Thinking and Working Politically
What does it mean? Why is it important? And how do you do it?

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Introduction

The purpose of this short note is:

- To suggest ways we might usefully conceptualise what it means to think and work politically in a developmental context, where development is understood as the processes which shape and reform locally appropriate and legitimate institutions that promote sustainable economic growth, foster political stability, enhance progress on key issue areas (such as gender, service delivery or emissions reduction) and facilitate inclusive social development, at national and sub-national levels.

- To outline some of the preliminary findings about the role of leadership, politics and coalitions in development as a platform for the central question of the workshop: how research evidence can be transformed into policy, programme and operational messages.

This note unpacks the idea of '*thinking* politically' by summarising some of the working assumptions and building blocks of the DLP's research and it suggests how we might think about '*working* politically'.[1] The paper closes by indicating some of the emerging findings about what makes for an effective politics of development and reform and hence leads to the central question for the workshop — what policy, programme and operational implications flow from this evidence?

Politics, as the term is used in the DLP, does not refer simply or solely to national level 'state-centric' activities about who's in or out, up or down, winning or losing, in and around the 'government'. Rather, we detach the idea of politics from its very narrow conventional and everyday association with the sites and activities of 'the government' and the 'state', and the competitive electoral and other processes involved when groups compete for power. Instead, while politics is certainly at the core of those processes, we understand politics as an activity to be a much wider and more general phenomenon. It consists of the pervasive and unavoidable (and necessary[2]) activities of conflict, negotiation and compromise involved wherever and whenever human beings in groups have to take decisions about how resources are to be used, produced and distributed. This is not confined to the so-called public domain but extends to all spheres of collective human life — in federations, firms and families; in businesses, schools, NGOs and churches, and to all the complex relations between them. All politics takes place in a more-or-less structured context, constituted by both formal and informal institutional contexts of constraints and opportunities, and by relations of power. Some institutional environments are relatively stable contexts, while others are insecure

and shifting rapidly, or may consist of multiple (and sometimes) conflicting institutional forms. All parties to an issue bring different ideas, interests and preferences, and forms and degrees of power. Politics occurs at national governmental level and at village level, but also in sectors – like agriculture or health or education; it occurs at local level, and in the private sector as well as in the relations within and amongst organizations of the public, private, sacred and secular sectors.

A fuller paper would have to cover a very wide field – ranging from the principles and practices of the variety of approaches and schools in political analysis and methods to questions about whether bilateral or multilateral agencies in the international community are capable of working politically and whether they have the workforce to do it – and much more. But in this short paper I shall seek to summarise some key issues by way of a series of points and questions which may help us to focus on the policy implications of our work. In doing so, I hope also to indicate how some quite complicated theoretical and explanatory issues in political science and political theory can be made *relevant and usable* for the understanding and promotion of human development, and how understanding them is a key condition of both thinking and working politically.

'Thinking Politically' (about development) – What does it mean?

A number of elements, assumptions and propositions make up the mind–set that underpins 'thinking politically' – and the evidence to support this is contained not only in the research findings of the DLP but in much other work as well.

1. The first element in thinking politically is the recognition that **politics matters** crucially for developmental outcomes at all levels and in all sectors. There is nothing especially original in this view. [3] The scientific evidence is overwhelming. Informally, policy-makers have understood this for more than 20 years and have discussed it – quietly – over coffee and in corridors.[4] However, it is now widely admitted, and publicly so, amongst thoughtful policy-makers. It is, for instance, unequivocally

stated in the most recent DFID synthesis of its funded governance/politics research (DFID, 2010) over the last decade. But although there is now acknowledgement of the critical importance of politics, and although some effort has been given to devising 'tools' for political analysis, the main bilateral and multilateral donors have not given much attention to formulating practical policies, strategies and practices for *working* politically.

It follows that equally thoughtful policy-makers ask the question: so what? What do we do about it? How do we operationalise insights and evidence about the centrality of politics? What do we do on Monday? **This is the key question which the DLP in its work is hoping to help answer** with its focus on the role of agency – leaders, elites and coalitions.

2. The second element is the important qualifier - *not by politics alone*. In short, effective and sustained development and change does not happen successfully by politics *alone*. Technical, administrative and practical components – as well as political processes - are just as essential for the successful building and maintenance of a deep tube-well or a waste management system, as for the establishment and consolidation of a constitution or a piece of legislation concerning rights, gender inequalities, health and safety, or institutional reform concerning, say, competition or aviation policy. Both political and technical dimensions are central to developmental outcomes. There is no technical solution to a problem without a political solution; and the resolution of political problems will always require technical support and implementation (for instance in drafting water-tight legislation or regulations to an Act).

3. Third, it follows that, if one is taking politics seriously, *agency matters*. By 'agency' is meant the choices, decisions and actions of individuals, groups and organizations and, in particular, their leaders and 'elites'.[5] They have the potential to change things. Just as structures (institutions, rules, cultural norms) have 'causal power' (that is, they have power to influence what we do), so too do agents, though their causal power is different (Archer, 2003). Recognising the importance of agency in thinking politically is influenced by the interesting literature on the relationship between structure and agency in

social theory and political science, but it is also influenced by what we observe empirically (in every day events) and from the research evidence.

It is also noteworthy how little attention is given to the role of agency in much of the developmental literature and policy announcements. Apart from appeals to the need for 'ethical' leadership or 'developmental integrity',[6] the emphasis in the policy literature is on supporting, recommending and sometimes insisting on 'structural' or 'institutional' solutions for a wide range of development problems, not on agents or agency or on the political processes which shape the design and content of institutions. Of course institutions matter. But if one accepts that structural and cultural factors do not woodenly *'determine'* how people behave, and that it is people who both (a) make or reform institutions and (b) also implement and make them work, or not as the case may be, then there must be 'room for *manoeuvre',* that is for 'agency'. It is not without significance that one of the DLP research papers has the word 'manoeuvre' as the central active word in its excellent title – *'Manoeuvres* for a low carbon state' (Harrison and Kostka, 2011 and in this document). They use the term to describe how sub-national leaders in China and India operate politically in very different political and institutional environments – where the 'room for manoeuvre' is different - to achieve emissions reduction targets. That 'room' is filled by what has been called the 'properties and powers' of agents themselves (Archer, 2003: 1). While all agency (like politics) occurs within structural contexts, which contain both constraints and opportunities, the evidence from DLP research and elsewhere is that agents (people and their organizations, leaders and followers alike) act in different ways within those contexts and can make a considerable difference. Moreover, people think, strategise, intend and attempt to resolve problems in different ways in the same contexts.

From the point of view of thinking politically about the role of agency in development, what therefore matters is:

> (a) How and under what conditions do *developmental agents* emerge (and in particular leaders at all levels and in

all sectors), rather than predatory or corrupt ones?

(b) How they can be helped to emerge?

(c) What factors shape the success of their efforts?

These, too, have been key questions of the DLP research and for which some important answers are emerging.

4. Fourth, *leadership matters.* There is now some acknowledgement of this. For instance, Michael Spence (the economics Nobel Laureate), and David Brady (2010: 1) pointed out in their synthesis of the work of the Commission on Growth and Development that the evidence from the country studies showed that politics and leadership 'were centrally important ingredients in the story'.[7] Yet, despite a considerable literature on 'leadership' (predominantly in the corporate context, from where there have been efforts to leverage it out into the developmental context), there has been little serious attention given to analysing the role of leadership – as agency – in the politics of development, and even less to the factors that make for 'ethical' leadership or 'developmental integrity'. The LDP has a number of papers on this, all available on the website at www.dlprog.org

What they show – and what the evidence from other DLP research findings also shows – is that if we are to *think politically* about leadership we should **not** think about 'leaders' in the 'great man or woman of history' tradition, focussing on an individual – though individuals matter and can make a difference (consider and contrast Pol Pot, Nelson Mandela, Muhammad Yunus). Rather, thinking politically about leadership requires treating and analysing it as a process, a political process, which involves mobilising people and resources in support of a particular goal or goals. An individual leader may matter, but the extent to which s/he is able to pursue a 'vision' (of a material and concrete developmental kind) and promote the achievement of a goal will depend very much on his/her capacity to mobilise an alliance or coalition of other people, organizations or interests in support of that goal, whether good or bad. And it will also de-

pend critically on the structure of constraints and opportunities they face in the institutional and political context; the interests, strength and nature of the political opposition; the strategies they adopt; the networks they exploit; and the manner in which their tactics and communications are 'framed'. That's politics. The evidence from the DLP research – and other academic studies – is overwhelming on this point.

For instance, the very different strategies adopted by the leaderships in the Indonesian case study (Rosser, et al., 2011, and in this document), and the factors that shaped their strategies and the outcomes, illustrate not only the salience of leadership, as a key agential variable for developmental results, but also how the interaction of structure and agency should always be at the core of how we think and understand politically.

The final point here, of course, is that the 'leadership' issue is often closely identified (as the Commission and Growth and Development did) with the narrowly *political* leadership at the national, governmental or regime level. That is far too limiting a view – and the role of leadership at sub-national levels, in the private sector, in organizations and NGOs and in functional sectors or issue areas is just as important for developmental outcomes.

5. Fifth, *coalitions matter.* Elsewhere coalitions have been described as 'central to the everyday politics of all societies and … fundamental for security, state building, economic growth and political stability' (Leftwich, 2009: 15). This is clearly crucial in developmental contexts. Developmental agents,[8] or developmental leaders, as with predatory ones, seldom can or do work on their own on the 'great man or woman of history' model of leadership or agency. Minka Woermann and Ed Grebe (2011) in their research on 'developmental integrity' for the DLP refer to this latter model as the 'agential model' and counter-pose it to their preferred and more realist conception of leadership as 'systemic'. The 'systemic' model points to effective leadership as a collective process of mobilising people and resources. The mobilization may be for developmental ends, or it may be for rather more predatory and non-developmental ends as in the recent

history of Zimbabwe. As Eldred Masunungure and Michael Bratton have shown in their work (Bratton and Masunungure, 2011, and in this document) the story of the Zimbabwean tragedy is not the story of Mr Mugabe alone. In all the DLP research, and at all levels – from China to Cape Town – the really very important role of coalitions - both formal and informal, inclusive or narrow - of individuals and organizations in the politics of development (or its opposite) has become very clear.

6. And here is an important link to another key element in thinking politically about development. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that overcoming *collective action problems* constitutes one of the major challenges of development. Collective action problems are best understood as those pervasive problem situations in which people or groups with diverse (and often competing) interests find it hard to agree on an institutional or organizational arrangement from which they would all benefit and without which they would all be worse off. Work from almost all the research papers shows how coalitions (formal or informal) represent a crucial *political mechanism* for the resolution of such problems. As Sarah Phillips shows in her paper on Yemen (Phillips, 2011, and in this document), the failure to build a sufficiently inclusive coalition across a major divide appears to be the single most important factor explaining the inability of Yemen elites and leaders to resolve a series of critical economic, political and social problems facing that country. While there are complex structural issues here, it is also clear from this work on Yemen – and indeed all the other research of the DLP – that agency is critical, and that understanding how agents have interacted with structures helps to explain when, where, whether and how difficult collective action problems have been resolved.

7. It follows from this that thinking politically - and especially about the role of agency - requires us to focus on and *understand the micro-politics* of the phenomenon with which we are concerned. Understanding the structural and institutional contexts, and what is loosely called the 'political economy' is important, of course. But for working politically, there is simply no alternative to understanding, in detail, who the players are, what they do, where they come from, their organizational affiliations, networks,

ideologies and interests and the political dynamics of the issue or sector. Detailed political ethnography is needed.

What stands out from all the DLP research papers is the grip which each of the research teams have had on the micro-politics of their cases. The detailed analysis by Eldred Masunungure and Mike Bratton (2011) of the anatomy of the Zimbabwean regime; the fine-grained grasp of the inner workings of Yemeni regime in Sarah Phillips' work (2011); the deep understanding of the detail of the Egyptian, Jordanian and South African women's coalitions in the work of Rebecca Hodes and Mariz Tadros and their teams (Hodes et al, 2011 and this document; Tadros, 2011 and this document); the work by Genia Kostka and Tom Harrison (2011 and this document) on emissions reduction politics in India and China, and Andrew Rosser's team's analysis of service delivery in 4 Indonesian districts (Rosser, et al., 2011 and this document), all illustrate the critical importance of understanding the micro-politics. Many (though not all[9]) of the existing 'tools' or frameworks for political analysis circulating in the international community, have a predominantly structural, institutional and macro-level focus, which are not calibrated to pick up the detailed politics of each case.[10] More often than not, the analyses undertaken through these frameworks are quick and, consequently, while they often provide a useful orientation to the broad political, economic and institutional contexts, they seldom reach an understanding of the **detailed inner politics of regimes, sector or issue areas**. Yet, where reform and development are concerned, where agency comes into its own, this is fundamental, especially when it comes to 'working politically'.

8. Thought it may be implicit in what has gone before, it is important to stress that the notion of politics used here, and our interest in the role of leaders and coalitions in institutional reform and innovation for development, is not confined to the national or central level of analysis. Thinking politically about development applies at all levels, from village to the top and across sectors. Research done by the DLP, for example in both the present and earlier phases (as well as work done by the Asia Foundation) has focussed on many of these.[11] In these cases, both successful and unsuc-

cessful outcomes have been explained with reference to the structural context, the path dependent historical legacies and the political environment by focussing critically on the way in which agents (individual and organizations) have interacted with those structural properties, manoeuvred politically, built on networks, forged coalitions and both framed and strategized their campaigns or practices.

9. Finally, thinking politically means recognising that *processes are just as important as projects* in development and change, and that their evolution and forms, and their institutional expression, will vary from context to context and will require both support and time to consolidate. Respecting, supporting and encouraging local leaderships in the endogenous shaping or reform of institutions that promote positive developmental outcomes, represents the bridge that links thinking politically to working politically.

'Working Politically': What does it mean?

There is understandable caution and reserve about the idea of 'working politically', or for donors trying to address 'the political dimensions of development' — and for good reason. The phrase itself is easily misinterpreted as insensitive interference, as an invasion of sovereignty and a disregard for principles of ownership and endogenously driven developmental processes. It may sound like 'regime change'. Given those many cases of bullying or intervention by conditionality of the international community in developing countries, there is good reason for such caution, as the very idea of working politically might seem to suggest a flagrant violation of the principles of Accra and Paris.

To make clear that this is not the meaning or intention, a preliminary definition may be useful. Working politically in development means supporting, brokering, facilitating and aiding the emergence and practices of developmental or reform leaderships, organizations, networks and coalitions, in the public and private fields, at all levels, and across all sectors, in response to, and in concert with, initiatives and requests from local individuals and groups. It means *investing*

in processes designed to support the formation and effectiveness of developmental coalitions, sometimes over long periods, committed to institutional reform and innovation by enhancing not just technical skills (the conventional domain of capacity building) but also the political capacity of organizations in areas such as negotiation, advocacy, communication and the generation of constructive policy options. It may involve supporting processes which lead to 'political settlements' whether these be at the macro-levels or in specific policy sectors (for example education or agriculture).

Working politically can be about very prosaic but important matters: helping groups campaign for waste management systems or feeder roads; or it may involve 'strengthening broad-based and democratically run national education coalitions, with active membership across the country, to enable local voices and experiences to influence national-level policy and practice' as in the case of the Commonwealth Education Fund (CEF), funded by DFID but *managed* by Oxfam, Save the Children and Action Aid (CEF, 2009). It may involve rethinking and re-working scholarship and higher educational support programmes so that they supplement a technical and skills focus with strategies that help to build networks, encourage the understanding of collective action problems and the importance of the provision of public goods.[12]

Working politically will take different forms in different countries, contexts, issue areas or sectors. It will require deep and detailed knowledge of the country, the sector, the issue area and the 'players'; it will require respectful and sensitive understanding of the local political dynamics and cultural norms; it will require long-term exposure to the country or issue concerned; it will require more social scientists and a well-trained, politically savvy workforce, both local and international, with the capacity to 'read' the politics, and knowing when and how to seize opportunities.

Working politically, in other words, directs attention, support and facilitation to the agents of reform and development – the leaders and the organizations – so as to invest in the local processes that will help resolve collective action and other problems through the work of alliances and coalitions and hence drive the formation and consolidation of the locally appropriate, feasible and legitimate institutions that are most likely to advance development outcomes.

Some Preliminary Findings

What evidence has emerged about the factors that shape the emergence, activities and relative success or failure of developmental leaderships and coalitions? Here is a provisional and preliminary list of some emerging findings

- Developmental leaderships and coalitions often emerge in response to a critical juncture – a threat, a challenge or a danger – or a new opportunity.

- Seizing the moment to initiate a reform or campaign can be critical and hence 'reading' the politics so as to be able to identify such 'openings' or opportunities is important.

- What matters is whether leaders have the capacity to respond and seize the opportunities. Do they have the knowledge, vision, prior experience and networks that will facilitate and shape such a response?

- This ability to exploit existing or new opportunities is important. For instance, democratisation and decentralization in Indonesia provided *bupati* considerable openings to adopt different strategies of service delivery. A similar opening occurred in South Africa after democratization.

- Prior or existing networks often facilitate the formation of developmental coalitions in unfolding situations of this kind.

- Prior knowledge and experience of 'working politically' extends and enriches the tactical and strategic repertoire of such leaders and elites.

- 'Well-educated' and – sometimes – well connected individuals regularly play an important part in directing and driving coalitions for reform.

- There is some evidence from this research and from elsewhere (Brannelly, Lewis and Ndaruhutse, 2011, and this document) to suggest that experience of higher education is a critical factor in the emergence of devel-

opmental leadership, in both the public and private spheres. More work is needed and has been commissioned by the DLP on this, where the hypothesis to be tested will be that there is a positive correlation between higher education and good governance as mediated by developmental leaders and elites or, to put it slightly differently, does higher education have a role to play in facilitating the emergence of developmental leaders and elites?

• How leaders and coalitions 'frame' their campaigns, strategies and communication can turn out to be very important, as the evidence from the South African, Jordanian and Egyptian women's coalitions demonstrates.

• Likewise, depending on the structural (political and institutional) context, strategic decisions about whether and to what extent to campaign publicly for institutional change, or whether to exploit 'contacts' and engage in 'backstairs' politics, can turn out to be decisive.

• The salience of the issue to enough people plays a significant part in influencing the level of support which developmental leaders or coalitions can expect and mobilise.

• The position of the central government on the issue can shape strategy but also influence outcomes.

• Identifying individuals within the government apparatus, or departments of state, that may be more amenable, sympathetic or simply appropriate for pressure and/or dialogue is a necessary political skill. Knowing where and how to connect with them is important.

• The nature, position, power and networks of the opposition to a reform initiative will influence both strategy and outcomes.

• Drawing on previous experience and/or learning from external experience, and adapting it to local contexts, can give sophistication, appropriateness and sharpness to a reform coaltion.

• The character and conditionality of funding by donors or supporters can make or break a coalition. Are tight conditions applied? Are funding arrangements transparent?

• The internal organization of a coalition committed to reform is important. Are procedures and financial arrangements transparent? Are roles and responsibilities clear, understood and accepted?

• How does the size of a coalition affect its effectiveness? Is there a trade-off between inclusiveness and effectiveness?

• Does a coalition share a common vision, programme and commitment, or is its programme a compromise between a number of interests and ideas, reducing the area of agreement to the lowest common denominator?

• How does a coalition 'navigate' between the formal and informal institutional environments?

When it comes to some of the measures of success of reform coalitions, and indeed what their goals may be, there are at least four that deserve mention.[13] Coalitions can be successful with respect to

• Achieving a specific policy goal (e.g. getting a law changed)

• Opening up debate on an issue that had hitherto been taboo

• Deepening and strengthening the coalition's internal organization and relationships for future purposes

• Increasing the capacity of constituent organizations

Each of these is a legitimate objective of a coalition and all contribute to the political processes and experience that drive the endogenous politics of developmental reforms.

Conclusion: What is to be done?

This short paper stops where the discussion of the workshop should begin. It has sought to distil briefly at least some of the common findings that have emerged from the research. The rich detail of each of these research papers is summarised in the Summaries which follow. These are the Executive Summaries of the full papers.

If the approach outlined about what it means to think and work politically has any value, and if the emerging findings about where developmental leaderships and coalitions come from and what seems to make for their relative success are useful points, then three questions are central for our

discussions:

- What are the policy, programme and operational implications for the international community of both official and non-official aid agencies?
- Do the bilateral and multi-lateral agencies have the capacity or work-force to work politically in support of developmental agents and coalitions?
- If they don't, then who can, and how?

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1.   Thinking around this issue has benefitted greatly from the DLP association with the Asia Foundation.
2.   Only the most optimistic of Marxists and some religious believers envisage a human society where there will be 'the end of politics'. For some, a society of government dominance and its 'political rule over men' will be transformed into the simple politics-free 'administration of things', in Engels' words (Engels, 1877/1958:123).
3.   It is a view about human society that can be traced back to Confucius in the East and Aristotle in the West.
4.   In its earliest manifestation, recognition of the importance of politics was expressed as an interest in 'governance', largely to avoid the p-word.
5.   The key concepts of 'elite', 'politics', 'leadership' and 'coalitions' - and others - as we use them in the DLP, are defined on the website at : http://www.dlprog.org/contents/about-us/our-core-focus/key-concepts.php
6.   This is discussed in one of the DLP research papers (Woermann and Grebe, 2011).
7.   They point out that in each of 13 'growth states', as they call the successful economic performers, leaderships chose growth models, built coalitions and established a stable political environment in which policy choices could bear economic fruit.
8.   Which are sometimes referred to as 'reform agents', 'development entrepreneurs' (Faustino and Fabella, forthcoming) and 'institutional entrepreneurs' (Pierson, 2004).
9.   An interesting example of the attempt to systematise an analytical framework for making sense of sectoral micro-politics is by Moncrieffe and Luttrell (2005).
10. These include Drivers of Change, Political Economy Analysis, Power Analysis, Strategic Governance and Corruption Analysis (SGACA). For reviews of these approaches see AusAID (September, 2010) and Haider and Rao (2010) and DFID (July, 2009).
11.   See earlier research papers on Botswana, Mauritius, the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa, all available in the Publications section of the DLP website at: http://www.dlprog.org/ftp/
12.   The DLP has commissioned a long-range study of the relationship between investment in higher education and good governance (Brannelly, et al, 2011, and this document).
13. We owe these insights to Amanda Tattersall (2010).