



Everyday Political Analysis

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In this short note we introduce a framework for thinking about politics and power called Everyday Political Analysis (EPA). EPA is for anyone who is convinced that politics and power matter, but feels less sure of how to work out what they mean for their programs. This note introduces a stripped-back political analysis framework – stripped down to its barest bones – leaving only the essentials needed to help frontline staff make quick but politically-informed decisions.

The political environment can kill a program, or make it thrive. In Zambia a technically sound donor health program was wrecked by a politician who restructured the health system to extend his power rather than to deliver services. In Uganda a donor livelihoods program was closed early because the implementers were more interested in personal enrichment than helping the poor. Making sense of the political context – and being able to use this understanding to make more politically savvy decisions – is essential to improving the effectiveness of development programs.

How can busy frontline staff make the kinds of quick but politically smart decisions that will make their programs succeed? PEA training and/or a formal PEA study help, but many staff still feel under-equipped to interpret fluid political contexts outside of the classroom when making frequent and fast decisions.

Everyday political analysis helps address a gap in the work of frontline staff: how to understand the changing political context and make politically-informed decisions on a day-to-day basis. The average program staff member is faced with having to make multiple politically-informed judgments every day, often quickly. The EPA framework provides a condensed checklist to help conduct quick political analysis and make this an accessible part of ordinary business practice.

There are **two 'steps' for everyday political analysis**.

- **Step 1: Understanding interests:** What makes people tick?
- **Step 2: Understanding change:** What space and capacity do people have to effect change?

For each step a series of yes/no questions helps unpack what is going on.

Where are we? A mirror, not a 'God's eye view'

A critical component to any political analysis is to include ourselves – especially if we are likely to be part of the incentive structure facing others, because of budget, diplomacy or expertise.

But more than this, it's critical to reflect on our own interests and incentives – to understand where we are coming from and our own room for manoeuvre. It would always be advisable to conduct your own internal political analysis – not just look 'outwards'.

Do not think of people as individuals – no person is an island

There is a well-known effect in psychology called 'attribution bias' where the observer tends to describe others' failings in terms of individual error: 'they are poor because they made bad decisions'. In contrast, we recognise the role of context for ourselves: 'I am poor because I was unlucky or the situation conspired against me'.

EPA starts from the person we want to understand – our counterpart, a bureaucrat, activist, politician or traditional leader. It can also be an organisation or group of individuals or a coalition, though note that any grouping of individuals will contain its own politics of competing objectives and interests. The important thing is to understand their context – the pressures they face from others and the rules within which they have to work.

Step 1: Understanding interests

How will the Minister of Health react to my program? Why is the President pursuing this course of action? What will the changes in MPs' discretionary funding mean for local service provision? Political analysis forces us to shift our focus from the poor, program beneficiaries and / or their representatives and instead concentrate on the powerful (whatever that means in your particular context). This is key to a political view of the world.

What makes people tick? The five questions below aim to help tease out an answer. Each question is accompanied by a set of prompts. Working through these questions should give a reasonable sense of what they might be trying to achieve and why.

1.1 Is what they want clear? Is it to secure a source of income? To secure power? To repay a favour? To make the world a better place? Is the person pursuing short- or longer-term goals? Are they focused on achieving one thing or lots of things? Are their goals aligned or in tension? Is the objective to block change or a reform / action or actually inaction? And how confident are they in their position?

1.2 Are they acting in line with their core beliefs?

Does it seem likely that their apparent objectives are in line with their beliefs? People's track records / past behaviour are important clues to this. Is what they say sincerely held or convenient rhetoric? What are the justifications given?

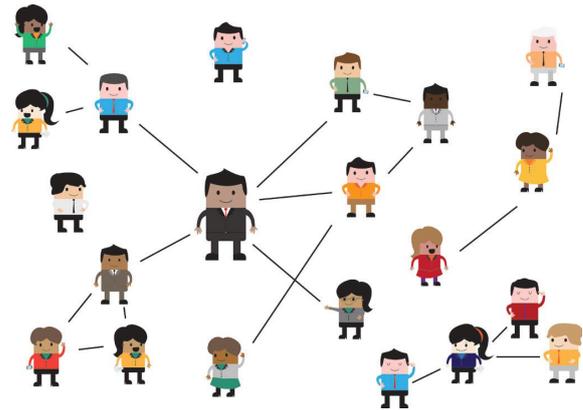
1.3 Do you understand the constraints they face?

Are their decisions inevitable? Is there evidence that suggests that they view their position as constrained? Or could they be presenting the constraints strategically to avoid having to justify their decision? Are these constraints formal, legal rules or policies? And don't forget the less visible but just as important informal or unwritten rules, such as the *suki* system in the Philippines – a 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' economic alliance system – or the *wantok* system in Melanesia, based on traditional norms around reciprocity and duty. Are these actually more structural factors – which serve to shape existing institutions – such as the class or caste system, the distribution of assets and land, demographic change or fiscal constraints, all of which shape the institutions?

1.4 Is it clear who and what the key influences on them are? Does their behaviour reflect the interests of others? Bearing in mind who they have to work with and report to, who are the other key stakeholders that they currently work with or are trying to work with (Figure 1)? How are these other individuals or organisations influencing them? Is this through sources of money, access to or security of employment, or other resources? Do others wield authority (traditional, political, religious or expertise) over them? Think outside the individual's organisation / ministry. Have you considered both local and international actors, including donors? Do *you* as a player within this network (whether as an NGO, donor or individual) have any influence over outcomes? Are you skewing incentives?

1.5 Is their behaviour being shaped by social norms about what is appropriate? Which norms? Are they customs, cultural, ethnic, gendered, religious? Do the norms valorise or limit behaviour? How powerful and legitimate is the norm? Does the norm align with or cut against 1-4 above? Is it specific to their situation or a general societal norm?

Figure 1: People are not individuals



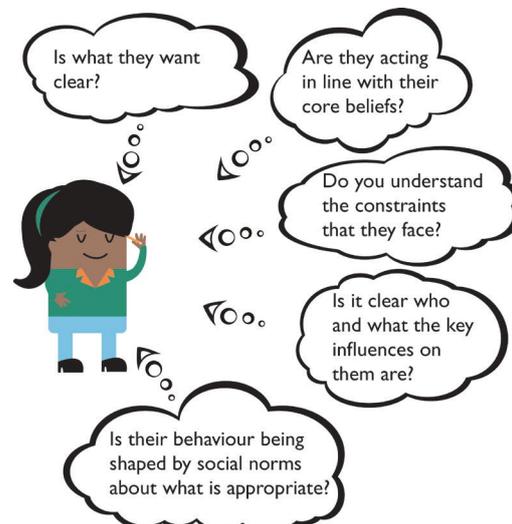
'Reform champions' – proceed with caution!

Don't imagine you can identify a 'reform champion' purely based on the professed commitment to the cause. People come and go – working with an individual can help in the short term, but it is more important to understand the overall network(s) in which they sit. Are they connected to the right people? Can they convince the rest of the system to change? What are their own interests, incentives and ideas? Do you know why they are backing this reform? If they are replaced (or need to be replaced) does everything change? To put it another way: don't put all your eggs in one basket. Remember EPA can also be used to test our assumptions, including those about program 'friends'.

The internal conversation

In day-to-day life, interests are almost never fixed nor firm. They do not emerge from a rational cost-benefit calculation by a fully-informed individual. Structures do not come with an instruction sheet (Blyth 2003). Rather than a mechanical process, people's interests emerge from an 'internal conversation' in which they try to make sense of the world they face (Archer 2003).

Figure 2: Understanding interests



¹ For example, in 2010 people in the establishment in Myanmar were quite undecided. There was a sense that reform was coming, but how soon? Until it was clearer which way things would go, it was risky to jump one way or the other.

Step 2: Understanding change

Given our initial understanding about what an individual or organisation wants, what can they realistically do? Will the minister get what he or she wants? Will the women's coalition be able to change legislation?

People will always weigh up the costs and benefits of any change to them, but this is almost never a mechanical process. There is almost always room for manoeuvre, and people can be creative in making the system 'work for them' within existing constraints or by renegotiating them. This space to manoeuvre is often found or created at considerable cost, and it will be for the individuals to decide whether they are willing to pay the price.²

Influence and power

Effective influence is all about power. We need to consider direct and visible forms of influence (voting or decision-making power), hidden forms (lobbying or private deals), and invisible and indirect forms (the influence of social norms). See <http://www.powercube.net/analyse-power/forms-of-power/> for an excellent explanation.

Beyond the usual suspects

When thinking about potential coalition partners it is useful to consider both 'bootleggers and Baptists' (Yandle 1983) – those who are committed to reforms and those who are more opportunistic and non-reformist. As Sidel (2014: 5) makes clear in his account of how President Aquino passed the 2012 'Sin Tax' reform through the Philippine Congress – and the role of British American Tobacco in this – 'reforms are not made by reformists alone'.

2.1 Are they the key decision maker? Who gets to decide, vote, sign off, fund, chair the process? This is not just about the formal decision-making chain but those people / organisations that hold informal power over a decision. Who could veto it? Can they influence these people? Do these other people influence them? This is critical to a political view of the world; we need to look beyond our usual focus on the poor and their (claimed) representatives, and ask who or what is key to effective change.

2.2 Do they have potential coalition partners? Are they trying to go it alone? Are there like-minded individuals or groups? Can they work beyond the usual suspects, e.g. private sector, the military, faith leaders? What's the glue that could hold the coalition together? Do you know if there's been a deal? Are interests aligned around an objective or values? Are they key brokers/'kingmakers' that hold different parts together?

Coalitions – not just for political parties!

Coalitions are not just the formal deals between parliamentary parties to form a government: they are extended networks of individuals and organisations that organise around an issue. They may or may not include elements of government, the legislature, the private sector and civil society. For example, the coalition that shaped the content of the Sexual Offences Bill in South Africa was made up of women's rights and legal advocacy organisations that worked with the government's Justice Committee, the media, and grassroots support. Coalitions are how leaders or 'reform champions' *actually get things done* – coalitions provide the potential to overcome collective action problems. But, in doing so, it is just as likely that they are collusive as developmental, which is why understanding the interests, strategies, ways of managing dissent, and the politics that go on inside a coalition is so critical. See Hodes et al. (2011) for a detailed account of the South African case.

2.3 Are their key decision points clear? What is the known timeline? Are there windows of opportunity? How many decision points need to be passed for them to achieve their objectives? Which decision points present the most risk to them achieving their objectives, and why?

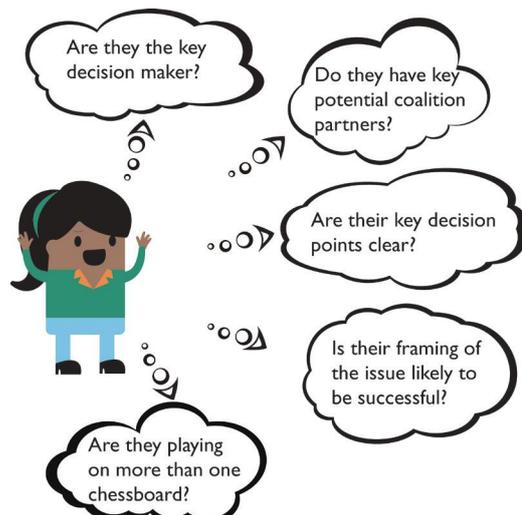
2.4 Is their framing of the issue likely to be successful? Will they convince other powerful stakeholders that the change is in their interests? Does it resonate with local social and political norms? If it doesn't, is it likely to provoke antagonism and backlash? Are they doing so on purpose?

2.5 Are they playing on more than one chessboard? Most people are trying to achieve multiple things at once. How do these relate to your reform? Successful mobilisation and influence means that individuals often have to play two or more games at once – pursuing one strategy with constituents and another with their colleagues in their political party or external players such as donors. Do you need to return to Step 1.1 to figure out if you are really clear on their objective(s)?

Strategic framing – what resonates?

In South Africa, women's coalitions working for legislation to protect women's rights successfully invoked a human rights framework that resonated with the country's political history and national identity. However in Jordan the very same approach was ineffective. As Mariz Tadros (2011) shows, women's coalitions in Jordan were only successful after reframing the issue in terms of protecting the Jordanian family, addressing religious concerns, and winning the attention of MPs. Getting the framing right requires understanding of what will convince key stakeholders to back a change.

Figure 3: Understanding change



² For example, John Githongo, as Kenya's Permanent Secretary for Governance and Ethics, managed to navigate the political establishment to uncover the high-level corruption, but eventually had to flee the country. Moreover, the change was minimal.

How to use this EPA framework

For each step there are five questions that require a **Yes / No answer**. Each question has a series of prompts to help answer it. The questions become more complicated as you go down the list. If the answer that emerges from a first attempt is unclear or unlikely, more tricky explanations should be addressed. Be clear about the assumptions you are making and aim for the explanation with the fewest assumptions.

Sometimes just Step 1 will be sufficient. For example, upon hearing of a politician's decision to block a new reform, you may wish to try and assess where they are coming from and whether there may be a way of countering the decision or at least navigating around it to find a 'win-win'.

On other occasions you will wish to run through both Step 1 and Step 2. For example, upon hearing of a community's intention to challenge a land grab, you may wish to assess the opportunities and constraints they face and whether and how it is possible to support them.

Answer	Next Steps
Yes / No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How confident are you? Is this sufficient for you to make your decision, or would it be useful to carry on through the subsequent statements to help explain and deepen your analysis? Given the available evidence, is your analysis 'robust enough'? Have you triangulated your evidence/thinking against other sources?
Not sure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is the most likely initial answer. Will more thinking help or is it time to try something different? If the response remains 'Don't know', and the issue is important, then it might be advisable to reach out to colleagues or contacts who understand the context well to help answer the question, or consider commissioning more in-depth expert political analysis. Finally, there may be times when the answer will always be an honest 'Not Sure / Don't Know / It's my best guess!' More information may not provide an answer – it's not a magic key. A judgement call may be necessary, followed by a plan to test the strategy.

As with any form of analysis, **triangulation** is important. Depending on the urgency and the sensitivity of the issue you are trying to analyse, this could be done through discussion with other colleagues and particularly local staff; drawing on your local contacts; a quick trawl through local media or academic research, if possible; or informal consultation with an expert. Often the usual route of testing your assumptions with a colleague will be enough, but it is worthwhile considering whether you can identify someone with whom you tend to disagree in order to be sure you're not just confirming your own biases.

The challenge for development programming is twofold. Programming staff need to better:

- Understand the political context:** taking key stakeholders' interests and incentives seriously, and understanding where power lies and how institutions and ideas provide opportunities or challenges for reforms is key to successful development programming.
- Work flexibly and adaptively:** because the political context is fluid, there is a need to be able to recalibrate and change course, often frequently and almost always quickly. In contrast to a more conventional, pre-planned approach, staff need to be able to be constantly responsive to new information or a changing context.

Keep it (as) simple (as possible)

Political analysis can always be made more complicated than it needs to be. The decision-making we face is rarely simple, of course, because the work we are doing involves many complexities. But the principle of focusing on the most simple explanations first provides a useful starting point. For example, if we are satisfied that the objective of our counterpart is clear we could leave the analysis there, but we might want to also understand whether this objective emerges from the pressures of other players or from social norms.

Interests – the internal driver(s) of behaviour. Most simply, people will seek to maximise their happiness in line with their interests, but where do interests come from? Some people are nationalists, some genuinely want to do the 'right thing', while others are guided by strong religious faiths/other moral frameworks. The bottom line is, of course, that all of these are rational; everyone's behaviour is rational to themselves. The challenge is to get inside the rationality and not limit our understanding of interests to maximising power, prestige or money.

Space to act – the innate ability of an individual to exercise choice. This is what people mean when they talk about 'agency'. But to exercise choice, people have to interpret contexts they find themselves in and work out what to do. Individuals are 'skilful, knowledgeable, strategic', and can be creative, lazy or bizarre. People always have the option of ignoring/re negotiating incentives to behave in a certain way. However, doing so means they often have to pay a price for 'going against the grain'.

'Politically informed' decision-making or assumption testing, as everyone knows, is not the same as pulling a PEA report out of a drawer and looking up the relevant section. It is active, based on personal analysis and assessment, either as individuals or as a team. For politically informed programming to become the norm and improve development outcomes, we need to embed political analysis into everyday, routine practice. As noted elsewhere (Hudson and Marquette 2015: 71):

...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 programs hit a wall, and staff know that there may be a political issue at play that they don't quite understand.

What's missing from our 'thinking politically toolbox', however, is a way of helping programming staff develop the 'craft' of political thinking in a way that fits their everyday working practices; that doesn't rely on external consultants or technical experts; and that fits the reality of everyday decision-making processes needed quickly and without a fully functioning 'crystal ball'.

EPA does *not* replace more traditional political analysis, for which there will always be a need, but instead complements it. It enables staff to commission more formal political analysis *when it is needed* but not when it is not, and it should, over time, enable staff to truly learn how to work politically. Importantly, EPA should not be seen as a PEA product but rather as a *process* (Fisher and Marquette 2014). Once people have done it a couple of times, the process should become easier and more intuitive.

EPA is designed to be used flexibly. This could be on your own in your office. It could be used by teams as the basis for discussions. It could be used by you or your team to help shape consultation with trusted experts. It is designed to be used at any and all stages of the aid management cycle, from the traditional pre-analysis and program design, to mid-term review and moments of strategy testing. But its relative strength – its quick and iterative nature – aims to help users to respond rapidly to unexpected change mid-program. By 'unexpected change' we do not mean *big* unexpected changes that can't be ignored – e.g. the Arab Spring or Cyclone Nargis – but all the small, literally everyday, things that need evaluating, like the announcement that the education minister is stepping down or an invitation to take part in a stakeholder process.

Using Everyday Political Analysis



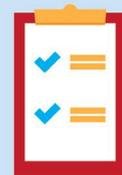
At your desk



Team discussion



With an expert



Always triangulate

Feedback on EPA

For us, this is a 'live' document that we will adapt as it is tested and after feedback. We are keen to hear back from people on their experience of using EPA. Was it helpful (or not)? Do people tend to use just one or both steps? Are there missing statements or prompts that would improve the analysis? Please email us at info@dlprog.org.

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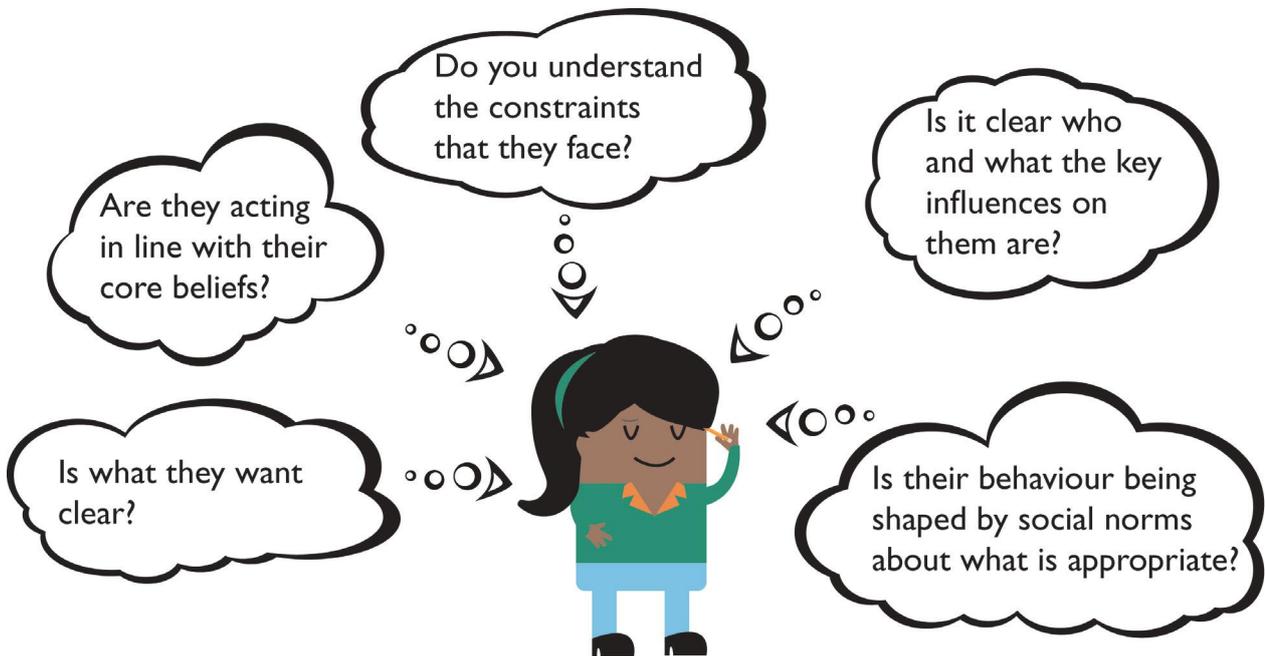
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Everyday Political Analysis framework

Step 1: Understanding interests



Step 2: Understanding change

