



Research Paper **37**

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

Niheer Dasandi, Heather Marquette and Mark Robinson
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The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) is an international research initiative based at the University of Birmingham, and working in partnership with University College London (UCL) and La Trobe University in Melbourne.

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The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP)
International Development Department
School of Government and Society
College of Social Sciences
University of Birmingham
Birmingham B15 2TT, UK
+44 (0)121 414 3911
www.dlprog.org
info@dlprog.org
@DLProg

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About the authors

Authors' names are listed in alphabetical order. All authors have contributed equally to the paper.

Niheer Dasandi is a DLP Research Fellow based at University College London. His research focuses on politics and development, particularly on the political economy of aid, links between inequality and poverty, the process of policy reform, and political-bureaucratic interactions.

Heather Marquette, DLP's Director, is Reader in Development Politics in the International Development Department, University of Birmingham. She is also Academic Director of the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre. A political scientist by training, she has extensive international experience in research, policy advice, consultancy and training on the politics of development, governance, corruption, political analysis, and aid policy.

Mark Robinson is Global Director, Governance at the World Resources Institute based in Washington, DC. His career in international development spans more than 25 years. He has held a number of leadership and management roles, most recently at the UK Department for International Development (DFID), where he led a large group of governance and conflict professionals and served as Deputy Director of the Research and Evidence Division.

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Executive summary

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 TWP 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' (Levy, 2014) 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 other things 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 programmes, NGO programmes 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 to 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.

1

Introduction

There has been considerable interest in and debate on ‘thinking and working politically’ (TWP) over the past decade, principally with reference to the programmes supported by foreign aid donors (Booth & Unsworth 2014; Carothers & de Gramont 2013; Hout 2012; Hudson & Leftwich 2014). This debate has generated an array of important ideas on how donors can (and should) engage with politics, and has created some space for this engagement to take place. However, when Carothers and de Gramont published *Development Aid Confronts Politics* in 2013, it looked like the TWP agenda had come to something of an impasse, standing – as they said – at ‘an almost revolution’ (Carothers & de Gramont 2013). The TWP agenda appeared to be a niche area of development thinking, populated by a small number of ‘experts’, speaking to one another in a language that did not seem to resonate more widely among scholars outside these circles.

A great deal has happened in the last couple of years. An international Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice¹ – bringing together leading experts from donor agencies, NGOs, the private sector, think tanks and academia – first met in November 2013 and has since been joined by a ‘Doing Development Differently’ (DDD) group, which emphasises its founders’ ‘problem driven iterative adaptation’ (PDIA) approach to development programming.² Some TWP case studies have been published (discussed in more detail below), and the ideas behind it increasingly feature in mainstream development discussions.³ More recently, it is at the heart of an OECD *Governance Practitioner’s Notebook* (Whaites et al. 2015), which brings together many of the leading writers on TWP.⁴ Despite this, it is unclear how far the discourse reaches beyond governance circles.⁵

In part this is because TWP has become synonymous in many people’s eyes with political economy analysis (PEA) – the set of donor tools developed to analyse the drivers of political behaviour in specific contexts where donors work and the impact this has on development interventions. Uptake of PEA has been lower than expected (Yanguas & Hulme 2015) and results are unclear or even disappointing. This results from several factors, including institutional resistance to incorporating PEA into donor operations and limited incentives for staff to adopt this approach. Thinking and working politically includes by necessity some form of political analysis, but it is so much more than that; however, the challenges we see in the uptake of PEA resonate across the thinking and working politically ‘spectrum’ (see Figure 1). In a paper for the OECD *Notebook*, Hudson and Marquette (2015: 67-68) argue that a lack of a strong evidence base for what works, when and why is one of the main reasons why there may be less uptake than expected, given the overwhelming sense that something is ‘broken’ in development programming as a result of the lack of attention paid to politics.

As Hudson and Marquette (2015: 67-68, emphasis in original) explain:

...despite lots and lots of evidence that ignoring politics can be disastrous for aid effectiveness, if we’re really honest, we don’t have a very good evidence *base* for what works, when and why. This matters for good program design as much as anything else. Understanding *how* and which bits of thinking and working politically are necessary and sufficient conditions for success is crucial.

1 See <http://www.dlprog.org/research/thinking-and-working-politically-community-of-practice.php>

2 See <http://doingdevelopmentdifferently.com/>. On PDIA, see Andrews, Pritchett & Woolcock (2012) and Rao (2014).

3 This included a talk on ‘Aid is Politics’ at the World Bank in January 2015 by DFID’s Chief Economist. See <http://blogs.worldbank.org/publicsphere/aid-politics-we-need-act>. See also, for example, <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/thinking-and-working-politically-an-exciting-new-aid-initiative/> and <http://www.gsdrc.org/professional-dev/thinking-and-working-politically/>.

4 There has also been growing attention to understanding the politics of policy reform by considering ‘pockets of effectiveness’ or ‘positive deviance’ (see Tendler 1997; Grindle 2004; Melo et al. 2012; Roll 2014). These studies focus on how public sector reforms have been implemented and how public sector agencies have been successful in developing countries, despite significant political obstacles. Promising new research in this area includes, for example, Andrews (2015), Hickey et al. (2015) and Green (forthcoming).

5 David Booth has talked about needing to move TWP out of the ‘governance ghetto’. <http://www.odi.org/comment/9274-five-myths-about-governance-development>

In this paper, we consider how TWP can move beyond the current impasse by addressing the need to build a better evidence base for TWP on what works, when and why. In order to move forward and to build this evidence base, there are two issues that require attention.

First, different approaches and arguments on TWP need to be brought together more clearly. The TWP 'field', such as it is, suffers from what Roll (2014: 27) has called 'marginal monologues': 'marginal' in the sense that 'it is neither in the mainstream of academic development studies and social sciences nor of current development policymakers' debates', and 'monologues' in the sense that a 'coherent terminology has not been established so far and authors often work in isolation from each other, not making reference to related literature'. This is important, partly for credibility, but also for coherence.

Second, it is necessary to develop an analytical framework that can be used to build a 'rigorous enough' evidence base to show whether and how TWP impacts the effectiveness of development programmes' implementation and outcomes. This paper addresses these two issues and suggests an analytical framework for building this much-needed evidence base.

As we explain in more detail later in the paper, our analytical framework builds on TWP literature, such as Booth and Unsworth (2014) and Fritz et al. (2014). However, it also draws on the following:

- public sector reform literature, such as the work on reforms in 'pockets of effectiveness' in public services (Roll 2014) or 'despite the odds' (Grindle 2004) – where powerful groups, institutions and/or norms are opposed to change or make change difficult;
- the literature on political settlements (for instance, Di John & Putzel 2009; Laws 2012; Parks & Cole 2010; Rocha Menocal 2015); and
- work on the political characteristics of sectors (for instance, Batley & Mcloughlin 2015; Mcloughlin & Batley 2012; Levy & Walton 2013).

In many ways, this 'non-TWP' literature reflects what 'politically informed programming' in development tends to be: pockets of effectiveness that happen where conditions for reform are unfavourable and will – political or otherwise – is often lacking. It recognises that we are unlikely to see massive, large-scale organisational change across the development sector; at least not in the short- to medium-term. Yet, just as Roll suggests with 'pockets of effectiveness' in public sector reform in difficult governance environments, the importance of TWP '...as "small-scale public sector reforms" should not be underestimated, both in terms of actual service provision for citizens and for academics and policymakers to learn from' (Roll 2014: 9).

This wider literature helps us to identify important areas that can improve programme implementation, and provides the basis for a framework of analysis. Furthermore, this research highlights the importance of going beyond a narrow focus on donors towards an approach that encompasses the full range of agents engaged in this programming, especially domestic actors that are ultimately responsible for programme design and implementation.

This paper provides the background and analytical framework for answering research questions we suggest here, and for building an evidence base on the impact on programme outcomes of incorporating politics into programme design and implementation. (Our aim is not to gather evidence to show, more broadly, that politics matters for development outcomes: we take that as a given.) The paper also discusses some priorities for case selection, looking at how different factors affect implementation and outcomes in varying sectors and political contexts.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin with a brief introduction to thinking and working politically, followed by a discussion of the current TWP literature to identify gaps in the existing evidence base. We then propose an analytical framework for building this base, by bringing together TWP and political economy of reform literatures. Finally, we discuss case study selection criteria, before offering concluding remarks.

2

What makes TWP programmes different?

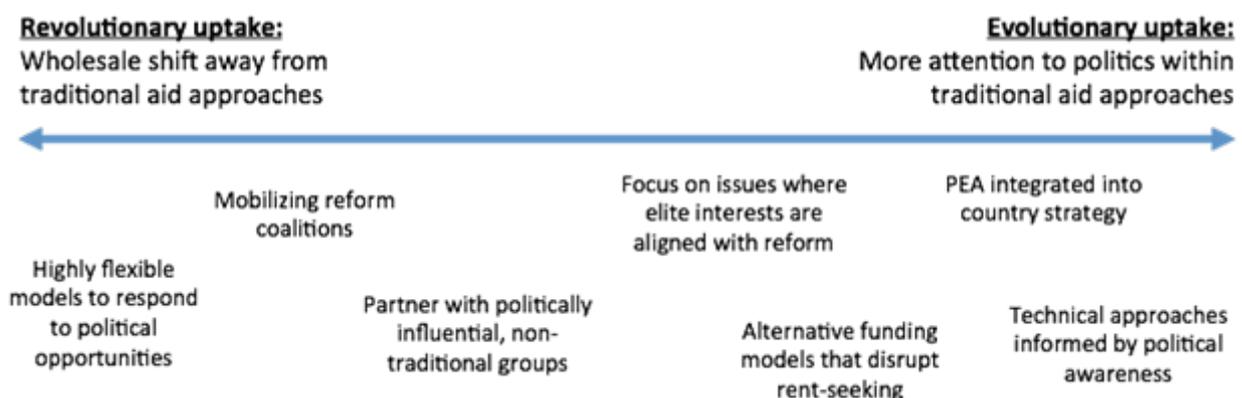
We have seen at least three phases in the TWP 'agenda'. There is some disagreement among different writers about what these are but, generally speaking, we see:

- *Phase One*: 'thinking politically' – emphasis on analysis and using political economy analysis to better understand the political context of aid interventions (Fisher & Marquette 2014; Hickey 2009; Hudson & Leftwich 2014; Unsworth 2009).
- *Phase Two*: 'working politically' – an increased interest in operational issues and how political factors and politically informed analysis facilitate implementation and the achievement of positive development outcomes (Booth & Unsworth 2014; Fritz et al. 2014; Levy & Walton 2013).
- *Phase Three*: 'politically smart, locally led' – growing understanding and acceptance 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' (TWP Community of Practice 2015: 1; Booth & Unsworth 2014).⁶

Although we use the term 'thinking and working politically' throughout this paper, we use it somewhat interchangeably with 'politically informed programming'. This builds on insights from all three phases, and refers to the design of development interventions that reflect and respond to the wider political context and are embedded in local realities. For Booth and Unsworth (2014: 3), this sort of programming includes a sense of history and an in-depth understanding of country and sector context, including embedded structures, local informal institutions and actors. Importantly, as both Leftwich (2008) and Unsworth (2009) remind us so well, it is about programming that in some way recognises the 'primacy of politics'.

TWP forces external actors in particular to consider the impact they have on the politics of recipient countries and to see themselves as political actors, not just providers of funding and technical assistance. It brings to light the unintended consequences of inadequately designed projects. It sharpens the focus on local leaderships and their successes – and failures – in bringing about needed reforms. In short, TWP does not fit a single model, nor is it only relevant for programmes that address explicitly political issues. Instead what we tend to see fits along a spectrum (see Figure 1). Some programmes may be more 'evolutionary', incorporating the findings from political analysis into their design or seeking to align better with elites' reform interests, while other programmes may look very different to traditional development programmes, in both design and aims. What all of these programmes will have in common, though, is that they keep politics as a central concern, whether through analysis, strategy, partnerships or design, or simply by trying to avoid the unintended consequences that arise from ignoring the local political context.

Figure 1: Spectrum of 'Politically Informed Programming'



Source: Parks (2014); see also <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/thinking-and-working-politically-update-where-have-aid-agencies-consultants-etc-got-to/>

⁶ The impetus behind the formation of the TWP Community of Practice, for instance, was how to translate the evidence that local 'political factors are usually much more important in determining developmental impact than the scale of aid funding or the technical quality of programming' into operationally relevant guidance (TWP CoP 2015).

3

Where we are so far on the evidence

Despite the interest and debates around TWP, there is an absence of an evidence base that demonstrates a clear positive effect on programme outcomes. Much of the evidence used so far to justify a politically informed approach is largely anecdotal and not systematically comparative, and draws on a small number of 'success stories' (for instance, Coalitions for Change in the Philippines or the State, Accountability and Voice Initiative in Nigeria). While there is some case-specific evidence of politically informed programmes (for instance, Booth & Unsworth 2014; Fabella et al. 2011; Fritz, Levy & Ort 2014; Wild et al. 2012), these are limited in number, often with an inbuilt selection bias. Notably, there has been little effort to consider whether any initial positive results in these cases have been sustained over a longer period of time.

This lack of a broader evidence base is understandable. The interest in thinking and working politically is still relatively recent and, as such, much of the focus has been on establishing what TWP means and developing appropriate analytical tools. Given that TWP is not yet in the mainstream, there are a limited number of potential case studies to choose from, and those responsible for implementing such programmes are often reluctant to allow independent researchers access, particularly where there may be uncertainty over results. Most case studies have been written up either by funders themselves or by other programme actors, such as consultants who have been involved in the programme through PEA or through evaluations, or who have been commissioned to write up success stories. Although some interesting insights emerge, questions regarding rigour and purpose remain.

In this section we identify lessons as well as gaps in the existing evidence base in order to inform our framework. We reviewed a selection of TWP literature that aims to report on empirical findings or practice rather than conceptual pieces or critiques (for instance, Carothers & de Gramont 2013; Fisher & Marquette 2014; Hudson & Leftwich 2014; Hout 2012; O'Keefe et al. 2014; Rocha Menocal 2014; and Unsworth 2009.) We selected some key resources from what is a very limited resource base, including influential studies by Andrews (2013); Booth and Chambers (2014), Booth and Unsworth (2014), Derbyshire et al. (2014), Fabella et al. (2014), Faustino and Booth (2014), Fritz et al. (2014) and Levy (2014). We discuss these here with the objective of identifying gaps, as well as drawing lessons for developing our framework.

One of the best attempts so far to produce something truly comparative is the paper on 'politically smart, locally led development' by Booth and Unsworth (2014). They look at seven cases studies taken from different countries, including programmes from different sectors, and pull together potential lessons learned:

- the programmes adopted an 'iterative problem solving, stepwise learning' process;
- programme staff brokered relationships with major interest groups;
- leaders were politically well-informed and were able to use that knowledge effectively;
- programme managers allowed local actors to take the lead;
- donors provided flexible and strategic funding; and
- there was a long-term commitment by donors and high level of continuity in staffing.

Although there is no explanation in the paper for how and why these particular seven cases were selected, one can assume that there was a degree of pragmatic opportunism involved (the authors were involved as consultants with at least four of the seven cases). There is little discussion of how these programmes emerged, what had gone before them or what the political context was (both in the country and in the donor itself) that allowed the approaches taken. The paper does not include an inventory of literature in this field or testable 'meta-hypotheses' (Leonard 2008: 11), though it certainly succeeds in generating middle-range theoretical explanations that could be used for generating future hypotheses, to be expected in exploratory research at this stage. In this sense, it is a useful and eloquent analysis of the likely common ingredients in 'politically smart' approaches.

World Bank staff have published a number of useful case studies of their experience with PEA, including the widely read book edited by Fritz, Levy and Ort (2014) on 'problem-driven' PEA. The edited volume considers the Bank's experiences in applying problem-driven PEA to its work through an analysis of eight case studies of World Bank programmes. The

study provides several general lessons on how to move from diagnosis and recommendation to action through the use of problem-driven PEA. In addition, the study provides some specific lessons based on cases analysed, which include: ensuring PEAs are focused around specific problems; anchoring PEAs in a substantive understanding of the country-level drivers of decision-making; using PEA in ways that adapt to changes in context; and working flexibly with key stakeholders. The eight case studies analysed employ different methodologies and approaches to 'evidencing', such as conducting household surveys, elite interviews and process tracing of decision-making. Each case consists of a discussion of the policy problem, a summary of the PEA and its recommendations, and of how the PEA was used in programme implementation. Unlike the majority of the TWP studies we consider here, this collection of cases emphasises the World Bank's *process* of thinking and working politically. Based on this, the study provides insights in how we can move from thinking politically to working politically. The volume also directly addresses the issue of 'evidencing' PEA and some of the difficulties in doing so in recognition of its own limitations in this regard.

Drawing on examples of successful reform in the Philippines, the study by Faustino and Booth (2014) proposes an approach to programming based on 'development entrepreneurship', which in particular seeks to ensure the impact of reforms spreads beyond initial project sites and that reforms will continue without additional donor support. Building on Booth and Unsworth (2014), the authors posit five distinguishing features of development entrepreneurship:

- a 'technically sound and politically possible' approach to selecting reform objectives;
- an iterative 'learning by doing' approach;
- principles for selecting self-motivated partners;
- donor organisations encouraging innovation through 'intrapreneurship'; and
- a set of practical programme management tools.

The study draws on 'snapshots' of examples of successful reforms in different sectors in the Philippines, which are used to draw out the main lessons of development entrepreneurship. Although expressed implicitly, rather than explicitly, it also draws heavily on the personal experiences of one of the authors. The discussion of the specific examples of reform success is relatively short (although based on more detailed analysis from other studies), and as such the link between examples and the lessons derived is not always clear. It does not include much discussion of challenges faced. Conceptually, the paper situates itself within the business entrepreneur literature rather than the literature on political entrepreneurship, to which it seems more closely related. The latter would raise some red flags about potential (political) pitfalls of applying development entrepreneurship as an approach in highly corrupt and unstable environments. As the study draws on reform experiences in one country only, a key next step would be to examine these lessons in more depth in different contexts. This would also encourage greater reflection on the implications for practice of the development entrepreneur as an explicitly political actor.

The Faustino and Booth (2014) paper builds on an earlier study by Fabello et al. (2014). This analyses four cases of social sector policy reform in the Philippines, three of which were successful and one of which failed to achieve the desired outcomes. The book emphasises the role of coalitions in bringing about reforms and the importance of these coalitions managing their internal politics and building links with other actors. The book also highlights the importance of developmental leaders or 'entrepreneurs'. The framework used for the cases considers the issue of structure and agency more explicitly than the rest of the TWP literature reviewed here, which tends to be fairly light on theory as a whole. The discussion of the actual process of reform in each of the cases is brief, resulting in a lack of detail in the analysis of the process of change; however, the study also considers an example of reform failure, which provides a useful point of comparison.

Two papers published in 2014 analysed the DFID-funded State, Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) in Nigeria. The first is a 'think piece' by Derbyshire et al. (2014) that describes how the programme adopted a way of working that emphasises locally led problem definition and leadership, donors facilitating local actors in building relations with key stakeholders, and an adaptive and iterative approach, based on learning by doing. The paper describes different parts of the SAVI programme, tracing the evolution of the programme as told by programme actors themselves. This is used to draw lessons in line with the approaches put forward by Booth and Unsworth (2014) and Andrews (2013). It contains a useful discussion about both the positive *and* negative outcomes from the programme and how SAVI staff tried to learn lessons from these. The main gap is a lack of detailed analysis linking the approach taken in the SAVI programme to the outcomes. This is not surprising, however, given the paper is a 'think piece' rather than purporting to be a piece of in-depth empirical research.

The other is an ODI paper by Booth and Chambers (2014) that argues that the SAVI programme has been successful because it differs from typical donor interventions in a number of ways:

- it builds the capacity of state-level actors to promote action on locally salient but politically tractable issues;
- the programme keeps a low profile, with programme staff who are from the specific Nigerian states providing support to other stakeholders; and
- adopting an adaptive learning-based approach, in particular drawing on past DFID experience in Nigeria.

More generally, the programme is seen as taking a 'politically smart, locally led' approach (Booth & Unsworth 2014). The study draws on interviews, documentary analysis and discussions in 2014 and takes an 'exploratory' approach, focusing explicitly on the positives of the programme and how lessons may be applied elsewhere. It is not clear why this approach was taken, and it means that the study does not consider the extent to which the approach of the SAVI programme led to successful learning by doing.

Levy's (2014) book on 'working with the grain' argues for the need to move away from an approach to development policy based on 'good governance' toward a more evolutionary approach based on small, incremental change aligned with the complex realities of a given context. Working with the grain also involves making sure that development policy is compatible with the incentives of a critical mass of influential actors to ensure that these actors have a stake in promoting reform. The book draws on a wide range of examples and on both a comparative, cross-national approach and a within-country approach that focuses on the dynamics of change. Like the other TWP literature, the study is based on inductive theory building, in that the empirical examples are selected and discussed for the purpose of building an argument on working with the grain. In doing so, the study also seeks to bring together recent studies on politically informed approaches to development programming. As an experienced practitioner, Levy brings useful self-reflection here, but the line between reflection and empirical analysis is not always clear. As the author acknowledges, further evidence is needed for a with-the-grain approach, and this requires examining the arguments in different contexts.

Finally, the influential book by Andrews (2013) focuses on why so many donor-led efforts to bring about institutional reform in developing countries have had little impact. The book proposes an approach to promoting reform based on 'problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA)'. The study considers the process of change linked to institutional reform and provides lessons for development organisations:

- focus on identifying and exploring problems rather than solutions;
- facilitate opportunities for local actors to reflect on problems by playing a brokering role;
- focus on removing obstacles to change; and
- fund flexible learning-by-doing approaches to finding solutions.

The study refers to evidence from a wide range of cases, taking an inductive theory-building approach that draws lessons from numerous examples of reforms, public sector organisations and donor programmes from a wide range of countries. The study does not include original empirical material; a key next step would be to test the theory empirically by examining these lessons in different contexts to assess the extent to which the PDIA approach is associated with more successful development programmes.

There are a number of **broad issues** that emerge from our review of the existing literature on TWP cases. Much of the existing research within the TWP literature is based on an inductive theory-building approach, in which studies use empirical examples to generate lessons and theories on politically informed development programming (for instance, Booth & Unsworth 2014; Faustino & Booth 2014; Derbyshire et al. 2014). There are two reasons why so much of the literature adopts a theory-building approach.

First, the focus on incorporating politics into development programming is relatively recent. As such, the focus on theory generation is in large part the result of an absence of a theoretical framework and the scarcity of research – especially original, independent, empirical research – on this issue.

Secondly, there is also a sense sometimes of fitting evidence to a chosen narrative emerging from the small number of theory-building exercises. With little clarity on the principles for case study selection in the literature sampled, as well as an overall lack of attention paid to challenges, counterfactuals and so on, it is difficult to judge the credibility and the rigour of the findings in the existing literature. Common sense may tell us that it is a sensible narrative, but we will not know for sure without well-designed empirical research with clearly stated methods that are open to scrutiny and replication. This overwhelming tendency toward inductive theory building means that there has been relatively little effort to seriously examine dominant arguments and approaches in different organisational and political contexts. The risk is that the existing literature may suffer from the problem of confirmation bias, which means we end up drawing lessons from cases that fit our pre-existing notions of what factors led to more successful programme implementation and outcomes.⁷

The lack of attention given to testing arguments and theories on thinking and working politically in development programming means that, at the current time, there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that employing TWP approaches discussed in the literature have a clear impact on improving implementation and outcomes. To build this evidence base – and, in particular, to convince those who remain sceptical – research should be based on a more systematic approach to analysis of the extent to which politically informed approaches can develop better results.

⁷ Indeed, in several workshops on 'Thinking and Working Politically' and 'Doing Development Differently' development practitioners have made the point that they feel they have generally worked in a problem-driven and adaptive way – even when the programmes did not achieve the desired outcomes.

A related limitation of the TWP evidence base so far is lack of attention to, and detail provided about, the process of case selection in many studies. Again, the danger here is that the current evidence could run the risk of 'cherry picking' examples of programmes that support the arguments being put forward. This stands in contrast to, for example, literature on successful governance reforms in developing countries that generally provide more detailed discussion and justification for case selection (for instance, Andrews 2013; Batley & Larbi 2004; Grindle 2004; Robinson, 2007; Roll 2014; Tandler 1997). This also means that these studies are able to shed greater light on the specific context of each of the cases and to better identify and demonstrate which factors impacted programme outcomes.

Much of the existing TWP literature tends to take a rather static view of politically informed development programmes. Such an approach tells us little about the process of change within organisations, which is a significant gap. Studies that consider reform success and failure (for instance, Andrews 2013; Grindle 2004) tend to place much more emphasis on process. An important exception is Fritz et al.'s (2014) collection of case studies of World Bank programmes, which demonstrates how the findings of PEAs and the recommendations were taken on board by the different programmes and used in implementation.

These gaps in the existing TWP literature are not, in themselves, problematic. As we have pointed out, limitations in the existing research are to be expected given the relatively recent turn to politics in development programming. However, it is more concerning that most studies fail to acknowledge these gaps or to recognise that they are not empirical studies. They are, in the main, theory-building studies that suggest potential relationships between the design and implementation of development programmes and the outcomes of these programmes. However, the implicit tone of much of the TWP literature is one of causality. Much of the TWP literature seems to suggest that providing examples and anecdotal evidence of the success of a few politically-informed programmes in a small number of countries justifies causal claims on how thinking and working politically – both overall and along the lines of the authors' specific theorising – leads to more successful development outcomes. We argue that the current evidence base provides limited justification for such claims. This does not mean that the literature has not produced interesting theories well worth testing, because it has; what it has not produced is rigorous evidence that stands the test of empirical scrutiny.

In much of the TWP literature reviewed here there are three distinct gaps in terms of content, in addition to those of methodology and approach.

The first is gender. This has been identified as a key gap in PEA (Browne 2014; Koester 2015; Moyle 2015) and the same applies to the TWP literature more broadly. What does 'working with the grain' mean when, for example, 'the grain' – whatever that may be – includes deeply entrenched patriarchy?

The second is a range of political contexts. Few of the examples included in the literature are programmes in fragile states, for example. Are the lessons suggested applicable in more difficult environments? Is success replicable under different conditions? Can a fragile context make some things easier and other things more difficult and, if so, what would those things be?

Finally, all of the most often cited TWP texts (see Mcloughlin 2014) cover donor programmes. Specifically, they cover programmes in which a donor is the external partner responsible for funding and significant parts of the programme design, and the domestic partner is a local NGO. There is a lack of attention given to other types of development actor, for example where the external actor/funder is an international NGO, or those where the domestic partner is a government agency. If we test the theories out on non-donor programmes, will we find similar things? What challenges are unique to donor-funded programmes and which ones are not?

Therefore, to develop the evidence base for TWP, three important areas need to be addressed. Firstly, there needs to be greater emphasis placed on examining the theories and arguments made in the existing literature in different contexts. Secondly, more attention needs to be given to the issue of case selection. Research should draw on a broader and more systematic range of programmes in a specific range of sectors and organisational contexts to examine how far incorporating politics impacts programme implementation and outcomes. Finally, more attention needs to be given to the process of change and how development organisations move towards greater thinking and working politically.

4

Analytical framework

Our overall aim is to understand how and why some development interventions adopt a politically informed approach, and what the effect of thinking and working politically may be for the implementation and outcomes of development programmes. In considering the outcomes of development interventions, we consider both the effectiveness of a programme, and the extent to which it is able to avoid the unforeseen negative consequences that are often associated with 'apolitical' development programmes.

We propose the following **research questions** to guide the analysis:

1. *Why* do politically informed programmes emerge in some contexts and not others?
2. *How* do these programmes incorporate thinking and working politically?
3. Do these programmes manage to *persist* despite hostile environments?
4. How do different aspects of TWP *affect* the implementation and, if possible, the outcomes of politically informed programmes?
5. Do these programmes *trigger* positive transformations in other programmes or the broader governance environment and if so, how?⁸

Questions 1 and 2 focus on the *factors* that explain why some development programmes adopt a politically informed approach while others do not. They consider processes through which programmes adopt a TWP approach. For example, what are the particular aspects of TWP that programmes tend to adopt, and are there specific activities within a programme that tend to employ TWP approaches? Question 3 interrogates whether or not these programmes are able to persist 'despite the odds', for example, if staffing changes or there is a crisis in the political context. Finally, Questions 4 and 5 consider whether or not TWP affects the outcomes of a programme and, if so, whether or not it also triggers other transformational changes around it.

The existing debates and discussions on thinking and working politically in development programming highlight a wide range of factors that contribute to more politically informed approaches. However, most focus at the level of individuals working for development organisations or public sector agencies, or explore the organisational challenges that prevent TWP approaches becoming the norm. Our approach adds to this by bringing these together with other research in order to focus more on the wider political, sectoral and organisational contexts in which a development intervention takes place. In building on the existing literature on TWP, we propose a framework for understanding politically informed programming that involves **four levels of analysis**.

Figure 2: Factors to consider for 'thinking and working politically'



- The first level of analysis is the wider *political context* of development interventions – how the political system, leadership and the nature of the political settlement in a given context affect development programmes.
- The second is the *sectoral* level – how characteristics of specific sectors (e.g. health, education, or water delivery) influence programme implementation and impact.
- The third is the *organisational* level – how features of an implementing organisation can support or hinder politically informed programming.
- Finally, we consider the *individual* level, or the role of individuals thinking and working politically in programme success.

Distinguishing between these four levels enables us to develop a broader approach than is common in the literature and to consider the significance of interaction between these levels, rather than focusing primarily on one dimension of TWP. It is the interaction and interdependencies between these levels (political context, sector, organisation, individual) that will help us to better understand how politically informed programmes emerge and succeed.⁹

In seeking to answer the research questions laid out above, we consider each of these four levels. At each level, we look at what factors, if any, contribute to the emergence of politically informed programmes; what processes these programmes adopt; and how these factors and processes influence programme outcomes. In the remainder of this section, we discuss the four levels in more detail.

Level 1: The political context

A large body of literature considers the wider political context of development interventions. This literature provides us with two broad questions for analysing the political context in which development interventions take place.

- First, to what extent does the broader political context determine the opportunities and constraints for the implementation and effectiveness of a programme (see, for example, Roll 2014; Leonard 2008)?
- Second, are programmes more effective when they are adapted to the specific political contexts in which they are implemented, and if so, how?

The literature points to three different aspects of the political context that are important for development interventions. The first concerns the underlying *political settlement*, characterised by the balance of political power and bargaining over the rules of the game, usually – but not always – between contending elites. The nature of the political settlement is the critical determinant of the political context in a particular country. Political settlements emerge from a process of bargaining between elites over the rules and institutions governing the political system. They govern the extent of citizens' political inclusion and exclusion and shape the relationships of power and accountability between rulers and the ruled. A broader working definition views political settlements as 'informal and formal processes, agreements, and practices in a society that help consolidate politics, rather than violence, as a means for dealing with disagreements about interests, ideas and the distribution and use of power' (Laws & Leftwich 2014: 1). Until recently, the literature has not systematically explored the relationship between the nature of a political settlement and its implications for programme design and implementation, though a framework developed by Levy and Walton (2013) sets out to explore variations in service provisioning with reference to the political settlement at national and local levels.¹⁰ But the character of the political settlement does not only affect the nature of service provisioning. It also has a bearing on the extent of political inclusion and agreement among power holders over the allocation of budget resources for development ends and thus has fundamental implications for programme implementation (Rocha Menocal 2015).

A second strand in the literature is concerned with the broad political context of development programmes and those features of the *political system* that increase the likelihood of programme success. The focus here is on how the political context shapes programme implementation and the extent to which certain political contexts enable programmes to be designed in ways that increase the likelihood of success. Yet many political contexts embody institutional elements of different political systems in which formal democratic institutions coexist with patronage and cronyism. Experience from large democracies around the world, from the US to Brazil, India, Mexico and the Philippines, highlights the significance of this factor. Hence, democratic political institutions do not guarantee that programme implementation will be free from political interference and patronage, but suggest that the programme may have to 'work with the grain' of informal institutions (Booth & Crook 2011; Levy 2014).

9 One reviewer highlighted the potential for this to eventually be a predictive model, if case study research shows that particular context/sectors/organisations tend to lead to certain outcomes but not others in terms of TWP, or that these factors need to shape expectations of how TWP looks in particular settings. Of course, until the research is done, we will not know if this is possible, but it certainly is a suggestion worth eventual consideration.

10 Levy and Walton (2013) distinguish between six types of political settlement: dominant-developmental; dominant predatory (or extractive); inclusive competitive clientelistic; elitist competitive; clientelistic; and programmatic. Also see Levy (2014).

A third approach to analysing the significance of the political context focuses on agency and specific actors within the political system, especially *political and bureaucratic leaders*, who play an important role in shaping the wider political context, creating political incentives for reform and influencing organisational performance through political engagement.

Political leaders create incentives for government officials to operate and respond in particular ways. One strand of the literature on political leadership focuses on the strength of commitment to reform. Strong political commitment is found to be integral to successful reform initiatives across different sectors and in different political and institutional contexts (Tendler 1998; Grindle 2004; Robinson 2007; Levy 2014).

Another approach to understanding the developmental role of political leaders lies in the political incentives shaping programme prioritisation and implementation. Elected political leaders actively cultivate political support through the design and implementation of development programmes. This can be an integral element in political survival strategies as much as reflecting substantive policy commitments and resource availability (Ames 1987).

However, it is necessary to take a broad approach to looking at the political system that goes beyond a focus on the relationship between political leaders and the public. For example, there has been growing interest in how the relationship between a country's political and bureaucratic spheres shapes the development process (Grindle 2004; Dasandi 2014). Bureaucratic leaders in many contexts have sufficient power to influence the success or failure of programme implementation, particularly because they tend to remain in office for much longer periods than political leaders (Grindle & Thomas 1991). Hence, it is necessary to consider leadership in broader terms than is typically the case (see Andrews 2013). The commitment of political leaders is generally seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition for reform or programme success (Grindle 2004). Understanding the nature of the *political-bureaucratic interface* in a specific context is central to the implementation and impact of development programming. As Hirschmann (1999: 289) notes, 'the architects of development programmes and policies' have tended to 'underestimate the capacity of the bureaucracy to influence the implementation process'.

Beyond the politics-bureaucracy relationship, it is also necessary to consider the role of *other actors in the political system*, such as local governments, workers' unions, civil society and the private sector, in influencing development programming.

In addition to these areas, we argue that attention needs to be given to other types of power structures, such as gender, religion, ethnicity, caste and rural-urban divides (Browne 2014; Moyle 2015). Such power structures have a huge bearing on the attitudes of politicians and bureaucrats and often shape policies in ways that reinforce power inequalities (Goetz 1992; 2007). In addition, these power structures often have a significant impact on people's lives outside of formal governance systems. While these issues have long been the focus of development research and programming, they are only now being considered in TWP discussions. Much more attention needs to be given to how these power structures influence the design, implementation, and outcomes of development programmes and how various social groupings are differentially affected as a result.

Level 2: The sector

The second level at which politically informed programmes can be investigated is that of the sector or programme. The literature suggests that it is highly likely that the prospects for implementation will vary considerably by sector, according to its characteristics, and political significance and profile (Mcloughlin & Batley 2012; Levy & Walton 2013). This will depend on the balance of political interests in a particular sector and how these relate to resource allocation decisions and implementation strategies. It also raises implications for the type of good or service provided and the respective roles of public, private and non-governmental providers, as well as the prospects for accountability of service providers to elected politicians and citizens (Batley & Mcloughlin 2015).

These considerations give rise to the following questions:

- Are certain types of programmes more likely to be successful than others, based on the characteristics of the sector?
- 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?
- If so, what are the institutional characteristics of sectors associated with politically informed programming and programme success?

Mcloughlin and Batley (2012) identify a number of *sector characteristics* related to four broad areas that are central to the issue of accountability. These are: the nature of the good or service being delivered; the type and extent of market failure; task-related characteristics related to the type of form of service provision; and demand characteristics – that is, the engagement of clients as users of services. Levy and Walton (2013: 13) highlight a similar set of characteristics. These include: economic features (the importance of public good, externality and network aspects); technical requirements (such as required engineering skills); organisational features, including the extent of discretion required; the monitorability of sectoral performance; and the presence or absence of a direct interface with citizen users of the service.

Three propositions flow from this. First, the characteristics of a service influence the incentives for politicians, providers and users to commit resources to producing it, and for politicians to be accountable to citizens for service performance. For example, education is generally seen as having high political salience due to its role in building human capital, skill development and employment creation. It is also linked to wider processes of nation-building and affects political stability.

Second, sector characteristics may determine the balance of power between policy-makers and actors involved in service delivery, and the likely form and effectiveness of compacts between service providers and consumers. For example, the health sector is often highly professionalised due to the skills required, so that doctors are able to assert their own interests in relation to those of politicians.

Third, sector characteristics set the broad parameters for whether and how citizens can collectively mobilise around them and make demands on service delivery organisations. For example, users of health services in a community may not feel well informed enough to judge the quality of delivery compared to other sectors, such as agricultural projects, where they may have relevant technical skills and knowledge.

Level 3: The organisation

This level of analysis relates to the characteristics of the organisations involved in the design and implementation of specific programmes in different sectors. The literature has considered the characteristics of both the external actor, often responsible for funding and involved in the programme design, and the domestic partners, often responsible for programme implementation and aspects of design. External actors can be bilateral or multilateral donors or international NGOs, and the domestic actors can be government agencies and local NGOs.

The key question here is what organisational characteristics are associated with more politically informed approaches and successful programmes? Several recent studies consider the organisational characteristics associated with successful development reform and programmes. Some have focused on the characteristics of domestic organisations. Grindle (2004) considers the characteristics of 'reform design teams' that managed to implement education reforms 'despite the odds'. Roll (2014) and Tandler (1997) highlight the organisational characteristics associated with 'pockets of efficiency' within developing country public service delivery. The TWP literature has tended to focus more on the external actors. Andrews (2013) and Booth and Unsworth (2014) focus on the characteristics of donor organisations in successful development programming. This is also the principal focus of the framework devised by Levy and Walton (2013), who set out to explore the political factors that shape service delivery outcomes in a range of organisational contexts.

An emerging perspective in the literature is that successful organisations approach issues through a problem-solving lens and search for workable solutions through iterative learning (Andrews 2013; Booth & Unsworth 2014; Levy 2014). This 'iterative problem-solving, stepwise learning' differs from typical approaches adopted in implementing development programmes, which tend to start with a blueprint based on a solution mapped out in advance, and a linear approach to delivery and results (Booth & Unsworth 2014).

A number of factors are said to enable organisations to take a more problem-solving and iterative approach. One is the ability for an organisation to broker relationships with key stakeholders in a specific programme area, and thereby build coalitions that have a shared interest in successful reforms and implementation (Booth & Unsworth 2014; Grindle 2004; Hogg & Leftwich 2007; Leftwich & Hogg 2008; Leftwich 2012; Peiffer 2012). An important factor noted by Booth and Unsworth (2014) is that successful programmes are often designed in ways that allow local actors to take the lead in implementation, rather than external actors such as aid agencies or national line ministries.

Another key organisational factor in successful implementation noted by Grindle (2004) and Booth and Unsworth (2014) is that programme funding is both *flexible and strategic*. This means that funding tends to be based on the needs, priorities and timings that programme staff require, rather than top-down spending targets being determined from the outset of a programme. This is said to be crucial for enabling a problem-driven and iterative approach – as is long-term funding commitment (whether from national or municipal budgets or from aid donors), which underpins programme success and is frequently accompanied by continuity in staffing (Ames 1987; Booth & Unsworth 2014; Tandler 1997). This long-term commitment with continuity of staffing is critical in building relations of trust with key stakeholders.

Finally, the literature on 'pockets of effectiveness' in programme implementation also offers useful insights, whereby public organisations are able to produce positive development outcomes by virtue of *organisational autonomy and supportive political conditions* (Roll 2014). There are several characteristics of successful state agencies highlighted. The role of political leadership, discussed above, is referenced. Another factor is that recruitment and appointment into the organisation tend to be based on more meritocratic principles. Furthermore, salaries and benefits within such agencies tend to be higher than is generally the case across the civil service. Strong ties between the agency and political leaders is also seen as important for providing the autonomy needed for successful public service excellence. Finally, the operations of an agency tend to be based on standardised internal procedures, which improve predictability and transparency, and regular evaluations of the agency's performance (see Roll 2014).

Level 4: The individual

The fourth level in our framework focuses on the individual. There has been much attention given to the ability of individuals to think and work politically and exercise effective leadership, and how this in turn impacts programme success. One strand of the literature has focused on the incentives and motivations of front-line staff in public sector service delivery organisations (Perry & Wise 1990).

The principal-agent approach has dominated the literature on staffing and organisational performance over the past two decades, grounded in the assumption that front-line service providers (agents) are mainly driven by narrow self-interest rather than organisational incentives for enhancing performance. The implication is that managers (principals) need to enforce monitoring and supervision to ensure adequate standards of service quality and organisational performance. The emphasis in the principal-agent approach has been on curbing individual discretion and closing opportunities for bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption. The social accountability approach that has gained currency in recent years emphasises the role of clients in holding agents directly to account for service delivery, rather than working through politicians to demand bureaucratic accountability from service providers (Fox 2014).

An alternative approach to the principal-agent model centres on motivating and empowering staff in contrast to strengthening oversight and using sanctions to govern behaviour. This stems in part from recent developments in the public administration literature on *bureaucratic motivation*, which stress the positive aspects of public service and responsiveness to citizens as key behavioural attributes for civil servants (Perry & Wise 1990; Perry 2008; Perry et al. 2010). In the development field a similar perspective has its origin in research by Tandler, who identified four key elements of public service behaviour on the part of front-line government workers:

- dedication to jobs and a sense of civic duty reflected in better appreciation by local communities;
- recognition and rewards for good performance and public information campaigns;
- customised service and voluntarism arising from greater autonomy and discretion; and
- accountability to local communities arising from trust and scrutiny rather than supervision and oversight.

Improving municipal government performance and strengthening civil society were the results of this approach to improved local government and service delivery (Tandler 1997).

A more recent vein in the development literature focuses on the extent to which staff are given the time and space to put new ideas into action. Such autonomy is seen as key for fostering innovation (Faustino & Booth 2014). It also has an affinity with an earlier literature on 'street level bureaucrats' stemming from Lipsky's seminal work in the late 1970s. In it, he suggested that low grade public sector workers in the US who provide critical public service functions are effectively performing a policy-making function because they exercise discretion in service delivery and affect the lives of citizens (Lipsky 1980).

A parallel approach in the literature focuses on 'reform champions' or 'policy entrepreneurs' rather than public servants and service providers (Leonard 1991). For example, Grindle (2004) notes the importance of reform 'leaders' or 'champions' in cases of successful education reforms in Latin America. More recently, this focus on the role of individuals has been discussed in the context of 'development entrepreneurs'. They are equated with 'reform leaders' who commit to making social organisations work for the public good by creating the circumstances that lead to the adoption of better institutions (Faustino & Booth 2014).

Grindle's (2004) discussion of 'reform teams' in the education sector in different Latin American countries highlights a number of factors linked to individual reform champions that were important in the successful design and implementation of reforms. In her framework, Grindle lays out the various parts or 'arenas' of the reform process, which include agenda setting, design, adoption, implementation and sustainability. She considers the interests and institutions involved at each stage, as well as the various actions and choices involved. A primary benefit of this approach is that it provides a clear framework with politics at the centre. Two elements of Grindle's framework are especially useful for our purpose. First, the extent to which the core reform team is made up of a single and like-minded group of individuals is seen as fundamental to whether or not a reform is successful. Second, the ability of individuals in the reform team to create networks within government and to build a broad-based coalition is crucial to success.

This is consistent with an approach in the contemporary public sector reform literature which focuses on what Weber and Khademian (2008) call 'collaborative capacity builders'. These are people who assume a lead role in developing the capacity of networks spanning public sector bodies, civil society organisations and professional networks through problem-solving exercises by virtue of their legal authority, expertise or reputation as 'honest broker'. Such brokers need not be public managers even though they often have the legal authority and resources to serve in this capacity.

A further factor to consider is whether programmes are more politically informed because the organisation or reform team has adopted more politically informed practices, or because a key individual (or individuals) within the organisation works in a politically strategic way. In other words, is the development organisation as a whole involved in thinking and working

politically – or do key individuals have either sufficient autonomy to work politically or the ability to create the space to work politically despite organisational constraints? While much of the focus of the literature on politically informed programming has been on the former; more recently some researchers have highlighted the importance of various personality traits that are believed to better enable working politically (see, for example, Faustino & Booth 2014). Based on this approach, organisations should seek to provide such individuals with the necessary autonomy to work politically.

This implies a very different role for development organisations. It may explain why the 'transplantation mechanism' is so powerful, at least initially. If an individual renowned for thinking and working politically moves into a new location, he or she can trigger a new way of working within the team. However, they invariably move on; this may explain why individuals are so important but also why bedding down new ways of working within organisations is vital too. In other words, they may take their TWP approach with them wherever they go, but do they also leave it behind?

5

Case study selection

In order to build a 'rigorous enough' evidence base to examine whether and how TWP impacts the effectiveness of development programmes' implementation and outcomes, it is necessary to study and compare different programmes in more depth to enable the examination of arguments we have drawn from the existing literature. Our favoured approach is comparative case study research that captures variations across the four variables outlined in the analytical framework in a limited number of country contexts. A key issue in doing this will be developing case selection criteria that overcome the current limitations of the evidence base for politically informed development programming. In this section, we briefly detail what the case selection criteria might look like.

In our analytical framework we have identified four levels of analysis referred to in existing discussion and debates: political context, sector, organisation and individual. In selecting development programmes to study, we believe it will be important to focus on the first three levels. An individual level criterion *for case selection* is not necessary because the discussion of the role of individuals in TWP tends to occur in discussions of the organisational level; therefore it is neither possible nor desirable to try to select cases on the individual level (though it is, of course, desirable to study the role of individuals within organisations). Ensuring consideration is given to the organisational level in case selection would allow the arguments about the role of individuals to be tested.

The case selection criteria need to ensure the inclusion of programmes across and within each of the other three levels. This means explicitly looking at:

- programmes based in different political contexts, and different types of programmes within the same political context;
- programmes that target sectors with different characteristics, and programmes within the same sector;
- programmes implemented by different types of development organisation, and by the same development organisation.

In terms of organisational variation, it would be interesting to consider donor programmes, NGO programmes and those in which government actors are responsible for programme design and implementation.

However, beyond these broad groups, differences in organisational structure, approach to development programming and so on should also be considered. Case selection should therefore allow for comparison across the spectrum, looking at those programmes that are designed differently and those that take a more traditional and technical approach to development programming, but which have still incorporated aspects of thinking and working politically into design and delivery.

Ensuring this variation across and within levels would help to avoid the 'cannibalistic comparativism' that Steinmetz (2005: 149) warns against, in which factors and lessons are identified based on comparisons made across cases without fully taking into account the specific context of different programmes. It is particularly important in trying to build a robust evidence base on TWP to consider the contexts in which different factors identified in the literature hold and in which they do not, to enable nuanced analysis. For example, if we were examining the impact of aligning programmes with the political context, we would want to consider whether this is important in some political contexts (and not others), and whether this matters for programmes in particular sectors (such as water) and not others (such as cash transfers). Similarly, the research may find that the impact of specific organisational approaches on outcomes varies across different political contexts.

An additional criterion for case selection is access. Conducting meaningful analysis of a particular programme requires researchers to be able to access substantial information regarding the programme's activities, including being able to interview programme actors through fieldwork or, in some ongoing cases, observe programme activities on the ground. As some of this information may be sensitive and may even be linked to disappointing programme outcomes, it is important to consider how – and to what degree – programme access would be provided. It is also important to consider the issue of selection bias with regard to access. Programmes that achieve more successful results are likely to be more willing to provide researchers with the necessary access to conduct this analysis. Hence, it is necessary to ensure that selecting programmes on the basis of access does not limit the sample only to programmes that have been relatively successful. Therefore, much more attention needs to be given to the issue of access for researchers if we are to move

beyond providing selective anecdotal evidence on thinking and working politically, and towards building evidence based on in-depth analysis of development programmes.¹¹

In order to further address the issue of selection bias, it would also be important to include both current and past programmes. This would allow researchers to consider completed programmes where sufficient time has passed to judge whether or not they were successful, as well as ongoing, evolving programmes for which outcomes are unknown when the analysis begins.

The selection of case studies would need to enable comparison across an adequate number of cases that reflect variations in political context, sector type, and organisational form. One approach would be to begin by selecting two to three sectors that include very different programmes, in the social sectors (e.g. health or education), growth and job creation (e.g. infrastructure or employment generation programmes), and environmental services (e.g. water or forest management). These could be selected from political contexts that involve different types of political settlement, regime characteristics and political leadership. In turn, these would need to be mapped on to different organisational types, to include programmes implemented by donors, governments and NGOs. This would yield a sample of at least 15 case studies, which would be credible for generating robust evidence for comparative analysis of programme outcomes.

11 This echoes Leonard (2008: 10), writing about what we know (and don't know) about reform success in weak states: 'Donors have been extremely reluctant until very recently to admit openly that there is a political dimension to their work, and political analysis therefore had been left hidden in the ad hoc "craft wisdom" of development practitioners. Some of these men and women had superb intuitions, but clearly most did not; the invisibility of politics made it hard for the first to educate the second, and academic students of politics were excluded from the endeavor altogether.'

6

Conclusion

This paper has considered the available evidence for TWP and the steps required to build a more robust evidence base to demonstrate the significance of this approach for development outcomes. It has provided an analytical framework for in-depth analysis of the main arguments in the discussion on thinking and working politically in development programming. In addition, it has proposed several broad research questions to guide efforts to build the evidence base.

We believe that this approach can help to address the current methodological and analytical gaps in the existing literature. Furthermore, it also helps to fill gaps in the content of current discussion on TWP in development programming, such as the lack of attention given to the issue of gender, and to different – and often more fragile – political contexts.

Conducting the necessary analysis to help build this evidence base will be central to moving thinking and working politically from the margins of development thinking and policy into mainstream development programming.

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The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP)
International Development Department
School of Government and Society
College of Social Sciences
University of Birmingham
Birmingham B15 2TT, UK
+44 (0)121 414 3911
www.dlprog.org
info@dlprog.org
[@DLProg](https://twitter.com/DLProg)