

Thinking and Working Politically: From Theory Building to Building an Evidence Base

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This paper discusses the steps required to build a robust evidence base for 'thinking and working politically' (TWP) in development. It argues that better understanding what works, when and why is an important step in moving thinking and working politically into mainstream development programming. The paper reviews the existing evidence base on TWP, building on this and on other literature on public sector reform and 'pockets of effectiveness' to suggest research questions, case study selection criteria, and a four-level analytical framework: 1) political context; 2) sector; 3) organisation; and 4) individual. The paper also calls for more focus on gender issues, and on different – and often more fragile – political contexts.

The ideas behind 'thinking and working politically' are increasingly common in development discussions, and there is an overwhelming consensus that ignoring politics can be disastrous for aid effectiveness. Understanding which parts of TWP are necessary and sufficient conditions for success is crucial.

The paper aims to fill two gaps in the literature. The first is in bringing together more clearly different approaches and arguments on TWP. The TWP 'field', such as it is, does not have a coherent terminology, and authors tend to work in relative isolation from one another. The second is in developing an analytical framework that can be used to build a 'rigorous enough' evidence base to show whether and how TWP happens and whether or not it influences the effectiveness of programme implementation and outcomes.

The current evidence base

Since TWP is a relatively recent arrival in the development debate, gaps in the literature are to be expected. Much of the existing research is based on an inductive theory-building approach, in which studies use empirical examples to generate

lessons and theories on politically informed development programming. This is an important first step in developing an evidence base; however, it is not in itself 'evidence'. There are important gaps in methodology where claims that particular approaches to TWP lead to more successful development outcomes cannot be justified by the existing literature.

There is an urgent need for more systematic research and analysis if we are to understand which approaches can deliver better results.

Issues of methodology

Much of the evidence for the desirability of TWP is anecdotal rather than systematically comparative, although there are notable exceptions (such as comparative work by Booth & Unsworth, 2014 and Fritz, Levy & Ort, 2014). However, a number of limitations run through the literature:

- **selection bias** – a lack of attention to detail in the process of case selection: some studies appear to 'cherry-pick' programmes that fit existing notions of what factors led to more successful programme implementation and outcomes;
- **limited range of contexts** – a lack of in-depth examination of context-specific issues and what this may mean for applying lessons in other contexts;
- **insufficient testing of theories** – theories are generated but not empirically tested, so any claims of causality are questionable;
- **insufficient follow-up** – to find out whether positive results have been sustained through the life of the project/programme or beyond; and
- **insufficient discussion of the change process** – a rather static view of TWP is presented, which also limits discussion of what *didn't* work and why.

Content gaps

- **Gender** – for instance, what does ‘working with the grain’ mean when ‘the grain’ includes entrenched patriarchy?
- **Political context** – few examples focus on fragile states; for instance, can a fragile context make some aspects of development programming easier and others more difficult?
- **Development actors** – most of the literature examines donor programmes. What challenges are unique to donor-funded programmes and which ones are not?

Towards an analytical framework for TWP

Drawing on Roll (2014) in particular, the paper suggests the following broad **research questions** to guide the analysis:

- *Why* do politically informed programmes emerge in some contexts and not others?
- *How* do these programmes incorporate TWP?
- Do these programmes *persist* despite hostile environments?
- How do different aspects of TWP affect the *implementation* and the *outcomes* of politically informed programmes?
- Do these programmes *trigger* positive transformations in other programmes or the broader governance environment? If so, how?

Four levels of analysis

Our four-level framework (political context, sector, organisation, individual) enables us to develop a broad approach and to consider the **interaction and interdependencies** between the levels. It is this interaction that will help us to better understand how politically informed programmes emerge and succeed.

The **political context** considers the political system, political and bureaucratic leadership and interaction, and the nature of the political settlement, as well as other types of power structures such as gender, religion, ethnicity, caste and rural-urban divides. To what extent does the broader political context determine the opportunities and constraints for programme implementation and effectiveness? Are programmes more effective when they are adapted to the specific political contexts in which they are implemented, and if so, how?

At the **sectoral level** the literature suggests that prospects for implementation will vary considerably according to a sector’s characteristics and political significance (McLoughlin & Batley 2012; Levy & Walton 2013). Are there characteristics of particular sectors that make it easier to design more politically informed programmes with a greater likelihood of having a positive impact? What are the institutional characteristics of sectors associated with politically informed programming and programme success?

The **organisational level** considers the characteristics of external actors and domestic partners. What organisational

characteristics are associated with more politically informed approaches and successful programmes? Current suggestions in the literature include a problem-solving and iterative approach, flexible and strategic funding, and public organisations that have organisational autonomy and political support, but how might this look in different sectors and different contexts? Are necessary changes in organisational behaviour evolutionary or revolutionary (Parks 2014)?

At the **individual level**, a key question is whether the space to work politically despite organisational constraints is created by individuals. ‘Reform champions’ or ‘policy entrepreneurs’ are often seen as the source of innovation, but we need empirical evidence to understand who they are and how they work. Sustainability of changes based on individual behaviour also requires consideration: if an individual renowned for TWP moves to a different organisation, do they take their TWP approach with them, and do they also leave it behind?

Case study selection criteria

Designing research to answer these questions requires greater consideration of case selection. Case selection should allow for sufficient comparison. This means covering:

- programmes in differing political contexts, and different programmes in the same political context;
- programmes that target differing sectors, and those in the same sector;
- similar programmes implemented by different types of development organisation and by the same organisation;
- donor, NGO and government programmes.

In selecting development programmes to study, we believe it will be important to focus on the framework’s first three levels (political context, sector, organisation). An individual level criterion *for case selection* is not necessary because ensuring case selection considers the organisational level will allow the arguments about the role of individuals to be tested.

Variation across and within levels will help avoid the ‘cannibalistic comparativism’ that Steinmetz (2005: 149) warns against, in which findings are based on comparisons made across cases without fully taking into account the specific context of different programmes. What this should also do is to help uncover whether there is one way to ‘think and work politically’ or whether there are multiple ways, each appropriate to the particular context.

Finally, to avoid selection bias, it is important to research both ongoing and completed programmes. Because the outcomes of ongoing programmes will not be known when the analysis begins, researchers would have the opportunity to learn more about what doesn’t work when it comes to approaches to TWP as well as what does.

Full paper: <http://publications.dlprog.org/TWPev.pdf>

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