TWP 'HOW TO' NOTE #1

What is Thinking and Working Politically?

What is 'Thinking and Working Politically'?

Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) is a way of *thinking* about the role that power and politics play in how change happens, and *applying* this knowledge in how we design and deliver aid programs.[1] Two key assumptions underpin the TWP approach:
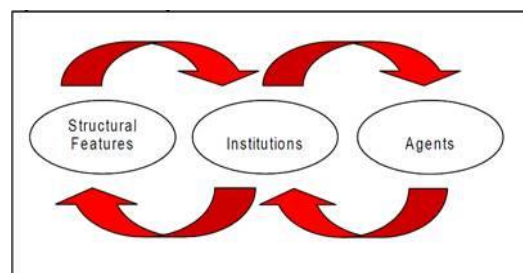
1. Change is inherently **political**. It involves the renegotiation of power and resources: who has it, who doesn't, how they accumulate and retain it, and how power is distributed and used. We know that change will also create 'winners and losers': people or groups who want to block change and keep the status quo as it is (e.g. for financial reasons), and those who will gain from change. Change also requires alliance building, negotiation, compromise and potentially conflict. As such, any program looking to support change (be it to reduce poverty, promote growth etc), needs to understand the interests, motivations and incentives that drive the behavior of those who have a stake in the process. See Box 1.

2. Change is also **complex and often unpredictable**. It is very hard to know, with any certainty, how a reform process will unfold at the outset of a project. The challenge is that the decisions of key actors, their interests and drivers are either hidden or very hard to understand – especially at design. Furthermore, people's interests, incentives and access to power is itself dynamic – and will change in response to their circumstance, as well as their interactions with each other.[2] Thus, even the best analysis can quickly become outdated if the political reality of a given reform is fluid and uncertain.[3]

It is these two underlying assumptions – that change is inherently political, as well as complex and unpredictable – that shape a 'thinking and working politically' view of the world.

So what does 'Thinking and Working Politically' look like?

> **Box 1: A political view of the world...***
>
> There are many ways to understand how or why humans create and solve problems. A political view of the world tries to understand human behavior by focusing on three issues: structure, institutions and agents (or actors) - and how they relate to each another.
>
>
>
> *Source: DFID Drivers of Change work 2003*
>
> **Structural:** These are the background issues which shape the political and institutional environment. E.g. demographic pressures, political ideology, religious beliefs. These shape (and are shaped by) the rules and preferences of individuals and groups, but are hard to influence. They often change over years rather than month.
>
> **Institutions**: These are the 'rules of the game'. They can be formal (e.g. policies, laws) or informal (e.g. norms, attitudes). They influence how deals get done, how people engage with each other and what is deemed acceptable behavior.
>
> **Agents**: The people or groups with power who participate in change or bargaining processes. E.g. lobbyists, networks, powerful individuals, coalitions etc.

---

[1] The TWP approach emerged from a frustration amongst aid practitioners that development projects were not achieving their intended impact, despite efforts to improve the technical quality of programs. *"Evidence tells us that domestic political factors are usually much more important in determining developmental impact than the scale of aid funding or the technical quality of programming.... Successful implementation usually happens when programs are aligned with a domestic support base that is influential enough to generate reform momentum, and overcome the resistance of those benefitting from the status quo. Too many times over the past few decades, we have seen projects fail because they demand changes that **are not politically feasible"**.* See: http://publications.dlprog.org/TWP.pdf
[2] Cole, Ladner, Koenig and Tyrrel, 2016 "Reflections on Implementing Politically Informed, Searching Programs: Lessons for Aid Practitioners and Policy Makers". The Asia Foundation
[3] Op cit.

A TWP approach has three core principles (adapted from https://twpcommunity.org/what-is-twp/):

1. *First, strong political analysis, insight and understanding*. In programming this means:
   - Constantly questioning, analyzing and refining the project scope, strategy and outcomes with a relentless focus on where power *really* sits, interests, incentives and institutions – for example through **political economy analysis (see 'how to notes #4 and #5')**
   - Designing projects based on problems and solutions that have been identified by local actors (and not by outsiders). This requires the project to have deep local networks and relationships – especially informal ones and with powerful actors.

2. *Second, a detailed appreciation of, and response to, the local context*
   - Working with and through domestic stakeholders, conveners and power brokers – i.e. those who actually have the resources and power to lead or make change happen.
   - Working with networks and supporting coalitions (vs relying just on one 'champion').

3. *Third, flexibility and adaptability in program design and implementation*.
   - Setting ambitious program goals but being flexible in the strategy used to get there (including being able to change outputs, inputs and even outcomes on a regular basis).
   - Continuing to assess the local political context throughout implementation (and not just at design) and adjusting the program in response to this analysis.
   - Merging design (traditionally 6-12 months) with implementation (typically 1.5-2 years) so that the team are constantly 'designing', 'testing' and 'reflecting' all at once.
   - Engaging the team in regular review and reflection to look critically at what's working, what's not and why, and actively stopping/ adjusting/ refining project budget and activities in response.

Table 1, below, compares a TWP approach to programming to more traditional approach.

Table 1: TWP vs. Traditional Program Approaches
(Adapted from Graham Teskey 2017)

	Traditional Program Approach	A full-scale TWP Approach
Problem framing	Problem usually defined in terms of a technical deficit or as a capacity issue	Problem defined in terms of power, politics, institutions, incentives etc
Planning paradigm	Teams lock in their approach (outputs, choice of partners, activities etc) at program outset.	Teams 'search' for the right approach to solve the problem through a constant cycle of learning/ building relationships/ acting.
Goal	Transactional. Largely used for accountability purposes.	Transformational and ambitious. Anchors and drives teams work.
Theory of Change	Usually set one single, prescriptive theory of change at design and this remains the same for the duration of the project	Multiple, plausible ToCs that are constantly tested and adapted through implementation and as new information arises.
Inputs/ Outputs	Programmed, static	Indicative, constantly updated
Implementation approach	Linear sequencing over usually 3 years of (1) design (2) implementing work-plan (3) end of program review	Traditional barriers between designs/ implement/ review collapsed. Team is free to constantly reflect on and update their design assumptions at implementation
Capacity to respond to change	Rigid program work-plan with little flexibility to respond to changes in context.	Capacity to recognize and respond program to critical junctures (e.g. a policy reform window)
Change agents/ partners	Officials, TA, formal structures and partners	Coalitions, networks, leaders, informal as well as formal partnerships**Importantly, the team do not rely on one 'champion' or individual, focus instead on coalitions and networks*

Where does gender fit in all this?

There is – as yet – no one agreed tool or approach to integrate gender into TWP.[4] But we know that gender is critical to a political understanding of the world for one simple reason: *gender shapes power relations at all levels of society (public, private, political etc), and in TWP, we want to understand how power is negotiated, used and maintained.*

As such, TWP must also take into account how one of the world's most significant systems of power – gender – constrains or enables the outcomes we want our aid programs to achieve.

The DLP helps us understand the importance to gender to TWP in five ways:

> **What is gender?**
>
> "Gender is the socially constructed characteristics of women, men, and other genders. These include norms, roles, power relationships and institutions. Therefore, gender is not synonymous with 'women', and gender analysis is focused on more than the differences between women, men and nonbinary genders. For example, institutions both reflect and reinforce gender through their membership, their formal and informal rules, and the outcomes they produce. Yet, it is rarely easy to see – and therefore respond to – these gendered aspects of institutions without specifically applying a gender lens". *Source: Gender and Politics in Practice, DLP.*

Why does Gender matter to TWP?	Explanation
Gender helps us understand the significant inequalities that often exist between women and men.	"For example, one of the most consistent features of political decision-making is women's lack of influence. This is in turn often the result of….perhaps the most pervasive, institutionalized and detrimental power-over relationship in our world: the domination of women by men."[5]
Gender roles are power relations.	"[Gender] is a key mechanism through which power not only constrains but constitutes individuals and is perhaps the most persistent form of 'invisible power' in our world….In many contexts, what it means to be a woman is to be powerless; it is considered 'feminine' to be quiet, accommodating, and obedient. By contrast it is considered 'manly' to … get others to do what you want them to do….This, for example, significantly reduces women's access to decision-making …Recognizing these dynamics, work on women's empowerment has stressed women's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge (power-within) as a critical aspect of the process for change."
The private sphere is an arena of power and politics.	Often, in TWP, we focus on the public sphere (media, Parliaments, politicians etc), and overlook the private sphere. However, how power is exercised by men and women privately (e.g. in the home, in relationships) can influence how people behave publically. Because TWP is about understanding what drives behavior, it must understand the public/ private sphere too.
Gender interacts with other hierarchical power relationships.	Gender also helps TWP understand how other forms of inequality, such as class or ethnicity, might interact with gender to shape the incentives, norms and power relationships which affect how actors behave.
Our understandings of power may themselves be the result of men's power over women.	Gender helps us be critical and reflect on where our own understanding of power (e.g. who we believe has power, who as the ability to use it, and whether or not we are missing the opportunity to support change agents that we might otherwise overlook).

---

[4] To date, it is widely accepted that the TWP movement has struggled to integrate gender into its thinking and tools. Where gender has been included, it is often narrowly focused on 'women' and their formal representation (e.g. numbers of women in parliament etc). See Browne, E. (2014) Gender in Political Economy Analysis, Helpdesk Research Report 1071. GSDRC, University of Birmingham and Koester, D. (2015) Gender & Power, DLP Concept Brief 04.

[5] Direct quotes sourced from: http://publications.dlprog.org/Gender&Power.pdf

Is TWP different to DDD* and PDIA**?

*DDD = Doing Development Differently
**PDIA = Program Driven Iterative Adaptation

Yes, but only by matter of degree.

The thinking in this note comes from the mounting literature discussing what is variously called 'Doing Development Differently'. 'Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation', and Thinking and Working Politically.

While these approaches emphasize slightly different aspects of the broad 'responsiveness' agenda, they should be thought of as complements, not substitutes. The figure below highlights their different points of emphasis as well as their commonalities.

Figure 1: DDD, PDIA and TWP
(Source: Graham Teskey 2017)

	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		