

Thinking & Working Politically Community of Practice Workshop Report



London, 15-16 September 2014

Session 1 - What do we want from the TWP Agenda?

To move from political analysis/PEA to political strategy. Create an arena in which to discuss failure honestly and openly, and that provides support and advice for engaging with high level leadership, e.g. senior officials and ministers. Can this group provide the access to information and resources to support this? We need to think about the issues that politicians are grappling with – targeted influencing strategy. How best to engage with high level leadership, use of watch words “certainty, brevity, and surety”.

To ensure change in our organisations we need a **multi-level strategy**, looking at development diplomacy (high level interactions), national plans and economic reforms, and project level.

Engage beyond the governance arena. Can we produce case studies that showcase TWP in other (traditionally more technical) sectors? Help to **spread this outside of the governance silo**? Suggestion that economists are gatekeepers in some organisations, so we should try to bring them on board. However, a note of caution: **we shouldn't try to move outside of our micro-silo too quickly**. We need to have a coherent framework to understand and explain what we're talking about first.

Credibility is key at the organisational level. Suggestion that if we have evidence that TWP and our advice is sensible, useful and connected to their realities, this will create demand and credibility in different groups. Suggest this needs to be led by sector people in country.

Case studies or evidence? Agreement that **we need more and better evidence of what TWP** can achieve but no consensus about how we should demonstrate that. Certainly the answer is not more guidance – **“case studies open the mind, guidance closes the mind”**. Regional/sectoral practitioner CoPs – need more input from the field. What would be most persuasive or influential, case studies or more rigorous/traditional evidence? Some asserted that we can't just say – ‘here is an interesting program that we think kind of worked’... that we need strong analysis with clear products and outputs, which can be translated into actions and strategy. But there was some reluctance as the evidence so far has been mixed, and there was a fear that this would therefore create pushback. “TWP is about realising there is no black and white – it is more nuanced [shades of grey]. It is actually very difficult to convey that...” Case studies could be a better (or complimentary) way to illustrate this nuance; they are more persuasive to practitioners.

Credibility is key. Credibility means different things to different groups but it's important. Perhaps **identify “key thinkers” to help sell the message**.

Unintended consequences or counterfactual. Might be useful and persuasive to have evidence or examples of where not ‘TWP’ has resulted in failure or unintended consequences. Can we use the growing awareness of the **risk of failure and the requirement to ‘do no harm’** in development projects to push TWP? TWP can ensure a better, more appropriate and successful approach (possibly?). A cautionary note was raised to point out that TWP can also have unintended consequences and can ‘do harm’ if it is done badly, if the analysis is not properly embedded in practice or even if things just go wrong.

Compelling narrative that has traction with senior leaders, sector specialists and program staff. This will mean translating this into language that makes sense to colleagues outside of governance silo. May need a number of different targeted narratives that speak to different groups, and their issues. Key is being able to speak the same language as the people you're talking to. Appeal to interests, understand problems, offer solutions. This requires us to not only simplify our language but to have better knowledge of language that resonates elsewhere.

Simplify TWP, less jargon, less esoteric/exclusive. The idea that TWP is about niche or boutique projects that are special/different to traditional development practice risks others (outside of silo) thinking it's not for them. **Need to make simple case about fundamental utility and importance of TWP, and appeal to the 95% of non-governance/-political programming**. Language is important here. TWP is amorphous & can be easily misinterpreted. We need to keep in mind how we sell this. Instead we can say: “how does institutional change happen? What assumptions do we make? And, how can we make it sustainable?” or “Who controls what, and how?” or start to talk about this as “good aid practice”, “effective aid”, “smart programming”, etc. But this also risks masking the politics, which is why we're here in the first place.

Framing: 'Do no harm' and 'unintended consequences' are useful framing tools. We can exploit opportunities with **the right framing**. E.g.

- Innovation agenda: If we want aid to be innovative and catalytic, what do we mean by this, and how can we frame it?
- Beyond aid,
- Post-2015

In order to spread this and have influence we need to understand **how change happens in our own organisations**. Currently feel constrained by authorising environments, procurement processes, tender pipeline etc. Need to address these issues too. Can we use the comparative strengths of our organisations to work together?

Important to **collaborate with other groups working on similar issues** (but not overlap). How can we connect our networks? Our own organisations connect on a number of levels so need to be dialled in to all of these. Networks to connect with immediately might be those that already think about politics and power (natural allies) like gender, state-building or fragile states people. Foreign affairs/foreign office colleagues can also be open to ideas of politics and power: People engage best with these kinds of ideas/advice in:

- Rapidly changing country environments (critical junctures)
- Obviously political sectors
- Informed, enlightened leadership in country offices

Embed gender into programming – **should see gender as a valuable tool** to better understand and get better results rather than as a bolted on 'requirement'.

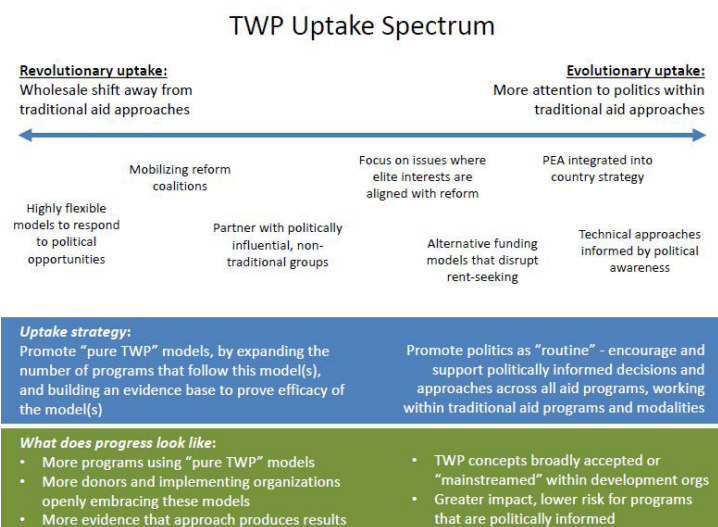
Session 2 – Defining the Essence of TWP

What makes a TWP program distinctive? There is a dilemma here: we've agreed that TWP is a departure from traditional practice but we don't want to make it an exclusive club irrelevant to the rest of the aid world. SO: **don't present it as 'cool new thing' but as an evolution of an existing agenda** (effectiveness agenda?). Find it hard to articulate this to non-governance sector. Need more clarity so as not to dilute the concept (narrative?)

Do we need revolutionary or evolutionary uptake? Needs to be a combination of the two. Using whichever approach is the most appropriate for a given program, sector, context etc. What is distinctive?

- About moving from PEA to power analysis.
- Politically astute programming (but not necessarily 'Political', i.e. regime change)
- How institutional change really happens.
- Targeted, iterative, problem-focused approach.
- Building coalitions around an issue.
- Brokering relationships.
- Looks like capacity building, but not about individuals. Developing the networks and linkages of individuals and organisation in order to have wider impact.
- Being comfortable with and having a system to deal with uncertainty.

Spectrum of revolutionary to evolutionary uptake of TWP (helps to define TWP)



Questions about managing TWP programs:

MEL: We need a **results framework** that can capture this kind of change. Big challenge. Can we separate monitoring and accountability mechanisms from learning mechanisms? Staff already overloaded with accountability requirements etc. Should we capture this through research or program management mechanisms?

Partners: **Problem with contractors who don't get it**, ToRs that can't capture it. Weak local partner capacity in fragile contexts. Program Leadership is essential to get buy-in (top and bottom) and build momentum.

Organisational structures and incentives: System requires certainty about results in order to get approval. Low appetite to learn from risk and failure. Focus is on money rather than change (as measure of success). No rewards for working like this. Competitive procurement is a challenge to this. People: very dependent upon how politically savvy our staff are and how effectively they can use this approach. Hiring/

promoting/posting procedures and rules do not currently encourage this.

Peer support: This approach requires commitment, 'emotional intelligence' and is very time intensive. Possible way to spread this is through peer support, but should be practitioner to practitioner not hub-spoke. Difficult with busy people.

It was agreed that we need at the minimum: **Narrative to persuade sector colleagues (and others)**; Clarify the minimum conditions for a project to be considered TWP (analysis, interrogative process affecting design?) Work on framing. Evidence on the difference TWP makes (annotated bibliography/database of cases?)

Session 3 - Strategy for taking this forward

How can we move from 5% of our portfolio (revolutionary) TWP programs to 25%? Instead of this suggestion that we need to aim to improve the effectiveness of the other 95% by (say) 15% through evolutionary TWP.

Questions we need to ask: **What strategy do we need? Who do we need to influence? When do we need to step back and let this move outside of the governance silo? What tools can we use? What are the barriers? How have people done this successfully in the past?** E.g.

World Bank's strategy for anti-corruption: needs strong framing/meta-narrative – define a problem and a solution (good vs. evil!), incentives for senior leaders, power of outsiders to influence. But: corruption is very easy to package as black and white – TWP 'dabbles in grey'. How can we sell this so we don't lose the grey?

Need to be aware: original ideas of original small group will always be co-opted, adjusted, moulded etc. as they grow and expand outside of that group. **We need to be ready and willing to take a backseat and beware of self aggrandizement.**

Narrative: Define problem and articulate solution:

- Unintended consequences.
- Risk of failure (reputational, fiduciary)
- Do no harm – working with local actors, smart programming.
- End of aid?/Aid needs to change (new donors), aid scepticism and beyond-aid agendas.
- Making aid more effective – evolution of the effectiveness agenda
- New geography of poverty (MICs)
- Innovation?
- Natural allies first? (gender, fragile states, etc.)

Suggestion: **Advocacy Strategy** or ad hoc, sharing of experiences in and across organisations (create demand from bottom up).

What we need:

- Credibility and resonance before evidence (more case studies)
- Advocacy strategy that targets both high level leadership and operational staff.
- Narrative (adaptable, tip sheet, core message, targeted to different audiences).

Actions

- Group will get together and work on narrative
- Investigate advocacy strategy (advocacy consultant?)
- Turning PE/PEA into political strategy (group will work on this).
- Begin engaging beyond governance – next meeting needs to reach out to sector colleagues.
- Change in language (away from politics but without losing the essence – power, ideas, interests?)
- Start increasing the coalition and collaborating with other groups working for similar ends.
- OECD workshop bring together GovNET, gender equality, conflict & fragility experts Nov 2014.
- Strategic calendar to help targeting/messaging.

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. The CoP will be organising events and developing a number of tools in 2015. The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) acts as secretariat for the CoP, and any enquiries can be sent to info@dlprog.org.
