

Thinking & Working Politically Community of Practice Workshop Report

Bangkok, 15-16 June 2015



Why do technically well-designed aid programmes not achieve expected levels of impact? Research shows that often this failure arises because they demand changes that are politically unfeasible. It is increasingly accepted that an understanding of context-specific political dynamics is crucial in both project design and implementation. Yet, while donors have increasingly acknowledged the importance of political context, the translation of this acknowledgement into more significant changes in mainstream development practice has been slow to materialise. Nonetheless, since 2013 there have been a number of influential groups calling for more fundamental changes to the conception, design and implementation of developmental assistance. Among these is a group of senior officials from major donors, researchers and practitioners who have been working together to promote *thinking and working politically* (TWP) in development.

In June, the TWP Community of Practice (CoP) met in Bangkok. This was the fifth time the group has met, but while earlier meetings of the CoP had involved a much smaller group, this meeting opened up space for a much larger group of interested individuals to come together to discuss what TWP means in both principle and practice. This meeting focussed on two key issues:

Day 1: The importance of gender in TWP, and the reciprocal link between TWP and gender approaches.

Day 2: How TWP can be scaled up to larger programmes and the country level.

Setting the scene – TWP considered

As discussed in previous meetings, the core principles of TWP were identified as 'strong political analysis, insight and understanding, detailed appreciation of and response to the local context, and flexibility and adaptability in program design and implementation'. Within this context, five types of questions were highlighted as warranting further consideration within the TWP agenda:

1. **The big historical sweep:** How does a strong, effective and accountable state come into being over the long term?
2. **The state of the state:** How can we assess the institutions, incentives and interests that drive decision-making?
3. **Constraints on growth:** How do we navigate donors' own interests that might not lend themselves to TWP?
4. **Characteristics of public services:** What do good services look like?
5. **Individual interventions:** How do we design programmes that address the above questions?

While it was noted that a number of organisational constraints limit the TWP agenda (e.g., nervousness about being seen to be political, lack of staff skills, risk aversion, lack of local knowledge, target-meeting etc.), the meeting focussed on finding ways of overcoming these constraints.

The opening session attempted to contextualize these debates by discussing what the case for TWP is and why gender needs to be brought into the agenda. This first session guided the discussion for the next two days and drew on a previously circulated note that made the case for thinking and working politically. This explains that if development is about change, and all change is ultimately political, then it is not possible to do development programming well without thinking and working politically.

Significant issues raised included:

- **What we are seeking to change:** Are we seeking to achieve set outcomes or achieve transformational change? We need to answer these bigger questions first so that we know what success might look like in the medium term.
- **Where TWP takes place:** It was noted that much of TWP focusses on the agency of individuals, but it may also need to look at wider structures and institutions. Furthermore, TWP is currently often only addressed at the project level, rather than the country program or donor level, or in relation to international influences on domestic politics.
- **How long TWP takes:** TWP often requires long-term thinking and programming, but it was noted that programmes that aim to work on a long-term basis often get shut down *because* they run for a long time (more than 10 years) and are considered to have not achieved their objectives effectively or efficiently. Agencies haven't yet worked out how to make long-term change integral to their programmes, and it is also very difficult to retain senior local staff who can facilitate this.

Day One: Bringing gender into the TWP agenda

If successful development programming is about taking politics seriously, then development programming has to understand how power works. The fact that gender defines who gets to speak, represent, earn more, and take on public roles, makes it one of the clearest and most pervasive systems of power there is. It was suggested that gender could enhance the TWP agenda as TWP currently tends to concentrate on visible positions of authority and questions of “power over x”, whereas feminist understandings of power seek to analyse and address less visible forms of authority by exploring hidden and invisible power relations, speaking to questions of “power to [mobilize/do] x” and “power with x”.

The case was also made that every problem has a gender dimension, and addressing this dimension can ameliorate problems. Evidence was presented that societies with greater gender equality are less prone to conflict. Conversely, many gender unequal societies see power as a zero-sum game, and such societies are more likely to resort to violence. As such, participants agreed that both TWP and gender were well connected agendas that mutually reinforced and benefitted one another.

“Gender relations are embedded in all institutions, they shape interests and mediate structure.”

The discussion focussed on a number of issues currently preventing a more gendered approach. The main issues discussed included:

- **Incentives:** There is often a need to work politically within constraints in order to make positive gender outcomes work for the elite (who may want the positive branding associated with being pro-gender) and program designers (who may want gender featured in log-frames etc.). There was also recognition of a need to exercise restraint and adhere to the principles of “do no harm”, by being aware of what can realistically be achieved and protecting the least powerful from backlashes against the gender agenda. In particular, it was noted that if some leaders are forced to change their behaviour they will lose power. The negative unintended consequences of this need to be well-managed to prevent spoilers.
- **Language:** The language of how we talk about gender also needs to be considered. Often gender is an afterthought in programming (“add women and stir”) and what it means to incorporate a gender perspective into programming is not fully explained or understood. Often this is assumed to be common sense, but it’s not always clear to everyone.
- **Sequencing:** It was noted that a number of chicken and egg dilemmas occur when incorporating gender into all aspects of programming. For example, do we first create an environment that is supportive of gender concerns and then find the right people to push forward an agenda that incorporates a gender perspective, or do we find the right people first and then use them to create the environment? Similarly, there is a tendency to think about improving gender in a post-conflict environment, but you cannot necessarily create a stable post-conflict environment without a good understanding of gender and greater gender equality.
- **Relationships:** The question was raised as to whether governance programmes that incorporate TWP work differently to gender programmes that think and work politically. It was suggested that perhaps gender interventions tend to work at a lower level than the critical junctures that governance interventions concern themselves with. However, gender relations and women’s organisations and movements can play a key role in driving and shaping these critical junctures.
- **Strategies:** It was acknowledged that pushing a gender agenda within TWP needs to have both strategic clarity and tactical flexibility. While no real consensus was reached over this issue, it was suggested that we could perhaps look at gender as being based on ends (greater gender equality) and TWP being a means to achieve these (and other) ends.
- **Debate:** (1) There was an ongoing debate throughout the day as to whether TWP was a value-free tool to achieve pre-agreed normative goals, or whether TWP (working with the grain etc.) was necessarily normative per se. For example, what if a realistic route to getting a reform through meant working with existing elites and potentially strengthening patriarchal structures? This is a challenge for approaching TWP as a value-free tool. (2) A further discussion was that it may be necessary to think big, but programme small, and work through what is feasible to achieve small victories than can build on each other into something bigger.

Core lessons from Day One

- Gender relations are embedded in all institutions; they shape interests and mediate structure.
- Gender should be thought of in terms of power relations: as both systems and different forms of power.
- We need to be careful to avoid the pervasive slippage between “women” and “gender” – gender is not just about women.
- There are mutual benefits between gender and TWP approaches in sharpening analysis of interests, institutions, incentives and ideas to create better political tactics.
- There are politically savvy ways of pushing a gender agenda outside of explicit gender programming; in other words, “you don’t always work on gender by working on gender”.

Day Two: Using TWP principles in large programs

Previous meetings of the CoP have focussed on smaller projects and programs on the 'revolutionary' end of the TWP scale that have been able to iteratively adapt to on-the-ground realities, but a majority of donor funding goes to large, complex, log-frame and output-orientated programs. Not much thinking so far has gone into how to incorporate TWP principles and lessons into these types of programs. Or indeed how to manage a portfolio of projects and programs in a TWP-informed manner:

“Overall an effective case was made that TWP both can and needs to be incorporated into larger programs ... [not just] smaller projects and programs on the 'revolutionary' end of the TWP scale”

Overall an effective case was made that TWP both can and needs to be incorporated into larger programs from the outset. To this end, a number of practical cases were presented and discussed that roughly corresponded to:

1. The problems that larger programs encountered when trying to think and work politically
2. Lessons that can be learnt from instances in which TWP approaches have been incorporated into certain aspects of larger programs.

The major structural and policy issues preventing the adoption of flexible, politically smart programming in larger aid programmes were identified as:

- **Problems of personnel:** It was noted that “being politically savvy” is not a core competency that large aid programs seek in recruiting staff. As a result, many programs do not have the staff capacity to think and work politically. This said, it was also observed that over the last 10 years, there has been a move towards recruiting staff with both technical expertise and a more generalist background that are able and willing to acknowledge the importance of governance and politics as well as execute technically-specialist work, so small steps in the right direction are being taken.
- **Lack of engagement with senior leadership:** Over the course of the cases presented it became clear that savvy and enabling country directors who were behind the TWP agenda were necessary. If country directors (and other senior leaders) are not attuned to TWP, then the number of potential points of entry and/or leverage will be significantly reduced. Greater embedding of TWP into country programs can't rely on a revolution from below (or even from the middle).
- **Problems of vision:** It was noted that different concepts mean different things to different people, and gaining both unity and clarity of vision is difficult. The example was given of how the 'working with the grain' agenda has been interpreted. It is often misinterpreted as supporting the status quo, when in reality it is – or should be – about identifying the local groups and processes that are supporting public goods and developmental goals and working with them. In some cases there did not seem to be a clear vision regarding the types of changes to institutions and power relations that programming staff were trying to achieve through TWP.
- **Problems of M&E and attribution:** The kinds of activities that TWP demands – relationship building, iterative and adaptive working – defy easy measurement. As a result TWP is rarely reflected in business cases, program cycles and results frameworks, and these may not be appropriate to processes that can be described as 'muddling through' or 'disjointed incrementalism'. In some of the cases presented it was noted that even when TWP principles have been applied, it's difficult to tell the stories of change. Several ideas were proposed for how we might recreate project frameworks that better incentivise and support TWP. We also need to think about how we can tell better stories and produce 'rigorous enough' evidence that makes the case for TWP. It was noted that a lot of TWP initiatives are not – and sometimes cannot be – documented, and may be dependent on contractors, with an often high turnover of staff. This means that it is hard to learn lessons and keep a constant vision of TWP when not everyone's up-to-date or aware of the agenda.

Over the cases presented, however; several entry points for TWP were also identified. These included:

- **The importance of walking away:** Although difficult to do, when something isn't working, walking away can actually create space for critical reflection that can open the way for approaches that think and work more politically.
- **Not being tied to strict project frameworks:** Many of the cases presented of successful TWP attributed their flexibility to the fact that they were not tied to rigid logframes. While some programs were implemented entirely without logframes, others had logframes that were able to be successfully revised at various stages of the program's implementation.
- **Creating coalitions of interests:** It was shown that TWP requires identifying both facilitators and spoilers, and convincing them that the interventions also work in *their* interest. This may involve creating programs that align with government priorities (as long as these priorities also align with broader program objectives).
- **Creating room for manoeuvre:** Sometimes TWP approaches were able to emerge in more traditional programs because some space was created for innovation, or some cover was provided for those who 'bent' the normal rules. If the positive outcomes of this “space to innovate” are presented to key stakeholders, then space may be opened up in future programs' designs. These examples can be used to share strategies for organisational change.

Overall, the meeting proved very successful in enabling meaningful discussion about what thinking and working politically means in practice, the role that more gendered approaches could play in this practice, and the kinds of changes that need to take place for the TWP approach to become more mainstream and large-scale. As one participant noted, “the meeting has broadened the discussion – while we don't know the answers, we're clearer on some of the questions”.