

Practitioner perspective: Politics on Monday morning

Richard Butterworth

Dear Lucy,

I won't need to tell you that politics matters for development, and especially for governance. You will have read this a lot in your background reading, and as a Governance Adviser, I doubt it will have come as news to you. As we know, politics isn't just what people do when they are not behaving rationally: it is the way that societies and economies change. And those changes are what development is ultimately all about.

But this may not help you very much with your current assignment. It's one thing knowing that politics matters. But how does that affect what you do on a Monday morning? I can't offer all the answers – particularly how to apply it to the country you are about to visit. But I can give you a few thoughts from my own experience.

You may have already encountered people in development who get uncomfortable when you talk about politics. If you haven't, you soon will. As a Governance Adviser, it's useful to understand why this is, and what you can do in your role to respond to it.

The first reason for this discomfort about politics is that many of us working in development are technical experts of one sort or another. We are instinctively more comfortable believing that there is a technical solution to the problems that we see around us – even when faced with growing evidence that there probably isn't.

This doesn't mean that everyone in the development business is trying to sell their own skills and tools as the answer to everything (although you will meet plenty out there who are). There's also a healthy element of humility in this. If I don't have expertise that adds value to this country, wouldn't I be better getting out of the way? After decades of experience, shouldn't we be able to offer some idea of how countries can get to the end goal of “development” faster? Admitting that we might not have the solutions sometimes makes us uncomfortable.

I'm afraid we need to live with that discomfort. Development is too important – and too complex – to be done entirely within development professionals' comfort zone. Politics matters, and political processes are context specific and unpredictable. Local counterparts – inside and outside government – who understand those processes better than we do might humour us when we go to them with pre-packaged solutions (particularly if they stand to benefit from the project), but they are more likely to take us seriously when we recognise we don't have all the answers.

This doesn't mean technical expertise is not important and necessary. It's just rarely sufficient. An important part of your role as a Governance Adviser is to lead people gently but firmly out of their comfort zone. You need to help your colleagues find a place where they can apply their technical expertise in ways that reinforce initiatives from real and influential coalitions of interests within the country itself: what the literature calls “working with the grain”.

A quick note of caution here. The language of “working with the grain” has started to go mainstream, so I'm afraid you'll increasingly see it being used in contexts where it really shouldn't. Last week, for example, I saw a document suggesting that because a country's Poverty Reduction Strategy has a goal to increase growth by 2 percentage points, attempts to promote the significant reforms that would unlock that extra growth would be “working with the grain”. You'll spot the flaw in that logic. A lot of the goals in poverty reduction strategies or development plans are aspirational (some less charitable types would call them wishful thinking). The assumption¹ that a government will take on powerful vested interests in order to achieve those goals is also, sadly, often wishful thinking.

This is where political economy analysis can help us. If done well, it will give us a much better idea of what “working with the grain” really means. At the very least, it will tell us what it doesn't mean. Some people in the development profession (including DFID, my own organisation) became frustrated with the initial wave of Drivers of Change studies, because they provided lots of pointers on what *not* to do, but not a lot on what we could do. At a time of rapidly growing aid budgets, advice on what not to do wasn't seen as all that helpful. In recent years, aid budgets have stopped growing and we have started talking more about value for money (and developing increasingly elaborate frameworks to assess and measure it). But there's a more basic angle on VFM point that is often overlooked – which I will one day market as my First Law of VFM. That law is *Don't Do Stupid Stuff*. In other words, don't invest in technical fixes that an understanding of the politics should tell you are never going to happen.

Of course, if we use PEA intelligently, it ought to provide some pointers on what to do, as well as what not to do. More of that in a minute. But if PEA

alerts you to the stupid stuff that you shouldn't do, there's value for money in that as well.

Before that, there's another reason why development people get uncomfortable talking about politics, and that's the tension that Tom Carothers describes in your briefing pack on "Accountability and Actors" about the concept of country ownership. There are some legitimate grounds for caution here; essentially the "do no harm" principle. If our aid is too confrontational and critical, and starts to be seen (rightly or wrongly) as fomenting regime change, then you have a problem. If that provokes a backlash against domestic civil society, or lands local visionaries in jail (or worse), then you are probably doing harm.

Ultimately, though, Tom's conclusion is right. Unless you are dealing with the world's best, most democratic, pluralist government (from your background notes, it doesn't sound like that's the government you are dealing with this week), it's unlikely that all the positive social, political and economic changes that might happen will be driven by the national government. So if we want our aid to be effective in supporting change, we need to find ways to work with a diverse range of partners and partnerships.

So how to square that circle in practice? How do you avoid the backlash, without retreating into the easy option of only working with the government machinery? (By the way, you might want to rethink your initial thought that that's the route to go down in the country you're looking at).

This is one way where political economy analysis can help us. Where I have seen PEA work best is where it is built into a programme, not just as a one-off analytical "product", but as a process. You can use that sort of PEA to identify issues that are not overtly confrontational or threatening to a government, but where there is scope for independent civil society or the private sector to bring policy makers to account. We used this sort of PEA to guide a civil-society programme in a country where we disliked the government enough not to give any aid to them (even technical assistance – although we still maintained a dialogue with them around less contentious programming), and where that government was so repressive that many people at HQ thought there was no space for civil society at all.

We used PEA to identify issues that were:

- important enough to local civil society and private sector counterparts for them to want to work with us
- areas where some of those counterparts had channels to communicate with people in positions of power and had a prospect of changing something.

PEA also gave us some pointers on issues that might be too contentious and provoke a backlash. But the final decisions on what issues were safe to push, and how far, were taken by our local (non-government) partners, who were better judges of this than we could have been. This is another approach to country ownership. As a result, for example, the language of “democracy”, “human rights” and even “accountability” was conspicuously absent, even if the concepts were not. One important indicator of the success of that programme – not in the log frame but always in the back of our minds – was that none of our partners should end up in jail.

This programme was one example of a *coalitions for change* approach. You will be familiar with the approach from your reading. It has been used most often in civil-society programmes, but there’s no reason you can’t use similar approaches to support government reforms – particularly where your PEA tells you that reform-minded individuals or units within government might benefit from wider coalitions of support. Like any other approach to programming (PDIA, to name but one), it’s not a magic bullet to be applied to every development challenge. Think of it as part of a toolkit that can help you work more politically.

You mention political systems. Ironically, this is an area where we probably need to learn to work more politically. It’s surprising how often you see projects on elections, parliaments or political parties taking an entirely technical approach. Obviously we don’t want to go to the other extreme and end up overtly supporting one party, or one community, at the expense of another (Do No Harm again). But ultimately politics is political, and all the best programmes I have seen working on political systems have thought continuously about coalitions of interests, and incentives, and ideas, and not just the technical fixes. So if you do decide that some work on political systems makes sense, keep that in mind.

If you think there is mileage in a thinking and working politically approach in the country you are looking at, one additional area you might want to read up on is the literature on how coalitions work. Some of the best work in this area was done outside the development field (the best presentation I have seen on coalitions theory was by a community organiser in Australia²), but the Developmental Leadership Program has pulled some of this thinking together and expanded on it.³ It contains some interesting (and counter-intuitive) insights for development people: broader, more inclusive coalitions are not always better (it depends what you are trying to achieve); effective coalitions don’t usually develop into permanent organisations, so don’t try to make them “sustainable”; the success of coalitions is measured by the quality of joint working as well as the progress made towards the objective; and many of the most effective development coalitions have a well-connected, visionary local individual (Faustino’s “development entrepreneur”) at their heart – not a donor or a project. Having worked on

coalitions for change projects for a few years, this stuff was a real eye-opener for me when I discovered it.

Now, at this stage I could try to tell you what a perfect governance programme would look like in the country you are looking at. But I won't, because I don't have a clue. It's always tempting to speculate on the basis of limited knowledge of the context, but you would be well advised to ignore such speculation.

However, I can give a few pointers on how you might approach your mission:

- Don't try to get a complete understanding of the political economy in two weeks. You won't be able to. Do talk to as many people as you can get to see, and do read as much existing analysis as you can lay your hands on – but don't beat yourself up if you don't have all the answers after two weeks.
- Even if you do come up with the perfect set of governance interventions, informed by the perfect PEA that you won't have time to do in two weeks, bear in mind that it's extremely unlikely that DFAID would actually be able or willing to implement all of them.
- If your mission turns up some ideas that could help move the country in useful directions, are feasible and, ideally, triangulated with a few different local sources, that's a good start. (You've read about Good Enough Governance. Think Good Enough Programming.)
- Then make sure that whatever programming is developed from those ideas is flexible enough to adapt as it goes along. PDIA has some useful insights here: spend time getting agreement from the people who matter on what the problem is you are trying to solve; keep that goal in mind, but be flexible on the strategy for getting there.
- It isn't always easy to keep that flexibility in the face of your organisation's management systems. But if you're going to choose one battle to fight in DFAID, make it the battle for adaptive programming. You'll have to work hard at it, particularly on systems for M&E. Being a Governance Adviser doesn't mean you are excused from the need to monitor and report on what is being achieved with your taxpayers' money. You will probably find that standard tools like the log frame won't help you: you will need other ways to measure the changes that matter. But get it right, and it's worth the effort.

Finally, as David Booth has pointed out in a rather good blog,⁴ don't think about governance programming in a silo. Have a look at the other programming DFAID is doing in the country, and see how you can introduce governance insights into that to make it better. There are two ways to do that. One is the more standard "cross-cutting" governance advice, where you

use your insights to inform the design, monitoring or re-focusing of other programmes (including, if you can, gently steering them away from Stupid Stuff). The other way, which we are trying to do in the country where I work at the moment, is to develop programmes that work in more political ways to address challenges that other programmes are trying to address, but from a different angle. You won't be able to identify all the opportunities for this in two weeks. But you might identify some.

Ultimately, political economy analysis, and thinking and working politically, is not a set of tools, it's a way of thinking about development. Never forget that development is not something that donors do, it is a set of changes that happen within a country, driven by the vision and actions of local actors, which we may be able to support (if we can marshal the right sort of programmes and tools to support change – and don't get in the way).

In other words, it's all about politics.

Good luck.

Richard.

Notes

1. An overview of Drivers of Change is included within the online governance resource centre at: www.odi.org/publications/5399-drivers-change-dfid-doc.
2. Summarised in DLP (2012), *Coalitions in the Politics of Development*, Developmental Leadership Program, www.dlprog.org/publications/coalitions-in-the-politics-of-development.php.
3. "Reform coalitions", DLP website, www.dlprog.org/theme/reform-coalitions.php.
4. Booth, David (13 April 2015), "Five steps for reorienting governance work in development", ODI website, www.odi.org/comment/9468-five-steps-reorienting-governance-work-development.