

# Thinking & Working Politically Community of Practice Workshop Report



## 'Big messy problems'

London, 7 June 2017

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This one-day workshop was a chance to explore recent developments and debates in Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) and to map out future priorities for the Community of Practice (CoP). The event, which was oversubscribed, brought together around 35 participants with a diverse range of interests and organisational backgrounds. Approximately half of the audience were new to the CoP and in comparison to previous meetings there was much greater representation from NGOs and the private sector. There was a collective sense that politics and power has now moved much closer to the centre of development thinking and practice. The meeting also reflected on some of the challenges that exist in mainstreaming more politically informed and engaged approaches, particularly in light of emerging trends in the geo-political landscape.

The day was structured around four sessions. The first was an opportunity to take stock of recent progress, to reflect on some of the insights and implications of the 2017 World Development Report (WDR), and to hear brief reports from participants at other recent events. The group then looked at how TWP might move beyond its original programmatic focus and be applied to 'big messy problems', illustrated partly through a close discussion of case studies on trans-boundary and regional issues in Asia and Africa. In the third session the meeting looked briefly at how TWP thinking is being applied in three thematic areas: anti-corruption, gender and extractives. The event concluded with a discussion of potential opportunities for future work and group activities in light of a recent funding commitment to the TWP CoP from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). The workshop was conducted under the Chatham House rule which enables frank and insightful discussion.

### What is the current state of play?

It is now widely recognised in the aid community that 'politics matters' for development and there is a growing body of evidence that confirms the importance of understanding and engaging with underlying issues of power and politics. TWP advocates can be found amongst senior figures in most major donors including DFAT (Australia), DFID (UK), USAID (USA), and the World Bank. Having begun organically in 2013 as an informal learning and support network for like-minded governance specialists, the TWP CoP has sustained a rise in demand and interest on a scale that few would have predicted. The momentum behind TWP is bringing the group's ideas out of the traditional governance space to new audiences. TWP is increasingly of interest and value to work in sectors including economic growth, public services, and the environment. This is reflected in the increased reference to TWP, political economy and adaptation within programmes and policies.

The World Bank's flagship report, the [World Development Report 2017](#), points to the TWP CoP as a source of new ideas on how to engage with the political dynamics that shape capacity and development outcomes. The report also draws on some TWP-style thinking. For example, it illustrates how to address the power asymmetries that can frustrate effective policy interventions, through tapping into the incentives of key actors, shifting their preferences and beliefs, and re-shaping the contestability of the policy arena. These changes can come about through bargains amongst elites, through greater citizen engagement, or through reform coalitions. This prompted a discussion amongst the group around how best to use political economy analysis to inform ways of influencing or supporting local actors to bring about development progress. As illustrated in the WDR, international actors need to be aware that change sometimes involves leaders actively shaping the beliefs and preferences of other elites by altering the political environment. In other contexts, leaders more subtly shift elite incentives by deploying bargaining tactics and strategies to promote coordination and reach win-win solutions.

Further confirmation of the uptake of TWP in the World Bank was in evidence at the Jakarta Doing Development Differently (DDD) workshop in March 2017; a network that shares many of the principles of TWP. It was encouraging to see a new audience being exposed to TWP messages, particularly amongst local civil society organisations (CSOs) and representatives from the Indonesian government. There was, however, a tendency at the Jakarta meeting for the TWP/DDD label to be applied quite loosely to a wide range of approaches and activities, many of which would fit quite comfortably into traditional advocacy work or good-governance programming. As discussed in more detail below, this highlights the risk that as the TWP Community aims to reach a wider audience its core messages become de-politicised or diluted. In other words, that TWP is applied to conventional linear or technical programmes without actually changing their fundamental approaches.

## Big messy problems

TWP advocates have tended to focus on nudging relatively small-scale governance programmes towards a deeper engagement with local political dynamics. Much of the discussion at the London meeting was concerned with whether TWP has now reached a level of clarity and influence where it could be applied to larger-scale, cross-cutting development challenges and move beyond its conventional programmatic focus. Can TWP be applied to big messy problems: those large scale development challenges that are complex (rather than complicated), that are cross-cutting and multifaceted, and are often global or trans-boundary in character?

Some participants questioned whether it is feasible to do TWP-style work within the context of bigger projects with larger budgets. They argued that the approach is better suited to smaller, nimble initiatives that can make small bets and have the agility to scale funding up or down depending on which ones pay off. In addition, they suggested that it may be sensible to focus on 'small-p' political constraints within particular programmes rather than broader and messier problems where it would be harder to demonstrate the impact of TWP. Others argued that the distinction between larger and smaller interventions was misleading; even seemingly small development issues are part of larger problems, and so working politically at a 'small' scale may be an entry point to bring about more fundamental change. They contended that the TWP approach is valid at scale and applicable beyond governance, beyond programmes and beyond aid. As Duncan Green [notes](#), the potential scale for TWP might be put to the test by the recent decision in DFID to merge the governance and economic development teams. This presents both an opportunity for TWP advocates amongst the governance cadre to influence larger-scale development activity around economic growth, but also a risk that the governance agenda might be squeezed out altogether.

## Trans-boundary issues

To explore practically how TWP might be applied to larger and messier development challenges, the meeting looked at recent work on regional issues. Addressing regional problems involves engaging with complex political dynamics both within individual countries as well as between countries. 'Deep-dive' case study explorations of the Mekong River Commission and the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) revealed the highly political processes involved in trans-boundary water management and co-operation. Given the diverse range of national interests, development goals and strategic plans at stake, fostering co-operation around shared water resources depends on nudging multiple actors and partners to achieve desired impacts. In terms of applying TWP to larger-scale development challenges, one of the lessons from the example of water diplomacy is the need to engage with a diverse range of actors. Although governments are the main players in the Mekong region, for example, there are many others jostling for space in decision-making arenas, including NGOs, media, business, financiers, policy research institutes and universities. As a consequence, those networks and organisations that have established flexible links with multiple actors have been particularly useful in facilitating dialogue around politically sensitive issues. Another lesson that emerged from these case studies concerned the way that technical information and analysis can often feed into and support political strategies to foster co-operation. For example, by gathering robust technical data to illustrate the risk of water shortages, the NBI has made headway on the political task of encouraging the riparian countries to coordinate their water-use plans.

A TWP lens has also been brought to bear in navigating regional issues in Africa such as trade facilitation. The transportation of goods along trade corridors, for example, involves a range of formal and informal agreements and deals between operators at different scales, inland and coastal transporters, and unions and shipper's councils. Reforms to promote efficiency are likely to face resistance unless they can take account of these different interests and power relations. In addition, the willingness of countries to make regional trade commitments is shaped by the way in which those decisions create winners and losers, both within and between countries. The reality of domestic political resistance to regional commitments or investment often means that reformers must aim for 'best fit' approaches rather than best practice. The importance of TWP in this context is underscored by the experience of organisations such as TradeMark East Africa (TMEA), a sub-national trade-facilitation organisation which pools funding from a number of donors. TMEA has shown agility and flexibility in how it intervenes in the political arena, along with a willingness to experiment and learn from failures - qualities which are helped by the fact that it operates independently of direct donor control.

## TWP in thematic areas

The workshop then looked at how a TWP approach is being applied to three significant and cross-cutting development issues: anti-corruption, gender and inclusion and extractive resource governance.

**Anti-Corruption:** In the face of poor returns from conventional large-scale programmes anti-corruption programmes, DFID's Anti-Corruption Evidence Programme (ACE) has been created to investigate more effective initiatives. Applying TWP principles in this sector means targeting the behaviours and incentives which underpin specific types of corruption. The programme draws on political economy analysis, theories of rent-seeking, and political settlements analysis to assess the feasibility of particular strategies. The turn to TWP has come about partly through a realisation that anti-corruption initiatives are only likely to have traction if their enforcement is aligned with the interests and capabilities of powerful individuals and organisations at the sectoral level.

**Gender:** Despite areas of overlap and common points of emphasis, until recently there were only limited examples of TWP concepts and forms of analysis being applied to issues of gender equality. Members of the TWP Community have been at the vanguard of efforts to address this gap. The importance of integrating a gender perspective in TWP and the links between TWP and gender-related programming were discussed at a meeting of the group in Bangkok in 2015. Building on that momentum, recent research into women's leadership and coalitions working for gender-related objectives, much of which has been undertaken by the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP), confirms the importance of thinking and working politically to shift gendered power relations. Locally-led coalitions and leadership processes that unfold through formal and informal channels are among the TWP themes at the centre of this emerging literature.

**Extractives:** To explore how a TWP approach can be applied to extractives governance, the workshop looked at the DFID-funded Facility for Oil Sector Transparency (FOSTER) programme in Nigeria. FOSTER aims to promote accountability in the oil and gas sector. Efforts to improve the governance of the sector have historically been frustrated by predatory and collusive relationships between political and business elites. FOSTER works strategically with government, civil society and the private sector to overcome these obstacles. This involves ongoing political economy analysis to identify and support individuals or institutions with the potential to influence reform processes. FOSTER's flexible funding model has been central to its effectiveness. It has no obligation to support particular organisations or deliver predefined outputs and can react quickly to changes in the political economy environment in ways that are unlikely to be predicted in more linear programme models. This agility also depends on having in-country staff with appropriate aptitudes for political analysis and engagement. Another key element in the success of FOSTER was the fact that it worked under the radar with no branding, logos or business cards. By deliberately maintaining a low profile, FOSTER was able to engage with political and business actors who might otherwise be hesitant to collaborate with international donors.

## Where do we go from here?

**Reaching out to new audiences.** There was a sense amongst some participants that whilst the TWP Community has successfully influenced the development narrative, more work was needed to strengthen coalitions in support of TWP and to engage with more senior donor officials. This may be partly a case of developing more effective ways to share information about the contacts, networks and tools being developed by TWP advocates.

According to one individual at the London meeting, the need for coalition building is likely to gain in importance as more actors who may not share a TWP perspective move into the development space in the near future. In particular there are two wider global political trends which will shape the context in which the Community operates. The first is the increasing emphasis on the narrative of aid in the national interest. The second is the growing importance attached to modern slavery, refugees and extremism. Both trends imply a much closer correspondence between development policy and security, which could limit the space for politically nuanced thinking and practice.

As several members commented, it is important in this context for the Community of Practice to branch out beyond the group's traditional audience of aid donors and NGOs. In the UK, for example, aid money is increasingly being directed to the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). There is an urgent need for the TWP Community to articulate its offer to these other branches of government – as well as an opportunity to learn how political engagement is practiced in non-aid ministries, where TWP principles and practices may already be operative. Others added that the private sector and multinational corporations should be a target audience in the future, particularly in light of the increasing investment in DFID's private equity arm, the CDC.

One member pointed to a lack of ethnic and linguistic diversity in the room in London, suggesting that the group should also try to broaden its own internal audience. However, it is worth noting that this meeting did not represent the totality of the TWP membership base, and that the composition of the audience for the Community's meetings is inevitably shaped by the choice of location.

**Supporting responsive social contracts.** It was argued that TWP advocates should do more to challenge development orthodoxy. Much of the conventional aid narrative is premised on the legitimacy and responsiveness of recipient governments. But if those recipients are corrupt or predatory then aid money can end up supporting harmful political regimes. Rather than allowing TWP to become an 'add-on' to conventional programming which may do more damage than good, the onus is on Community members to interrogate how development resources can be used to support more legitimate and beneficial social contracts.

**Clarifying the group's normative agenda and message.** A number of participants suggested that, in branching out to new audiences and in challenging the tendency of aid to bolster harmful political orders, there may be a need for the Community to clarify its own normative values and ambitions. It was also suggested that the language of politics may be off-putting to some audiences, and so finding an alternative vocabulary to articulate the group's messages might be an advantage.

**Future work streams.** Members were keen to use the recently-confirmed funding to make progress with task-oriented work and to develop the evidence base for TWP. Alongside the production of a synthesis paper, a new case study, and learning resources, it was proposed that seed funding be made available for two working groups focused on specific themes or sectoral issues.

One participant pointed out that the funding is a risk as well as an opportunity. There is a danger that in putting a more formal structure in place, TWP will become part of the same conventional aid architecture on which it has provided a critical perspective. It was suggested that, instead of providing toolkits and other learning resources about TWP, it may more be more effective if the Community's messages remained implicit. In addition, whilst some members felt it was important for TWP to have a clear conceptual identity, particularly in relation to other similar networks and frameworks such as DDD or problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA), others argued that the group's success and influence is partly due to the fact that it has resisted a formal definition and identity. According to this view, the Community has been able to attract more interest because it has not been too closely associated with any particular organisation or institutional agenda. Whilst there was no outright consensus on these issues, there was a general sense that the challenges and opportunities presented by funding, and also the changes in the wider political environment for aid and development, call for research and engagement strategies which are themselves politically savvy.

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The Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) Community of Practice was formed in Delhi in November 2013. The CoP brings together a group of senior officials from leading development organisations, along with leading thinkers and researchers, with the aim of working together to promote thinking and working politically in development. We focus on how better thinking and working politically can improve development effectiveness, and particularly on how development programming may need to adapt to allow this to happen. For more information please contact us at [info@twpcommunity.org](mailto:info@twpcommunity.org); visit <https://twpcommunity.org/>; or follow us [@TWP\\_Community](#)

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