Politically Agile Programming. Paper 4.

Integrating Politics into the Project Cycle: README

Greg Power

The speed with which the development community has congregated around more politically-informed programming in the last few years has been remarkable. Whereas most donor agencies have traditionally been wary of 'politics', it is now regarded as essential to understanding and engaging with some of the most intractable problems in developing countries. The fact that even the World Bank was willing to embrace its importance in the 2017 *World Development Report* was seen by many as a significant shift in the accommodation of politics into development thinking.

And yet, … there remains a lot of scepticism as to how far that commitment goes, whether it will turn out to be another international development fad, and to what extent international programming is really willing to grapple with the realities of politics, rather than using 'politics' simply as another dry analytical tool.   At the launch of the World Development Report in London in March 2017, then DFID Minister Rory Stewart was asked the 'so what?' question by one of the panel, "Obviously politics matters, so what's new?". His reply was withering. "Its all very well saying, 'yeah we get that its all about politics', but the problem is, most of the people saying that, don't know anything about politics."

Leaving aside the arguments about what a genuinely political approach to international assistance means (which will be explored in a book that I hope will appear later this year), his wider point was

to caution against the complacency that underpins the "yeah, we get it" school of thought.   Anyone who has worked in politics knows how constantly complex and permanently haphazard it is. While exercises such as the WDR provide useful insights and analysis for framing an approach, working politically is an entirely different thing.   And although there has been some excellent work done by the *Development Leadership Programme* and *Thinking and Working Politically* initiative, in practice political analysis is still, for the most part, a stand-alone activity within projects. The practical task is to find ways of integrating politics and political analysis at every stage of a project, informing design, shaping delivery and providing the evidence for adaptation.

This paper is the second of three describing GPG's approach.   The previous paper explained the KAPE methodology we use to encourage and measure behavioural change, and the next paper will provide a guide to the political economy analysis (or more accurately 'political analysis'[1]) for political institutions.   This paper explains the README (*Research/Refine-Engage-Agree-Deliver-Monitor-Evolve*) project cycle. The underlying theme of all the papers is that because politics is constantly in flux, for political insights to matter, analysis and action need to be keeping pace with each other, so that political analysis is a constant feature in actively managing the process of institutional change. In other words, rather

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Greg Power is the Founder/Director of Global Partners Governance

than thinking simply in terms of 'analysis', politics should – as we explain – be a way of understanding problems, engaging with them and then altering them.

The paper starts with an assessment of how the current design and monitoring of projects works against that more active form of political change management. The main part of the paper explains the stages of the README project cycle, and how each stage of the process involves an assessment of the changing political dynamics around the programme's objectives. In conclusion, the paper argues for more active political management of all projects.

Logframe logic meets adaptive programming: Where'd the politics go?

At a seminar of development think tanks, donor agency staff and various implementing agencies towards the end of 2016 on the theme of politics and adaptive programming, an argument broke out amongst some of the more academic participants. One of the eminent thinkers declared "We have to recognise that political economy analysis and adaptive programming are two very different things."

In one sentence he went to the essence of an approach which seems to assume that a) political analysis can only be done by 'experts', b) that it requires different skills to actually doing the work, and c) that the two things should be treated as distinct exercises.

The subsequent discussion suggested that many disagreed with him, but it contained a kernel of truth about the way that politics is still treated within development agencies. It may be that many agency staff are indeed "comfortable with politics", but the vast majority still seem to regard it in much the same way as a bomb disposal expert approaching a suspect device.

There are two main problems with the current handling of politics.

In the first place, although most projects must now start with a political economy analysis (PEA) and theory of change, they often exist as separate and isolated activities, to be intermittently returned to during a project. A PEA provides a snapshot of conditions at a particular

time, but once a development project is funded, its very existence will alter the local incentives towards or against reform. In other words, large parts of the original PEA become redundant almost as soon as the project starts.

Second, once the project is running, reporting requirements then fail to get to grips with the politics of change. A good PEA will examine power and incentives, and describe the desired changes to structure, attitude and behaviour likely to improve institutional performance. Yet, logframes will rarely describe how a project itself altered incentives or mobilised support for reform initiatives, let alone include indicators that reflect changes of behaviour, opinion or cultural norms.

Admittedly, such things are difficult to measure, but not impossible. Dealing with this mosaic of factors requires a far more sophisticated, nuanced and political form of analysis and reporting than is encouraged through the standard project documents. Typically, reporting will be built around 'tangible' quantitative indicators such as increased capacity or resources, procedural reform or increased power. These are poor proxies for assessing political and behavioural change, and often simply serve to distort the way a project is run.

More problematically, once set, all activity will be geared towards hitting the indicators. They become the primary means by which funders hold project implementers to account, and project implementers know they will be judged against them. In short, set the wrong indicators and you end up doing the wrong things.

Ultimately, what is missing is any sense of the innately political process of managing change.

As Alina Rocha Menocal has pointed out, increasingly a PEA is "a comfort blanket – a bounded activity donors carry out to tick a box and move on – rather than an ongoing process of thinking and reflection."[2] The risk is that politics becomes a dry, technical exercise, that projects have to carry out, providing justification for the project design, but not informing its implementation.

Pick up any book about business management and it is likely to articulate

a handful of key stages for company executives in implementing successful reform. Usually they describe the need to bring wider attention to the significance of the problem at hand, and how the proposed reforms will address it. Leaders are then advised to build support around the vision for change, and a more detailed programme of reform. Crucially, they need to maintain momentum, and hold that support together, during the implementation phase, when vying interests and incentives are likely to be at their most febrile.

As numerous analyses have pointed out in recent years, international political assistance programmes have too often skated over these vital stages.[3] Although such programmes frequently altered political institutions, systems and processes, they just as often failed to take the people with them - meaning that they kept doing the same things as they had always done, just in slightly more efficient surroundings. As we have pointed out in previous publications, meaningful and 'sticky' change depends more on altering behaviour and outlook than structure.[4]

It is here that the absence of politics is most evident. The most arduous and sensitive part of an effective governance project is in getting the buy-in and traction amongst key interlocutors. In our projects we expend huge amounts of effort in engaging, persuading, negotiating and cajoling politicians, civil servants and ministers that their best interests are served by a particular set of reforms.

Yet, almost none of this is captured in the traditional reporting formats for funding agencies. The stuff that we are asked to report on – the quantitative indicators and technical measures – are relatively straightforward and easily achieved, especially compared with the time-consuming political negotiations that precede them. Yet, the quarterly reporting templates that we fill in fail to register or measure any of that activity, its significance, or the amount of effort involved. There seems to be an assumption that that political buy-in just happens.

Politically agile programming as active change management

The purpose of README and KAPE is to carry the logic of political analysis and change management throughout the project cycle, especially in unpredictable political environments. It is an attempt to move away from a 'hit and hope' approach in most traditional projects, by ensuring that the original PEA and theory of evolve from being a 'theory' or 'analysis', and into an active strategy for managing change, that adapts to the reality on the ground.

The README project cycle, as the diagram overleaf shows, is designed to ensure a constant focus on the underlying issues that the programme is grappling with. As is now widely recognised, thanks to the work of Matt Andrews and others around such ideas as 'problem-driven iterative adaptation' (PDIA), at each stage of a project the central problems are likely to change in their shape and nature. Although a project might start with broad agreement about a strategy to improve, say, primary education, the process of actually implementing it will unearth problems previously buried in the detail. As institutional reforms are rolled out, so various groups of stakeholders including parents, teachers, civil servants, and politicians will start to realise exactly how much they stand to gain or lose from specific changes. More explicitly, the incentives and interests of those local partners will evolve and perhaps entirely alter, as they see certain options closed off and new opportunities emerge, creating new and often fleeting coalitions of interest.

Political reflection and analysis needs to be a continuous part of the project cycle in order to stay on top of these developments, to understand how the problem at the centre is changing shape, and more importantly, why. The README cycle aims to provide a guide as to how to integrate that analysis at each stage of project development and delivery.

README – Research, Engage, Agree, Deliver, Monitor & Evolve

R - Research/Refine the Problem
Any project must start by defining the problem, and how to address it. GPG's approach to such analysis in political institutions is explained in the next politically agile programming paper, but in essence it should establish a hypothesis to be tested, and the basis for engaging local stakeholders. There are three stages to this.

First, identifying the most important symptoms of the problem. This sounds obvious, but the value of the initial analysis will be in distinguishing between the signal and the noise. In other words, it needs to place the problem in its own specific context,

README Project Cycle

and identifying the symptoms first will help to pin down what's relevant, and what's not.

Second, who matters? It should map power, and identify the entry points where a project might get most leverage. In political institutions, where there is a constant tussle for power between various office-holders – including Ministers, senior officials, the Speaker of Parliament, Secretary General, Prime Minister, leaders of different political parties, committee chairs and others – it should provide a sense of which individuals or parts of the institution will be vital partners. In other words, who has the capacity to make change happen, and who has the ability to block it.

Third, what do they stand to gain or lose? Change in the structure of any institution will create winners and losers. This is particularly true in political institutions, where change invariably alters the distribution of political power. The analysis should seek to understand what the institution looks like through the eyes of those who currently hold influence, and anticipate how change is likely to affect them. At this point, the potential for aligning the incentives of key figures will start to emerge.

E - Engage stakeholders and build a common understanding of 'The Problem'
The second stage is in using that analysis to engage stakeholders around a common understanding of the central problem. This means exploring how the interests of

different groups are likely to be affected by any likely changes, but also working out ways to reconcile and manage competing interests.

This will inevitably involve a process of testing and refining the assumptions in the original analysis with those stakeholders. Each discussion should either provide a distinct perspective on the problem and its possible solutions, or reinforce the previous analysis. Either way, it will be an iterative process that continually clarifies the key issues and gauges the level of potential support.

At the same time, it should be testing the boundaries of what is possible in a given context. The value of international assistance is in exposing long-standing and intractable problems to new ways of thinking. Frequently, those working inside political institutions are so busy dealing with the urgent matters right in front of them, that they cannot find the space to consider longer-term solutions. The process should seek to illuminate them in new ways for local partners, enhancing the understanding of the underlying causes and offering up the possibility of new solutions.

All of this should be seeking to establish an agreed diagnosis of the difficulties facing the institution, and support for change amongst key stakeholders. The complex task of coalition-building will turn on aligning those interests, and convincing those individuals and groups that their own long-term interests are likely to be served by a particular

approach. But it also depends on creating a sense of urgency, so that those same figures recognise the risks of doing nothing, and the potential costs of simply maintaining the status quo.

A - Agree project strategy, content and indicators with Stakeholders

The third stage is where that broad agreement is translated into more detailed reform plans, and the phase where local ownership needs to be asserted. Again, this is a political process of negotiation and compromise around the conflicting interests of many different groups, all of which further tests the project's original insights, analysis and rationale.

For political change to sustain itself, the people who are immediately affected by that change have to believe in it and make it work over the long-run. In other words, for a new system or procedure to work, people have to make it work, and to do that they need to see a direct, and often immediate, benefit. Without that buy-in, any changes to structure, process or procedure are likely to be fragile, probably short-lived, and liable not to achieve what was originally intended anyway. This means that both the strategy, and the logic of change behind it, need to be developed in conjunction with local stakeholders. They should be active partners in the development of the political analysis, and the change management strategy that flows from it.

A key change to the way that most projects are run, that would significantly increase the chances of lasting impact, would be to revise project documents and indicators through those discussions with local partners.

For all the talk of 'local ownership' as a principle, the contents of a logframe are usually the subject of private discussions between project implementers and their funders. It would be far better if local partners helped to set the indicators in the first place, especially when turning the strategy into a more detailed implementation plan. If they own the indicators for progress, they are much more likely to hit them: it shows that they accept the logic behind them, feel responsibility for meeting them and will drive progress.

Perhaps more significantly, those discussions will provide a much more nuanced understanding of the political challenges to implementing change and result in a more realistic assessment of feasible progress. The process of agreeing measures of progress will be more complex, involving considerable negotiation and compromise – each stage of which will further refine the political analysis – but it is also likely to enhance the project's ability to understand, anticipate, and adapt to, events.

D - Deliver

Arguably the most difficult, and innately political, part of any project is in holding all this together as reforms are being implemented, and adjusting when things do not go to plan.

The starting point is to recognise that no matter how elaborate they are, the neat strategic designs set out in the original analysis will not be implemented in full, once they hit the reality of politics. The very nature of political institutional development is that no-one ever gets exactly what they want. The variety of competing vested interests at work means that reforms are often a procedural fudge emerging from negotiation and compromise.[5] Project managers need to be astute enough to see the difference between what is desirable, and what is politically feasible, and adapt their plans.

One tactic for accommodating and adapting to the shifting interests is to tie several reforms together. Some of the key tenets of adaptive management advocate multiple entry points and a constant process of trying, failing, learning and adapting. While these are useful principles generally, they are particularly important in trying to hold together a diverse coalition of interests during the process of implementing reform. The more interlinked aspects there are to a reform programme, the easier it will be to find the necessary compromises and trade offs amongst stakeholders in the first place. But, equally, hold-ups and disruptions are inevitable, and multiple project streams make it easier to create the space to adapt to shifting interests, and maintain momentum, without the whole programme stalling.

Delivery also needs to be informed by a degree of strategic opportunism. Politics is never static, and anyone who has worked in a political campaign – be that for a political party or a civil society organisation – or in government, knows that when an opportunity emerges, you seize it while it is there. As projects are being implemented so they will generate new networks of interest,

allies and unexpected chances for reform. None of these may have been in the original programme plan, but project managers need to be astute enough to spot chances when they emerge that create new routes to achieve their objectives, and agile enough to exploit them.

M&E: Monitor and Evolve

Although 'monitoring' and 'evolving' provide the last two phases of the README project cycle it should be evident that the whole project cycle is characterised by a constant process of assessing, and adapting, to the problems at the centre of the project. There will though be points in the project where there needs to be a more strategic consideration of the original project strategy, logframe and indicators, which will depend almost entirely on the strength of the political analysis during the preceding phases.

If logframes are to become "living documents" of the sort that is envisaged by many donor agencies, adapting to conditions as they change, it seems to require a much greater integration of an ongoing political analysis than is currently the case. It is difficult to see any justification for altering project content unless it is accompanied by an assessment of the political context, new opportunities emerging, shifting coalitions of interest and altered incentive structures. In other words, everything highlighted in the sections above. And, as Pete Vowles, the former Head of Programme Delivery at DFID has pointed out, if projects are changed without any sense of learning they might be flexible, but they are not adaptive.[6] Without a thorough political analysis at each stage of the project, any changes look like they are based on hunches and guesswork. It's the political insight and analysis that makes them iterative.

This means that reporting mechanisms would need to capture the things that contribute to the process of agreeing, engaging and delivering projects, and the level of local buy-in. The point should be to understand whether something is working or not at the time, work out why, and encourage the agility to respond to it.

At this point, the README cycle starts again, to revise and refine the original political analysis and theory of change, assessing the more quantitative indicators of progress against the backdrop of the shifting political conditions. This revised analysis then in turn informs and shapes the subsequent engagement, agreement and delivery, so that instead of being static, it evolves and adapts as a change management strategy would.

Conclusion: A Political Approach to Project Management

As we mentioned at the start, many organisations like ourselves have been using an adaptive and politically agile approach for many years, and the README and KAPE papers are two contributions within a much wider debate about how to do development differently. Our discussions with donor agencies suggest they are as frustrated as project managers by the current attachment to the logframe.

Yet, for all the talk of 'getting politics', the fundamental problem still lies in the disconnect between the increasing emphasis on detailed political analysis at the outset of a project, and the failure to translate those insights in to a working process for managing change.

Somehow, the current approach to programme design and delivery is both over-complicating the straightforward and over-simplifying the complex.

In the first place, there is a risk that political analysis becomes over-reliant on academic expertise, and too complicated to be useful. There is undoubtedly huge value in a wide-ranging analysis to establish context, but the most useful political insights come more from engaging with the problems, than standing back and looking at them.

This sort of preference for analysis over action is though peculiar to international development agencies. As an ODI paper which examined the merging of Australia's aid agency with its foreign affairs ministry tellingly noted, the development professionals came into increasing contact with "foreign affairs and trade specialists for whom political analysis is fundamental to day-to-day operations". For the diplomats political analysis was "a core part of thinking about effectiveness, not an additional form of analysis applied after an investment idea has been developed."[7]

This approach is also characterised by a tone implying that politics itself is the problem

that needs to be solved - an obstacle to development, rather than an innate part of it.[8] The suggestion seems to be that hefty PEA will iron out a lot of the uncertainty and risk involved in politics. Yet the point of understanding political complexity is not to 'manage' it, but to appreciate that it is inevitably unpredictable - this is where the very opportunities for change emerge – and to have enough political astuteness to understand what's going on and the wherewithal to respond.

If PEA becomes the preserve of experts, it risks becoming a rigid discipline, where there is 'right way' and 'wrong way' of doing these things. And an overly-prescriptive approach will end up being as restrictive as the logframe – undermining the very purpose of trying to adopt a more political approach in the first place.

Meanwhile the over-simplification occurs in the translation of those political analyses into the project documents that then govern how a two-, three-, or five-year project is to be run.

Anyone who has had to turn an exhaustive political and contextual analysis into a project proposal, faced with several pages of empty grids, replete with activities, milestones and indicators, will be familiar with that feeling of resignation, the inward sigh, and the thought, "right, let's logframe the shit out of this thing".

All too frequently the result, as a 2017 paper published by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium highlighted, is the continuing tendency of projects to reduce identifiably political problems of inadequate capacity into simplistic and ineffective technical delivery exercises.[9]

If, as we argue, projects should be conceived as exercises in strategic change management, instead of technical delivery exercises, they need to be supplemented by more sophisticated and nuanced forms of reporting, which capture changes in political conditions, local buy-in and dominant incentive structures. At present there is a gap between the inputs and activities in a typical logframe, and the assumption that certain outputs and impact will inevitably flow them.

That gap needs to be filled by an evolving political strategy for managing change. Reporting should be less about restating the logframe contents, and more about describing progress (and difficulties encountered) towards the project's strategic objectives. It was for this reason that the previous paper in the series described the way in which KAPE sought to provide alternative measures that track changes in outlook, behaviour and institutional practice.

The integration of politics into the project cycle requires a qualitative shift in the approach to political analysis, so that it is an active and ongoing part of project delivery. Rather than simply providing an explanation of what's going on, that political analysis should be seen as a way of doing three things, namely: i) as a way of understanding incentives and interests, ii) as a technique for engaging and building agreement around a plan of action and iii) as a way of implementing meaningful change and altering behaviour.

The next paper in the series will explain that approach in more detail.

[1] The distinction here may seem pedantic, but as David Hudson and Adrian Leftwich explain in *From Political Economy to Political Analysis* the latter description implies a much more active and adaptive way of engaging with key political drivers. – See Hudson, D, and Leftwich, A, (2014), *From Political Economy to Political Analysis*, Development Leadership Programme

[2] Menocal, A, R, (2014), *Getting real about politics: From thinking politically to working differently*, ODI: London

[3] see in particular Andrews, M. (2013), *The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development*, Cambridge University Press

[4] See Power, G (2016) *Politically Agile Programming Paper 3. All About Behaviour: KAPE®, Adaptation and 'Sticky' Institutional Change*, Global Partners Governance: London

[5] See for example, Polsby, N. (2003), *How Congress Evolves: Social Bases of Institutional Change*, Oxford University Press; Schickler, E., (2001), *Disjointed Pluralism: Institutional Innovation and the Development of the U.S. Congress*, Princeton University Press; Huntington, S., (1968), *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Yale University Press; Fukuyama, F., (2015) *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy*, Profile: London

[6]

[7] Booth, D., Harris, D., & Wild, L., (2016), *From Political Economy Analysis to Doing Development Differently: A Learning Experience*, ODI: London

[8] See Routley, D, & Hulme, L, (2013), *Donors, Development Agencies and the use of Political Economic Analysis: Getting to grips with the politics of development?* ESID Worrking Paper 19: Manchester; Unsworth, S. (2008). *Is Political Analysis Changing Donor Behaviour*. Available from:

[9] Denney, L. & Mallett, R. (2017), *Service Delivery and State Capacity: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium*, SLRC