

# Thinking and Working Politically

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Development assistance works best, and is least liable to do harm, when the people designing it are thinking and working politically (TWP). This thought has been around for some time, but what it implies in practice has not always been clear. Big steps have been taken to encourage donor agency staff to *think* politically about the programmes they design and deliver, so that they take proper account of political realities. In DFID, a generation of governance and social development advisers have been trained in what this means. To date, however, fewer economists and sector specialists have been persuaded of the need to step outside their usual ways of thinking about country context. There has been a tendency to see TWP as mostly a matter for governance specialists.

A possible reason for this misunderstanding is that the implications of TWP for ways of *working* with aid have not been clearly articulated until recently. Today there are several communities of practice committed to building understanding of political context into the way development agencies work and the kind of implementing organisations they hire. In this context, TWP is about ways of operating that are politically smart as well as politically informed.

The idea of politically smart aid takes on board that development challenges are typically *complex*. That is, they involve a large number of interacting factors and actors, making desirable outcomes both hard to achieve and difficult to predict. Because of this uncertainty, blueprint-type plans have a high failure rate and the wise approach is to respond to development problems in an iterative and adaptive, way – in other words, making a series of ‘small bets’ on solutions that might work, and adapting quickly to lessons learned. Experience suggests that this is better than risking a lot on one large gamble that assumes we know all we need to know about how to get results.

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The latest thinking in this area takes a further step. Based on close examination of initiatives that have succeeded with innovative ways of working, it suggests that they share a set of features. First, they apply iterative problem solving, or stepwise learning. Second, they involve brokering constructive relations among key players to discover shared interests and smart ways of dealing with vested interests. This is able to happen, finally, because the initiatives are *locally led*, at least in the sense of addressing problems that are salient for domestic actors, rather than selected by donors. One variant of this approach, applied with particular success in the field of economic reform, is called development entrepreneurship.

TWP requires donors to find new ways of partnering with organisations that are capable of acting with the needed imagination and flexibility to solve fundamental development problems. This can be challenging, because it is new territory – much less familiar than hiring an implementing organisation to carry out a pre-designed programme. However, the evidence is clear. Smart, adaptive ways of working with aid get results that cannot be obtained any other way. And they are perfectly consistent with a robust results-based accountability to ministers and taxpayers.

The readings in this pack reflect the evolution of TWP thinking, from the first recognition of the need for better political understanding to the latest operational models.

**Reading 1:** Carothers, T. & de Gramont, D. (2013). The new politics agenda. In *Development aid confronts politics: The almost revolution*, (ch. 1). Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/04/16/development-aid-confronts-politics/fzqk>

[http://carnegieendowment.org/files/development\\_aid\\_politics\\_ch\\_1.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/development_aid_politics_ch_1.pdf)

Carothers and de Gramont set the scene. In this extract, they describe how awareness of politics has evolved since the beginnings of overseas aid in the 1950s. The whole book covers both politically smart aid and the separate issue of aid to democratic political development. Chapters 5, 6 and 8, dealing with the first topic, are the most relevant. The book is not freely downloadable but is a good buy for those with further interest.

**Reading 2:** Rocha Menocal, A. (2014). *Getting real about politics: From thinking politically to working differently*. London: Overseas Development Institute.

<http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8887.pdf>

This is a good, concise account of why the discussion has moved on from getting better political understanding to ways of supporting operations that work in a politically smart way.

**Reading 3:** Andrews, M., Pritchett, L. & Woolcock, M. (2012). *Escaping capability traps through problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA)*. Working Paper 299. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development.

<http://www.cgdev.org/publication/escaping-capability-traps-through-problem-driven-iterative-adaptation-pdia-working-paper>

Andrews and his colleagues explain why Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) is the approach that works best in public sector reform and development. This paper builds on an earlier one showing that the way countries respond to donor-supported institutional reforms leads them into ‘capability traps’, where they end up less capable than before.

**Reading 4:** Booth, D. & Unsworth, S. (2014). Politically smart, locally led development. Discussion Paper. London: Overseas Development Institute.

<http://www.odi.org/publications/8800-politically-smart-locally-led>

Booth and Unsworth analyse the experience of seven development initiatives that achieved substantial results in innovative ways. Common success factors include an ability to work in iterative and adaptive ways and a commitment to brokering constructive relationships among stakeholders. The interventions enjoyed funding conditions that allowed them to be both politically smart (informed and astute) and led by local (national or sub-national) concerns.

**Reading 5:** Faustino, J. and Booth, D., (2014). *Development entrepreneurship: How donors and leaders can foster institutional change*. Working Politically in Practice Series, Case Study No. 2. London: The Asia Foundation and ODI.

<http://www.odi.org/publications/9118-development-entrepreneurship>

This paper describes a variant of 'politically smart, locally led' working that may be of particular interest to economists. It draws on experience in economic reform in the Philippines and shows the relevance to development work of practical lessons from successful business start-ups, military strategy and other fields.

## Questions to guide readings

- What is wrong with the idea that donors deal with the technical side of development, leaving countries with responsibility for the political side?
- Is thinking and working politically only relevant to governance advisers?
- What is the connection between being politically smart and working in an adaptive and iterative way to address specific development problems?
- Does the logic of TWP necessarily imply assisting domestic actors to take the lead in finding solutions to problems that are relevant and urgent in a country context?
- What kind of funding arrangements can enable politically smart, locally led initiatives to be more widely adopted?