Issue 1, March 2017

Abt ASSOCIATES

BOLD THINKERS DRIVING REAL-WORLD IMPACT

GOVERNANCE
WORKING PAPER SERIES

Thinking and Working Politically: Are we seeing the emergence of a second orthodoxy?

Graham Teskey
Principal Technical Lead - Governance
Abt Associates

Disclaimer: The views expressed in the publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Abt Associates. Abt Associates accepts no responsibility for any loss, damage or injury resulting from reliance on any of the information or views contained in this publication.

Foreword

Since its founding in 1965, a hallmark of Abt Associates work has been its pursuit of new and better ways of delivering community and development assistance. Initially much of Abt Associates work was focused in the fields of health and social policy. Nowadays, the company also applies its technical and program capabilities into the governance arena – including on issues of front line service delivery, community driven development, local governance, economic and public sector management and leadership and coalitions.

Abt Associates sees 'governance' as more than just a sector: it is a way of thinking about how development (i.e. change) occurs. As such, Abt Associates applies 'governance' as a way of working across all sectoral and governance-specific investments. Our approach is distinguished by seven features:

i. investing deeply in local staff and relationships, and networks and partnerships;
ii. integrating real-time, highly quality contextual and political analysis into our programming;
iii. focusing on best-fit, locally defined problems and solutions;
iv. focusing on approaches and solutions that are not only technically sound, but also politically possible;
v. working with the 'grain', acknowledging that change cannot be driven by outsiders;
vi. using iterative, adaptive and responsive programming techniques, and;
vii. focusing more on enabling and equipping leaders rather than 'doing'.

This paper, the first in Abt Associates' inaugural *Governances Working Paper Series*, examines whether a 'second orthodoxy' has emerged to stand alongside – or even supplant – the traditional project framework in the aid industry.

This 'second orthodoxy' is characterized by a focus on clearly identifying and understanding the nature of the problem being addressed (in particular its political economy factors) and taking small, incremental steps and adjustments towards a long-term goal. It assumes that 'solutions' to complex development problems can only emerge through implementation, and are very hard to identify at the outset of a program. Such an approach stands in stark contrast to more traditional aid approaches (or the 'first orthodoxy') which tend to lock in inputs-outputs-outcomes up-front at design, and chart a linear course towards a given 'solution'.

"This paper is an important reference for aid practioners attempting to shift overly linear planning and thinking of their aid projects, to reflect the messy and unpredictable reality in which aid is delivered…"

The author concludes with a series of recommendations for aid practitioners to help them translate this 'second orthodoxy' into day-to-day aid program design, implementation and review.

This 'new project framework' assumes that – at some level – donor preferences to know what they are buying up-front with their aid investment (results) and how this result will be achieved (pre-planning) will never disappear completely. As such, the author proposes a way of working that builds on the incentives already in place in the aid industry, rather than disregarding the project frame all-together.

This paper is an important reference for aid practitioners attempting to shift overly linear planning and thinking of their aid projects, to reflect the messy and unpredictable reality in which aid is delivered.

Jacqui De Lacy
Vice President, Strategy and Consulting
Abt Associates

Thinking and Working Politically:
Are we seeing the emergence of a second orthodoxy?[1]

Graham Teskey[2]

1 Purpose

1.1 The purpose of this paper is to consider the extent to which a 'second orthodoxy' is slowly emerging which can stand alongside, and in some cases may supplant, the 'first orthodoxy' of the traditional project framework. Care has to be taken in making this argument, as there is certainly no consensus within the development community on its importance, and even among advocates, there are slightly differing interpretations of what this second orthodoxy looks like. Further, it is not absolutely clear that the two orthodoxies can co-exist.

1.2 The paper does not call for any 'paradigm shift' in how development practitioners conceptualise programs and projects, nor does it demand that the project framework be scrapped; the former would be impossible and the latter undesirable. Equally readers will find no claims that Doing Development Differently or 'Thinking and Working Politically' will always and everywhere guarantee better development outcomes. Rather, the paper seeks to summarise how the two orthodoxies differ, where the second orthodoxy now stands, and propose how it can be taken forward in practical terms.

1.3 The idea for the paper came from a workshop conceived by the *Pyoe Pin* program[3] in Yangon, Myanmar, in October 2016. The starting point for the workshop was the recognition that if aid is to have a transformative impact on critical 'wicked hard' in-country development problems (especially in a country context changing as quickly as Myanmar), then development programs must not only be politically informed in design, but also politically 'savvy' in implementation. Such programmes will need to be geared towards continuous political engagement which promote economic and social reform through adaptation to political challenges and opportunities. The underlying principle is that external partners must engage with the day-to-day reality of politics, rather than relegate their implications to the assumptions column of the project framework.

1.4 The paper has six further parts. Part 2 reprises the well-known arguments about why politics, institutions and interests matter in development. Part 3 traces the emergence of what we are calling the 'second orthodoxy' and compares it with the old project orthodoxy. Part 4 clarifies the differences among the three most widely quoted approaches: PDIA (Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation), DDD (Doing Development Differently), and TWP (Thinking and Working Politically). Part 5 suggests a revised way of visualising the project framework in a way that helps us move away from the input-output-outcome-impact linear tyranny. Part 6 proposes a template or frame of reference that could be used by practitioners who want to think and work politically and *institutionalise*[4] the ideas that underpin the second orthodoxy. Part 7 presents a short summary and conclusion.

2 We know that politics matter

2.1 There now is a persuasive volume of evidence that demonstrates that capacity and technical knowledge alone are insufficient to change deeply entrenched political interests and bureaucratic norms. These critiques demonstrate that an understanding of power asymmetries is frequently the critical missing

[1] The author would like to acknowledge the insights and comments of Kirsten Bishop, Gerry Fox, Lavinia Tyrrel and especially Tom Parks on earlier drafts of this paper
[2] Principal Technical Lead, Governance, Abt Associates
[3] *Pyoe Pin*, meaning 'Green Shoots' in Burmese, is a DFID-funded, British Council-executed program that seeks to support domestic reformers in Myanmar address deep seated collective action problems by mobilising domestic 'coalitions for change'
[4] Used here in the sense of 'to make routine' or 'to adopt as regular and standard practice'

ingredient in project design and implementation. Many eminent thinkers have looked at the difference between success and failure in development, and all point to the primacy of domestic politics[5].

2.2 This point has not been lost on development agencies and some have tried to provoke greater attention to the role that politics plays. However, this recognition is yet to pass into the mainstream of development practice. Despite the slow but sure accretion of this knowledge the international community seems to be wedded to doing development traditionally. Notwithstanding many donor agencies investing significantly in their understanding of power dynamics and asymmetries as well as behavioural economics, actually changing aid practice to make them more politically informed and responsive has proven difficult. This is probably due to the fact that much aid remains inflexible and averse to the types of operating approaches that could translate political-economy knowledge into impact. In country, front-line program staffs are obliged to follow the (legitimate) rules and regulations of their parent departments – which rarely admit flexible and responsive disbursement of funds. Neither has risk aversion and the slavish addiction to the tyranny of the vertical logic of the Project Framework helped matters. Both factors reinforce a set of incentives which militate against attempts to 'do development differently'. All this is widely recognised.

2.3 What can be seen in practice – to this author at least - seems to be a sort of institutional schizophrenia, where development agencies pick and choose from the two orthodoxies when and where it suits them. Given the *real politik* of aid, where the tabloid press will be unforgiving over even the slightest whiff of 'failure', this may be the best that can be hoped for. So this paper starts from the point that the Doing Development Differently / TWP 'movement' must combine the need for clear, critical and logical thinking about the relationship among inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts on the one hand, with the need for respecting the real-world process whereby change moves in fits and starts and is contested on the other.

3 Origins of the second orthodoxy

3.1 The three 'strands' of the second orthodoxy have different origins. The ideas underpinning PDIA were first published in 2012 in a Centre for Global Development paper[6] by Matt Andrews, Michael Woolcock and Lant Pritchett. This led to Harvard University hosting a meeting in October 2014 considering ways of 'Doing Development Differently'. The consensus document produced at this meeting – the 'Harvard Manifesto' – has been widely circulated, and more than 400 development leaders have endorsed it.[7] The opening two paragraphs of the manifesto summarise the problem: successful programs need to align with the interests of powerful actors who can create enough reform momentum, and to ensure implementation happens with minimal disruption from opponents. If such 'political will' does not exist for a project or reform initiative, those projects or reforms are unlikely to happen. Thus DDD represents the practical outworking of the original PDIA research paper.

3.2 At about the same time, a group of experienced governance advisers and practitioners from a number of development organisations, together with a few leading thinkers and researchers[8], began collaborating to promote *thinking and working politically* (TWP). The origin of this phrase is uncertain. The first *formal* academic reference seems to be Adrian Leftwich's 2011 paper[9], but there are a number of published and unpublished DFID papers dating from the early 2000s that embrace this approach without

[5] See for example: **Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson** (2012) 'Why Nations Fail'. New York: Crown Books; **Matt Andrews** (2013) 'The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development', New York, Cambridge University Press; **Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont** (2013) 'Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution', Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment; **Francis Fukuyama** (2012) 'The Origins of Political Order', New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux; **Francis Fukuyama** (2014) 'Political Order and Political Decay', New York. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; **Douglas North, John Wallis and Barry Weingast** (2009) 'Violence and Social Orders', New York, Cambridge University Press; and **Dani Rodrik** (2007) 'One Economics, Many Recipes', Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press

[6] Andrews, M., Pritchett, L. & Woolcock. M. (2012). Escaping Capability Traps through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA). CGD Working Paper 299. Washington, D.C.: Center for Global Development. http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/1426292

[7] On line, with signatories, at http://buildingstatecapability.com/the-ddd-manifesto/

[8] Participation has included representation from DFID, DFAT, the World Bank, UNDP, NORAD, ECDPM, the University of Birmingham, the Overseas Development Institute, the University of Melbourne, the Asian Development Bank and USAID

[9] Adrian Leftwich (2011) 'Thinking and Working Politically: What does it mean? Why is it important? And how do you do it?' Developmental Leadership Program discussion paper. However, it should be noted that the contents of this paper are very different to the focus of the international TWP CoP

naming it as such (notably the 'Drivers of Change' work led by Sue Unsworth). Stefan Kossoff, then DFID's Head of Governance Profession, authored an internal note in 2009 entitled "Thinking and Working Politically in DFID".

3.3 The International Community of Practice on TWP was established in late 2013 by the present author. The first meeting was held in Delhi in November of that year to 'piggy-back' on DFID's Asia Governance professional development conference. The group has met several times since then, always in the margins of other events where a quorum is likely (the CoP has no budget, no constitution and no formal – or even informal - rules of the game). Its purpose is to promote both the evidence for, and the uptake of, TWP approaches by donors.

3.4 So how do the two orthodoxies compare? The 1960s and 1970s were the hey-day of 'the project'. Projects were what development was all about, stemming from the dominance of gap theory, the conventional wisdom was that if only rich countries could make available sufficient lumps of productive capital poor countries would soon catch up as their critical resource gaps narrowed. Cost-benefit analysis was the single most important tool for choosing the best projects: where could the highest economic returns be generated at the margin? There were even alternative methodologies for calculating economic internal rates of return: the Little-Mirrlees method and the UNIDO method[10]. Projects were concrete (often literally) and discrete. They had beginnings and ends. They had inputs and outputs. These ideas were absorbed into the Logical Framework Approach, developed by Fry Consultants Inc, for USAID in 1969. It is arguable that this one tool has had more impact on the way the international development community thinks and works than any other. It still dominates design and practice today.

3.5 Figure 1 below compares this first orthodoxy against what this note is calling the second orthodoxy – the orthodoxy of doing development differently or thinking and working politically. A quick scan of the figure will show just how different the two approaches are; the two represent different social science traditions.

Figure 1: Orthodoxies compared

	The first orthodoxy	The second orthodoxy
Discipline	Economics, management	Power dynamics and asymmetries, Institutional economics, entrepreneurial studies
Planning paradigm	Blue print; end-state; linear; rational sequencing	Clear objectives but path undefined; disjointed incrementalism based on trial and error, iterative
Motif	Project frameworks	Systems theory, complexity
Philosophy	Idealist	Realist
Timing	Fixed	Open
Theory of Change	Prescriptive	Adaptive
Inputs	Programmed	Indicative
Success measures	MDGs, SDGs, outputs	Processes, institutions, outcomes
Problem definition	Lack of resources or capacity constraints	Limited scope for collective action; reform resistant institutions
Changes sought	Transactional	Transformational
Change agents	Officials, TA	Coalitions, networks, leaders
Way of working	Principal-Agent	Partnership
Key partners	Central government MDA*s, regulator	Actors pressuring core MDAs for change

*Ministries Departments Agencies

3.6 In practical, operational terms, there are five main differences between the two approaches:

[10] Ian M D Little and James A Mirrlees "Manual of Project Appraisal in Developing Countries", OECD 1968. UNIDO "Guidelines for Project Evaluation" Vienna, 1972

- TWP starts with an explicit assessment of power asymmetries: this will not only help clarify the nature of the problem, but indicate the extent to which it will be politically feasible to address the problem[11]. Thus TWP has major implications for ***investment selection***;
- In planning investments, TWP approaches stress the importance of maximising the focus on the problem and the goal. How to reach the goal (what precise mix of activities and outputs) is not explicitly prescribed at the outset – a much more organismic, ***learning by doing (or 'searching[12]') approach*** is proposed;
- What, under the first orthodoxy, were three separate processes (***implementation, monitoring and learning) are collapsed into one***;
- Lying at the very core of TWP, its *leitmotif* indeed, is the need for a ***flexible, adaptive and responsive programming capability***. This is necessary in order to respond to the changing political circumstances of the day as well as the real world problems of delays and unforeseen technical mishaps; and
- Possibly the biggest difference between the two orthodoxies is the TWP emphasis on the recognition that ***there will be winners and losers*** from change, and that the funder may have to explicitly (and either overtly or covertly) insert itself on the side of progressive pro-poor change.

4 What are the differences among these three sets of letters?

4.1 As yet the second orthodoxy is not uniform. We have already noted that three sets of abbreviations jostle for attention: PDIA, DDD and TWP. But there is more that unites this trio than divides them. Figure 2 summarises their common features and their differences. These differences are undoubtedly differences in degree, rather than in kind. This figure is presented without further commentary.

Figure 2: DDD, PDIA and TWP

	Doing Development Differently	Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation	Thinking and working politically
Three features emphasised	• Use locally legitimate institutions • Partnership not principal agent • Focus on real results	• Relentless focus on a specific problem • Make many small 'bets' • Learn and adapt as you go	• Explicit recognition of competing interests • Engage with (i.e. fund) reformers / pro-poor coalitions • Based at all times in political economy perspectives: country / sector / program / issue
Common features	• Context is everything • Best fit not good practice • No blueprint – rather flexible, responsive, adaptive programming • Real-time learning • Long-term commitments with staff continuity • Enabling, not doing		

4.2 We return to the question of how to bring these agendas together.

5 A new project framing

5.1 What this note is calling the 'first orthodoxy' has proved of tremendous benefit to development practitioners. It has provided a solid framework in which to structure thinking, identify outputs (and how they differ from outcomes), and consider how change happens. Its weaknesses are well known: it can encourage linearity; it relegates all the 'tricky stuff' to the right hand column of the matrix where all

[11] It is noteworthy that the 2017 World Development Report on Governance and the Law emphasises power asymmetries – see figure BO 13.1 on page 30 and discussion

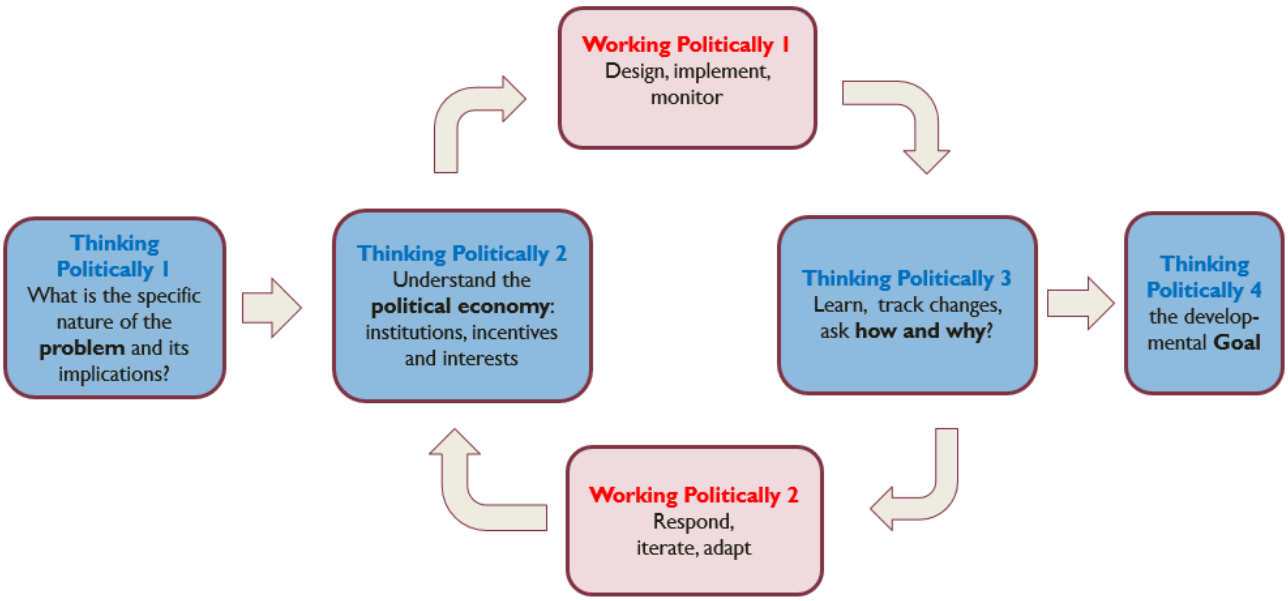
[12] To borrow Bill Easterly's term

assumptions / risks are dumped (and then forgotten), and it can be overly prescriptive and inflexible regarding inputs, activities and time lines.

5.2 The challenge therefore is to retain the discipline of the project framework while incorporating two innovations: first, to reflect the fact that change proceeds stochastically, in 'stops and starts', and in most places, at most times, is not completely (or even partially) predictable; and second, to encourage planners[13] consciously to think about – and possible engage with – the power asymmetries which swirl around the intervention under consideration.

5.3 What would such a framework look like? Figure 3 presents one possibility. The **blue cells represent the "thinking politically'** part of the process. They form the core of the whole approach – a solid blue line marching across the page. The extreme left and right hand cells constitute the two *anchors* of the planning process: the **nature of the problem** (and its implications) and **the goal** we are trying to achieve. These should be kept under periodic review, but in all likelihood will not change dramatically over the 'life of the project'[14].

Figure 3: A TWP Project Framework?



5.4 Once the problem has been identified, the next step **would not be** to identify the inputs and activities designed to 'solve the problem'. On the contrary it would be to identify the interests, incentives and institutions of all the stakeholders; those that would gain and those that would lose. What are the formal and informal rules of the game that determine 'how thing are done' in this sphere? How powerful are the progressive forces and who and what stands opposed to change? If the chances of positive change are judged unlikely – then do not proceed. This is what the simple phrase 'technically desirable and politically feasible' means in practice.

[13] For much as we like the idea of 'searchers', aid agencies and governments will continue to employ, and to need, planners.
[14] This phrase is used as a shorthand describing all aspects of the intervention, in full knowledge of all the pitfalls of 'projects', 'lifespans' and the like.

5.5 The **red cells represent the 'working politically'** part of the process. The first cell says 'design, implement and monitor'. These three words cover (at least) seven important functions. Breaking down 'Working Politically Cell 1' will generate something like the figure on the right. Each of the seven functions raises its own challenges, and illustrates the TWP is more demanding of staff skills and time than the more familiar vertical approach of the first orthodoxy, where many of these tasks are – quite frankly – ignored.

Working Politically 1
'Design, implement, monitor'

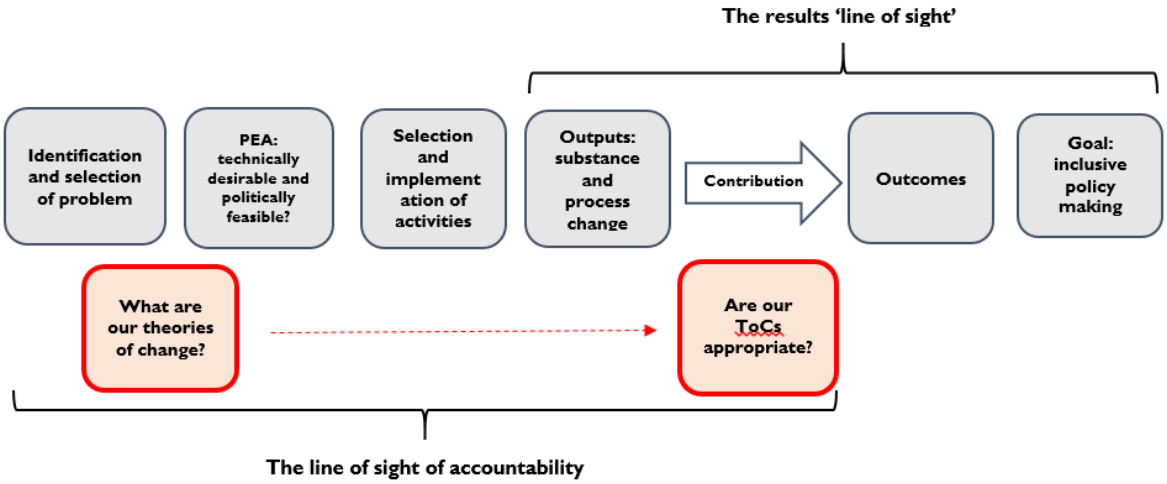
1. Build relationships / partnerships to maximise influence and reach
2. Ensure we are working with locally legitimate institutions
3. Design programs to harness political dynamics for change *that currently exist*
4. Do we have a working theory of how change may happen and how our actions will help deliver that change?
5. What *initial* range of inputs, activities, budgets and outputs are we proposing?
6. Are we sure we can generate the real time information we need to know what is happening on the ground and why?
7. Implement programs through iterative and responsive approaches

5.6 Under a TWP approach, the initiative is designed, implemented and monitored simultaneously. Here, as noted above, design is 'collapsed' into the implementation process. There is no prescriptive, *ex ante* blueprint to follow. These sorts of 'design, implement, monitor' approaches are most appropriate where it is not possible to predict precisely what will work in advance and where a high level of flexibility is required to operate effectively. This sort of approach is particularly suitable for organisational and institutional development initiatives, where the initiative has *no option but* to think and work politically, to focus on relationships, to be astute to opportunities in the environment and to prioritise learning by doing and experimentation[15].

5.7 The third blue (thinking politically) cell requires us to reflect on what has changed, and why. At this point the theory (theories) of change should be revisited, and if necessary, revised. What progress has been made toward the ultimate goal? Each cell can be expanded in this way. This is what Figure 5 attempts to do (part 6 below).

5.8 At this point it is critical that the planners (particularly if they are working for an external aid partner such as a bilateral agency) distinguish between two critical lines of sight: the first is their own line of ***accountability*** (for what they are individually and collectively accountable); and the second, the line of sight of ***results***. This is shown diagrammatically in figure 4. For sake of representation, the chain is shown in linear fashion.

Figure 4: Lines of Sight



[15] See DFAT Embassy Jakarta, Practice Note 2: Design and Implement, November 2016

5.9 The line of sight of accountability is demonstrated by the lower arrow. Planners, and by extension, aid organisations, generally, are accountable for:

- problem identification and investment selection – including the initial theorisation of how change happens (thinking politically cell 1);
- the quality of the initial political economy analysis (thinking politically cell 2);
- the quality of design, implementation and monitoring (and all it entails as detailed above in working politically cell 1);
- tracking the delivery of outputs and the extent to which outcomes are likely – i.e. a reassessment of the theory of change (thinking politically cell 3);
- the flexible, adaptive and responsive nature of the changes put in place as a result of progress and associated learning (working politically cell 2); and
- which takes us back, iteratively, to thinking politically cell 2.

5.10 External actors are thus accountable up to and including the theory of change they are working to in order to deliver the change they are seeking (the outcomes and the goal). The critical elements here are the relevance and appropriateness of the problem originally identified, the selection of activities to be funded, the quality of design and implementation, the delivery of outputs, and the quality of the argument (the theory of change) that claims that these outputs will make a critical contribution to the outcomes sought. For all these the agency is indeed accountable.

5.11 By contrast, the results line of sight, the upper arrow, refers to the way in which outputs are expected to be translated into outcomes and goal achievement. This is *why the initiative is being funded*, but it is not synonymous with the donors' line of accountability.

5.12 Returning to figure 3, the second red (working politically cell) requires us to consider whether adjustments are needed to the project design itself, the implementation schedule and timetable, or the resources required. This is the stage that has almost uniquely come to be associated with the DDD / PDA / TWP agenda: the extent to which program managers and donors can ever be 'flexible, adaptive and responsive' to changing circumstances. While this of course is importance, it is only a part of the broader TWP agenda – as outlined in paragraph 3.6 above. This takes us full circle: back to the blue thinking politically cell number 2, the point where interests, incentives and institutions need to be revisited and reconsidered.

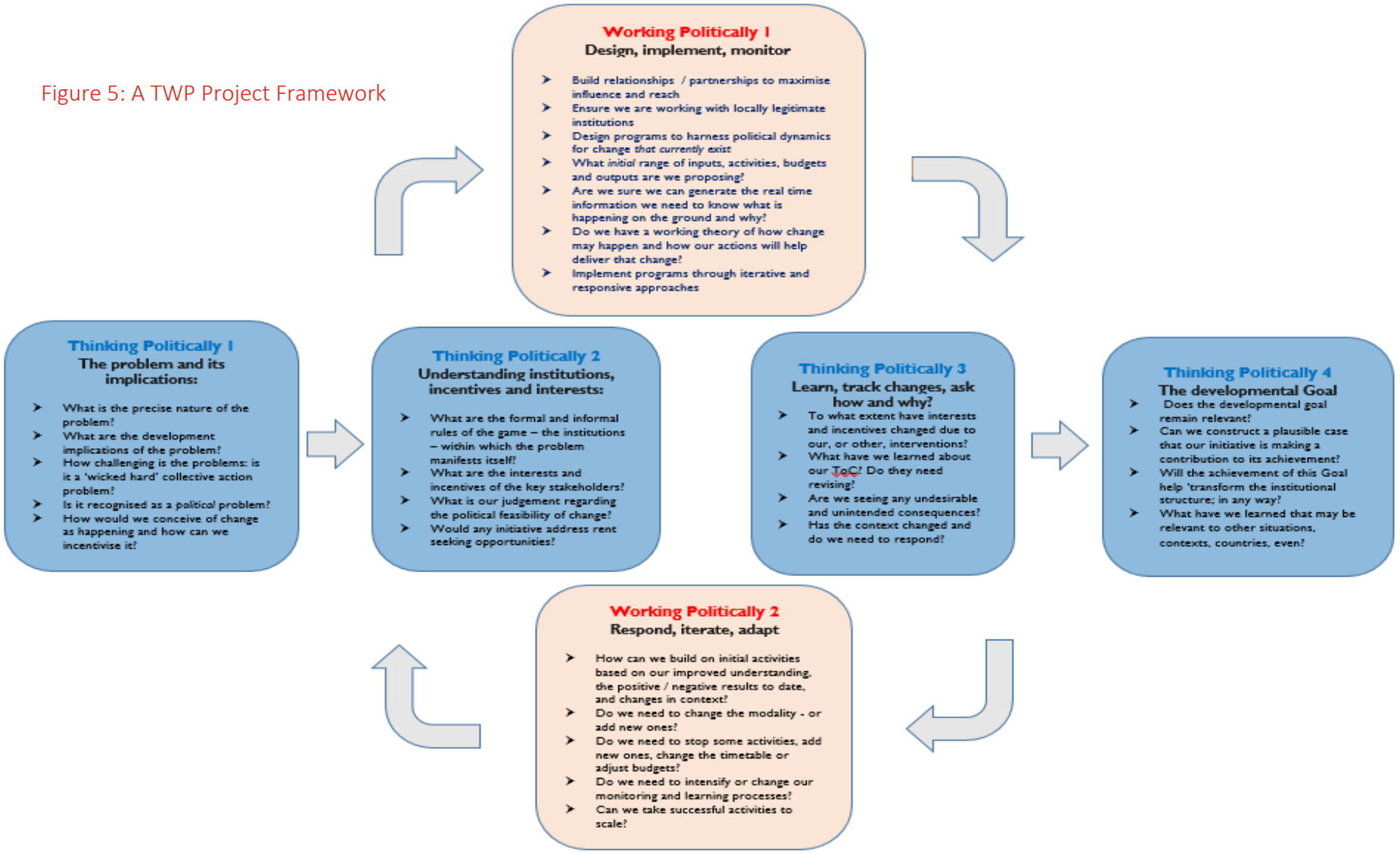
5.13 This presentation is primarily offered as a corrective to overly linear thinking and planning. Its usefulness lies in the fact that it stresses the iterative nature of change and change processes. It provides a broad framing of how we can think about how change happens and our role in that process. But it does not provide a template to be completed – it lacks the '*just fill me in*' seductive power of the four-by-four project framework.

6 How could we organise our practice to think and work more politically?

6.1 Figure 5 suggests a set of questions or issues to be addressed at each stage of the TWP cycle. They are indicative only: they *indicate* the ways in which the initiative under question should be interrogated. In completing the 'new project framework', each question should be answered giving our best guess or 'narrative summary' (to match the original framework language), as well as from where we have sourced our information (the basis of our judgement).

6.2 Clearly this is a very different 'tool' to the more usual four by four project framework. Parts of the original framework can be woven into the new iterative framework (particularly in the 'working politically 1' section). But the point is not to challenge - let alone replace - the project framework; the purpose is to complement it by framing in a different way how development practitioners conceive, or think of, the steps that may be necessary in trying to 'think and work politically'.

Figure 5: A TWP Project Framework



7 Summary and conclusions

7.1 It is the central argument of this paper that a second 'orthodoxy' is now emerging, albeit tentatively, within a number of development agencies[16]. The precise 'what' and 'how' of this orthodoxy is still to be formalised, let alone institutionalised. This author is driven to conclude that practitioners – whether working inside those agencies or for service providers, such as Abt Associates - now must take advantage of this supportive authorising environment and push hard on the agenda. Experience tells us that these windows of opportunity tend to remain open only for a short while. This will require us to specify what we mean by thinking and working politically at each stage of the program / project cycle, and to make the daily operational implications clear. These include the critical importance of:

- having sufficiently skilled and experienced staff to recognise 'what is going on' and draw out the implications for our initiatives;
- being absolutely clear not only about our theory of change – how we think change happens in this particular subset of the domestic political economy (who the key players are, their interests and incentives, and the formal and informal institutions in which change will happen), but also about our theory of action – why we judge our activities and outputs will deliver the outcome we are seeking;
- clearly differentiating the shorter-term 'results' for which we are accountable and the longer-term big changes we are seeking[17]; and
- ensuring all stakeholders (but especially partner governments and our own senior managers) remain in agreement on the specific problem we are addressing and the goal towards which we are moving.

7.2 In an attempt to help seize the day this paper proposes a way forward in which the ideas and insights of DDD and TWP can be integrated into the accepted legitimacy and logical thinking of the traditional project framework. We need to move beyond the hand-wringing that 'all development is political' (paragraph 2.1) and adapt our thinking habits and our working practices to reflect *how change actually happens*[18].

7.3 It is inevitable however that in making what in reality are some rather modest proposals, a number of bigger questions are raised. Two are worth noting. First, what are the implications of co-existing orthodoxies? Can we foresee a merging of the two approaches as sketched out in Figure 6, or will the two approaches remain stubbornly separated? If the latter, can development agencies cope with such formalised schizophrenia, and can operational staff handle two rather different project philosophies simultaneously? Or will one orthodoxy win-out – or more realistically will the first orthodoxy continue its stranglehold on the developmental mind-set and the organisational plumbing of development agencies? My own tentative answer – more by way of a guess – is that the two are unlikely to merge and will sit alongside each other, rather tentatively, and each will be used when and where judged most appropriate.

7.4 Second, TWP, PDIA and DDD have been developed in response to how events in the real world can undermine our best laid project plans. The focus of these three approaches is very much at the 'project' level, where part of the answer is to remain focused on the 'problem' itself. We know that donors have been overly focused on what an organisation looks like (its form) rather than on what it achieves (its function)[19]. We have learned that change processes do not start from a clean institutional

[16] An informal, and wholly unscientific, review of a dozen or so bid documents released to the market by DFID, DFAT and USAID over the past 15 months have all called for 'flexible, adaptive programing' and referenced the need to 'think and work politically'. None of the documents provided further details or specificity.
[17] For a great discussion of this see Richard Butterworth's internal DFID paper "Big Changes that matter for Bangladesh: A paper for the Bilateral Aid Review", undated but probably 2015.
[18] For a whole book on this, see Duncan Green 'How Change Happens', Oxford University Press, 2016.
[19] There is of course an horrible academic term for this: isomorphic mimicry.

slate: institutions are 'sticky' in that old norms and values ("how things are done around here") are carried over into new organisational structures. This has been demonstrated in even the most adverse circumstances after violent conflict[20]. In most cases we find that the form has changed but the function remains the same. We also know that despite the rhetoric that 'one size does not fit all', donors and consultancy firms frequently arrive in country with a 'solution in their pocket' and a normative idea of what 'a good organisation looks like' in their heads. Too often such solutions are not locally owned and thus the reform merely changes the organisational furniture but has little impact on performance or outcomes.

7.5 But it is legitimate to ask what this more politically and institutionally informed analysis means 'at scale'? A recent paper on Malawi[21] highlights this issue, and emphasises that the challenge goes much deeper than putting in place flexible and adaptive implementation. For external partners, it is extremely difficult to have flexible and adaptive resource plans when addressing issues 'at scale'. So what does it mean 'at scale' to remain focused on the problem, not on the solution, on function not form, on outcome not design? Is there is an alternative approach? Again, my tentative answer is that advocates of TWP and DDD do not yet have convincing answers to this question. Going to scale implies a confidence in methodology and the appropriateness of the technical fix. It also implies adequate political and bureaucratic support for implementation at all levels. Yet we know that all manner of 'events' can derail implementation – a TWP approach for 'programs at scale' would require each element to be micro-managed and 'caressed' through the system. This may be the next frontier for TWP / DDD.

7.6 So TWP, DDD and PDIA not only challenge our project orthodoxy, they also challenge the broader edifice of development: how we think about institutions and institutional change. But for now – let's take one step at a time and get real about 'project design'.

[20] 'Building Public Services in Post-Conflict Countries'. Blum, Rodriguez and Srivastava. World Bank, forthcoming.
[21] Kate Bridges. 'Why the iceberg sinks: a critical look at Malawi's history of institutional reform'. 2016.

Abt Associates

Abt Associates is a mission-driven, global leader in research, evaluation and implementing programs in the fields of health, social and environmental policy, and international development. Known for its rigorous approach to solving complex challenges, Abt Associates is regularly ranked as one of the top 20 global research firms and was named one of the 40 international development innovators. The company has offices in the U.S., Australia and the U.K., and program offices in more than 50 countries.

As the Australian subsidiary of Abt Associates, we work with our clients to implement bold, innovative solutions to improve the lives of the community and deliver valued outcomes for our clients. We provide a comprehensive range of services from policy to service delivery in the public and private sectors contributing to long-term benefits for clients and communities. Operating in remote and challenging environments, we offer extensive experience in the region, strong technical capacity, and a proven project management track record.

To learn more visit, https://abtassoc.com.au

To follow the latest thinking on governance, visit the Governance Soapbox, https://abtassocgovernancesoapbox.wordpress.com

Abt

BOLD THINKERS DRIVING REAL-WORLD IMPACT