is “revolutionary uptake”, reform coalitions are mobilised and programmes use highly flexible models

in order to respond to political opportunities where they arise in order to bring about largely political and social change. Different aims, different programme designs and different political analysis needs; our conversations about political analysis need to better reflect these, and our evidence base needs to help us to do this with more credibility at whichever end of the spectrum we're talking about.

4. Operational gaps: getting real about the things we can do something about

We all talk about how the bureaucratic procedures within aid agencies – be they donors or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – need to change and how these limit the effectiveness and uptake of PEA. There's already excellent research on this (e.g. Carothers and de Gramont, 2013; Yanguas and Hulme, 2014; Hout, 2012). Staff face organisational incentives and barriers that affect their ability and willingness to engage meaningfully with political analysis. Their careers are made or broken on their track record of spending money, often regardless of whether or not outcomes have been achieved, whether they like it or not. They are already pushed to their limits in terms of time pressures (as in any industry nowadays) and can rarely work with analysis in anything other than a shallow way. In an era of austerity and tightening budgets for donors and charities alike, they're unlikely to get more staff to relieve this pressure. They're already under pressure to spend money/raise money, get value for money, be more open and transparent and so on, not all of which makes uptake of PEA any easier.

At a recent World Bank event in London, staff from different development agencies admitted that the best, most useful political analysis they've used has been informal rather than formal: conversations with taxi drivers, opposition politicians, journalists, their peers in country. They don't (or can't) write this down, though, and it gets incorporated into country strategies only in annexes, if at all. It stays in their heads and moves on with them when they inevitably move to a different country. In a current study that the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC) and the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) are undertaking for a donor on the use of evidence in programming on political settlements in fragile environments, the most useful source of information for programming actors working in very difficult environments seems to be very short reports, mainly by email, from local analysts. "Informal political analysis" may be the living, breathing manifestation of truly thinking and working politically, but in an era where there are few country specialists and no one sticks around in one place for more than two or three years, it makes it very hard to not keep reinventing the wheel. It also makes validation of material difficult and doesn't necessarily feed into internal processes or strategy, particularly if there's no structure in place to manage the analysis coming in.

Donor procedures make “working politically” difficult, thanks to inflexible ways of working (Andrews, 2013). Log frames are believed to lock in projects and programmes at an early stage in the process, regardless of what may happen politically speaking along the way (Powers, 2014). We often talk about how “mavericks” are able to think and work politically by ignoring official ways of working or finding ways around the system. If they can’t do this, then they can work with local “development entrepreneurs” who can do the flexible, adaptive work for them (Faustino, 2012).

But we can’t always programme around mavericks, who are the exception and not the norm, and not everyone can or should be an “entrepreneur”. Thinking and working politically can mean designing development programmes that are politically radical and perpetually fluid, but it doesn’t have to be. At its heart, it’s about programming that is sensibly designed.

Imagine now we have better political analysis that covers all the levels it needs to and feeds into strategy, we’re incorporating it better in frontline activities, and we have an evidence base that proves it’s important. Will this change development agencies’ working practices? Most aid projects and programmes still aren’t designed in a way that puts politics at the forefront. We seem to be stuck at what Carothers and de Gramont call the “almost revolution”. This is not about having the tools or commitment to work politically, but rather it’s about making the ways we work fit for purpose. To be able to think and work politically, we need to be able to strategise, to build relationships and to risk experimenting with more flexible and adaptive politically-informed approaches. Sadly, staff rarely have tangible incentives, resources or the support to change the way they work.

But this may not be about the levels that we’ve already talked about: getting rid of incentives to spend, changing the norm of three-year postings and so on. Even with the best evidence base in the world, changing these involves making a case to treat development agencies differently to any other government department, to take their staff out of civil service structures, and – let’s be honest – to make them less politically accountable to their parliaments and the public. Let’s be honest again – this is *never* going to happen. It could happen in philanthropic organisations, could possibly happen at the World Bank, and it could happen in NGOs, but it is almost certainly not going to happen for bilateral agencies. We need to be much more realistic about this.

However, there are things that we *can* change that will probably make a big difference that come to light when we stop looking only at the “big P” bureaucratic blockages. Everyday working practices in donor agencies need to change in order to really think and work politically, and many of these are fairly straightforward. It’s about seeing the possible in existing bureaucratic arrangements; after all, even log frames have plenty of room for manoeuvre depending on how they are designed.

There are countless small, but serious, everyday barriers to thinking and working politically and designing more politically informed programming. For example, if a “politically informed” health programme is to be put in place it could fruitfully be done by joining up health and governance teams in order to co-design the programme, provided of course that each team includes (senior) staff who “get it”. This is more challenging than it sounds though, but not for the reasons we often read about in the literature. Instead it’s because aligning schedules between the health and governance teams can take weeks, as different teams will tend to operate on different timetables; the language and assumptions that inform different teams need to be made explicit to move towards a shared understanding of the issue and this takes time; different teams or units have their own (multiple) objectives and interests, and these need to be brokered (Lancaster, 2007; Allison, 1971).⁶ To collaborate effectively we need to take on board how development agency staff actually work.

These sound like superficially mundane issues, but they’re not. Joining up policy and implementation is an administrative not an analytical barrier (Ling, 2002). These aren’t just pesky bits of sand in the wheels; they are boulders. They fundamentally arise because of the way that development agencies are set up, but the solution is not to throw away the rulebook or tear down silo (and indeed specialist!) walls willy-nilly. Instead it points to the need to think about who can act as internal brokers, the people within the organisation who are willing and able to bring different teams together. People in different teams who are interested in, and committed to, working differently; who can see the internal room for manoeuvre; who have the seniority and the reputation that allows them space to innovate and to carry the rest of the team along, sceptics and all; and who are interested in collaboration outside their own team, even if it means sharing both the glory of success and the pain of failure.

We recently spoke to one country team in Asia doing some exciting work on bringing politics into sector programming. They have a relatively new (but very experienced) team leader who has worked to create a coherent strategy across the entire sector programme. Team members explained that this brought all programme leads together on a regular basis, rather than them all managing discrete and disparate programmes. This created both the space and the opportunity to think and work politically, and it made political challenges (and opportunities) more visible. A relatively small change paying out potentially huge dividends, even before we take “thinking and working politically” into account. It’s not just good aid practice; it’s good business practice.

Senior management in country offices could free up time in their weekly or biweekly meetings to discuss issues emerging from political analysis. Governance staff could be embedded in sector teams – and vice versa, building

relationships, sharing challenges and expertise. Co-design of programmes could be incentivised. It is a mistake to overlook these issues in favour of the “big P” issues. Making such changes needs high-level support and leadership, but only at the country office level, not at the prime minister level. Worth a try first? Would these things help to make the “big P” challenges less challenging? If we can get sector teams thinking more strategically, creating space for conversations, questioning, innovation, relationship building and support, maybe when teams need to get money out the door, or individuals move on after a couple of years, the costs won't be as high.

5. Conclusions: organising the “revolution”?

PEA has often been about trying to fit staff into the tools that we design, as opposed to designing tools that fit the way staff actually work. Imagine staff are politically savvy. Imagine they have a deep understanding of the contexts in which they work. Imagine they know what an “institution” is. Imagine they love being flexible and adaptive and don't enjoy a clear roadmap and rules. Imagine they have the freedom to learn from failure and that this failure won't end up splashed all over the media or in being asked tricky questions by parliament. PEA needs to fit the way staff *actually* work, not the way analysts would love them to work. The thinking and working politically “agenda” needs to start from where we are, not an imaginary world where we all have a can opener.⁷ Getting discussions closer to the ground – to practitioners and local actors – may help here, though this isn't a panacea. These folks need to buy in to the need for “thinking and working politically” too.

Our overall message is that it is everyday, practical issues that make uptake of PEA/political analysis and the overarching “thinking and working politically” agenda difficult. While no one explicitly argues that getting the analysis right is a silver bullet, until we are clear that getting it right is but one among a whole series of necessary steps to improve development outcomes, we will be encumbered by an implicit silver bullet-ism. However, this is not a counsel of despair nor an argument against better and more political analysis leading to more politically informed programming. On the contrary, we think that serious, committed and careful political analysis is a must. At the same time let's get serious about what it can do, if done well, but also what it can't and won't change. And we need the evidence base to prove this.

In our ideal world, in ten years' time it would be great if we could not get away with designing programmes without having a politics lens, just as ignoring poverty, welfare, environmental sustainability or gender is not ok now. It's important to remember that these were all battles in the past that were eventually won. As long as we keep the politics in PEA, it is possible to win this battle too, but only if we're more realistic about the end goal and how to achieve it.

How can we start prioritising in order to take this agenda forward? We suggest:

1. Conceptual:

- Stop trying to fit “politics” into one analytical framework/approach. There are lots of ways to analyse politics beyond institutionalism, and some of these may resonate better with different audiences.
- Power may be a better entry point for analysis and discussions than incentives.
- Don't discount the value of understanding ideas and what drives people.
- The framework in Hudson and Leftwich (2014: pp. 103-109) is one starting point, but there are others out there.

2. Operational

- Work on finding “everyday political analysis” tools/processes that help to building thinking and working politically into normal working practices, particularly at the frontline.
- Be careful not to let these – or political analysis at any level – turn into tick-box exercises, as has often happened with PEA.
- Think more about how to get political analysis into strategy processes.

3. Evidential

- The DLP will soon publish an analytical framework to help build a more systematic evidence base on politically informed programming and welcome discussion on how best to take this forward in collaboration with other teams.
- Encourage project/programme actors to better build learning on “thinking and working politically” into their work and then make this publically available for others to learn from. Donors could prioritise funding for this as part of design.
- Ensure that claims on what works and what doesn't are based on a “rigorous enough” evidence base.
- Be honest about failures as well as successes (or even cases of failure within success). These can be important learning opportunities.

4. Organisational

- Check whether or not there are easy ways for senior managers to rethink business practices in order to create space for discussions and learning around political analysis.
- Identify potential individual “brokers” within teams who are able to encourage and support different ways of working and offer support and incentives to help them broker.
- Consider more cross-sector working, but be sure that there are members of each team committed to thinking and working politically.

Notes

1. Dr David Hudson (University College London) and Dr Heather Marquette (University of Birmingham) are the directors of the Developmental Leadership Program. We would like to thank Brendan Halloran and Tom Parks, in particular, for comments on an earlier draft, and Eduardo Gonzalez and Alan Whaites, for their encouragement.
2. There may, however, be some benefits from talking about political analysis as a means to address constraints and as a way of managing risk. Particularly in more sensitive contexts, where external actors are aware of not (being seen to be) engaging in domestic politics, it could be helpful to frame thinking and working politically initially as a way of managing constraints and risks.
3. To our knowledge, the most promising implementation of such an approach is the Strategy Testing being pioneered by The Asia Foundation. See “Strategy Testing: An alternative approach for monitoring flexible and iterative programmes”, Effective Development Group website, www.edgroup.com.au/workshop-18-strategy-testing-an-alternative-approach-for-monitoring-flexible-and-iterative-programs/.
4. As Campbell et al. found when examining what policymakers want in terms of an evidence-base, that they need powerful and compelling anecdotes that resonate with politicians and the public to persuade and get something on the agenda, but to keep it there the evidence-base needs “to be defensible and withstand challenges made to the policy decisions. Research that could not stand up to such scrutiny was seen as of little use in terms of evidence-based policy” (Campbell et al. 2007: p. 27).
5. See “TWP uptake spectrum”, in the From Poverty to Power blog (3 March 2015), <http://oxfamlogs.org/fp2p/how-can-we-persuade-aid-agencies-to-think-and-work-politically/twp-uptake-spectrum-2/>.
6. These are all challenges from a real-life initiative to co-design a health/governance programme.
7. Much of the discussion around this reminds us of the famous joke, first summed up by Kenneth Boulding in 1970: “There is a story that has been going around about a physicist, a chemist and an economist who were stranded on a desert island with no implements and a can of food. The physicist and the chemist each devised an ingenious mechanism for getting the can open; the economist merely said, ‘Assume we have a can opener!’” The PEA world has never been very realistic when it comes to the changes needed to take on board this agenda, and it seems to be getting worse rather than better.

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