



Enabling Change: A Behavioural Approach to Political Programming

International development work has experienced an exceptional surge of interest in politics, with a variety of initiatives and publications seeking to find new ways of understanding and addressing the most intractable problems in developing countries. For some time there has been general agreement about the broad tenets of this approach including utilising small scale projects that are ‘politically-smart’, locally driven, responsive to need and employing multiple entry-points, and captured most ably under the rubric of the *Thinking and Working Politically* and the *Doing Development Differently* coalitions.

There remains though a gap between the agreement over principles that inform such an approach and workable models for employing these insights in the design, delivery and measurement of international assistance projects. We have written previously about these issues¹ and Global Partners Governance (GPG) is in a rare position in this field in that we undertake research, analysis, and evaluation for donors and implementing agencies, but also deliver projects designed to strengthen representative politics. Each stream of work informs the other, and this set of ‘Politically Agile Programming’ papers is an attempt to capture the insights from our analytical work and our experience working in some of the most difficult and sensitive political environments over the last ten years.

Our work is focused exclusively on political institutions and the people that work within them, including parliaments, political parties, ministries, and local government, to make them more effective, resilient and responsive. But we believe that our approach has wider implications and may

be of use to the broader development field. It is perhaps worth noting that international development agencies appear to have struggled to employ political analysis in their programmes, with these most political institutions, perhaps ironically because of the politically sensitive nature of such work.

This note attempts to capture the logic and key features of our *enabling* approach. That logic is informed by three key principles. First, effective political institutions are defined more by the characteristics they display than by their structure - specifically by the extent to which they are *resilient*, *representative* and *responsive*. Second, meaningful and *self-sustaining political change* comes about through changing behaviour, not simply by changing rules or structures, yet behavioural change is rarely recognised as an explicit objective of aid programmes. Third, self-sustaining political change can only be implemented by the people who are directly affected by it. The role of project deliverers is thus not to implement change, but to enable others to implement change for themselves.

These insights are obvious to any organisations working on the ground in political institutions, but applying their logic fully would entirely change the way in which international assistance programmes (especially in the political sphere) are designed, commissioned, delivered and measured. Donor agencies and project deliverers need the courage of their convictions to move from simply talking about politics to engaging with the full implications of working politically.

Contents

1) Strengthening Representative Politics: Enhancing Institutional Resilience, Representation and Responsiveness	2
2) Changing Behaviour by Disturbing the Status Quo	3
3) Enabling change: Promoting a Process of Self-Sustaining Reform	4
4) Enabling, Not Implementing: “It’s amazing what you can accomplish provided you don’t care who gets the credit”	6

As our previous paper in this series noted, the challenge is principally for project implementers rather than donors to come up with alternatives to the logframe and identify new ways of measuring impact² (because, bluntly, we have greater expertise in understanding the difficulty of delivering projects and securing political progress). Subsequent papers will explore in more detail these themes and potential new ways for delivering and measuring political projects, including our own KAPE methodology.

This introductory paper though is in four parts, explaining, first, the difference between *strengthening representative politics* and ‘good governance’, second, why behavioural change needs to be an explicit objective, third, why programmes need to start with enabling people to implement change rather than redesigning structures and fourth, why an enabling approach entirely changes the logic of project design and delivery.

1) Strengthening Representative Politics: Enhancing Institutional Resilience, Representation and Responsiveness

In their widely-acclaimed *Why Nations Fail* Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson highlight the importance of what they describe as ‘inclusive institutions’ to national stability and long-term economic development. Their central argument, simply put, is that systems of government that are politically inclusive, accountable and representative find it less easy to extract wealth from the state, and have greater incentive to encourage economic innovation. While the academic community continues to argue about the exact links between governance and economic development, the generally accepted key point is that politics matters. Donor agencies have recognised for some time that the quality of national politics will shape the path of a country’s development, and yet donor emphasis on ‘good governance’ remains a decidedly apolitical exercise.

Many of these failings are now widely understood thanks to the work of people such as Matt Andrews, Thomas Carothers and Diane De Gramont, and Adrian Leftwich, amongst others. At one level, the ‘good governance’ agenda has increasingly been equated with a set of ideals about what a state should look like, and has tended to result in a technocratic approach to designing institutional and constitutional architecture. Projects thus tend to roll out

a standard series of institutional reforms designed to improve efficiency and effectiveness, but which are concerned more with process than outcome, and almost entirely separate from the operation of (‘big P’) politics which decides policy priorities and their implementation.

This approach has, in turn, meant a superficial focus on structures and processes rather than deeper-seated change. As Matt Andrews argues in *The Limits to Institutional Reform in Development*³, it is a relatively easy task to implement new systems, but an entirely different exercise to actually make them work. Using the analogy of the institution as an iceberg, he describes the regulative framework as the tip, which is visible – and which international assistance programmes attempt to ‘fix’. Below the waterline the much larger part of the institutional iceberg is made up of cultural factors which shape how the institution interprets and applies the institutional structure. This is where ‘small p’ politics occurs, influencing attitudes and behaviour that determine whether reforms to structure actually achieve their intended effect.

In short, good governance programmes have tended to look for technical solutions to what are, ultimately, political and behavioural problems. Governance programmes have avoided ‘politics’ in two senses. First, although they use political analysis, too many projects still fail to engage with the character and quality of the political system as a whole, and the extent to which it is accountable to, and reflects, the interests of citizens. But, second, they have also largely bypassed the internal political dynamics within institutions that determine culture, individual behaviour and levels of performance. As Acemoglu and Robinson note, attempts by international agencies to improve things often fail because “they do not take place in the context of an explanation of why bad policies and institutions are there in the first place.”⁴

An alternative approach to governance needs to place far greater emphasis on both ‘big P’ and ‘small p’ politics simultaneously. International assistance should be actively seeking to build inclusive political institutions that serve the interests of the public, but at the same time it also needs to focus on strengthening the performance of those institutions, principally by altering behaviour within them.

It is for these reasons that GPG has developed an overtly political approach that we describe as ‘strengthening representative politics’ rather than good governance. This

is partly a recognition that every nation has a distinct history and all have developed local or national structures for deliberating and deciding, based around the central organising principle of representation (however limited this might be in certain countries). The task of strengthening representative politics thus begins with what already exists and GPG's approach is built around three pillars of institutional development: resilience, representation and responsiveness.

- Resilience. Governance institutions in developing countries need to be able to manage continually changing political problems. Programmes should help institutions not to deal with one problem, but should enhance their capacity to manage the complexity of governance, by ensuring robust structures and processes, but also the capacity of the people within institutions to anticipate and adapt to those challenges.
- Representation. Inclusive political institutions need to be representative of the people that they serve - in terms of their complexion, the articulation of views and in the policies that they deliver. The diversity of the nation should be reflected in both process and outcome, elements which are particularly important in post-conflict countries or divided societies.
- Responsiveness. The long-term legitimacy of government depends, in part, on the extent to which it responds to, and meets the needs of the public. Political institutions need to be accountable for their actions, have mechanisms for public engagement to ensure that citizens' voices are heard, and have the capacity to understand, address and manage public expectations.

The important underlying point is that supporting effective political institutions is less about structure than it is about the institutional outlook, culture and character. Political reform programmes should be built around strengthening those institutional characteristics of resilience, representation and responsiveness to enable institutions to cope. That means that change is ultimately more about behaviour than it is about specific structures and processes.

2) Changing Behaviour by Disturbing the Status Quo

The ultimate purpose of all political programmes should be to change behaviour. Although structural reform is often essential, it is only valuable if it then has an effect on the attitudes and behaviour of the people working inside the institution. In other words, giving an institution better processes and greater capacity or power

is only effective when the people within that institution decide to use those new abilities to improve performance. Otherwise, the original problems simply persist, just in different (although occasionally more efficient) surroundings.

Literature on management in the public and private sectors has been churning out material on organisational change for several decades, emphasising the need to develop a common sense of the problem to be faced, its possible solutions, and a coalition for change around those reforms. But central to these strategies is the need for people to first see the need for change and then to implement it. The point is summed up neatly by Geoff Mulgan, Chief Executive of NESTA and former Downing Street adviser,

Structures are the most visible aspects of an organisation – but not usually the most important for achieving results. The most common mistake made by people trying to reshape [institutions] is that they overestimate the role of structures relative to processes and cultures. It's striking that the most effective leaders achieve as much through influence and norms as they do through formal mechanisms.⁵

The international development field has cottoned on to these insights in recent years but is still short of strategies for making it work. Although the importance of understanding and engaging with incentive structures to change behaviour is acknowledged, it is rarely an explicit objective of programmes. Often it is referred to as something which has to happen for projects to work, but there is at best a tenuous link between project techniques and the assumed outcomes. The assumption seems to be that behaviour change will simply fall into place as the project progresses. Programmes need to move away from this 'hit and hope' approach to something closer to an active change management strategy.

The question is, if donor agencies have long-recognised the significance of incentives why have they frequently failed to carry through this analysis to inform a strategy for change? The problem is that reforming institutions has overtly political consequences, in both a 'small p' and 'big P' sense. At the very least, it involves the difficult process of disturbing the status quo, and will often also involve a rebalancing of power within, and between, institutions. Using and altering existing incentive structures means directly addressing power and resistance to change.

The starting point is to understand the personal, political and institutional incentives

that are currently causing people to behave the way that they do.⁶ But it also means understanding what the institution looks like through the eyes of those who have power, and who shape patterns of behaviour. This needs to go beyond simply identifying who is in control of an institution (or parts of that institution), but also the source of that authority and how power is used in practice. Frequently, authority stems from control over patronage, preferment or procedure. The ability to reward or punish, promote or demote individuals will be a significant source of influence over the way an institution is run. But equally, the ability to determine the interpretation of rules, regulations and structures is likely to shape institutional expectations and behavioural norms. Understanding sources of influence means that programmes can anticipate how reforms might affect the balance of power, and thus anticipate opposition, and either mitigate or tackle those objections.

Resistance to change though goes beyond those figures within the institution that have power. All change is frightening and change management literature from the business world often focuses on what one author has called the ‘the elegance and tenacity of the status quo’.⁷ In short, getting people to change is difficult, and political programming often simply ignores this critical factor.

The Nobel Prize winning economist/psychologist Daniel Kahneman in *Thinking Fast and Slow* emphasises the innate conservatism of most people, due to a fear of loss if things change. Programmes for reform inevitably create some winners and some losers. Where the potential winners and their gains are ambiguous and uncertain, programmes are likely to maximise opposition. Crucially, as Kahneman points out, “people fight harder to prevent losses than to achieve gains... Loss aversion is a powerful conservative force that favours minimal changes from the status quo in the lives of both institutions and individuals.”⁸

In summary, while appreciating the incentives at work is useful for political programming, using those insights also depends on understanding opposition to change, both from those in power who most obviously have something to lose and a more general aversion to loss.

The underlying premise of all political programming – and one that too many governance programmes have shied away from – is to disturb the status quo, which almost always means a change in the balance of power. Engaging so deeply in politics is difficult territory for donor agencies, who are especially sensitive to

accusations of political interference and partisanship. Yet, achieving this reinforces the need for a different approach to political change that is genuinely locally-led. The goal of donor programmes should not be to implement change, but to enable others to implement change for themselves. As we explain below, this fundamentally changes the role of project deliverers.

3) Enabling Change: Promoting a Process of Self-Sustaining Reform

An enabling approach is especially important when it comes to behavioural change. The difficulties described above in shifting the status quo emphasise the need for the process of change to start within the institution in defining both problem and solution. Such changes to behaviour are far more likely to result in what we describe as a process of self-sustaining reform that lasts long beyond the lifetime of any project. But for that to happen the people within the institution have to see a direct benefit, and believe that reforms will make a positive difference to their working lives.

The role for political programming in this context is a strategic one, to enable and manage that process of change by highlighting opportunities, aligning incentives, anticipating opposition and mitigating the perception of loss. It is a process of local leadership combined with outsourced expertise. That international expertise will often be essential in managing complex political change, but being an expert does not depend on telling other people what to do. The role is, as Amartya Sen has pointed out, about enabling people to lead the sorts of lives that they have reason to value.⁹

GPG’s approach to that strategic change role is distinguished by four key elements:

i) Start with individuals, not institutions

Although there is now a much better understanding of the causes of institutional deficiency, programmes still tend to identify them in terms of institutional structure or systemic weakness. Knowing that an institution is not working effectively is useful, but programmes also need to understand the role of individuals in that process. For example, if a ministry is producing badly drafted law, and parliament is enacting it, programmes need to understand why the legislative role is regarded as such a low priority by ministers, civil servants and politicians.

If problems are only defined in institutional terms, programmes will look for institutional and structural solutions, rather than personal and behavioural ones. It means that programmes frequently end up tackling the symptoms of the original problem, rather than addressing the root causes. GPG's approach is to start with individual behaviour as a way of changing institutions, rather than the other way around, providing them with the capacity, incentive and will to implement reforms.

ii) Combine principle and self-interest

Self-sustaining reform depends on individuals seeing the virtue themselves in doing things differently, involving changes to behaviour, norms and practices, which in turn are more likely to result in a long-lasting effect. However, the value of understanding incentives, power and resistance to change is that programmes can then frame problems in a way that people can see a direct benefit. Too many political programmes still rely solely on a sense of altruism to make reforms work or abstract ideas about the potential benefits, particularly those related to creating political inclusion and governance. While more effective institutions, or political reform, or greater accountability might be highly desirable, the individuals responsible for implementing changes will not support them unless they can see an identifiable and tangible benefit.

In practice, the first question that everyone asks when change is mooted is 'how will this affect me?' This is entirely rational and logical. While altruism, or enlightened self-interest, undoubtedly plays a part in successful reforms, programmes need to offer a more compelling argument to those affected. In short, programmes need to engage directly with the problems as perceived by individuals, and offer ways of managing them. They need to be built around practical measures with obvious rewards - in short by finding ways of helping people do their jobs better, enhancing their career prospects or offering them the sorts of rewards they value.

The role of political programmes is to align that self-interest with institutional reform. It is a strategic change management role which combines individual benefit and new patterns of behaviour with a broader view of how to improve institutional resilience.

iii) Don't aim at everyone in the institution. Focus on creating pockets of good practice

For many donor agencies the size of a project budget is often the equivalent of

a virility test, highlighting the importance and commitment to addressing key political issues. However, there is limited evidence that this is more effective than smaller projects, and may be counter-productive especially in relation to politics. For example, when donor agencies land heavily in political institutions they frequently remove any sense of local control. The arrival of a large programme can often either simply maximise political resistance to outside 'experts' telling them what to do, or increase dependency on external support as international implementers end up doing the work themselves.

But, more importantly, changing an institution does not require blanket support that attempts to work with everyone in the institution. The process of internally-driven reform invariably comes from individuals or small groups within an institution doing things differently, who then have a catalytic effect on the behaviour of others.

Self-sustaining change is more likely to come from working closely with smaller groups of individuals to create new ways of working which then ripple across the institution. The idea of creating '*pockets of good practice*' means that innovations are owned by the beneficiaries, who then have the incentive to spread them. The job of the programme should be to both help those initial changes, but then seek to develop coalitions for change around those innovations. Change is then an internally-driven process, rather than one that is seen to be implemented from the outside.

iv) Capture, repeat and replicate effective behaviour change

Finally, the role of the project managers is to enhance the catalytic effect of those pockets of good practice. Projects should be aiming to have a ripple effect across the institution, so that new behaviours spread. In many instances more effective working practices will spread across the institution by themselves, as groups of individuals see direct evidence of how new sorts of behaviour are likely to benefit them.

However, there is an important role to be played by the project managers in ensuring that where good practice does start to emerge it is promoted and disseminated across the institution to ensure long-term effect. This might mean simply publicising examples of good practice or working with new groups of staff to instil the key lessons. At the same time, innovations emerging at the lower levels of the institution need to be fed up to people in positions of power, so that they can then, if necessary, be turned into institution-wide guidelines or formalised into new processes.

4) Enabling, Not Implementing: “It’s amazing what you can accomplish provided you don’t care who gets the credit”

Although the rhetoric of ‘local ownership’ has been a standard part of international assistance for over a decade, the vast majority of programmes fail on this front. Most programming still conflates two distinct challenges, namely, the need to deal with immediate political problems, and enhancing the capacity of the political system to cope with those political problems in the long-run. But in both cases, the apparently irresistible temptation is to have ‘implementers’, whose job it is to ‘fix things’.

In political programming at least, the task is not to fix things, but to enable others to fix things for themselves.

The above quote, attributed to US President Harry S. Truman, encapsulates what needs to change in political programming, and our idea of an enabling approach to political reform. Change needs to come from individuals within the institution, so that they (and the institution) can take the credit. The role of international assistance should be to provide ideas, advice and support, but they too need to be owned and driven by people within the institution. Programmes should enable political institutions to manage problems for themselves, rather than trying to do it for them. It is a model which depends on local partners finding their own solutions, with outside support that revolves around encouraging, cajoling and occasionally criticising. It creates a form of programming that is more like management consultancy and mentoring than traditional donor assistance. This fundamentally changes the role of the project deliverer, from *implementer* to *enabler*.

In addition, it changes what we mean by ‘impact’ and ‘sustainability’. Programmes need to have an effect beyond the lifetime of any project and beyond the project’s target group. Effective programmes should ideally have a catalytic role on the operation of institutions and politics more generally. And, as we note above, that sort of self-sustaining reform is much more likely to occur by changing institutional characteristics and behaviour than by

simply altering structures and processes. Programmes should be aiming to make institutions more resilient, representative and responsive, but that means the focus has to be how the people within the institution use its powers, rather than simply changing institutional structure and process.

Projects that are built around enabling rather than implementing require different forms of measurement. Capturing changes to individual and institutional behaviour, or the development of a new political culture, requires new forms of evidence, and approaches that draw on the rapidly expanding literature on behavioural economics, and the work of organisations such as the UK’s Behavioural Insights Team¹⁰. Similarly, assessing key institutional characteristics, and improvements to resilience, representation and responsiveness, will mean a more sophisticated and innovative use of quantitative and qualitative indicators. None of this will fit easily into a logframe. The next paper in our ‘Politically Agile Programming’ series will set out our KAPE methodology, which is our attempt to address some of these challenges. Subsequent papers will look in more detail at the process of measuring behavioural change and the strengthening of institutional characteristics.

In conclusion, the fundamental challenge for donor agencies and implementers - and one of the central themes of this paper - is that although most donor agencies agree with the logic of politically informed programming, they have struggled to implement it. *The Doing Development Differently* and *Thinking and Working Politically* coalitions are trying to help donor agencies overcome these challenges. But, ultimately, both donor agencies and project deliverers simply need the courage of their convictions, and carry these insights through to their logical conclusions. It means not just talking about the importance of politics, but engaging with its implications. Politics is complex, messy and unpredictable. Faced with this, projects will frequently struggle and sometimes fail, but should always learn. Critically, they should aim to enable the sort of change that builds resilient institutions - but that requires fundamental changes in the way that programmes are designed, delivered and measured.

Footnotes

¹See, for example, Power, G., & Coleman, O., (2011), *The Challenges of Political Programming*, International IDEA

² www.gpgovernance.net/publication/the-logframe-and-the-beautiful-game/

³ Andrews, M., (2013), *The Limits to Institutional Reform in Development*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge

⁴ Acemoglu, D. & Robinson, J., (2012), *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*, Profile Books: London, p.447

⁵ Rewiring the Brain: A Rough Blueprint for Reforming the Centres of Government, http://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/reforming_centres_of_govts_-_geoff_mulgan.pdf

⁶ For more detail on this see Power, G. (2011), *The Politics of Parliamentary Strengthening: Understanding Political Incentives and Institutional Behaviour in Parliamentary Support Strategies*, Global Partners/WFD

⁷ Heifetz, R., (2009), *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Harvard Business School Press, p. 70

⁸ Kahneman, D., (2011), *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Penguin: London, p. 305

⁹ Sen, A., (1999), *Development As Freedom*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, p. 293

¹⁰ www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk

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