TWP COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Thinking and working politically:

What have we learned since 2013?

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AM	Adaptive Management
CLA	Collaboration, Learning, Adapting
CoP	Community of Practice
DDD	Doing Development Differently
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DFID	Department for International Development
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
EoPO	End of Program Outcome
FCDO	Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
JSR	Journey to Self-Reliance
MDA	Ministries, Departments, and Agencies
MP	Member of Parliament
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPM	Oxford Policy Management
PDIA	Problem Driven Iterative Adaption
PEA	Political Economy Analysis
PROKAS	Promoting Knowledge for Accountable Systems
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TWP	Thinking and Working Politically
UK	United Kingdom
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1. Introduction

1.1. The Thinking and Working Politically (TWP)[1] Community of Practice (CoP) was established at a small meeting tacked on at the end of a meeting of Governance Advisers working for the United Kingdom's Department of International Development (DFID) on South and South-East Asian countries, held in Delhi in November 2013. Since then, a number of meetings have been held throughout the world, each addressing different issues; 'TWP' has entered the lexicon of mainstream development; the CoP has expanded to more than 300 people; a Washington DC chapter has been established; and the International CoP has been granted modest funding from DFID's successor, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and from Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). It is legitimate to ask, however, what has been achieved operationally: how have the ideas underpinning TWP affected operational practice?

1.2. This short paper traces the evolution of the idea and practice of TWP from 2013 to late 2021, and identifies what we have learned. What has been successful, and what has not? I asked in 2017 whether TWP had become a second orthodoxy (Teskey, 2017). Did this represent hubris or was 2017 in some ways the apogee of what might rather grandly be called the TWP 'movement'?

1.3. The paper has four sections: section 2 considers the evolution of the TWP 'idea'; section 3 briefly summarises how the context for development has changed since 2013; section 4 presents ten lessons learned; and part 5 concludes with a forward look on prospects for TWP.

2. The Evolution of the TWP and the CoP

2.1. There is no one unequivocal reason why the TWP CoP was established in late 2013. But three influences can be noted. First, the cumulative effect of the arguments and evidence presented by a senior DFID official, Sue Unsworth[2] and Adrian Leftwich, Professor of Politics at the University of York.

2.2. Two publications then spoke to the contemporary 'governance' *Zeitgeist*. The most significant was *Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution*, by Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont (2013). This book (called 'hugely insightful' by Francis Fukuyama) sought to explain why development assistance had failed to take politics into account and what could be done about it. The book was widely quoted – especially by governance advisers in the main bilateral agencies. It gave legitimacy to arguments that economics and economists held too much sway in those agencies.

[1] The origin of the phrase 'TWP' can be traced to Stefan Kossoff, a Senior Governance Adviser in DFID, who in 2009 circulated an internal paper entitled 'A Note on Thinking and Working Politically'.
[2] Instigator of DFID's 'Drivers of Change' work.

2.3. **The second written piece arose in DFID.** DFID's Chief Economist (always one grade above every other Chief Adviser position in the UK's senior civil service structure) at the time was Professor Stefan Dercon from Oxford University. He ruffled some feathers (and stroked others) by circulating an internal paper to staff entitled 'Aid is Politics' in July 2013 (see right). Dercon noted that development is a messy business and more often than not it does not go according to plan. He suggested that 'politics may get in the way'. DFID's Governance cadre interpreted this as giving the green light to consider issues of politics head on. Governance Advisers took this as their brief to try to articulate guidance for practitioners that would enable them to 'take politics into account'.

Aid is Politics

Stefan Dercon, Chief Economist
Friday, 26 July 2013

1. **Development is messy process.** Anyone telling us that "He'll Fix It" has to be looked upon with suspicion. But a common view has developed that it can be possible "to do" aid as a detached, technocratic process. Sachs has probably best articulated this view, with strong conviction and apparent certainty.[1] In this view, we are conscious that most of the contexts we work in are difficult, but we can find really worthwhile things to do, and with deep technical knowledge and much effort we can improve lives. I won't argue against this – yes, we can. But we also should not underestimate that politics may get in the way, and the short run results of this work may have consequences for achieving development in the longer run, and not necessary positive ones.

2.4. **These two publications, alongside the work of Unsworth and Leftwich, were in the back of many minds as the first meeting of what was to become the CoP was held, in an upper room of a suitably modest hotel. The meeting was attended by 40 or 50 people, mainly practitioners.** The objective and purposes of the meeting are reproduced on the right. The objectives were both modest and profound: how to follow through on Dercon's assertion that 'politics may get in the way', and in so doing influence development thinking and practice.

Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice
New Delhi, November 21-22, 2013

Objective

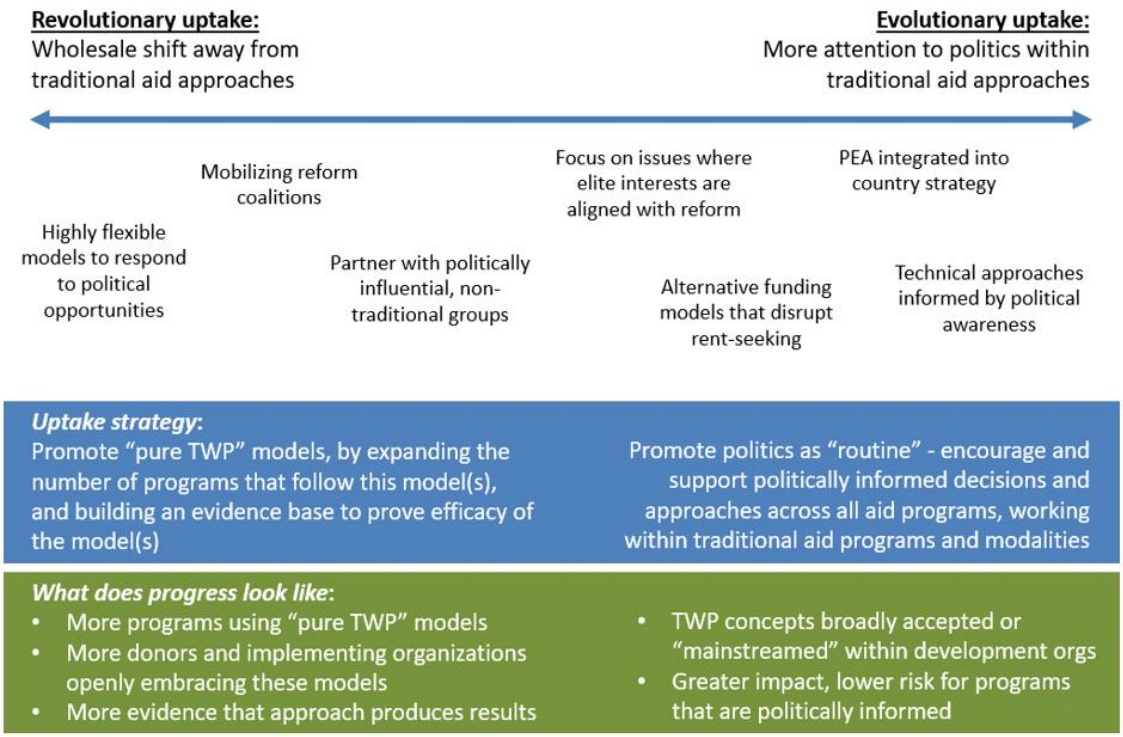
- To inform and influence the international development and donor community regarding how effectively to follow-through on the rhetorical and strategic assertion that 'politics matters.'

Purposes

- To bring together experienced and respected policy staff, researchers and practitioners to discuss the CoP [Community of Practice], share current approaches, identify what may be working, what definitely isn't working and some of the challenges and issues to be faced in making TWP [Thinking and Working Politically] the default operating mode of development organisations; and
- To identify a program of work that will produce recommendations on appropriate and effective T&WP programming, modalities, instruments and operational approaches for development agencies and implementing partners.

2.5. **One participant at that meeting was Tom Parks, now Country Director for The Asia Foundation in Thailand. At that time, he was Australia's Senior Fragility and Conflict Adviser.** He recommended what became known as the 'spectrum approach' (Figure 1 reproduces this approach).

Figure 1: The Spectrum approach to TWP



Source: Tom Parks, internal AusAID memorandum

2.6. **Parks was making the distinction between programs that were predominantly opportunistic, responding to sudden windows of opportunity, and were focused mainly on policy reform, and programs that were more 'traditional', but which required greater political insight in order to be effective.** The quintessential, and oft-quoted, example of the former is the 'Coalitions for Change' program in the Philippines, implemented by The Asia Foundation (Sidel and Faustino, 2019). While some development programs have sought to replicate this model (Pyoe Pin in Myanmar, PROKAS in Bangladesh, The Asia Foundation's work on solid waste disposal in Cambodia), the emphasis of most TWP practitioners has been on evolutionary uptake.

2.7. **It can be argued that 2014 was the year that TWP came of age.** The second meeting of the group was held in January in London, taking advantage of interested colleagues that were in town at the time. The focus of the meeting was to identify case studies which would inform an appropriate and realistic approach to operationalising 'evolution'.

2.8. **Of greater import and impact was the work of globally renowned scholarly professionals and professional scholars.** Alina Rocha-Menocal[3] (definitely a scholarly professional) published a paper that emphasised the 'W' in the TWP abbreviation: that aid agencies and individual practitioners need to work differently, as well as (merely) think politically (Rocha Menocal, 2014). While the paper did not go into detail about how this could be achieved, it provided the unforgettable line that considering politics in development was like the family going on a bear

[3] Currently Co-chair of the international CoP.

hunt in Michael Rosen's children's classic: 'we can't go around it, we can't go over it, we'll have to go through it…'. The CoP was established to do just that.

2.9. **Further impetus came in October 2014 when three globally renowned professional scholars at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government – Lant Pritchett, Matt Andrews, and Michael Woolcock –**unveiled the Harvard Manifesto on Doing Development Differently (DDD). DDD was built on the ideas expressed in their 2012 paper on 'capability traps' (Andrews et al., 2012). The ideas underpinning TWP, DDD, and Problem Driven (PDIA) came to be seen as largely synonymous, although each emphasised slightly different aspects of the 'thinking politically' agenda (see Table 1, and the blog by Heather Marquette at https://oxfamapps.org/fp2p/what-were-missing-by-not-getting-our-twp-alphabet-straight/).

Figure 2: DDD, PDIA and TWP contrasted

	Doing Development Differently	Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation	Thinking and working politically
Three features emphasised	Use locally legitimate institutions Partnership not principal agent Focus on real results	Relentless focus on a specific problem Make many small 'bets' Learn and adapt as you go	Explicit recognition of competing interests Engage with (i.e. fund) reformers / pro-poor coalitions Based at all times in political economy perspectives: country / sector / program / issue
Common features	Context is everything Best fit not good practice No blueprint – rather flexible, adaptive, and responsive programming Real-time learning Long-term commitments with staff continuity Enabling, not doing		

Source: author

2.10. **As 2014 drew to a close, the issue of how politics influences the practice of development was discussed at the headquarters of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris,** at the annual meeting of the Governance Network. Professor Dercon was invited to speak. His argument (see text on the right) was both simple and profound: simple because he noted that while economists look for first best (Pareto optimal) solutions, political economy analysis (PEA) often suggests that second-best solutions may be all that is feasible; profound because this formulation would up-end the way most development organisations have always worked. The origins of today's frequently used phrase 'investments must be both technically desirable and politically feasible' can be traced to this meeting and this presentation.

First/Second best with political policy variables

- **First best: make it feasible through (political) influencing to drive change;**
- **Second best if non-feasible – but still with optimal influencing to drive change.**

Note:

- **Reforming economic and political institutions? Can we do this?**
- **Trying to influence organisations/civil society/press to reform. Not so clear how successful… e.g. decentralisation? Can we do this?**

2.11. **These developments were influencing the coalescence of ideas regarding the theory and practice of TWP.** In early 2015 the CoP published its 'Case for TWP' flyer (reproduced in Annex 1). The three core principles were presented and discussed at the European Centre for Development Policy and Management (ECDPM) in Maastricht in May 2015 (see the figure on the right). The Co-chairs of the CoP argued that these three principles must stand or fall together: the use of political economy approaches to inform analysis; a nuanced understanding of the local policy context; and – in response – appropriate flexibility and adapatation in design and implementation.

2.12. **Broad agreement was also reached on the real and substantive differences between what can be called 'traditional' approaches to aid planning and delivery and 'TWP' approaches.** These are summarised in Figure 2 (source: author).

Figure 3: Differences between traditional and TWP approaches to aid planning and delivery

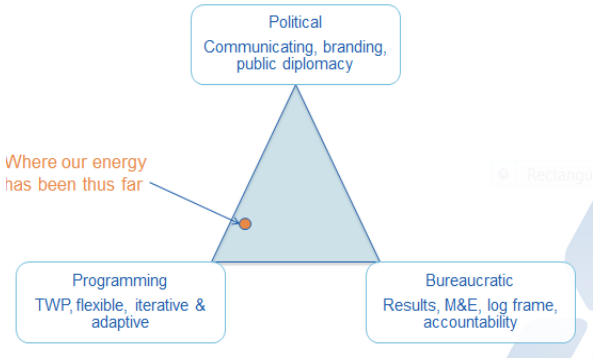
	Traditional	Adaptive
Discipline	Economics, management	Political economy, Institutional economics, entrepreneurial studies
Planning paradigm	Blueprint; end-state; linear; rational sequencing	Clear objectives but path undefined; disjointed incrementalism based on trial and error, iterative
Motif	Project frameworks	Systems theory, complexity
Philosophy	Idealist	Realist
Timing	Fixed	Open
Theory of Change	Prescriptive	Adaptive
Inputs	Programmed	Indicative
Success measures	SDGs, outputs	Processes, institutions, outcomes
Problem definition	Lack of resources or capacity constraints	Limited scope for collective action; reform resistant institutions
Changes sought	Transactional	Transformational
Change agents	Officials, TA	Coalitions, networks, leaders
Way of working	Principal-Agent	Partnership
Key partners	Central government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs)	Actors pressuring core MDAs for change

How was the CoP evolving?

2.13. **The CoP was evolving in ways that went beyond laying the groundwork for the approach.** It became clear that participants in CoP meetings valued a 'safe space' in which they could voice concerns regarding the barriers and vested interests in their own organisations that militated against any move towards either revolutionary or evolutionary uptake: general bureaucratic inertia, active resistance from management, procurement inflexibility, and the collision with the contemporaneous way in which the project framework was being used. One further issue repeatedly arose: sector colleagues sensed that the TWP agenda, and the associated PEA tools, was not only impinging on 'their' agenda, but that its primary message was 'why what we want to do won't work, rather than why it will'. This issue was taken to heart in 2015.

The Bangkok meeting of 2015

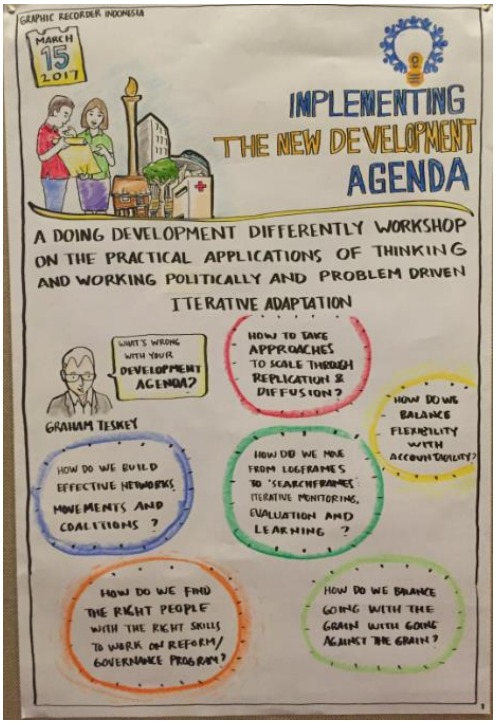
2.14. **A meeting of the CoP was convened in Bangkok in June 2015.** This meeting proved seminal on two counts. First, it was jointly convened by the TWP CoP and the gender team in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in Australia. The then Principal Gender Specialist in DFAT, Sally Moyle,[4] gave a presentation excoriating the TWP CoP for being largely gender-blind, given its focus on power dynamics at the national level and its preoccupation with the political settlement. The CoP took this to heart and has sought to address this in succeeding years (Brown et al., 2018).



2.15. **The second issue which had significant implications was a presentation by Professor David Hudson,[5] who reflected on where CoP energies had been spent, and where the need may be** – as shown in the schema on the right. Professor Hudson argued that the CoP was too introverted and inward-looking, and had neglected the need to involve and engage colleagues from different backgrounds. Again, this was undoubtedly the case, but six years on from 2015, less progress has been made here than the CoP would have liked.

Jakarta

2.16. **One other meeting is worth mentioning.** In March 2017, the Government of Indonesia, the World Bank, and Australia's DFAT hosted a workshop, entitled 'Implementing the new Development Agenda', which attracted over 200 participants from all over South-East Asia. The workshop was designed to *deepen* knowledge of the agenda and *broaden* its appeal – in particular its relevance to developing countries themselves and not just the donor community. The workshop organised parallel sessions, looking at specific issues that aid practitioners and their national counterparts are grappling with:



- taking TWP / DDD approaches to scale through replication and diffusion;
- from 'log frame' to 'search-frame': iterative monitoring and learning;
- networks, movements and coalitions: beyond the usual suspects;
- flexible and accountable: making your authorising environment work for you;
- building the 'dream team': politically astute, problem driven and adaptive; and

[4] Now Honorary Associate Professor at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia.
[5] Professor of Politics and Development at the University of Birmingham, UK.

- going against the grain: gender and inclusion.

2.17. The Jakarta meeting spurred further thinking and crystallisation of the TWP 'agenda'. Many presenters emphasised the need for the ability to revise program design and shift budgets in real time as implementation and learning proceed. As result, TWP further developed the three principles noted in paragraph 2.10 above.

- being much more thoughtful and analytical at the selection stage (thinking about what is both technically appropriate and what is politically feasible);
- being more rigorous about our theories of change (how change actually happens) and theories of action (how and why the interventions proposed will make a difference);
- being able to work flexibly (meaning to *respond* to changing policy priorities and contexts, and by *adapting* implementation – changing course, speeding up or slowing down, adding or dropping inputs and activities, changing sequencing etc.); and
- showing the willingness and ability actively to intervene alongside, and support, social groups and coalitions advocating reform for the public good.

The Oxford Policy Management (OPM) review of April 2018

2.18. The purpose of the review of the TWP CoP was to 'take stock of developments of the TWP Community of Practice, both since its inception and particularly since June 2017 in order to assess what works and what could be strengthened in terms of the practices within the community' (OPM, 2018). The review identified three key achievements:

- 'support to the establishment or affiliation of working groups within the TWP Community of Practice';
- 'the production of evidence papers within the Community of Practice to begin to aggregate data and generate lessons learned on the application of TWP in development discourse and practice'; and
- 'the establishment of a website with useful functions as a repository of key information and as a resource particularly for new or potential members'.

2.19. Recommendations included:

- the CoP should strengthen its communications;
- use any funding available to dedicate staff time to developing and communicating the CoP's strategic direction;
- develop different workshops to meet different group needs;
- explore the use of innovation labs; and
- coordinate the findings of wider research of relevance to TWP.

And finally….

2.20. **Prior to its abolition, DFID made a number of significant commitments to TWP, both conceptual and practical.** The 2018 Stabilisation Guide is anchored around TWP, and the current Governance Competency Framework notes the ability to think and work politically as the first core competency. In March 2019 DFID published its 'position paper' on governance (DFID, 2019). The paper identified four 'shifts' in its governance positioning. First among these was the adoption of TWP 'across all our initiatives' – not just so-called 'governance' programming (quoted on the right). It is not clear whether this commitment has survived DFID's abolition.

> **i. Thinking and working politically across all our initiatives**
>
> 43. Development interventions still too often underperform because they do not understand local politics and incentives or take politically feasible approaches that recognise the long-term, and difficult nature of change.[48] **Moving forward we will continue to prioritise the importance of thinking and working politically**. For example, as we have done, integrating PEA in our Country Development Diagnostics and Inclusive Growth Diagnostics to guide strategic portfolio decision making.

2.21. **The second commitment was an allocation of funds to the secretariat of the CoP, housed at the University of Birmingham.** Although scaled down, the (relatively modest) funding has survived and runs until the end of March 2023.

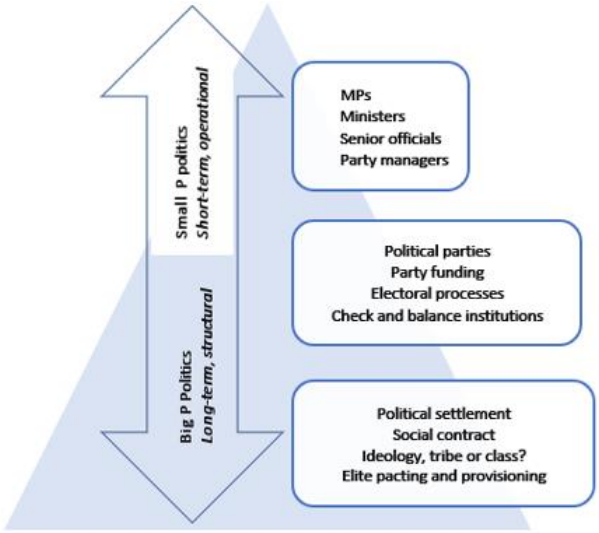
3. The changed context

3.1. **2013 now seems like ancient history.** The differences in geo-political and national contexts could hardly be more different. It is no exaggeration to say that DFID sat astride the donor world, and was widely admired for its consistency, coherence, and technical excellence. Down under, AusAID was – explicitly – modelling itself on DFID. A number of ex-DFID advisers were recruited[6] as AusAID, under the driven Directorship of Peter Baxter, sought to transform itself from a project factory into a serious development organisation. This ended in September 2013 following the federal election, when AusAID was abolished, literally overnight. Specialist skills were deemed unnecessary and hundreds of years of development experience walked out of the door, many experts were unceremoniously sacked, also overnight, with no prior warning. Observers are watching to see what will happen in the FCDO (Teskey, 2020).

3.2. **The geo-political environment has changed.** China has continued its inexorable rise, to the extent that we are once again living in a bi-polar world, even if it is, at the moment at least, an asymmetrical bipolarity. National interests dominate. Thomas Hobbes is back in fashion. The domestic political economy in many donor countries is less supportive of aid, and they are generating distinctive and mutually exclusive narratives: for example, Black Lives Matter and decolonising aid on the one hand, and the populist sloganeering of Global Britain and America First on the other. Post-Iraq, post-Syria, post-Afghanistan, the West's state-building agenda appears to be dead. Under Dominic Raab – then the Foreign Secretary – the FCDO was committed to Open Societies, under Liz Truss this may switch to a 'network of liberty'. Whatever the rhetoric, the debate is about the nature of the political regime: how societies are governed.

[6] Including the author.

3.3. **These trends have had implications for all aid agencies, most notably for the UK and Australia.** Less attention is now being paid to the underlying issues of governance, as policy reform, system strengthening, and institutional support rarely lead to the short-term photogenic results so beloved of ministers. Further, and of deeper concern, is that the dominant culture in foreign affairs departments seems to dismiss the idea that governance advisers have much to offer anyway. Over the last 18 months I have seen little evidence that the gap between high politics and low politics (as in the schema on the right) is being narrowed (Teskey, 2020). Indeed, I would note three trends as development agencies are 'asset stripped':



- **downgraded:** the critically important but unglamorous work of program design, review, and evaluation has been downgraded and is increasingly contracted out to consultants;
- **degraded:** in-country, frontline, technical policy discussions with partners has been degraded. Government-to-government discussions over technical issues now don't happen – or if they do it's through outsiders; and
- **upgraded:** the emphasis on the here and now, the transactional, the soundbite, the 'announceable', has been upgraded.

4. Ten lessons

4.1. **Much has happened since 2013.** Neither the patterning of geo-political affairs nor the organisational structure and culture of aid agencies has encouraged the adoption of TWP practices. The following lists ten lessons. They represent my personal take and undoubtedly are neither exclusive nor exhaustive. The ten lessons can be divided into macro- and micro-level observations. The three macro-level observations focus on the relationship between TWP and the geo-strategic context in which development is situated, while the seven micro-level considerations focus on the way individual investment projects and programs are designed and delivered. Whimsically, each is assigned a traffic light colour, in order to help indicate optimism (or otherwise) for the future.

Macro-level lessons

Lesson 1: TWP (and DDD) have been overwhelmed by changes in the international context

4.2. As noted in section 3, international relations have changed fundamentally since 2013: national interests now trump universal values, and countries are aggressively and unashamedly pursuing their own narrow national interests. TWP has got lost in this maelstrom. Ministers and senior officials in general, and in aid departments in particular, have little interest in project effectiveness and nuanced ways of operating. What matters is project visibility – something on

which rhetoric can be built and claims regarding 'results' can be made in the short term. Keynes was right – in the long term we are all dead, and the long term has no relevance for, or interest in, aid projects.

Lesson 2: The organisational culture and 'DNA' of formal government aid departments have major implications for their interest in, and ability to, 'think and work politically'.

4.3. For all the rhetorical support for TWP in policy documents, program designs, and requests for tenders, it is impossible to conclude that it has been translated into practice through changed operational systems, design flexibility, contracting arrangements and other mechanisms and processes on the donor side. Multilateral institutions continue to resist references to 'small p' politics, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) espouses neutral terminology, such as 'the Journey to Self-Reliance' (JSR) or 'Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting' (CLA). In Australia, the longer-term impact of the abolition of AusAID was thoughtfully considered by Richard Moore (Moore, 2019). Despite pulling some of his punches, Moore dissected the implications of the explicit rejection of the need for technical specialists in DFAT. This remains the case today: in December 2020, DFAT's Principal Governance Specialist vacated the position, and she will not be replaced. There is now only one governance specialist in DFAT: in 2013 there was a branch with 30 staff covering the full range of governance issues, from anti-corruption to law and justice, from public service reform to fragility and conflict. It may be too early to tell what is happening in the FCDO, but I doubt whether the commitment made in DFID's 2019 'Governance' Positions' paper – to adopt a TWP approach 'across all our initiatives' – will be honoured.

Lesson 3: The practice of TWP (and indeed DDD) has not been localised

4.4. While there are exceptions, the 'second orthodoxy' has failed to escape from its Western aid department confines. There remain too few national researchers and actors who are influencing the debate and proposing alternative, locally appropriate methods and approaches to undertaking political settlement and PEA analysis, or more flexible and adaptive ways to program and project implementation. That is not to say there are none. I have been privileged over the last five years to work with four programs where national colleagues have grappled with the challenges of TWP: Australia's Pathways to Peace and KOMPAK programs in the Philippines and Indonesia respectively, and the UK's Pyoe Pin and PROKAS in Myanmar and Bangladesh. I am sure there are others, yet the high hopes of the TWP 'movement' as expressed in 2013 seem to have foundered against the rocks of nationalist donor practice.

Micro-level lessons

Lesson 4: TWP is now commonplace but not common practice

4.5. Many donors do now use some form of TWP rhetoric in their documentation and their requests for tender. There seems to be a recognition that at some level TWP 'makes sense' – clearly, events will blow the best laid plans off course and blue-print approaches to planning are redundant. Yet translating the Thinking (mainly one-off studies of political economy) into coherent Working remains a work in progress. As noted above, with foreign affairs departments taking over aid agencies in the UK and in Australia, the space for TWP has shrunk. There is less patience for considering the nuance of inhibiting factors on project success – what

Andrew Natsios once referred to as the 'frenzy of results' (i.e. the pressure to achieve tangible and easily quantifiable results, with the emphasis on bean counting rather than something more transformational) remains very much in place (Natsios, 2010).

Lesson 5: Where successful at the project level, TWP has metamorphosed into Adaptive Management in practice

4.6. Talking about 'adaptive management' (AM) appears to be more acceptable to aid departments than referring to TWP. 'Management' carries the ring of professionalism and the considered application of proven ways of working. Airport bookstalls are full of books on business management, despite their very mixed record, but none on TWP. Some would argue that this represents a retreat to technique and that TWP has been de-politicised. I do not share this view. If formal processes for adaptive management are the only way to operationalise the insights of thinking and working politically, then it is to be welcomed.[7] The one caveat, of course, is that AM techniques and processes will never substitute for any form of thinking whatsoever – be it political or not. TWP has worked more effectively when the W part has been taken seriously on the ground, which means more adaptively, but it has not worked all that well where the thinking part does not continue to anchor and inform the working part. To the extent that 'AM' may have substituted for 'TWP' could represent a delicious irony: the concerted effort 'to bring politics back in', as Professor Dercon put it, has resulted in precisely opposite.

Lesson 6: TWP has struggled to make inroads into sector-specific programs

4.7. This is an issue of which the CoP has long been aware. It is fair to say that the Bangkok meeting referred to above forced the CoP to place gender, diversity, and inclusion issues front and centre in any power analysis. Gender and governance are now often bracketed as key cross-cutting issues in many development initiatives. Incorporating a TWP approach into sector-specific initiatives has proved much harder. There are a number of possible explanations for this. It can be seen as irrelevant, or that asking these difficult questions about political feasibility may reduce the chances of 'our project' being approved: political economy tells us all the things that may go wrong without providing any guidance about how to improve the likelihood of success. The worst case is that sector colleagues see TWP as an attempt to take over 'their patch'.

Lesson 7: Organisational structures and staffing for implementing TWP projects have to be specifically tailored

4.8. The literature and practice of TWP – and adaptive management – are replete with terms used interchangeably and uncritically: flexibility, responsiveness, adaptation, agility, etc. Practice has shown that it is *adaptation* that poses the major challenges to TWP: *the ability to change course as implementation proceeds*. Why should this be the case? It is because adaptation in program delivery requires four functions *to be delivered simultaneously*:

- implementation: the day-to-day, week-to-week task of delivering activities *(how are we doing on physical progress?)*;
- monitoring: the regular and frequent checking of progress towards achieving outputs *(are we on track against the plan, the budget – and most importantly – against outputs and possibly outcomes?)*;

[7] See: Teskey, G. and Tyrrel, L. (2021) I*mplementing adaptive management: a front-line effort. Is there an emerging practice?* Abt Associates Working Paper.

- learning: our internal and reflexive questioning of progress – what are we learning about translating inputs and activities into outputs and outcomes *(what is working and what isn't?)*; and
- adapting: revising our implementation plan, adding unforeseen activities and dropping others, changing the balance of inputs, be they cash, people or events etc. *(how are we changing the plan?).*

4.9. The critical point here is that only if we 'learn as we go' can we adapt in real time: this requires delivery (implementation), data collection (monitoring), learning (reflection) and adapting (changing) to be undertaken simultaneously, not sequentially. And it is here I believe that we run into constraints in organisational (program management) design. More often than not, the responsibility for monitoring is given to structurally separate functional units, far removed from operational delivery and implementation. Staff responsible for delivery say 'monitoring is nothing to do with me'. And most monitoring is undertaken *ex post*, rather than in real time. Effective adaption and TWP requires monitoring and learning responsibilities to be co-located with implementation teams.

4.10. At the individual level it will be important to recruit staff with the skills and competencies to undertake the four functions noted above. This is not straightforward; we have learned that the skills required for efficient and effective implementation against a plan and a budget are not the same as the skills for *assessing* progress, *analysing* what has worked and why, and having the experience and judgement to know which parts of the plan need *adapting* and in what direction – all in real time.

Lesson 8: TWP has to be incentivised by donors at the procurement and design stages, then enabled at delivery

4.11. TWP – or indeed adaptive management – will not just happen. It has to be thought about and planned for at the procurement stage, and contracts have to be designed in such a way as to incentivise adaptation. The donor must authorise levels of delegated financial authority to the implementing agent, otherwise adaptation will get snarled up in what is usually a sclerotic bureaucratic decision-making process.

Lesson 9: TWP has led to a greater appreciation of both formal and informal sources of knowledge

4.12. The demand for contextualised local knowledge is now more widely recognised and endorsed. This has gone beyond the need for *ex ante* political economy studies, and includes the recognition of tacit knowledge and local relationships and networks.

Lesson 10: Diplomatic colleagues remain unimpressed with TWP

4.13. Diplomats consider it self-evident that development is political but remain unpersuaded that it requires the design of an administrative system to make it work (as summarised in paragraph 3.3 above).

5. Back to the future

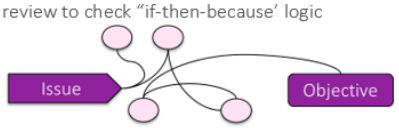
5.1. It is hard to assess the prospects for TWP. Donors' practices have proved more resistant to change than those gathered in the modest hotel in Delhi in 2013 expected. Was 2013 perhaps the apogee of enthusiasm? Certainly, in terms of the Parks spectrum, the experience has been very much 'evolutionary uptake', with 'more attention to politics within traditional aid approaches'. I would suggest that there are three things that must happen over the next two or three years if TWP is to survive and prosper.

5.2. First, donors must reflect their rhetorical commitment to working flexibly and adaptively with a more enlightened approach to program logic. Modest commitments do exist in policy and guidance documents. For example, DFAT's latest guidance on 'Program Logic/Theory of Change' (forthcoming) includes the following guidance, but does not discuss the mechanics by which investments are 'adapted'.

> **For highly flexible and adaptive investments** where the opportunities are harder to define, and solutions are being tested iteratively the proposed change pathways may be indicative but at a minimum the program logic must have:
>
> - clearly defined end-of-program-outcomes
> - initial intermediate outcomes and indicative outputs based on initial hypotheses that are tested and updated during implementation

5.3. This, then, is the first requirement if TWP is to be embraced more widely: coherence and consistency of expectations and responsibilities at design. It is understandable (if regrettable) that donors remain reluctant to refer in any way to politics, but it is not acceptable for donors to commit to TWP (or to work flexibly and adaptively) if their internal systems do not allow it. At the minimum, donor requirements regarding 'program logic' should enable the operationalisation of 'thinking and working politically' approaches. Figure 3 summarises the minimum requirements of a 'TWP program logic' (source: author).

Figure 3: A program logic table for TWP

'Level'	Narrative summary	Fixed or variable?
Goal	Partner government high level policy priority	**Fixed** • Goal, Objective and EoPO changed only in response to major change in host or donor policy, or national crisis (e.g. Covid) • If changed will require redesign of entire 'program logic' as below
Objective	Developmental purpose of investment (e.g. developmental impact of improved organisational performance)	
End of program Outcome	The desired change the investment is expected to deliver in the time frame of the project, and within the budget allocated (e.g. improved organisational performance – effectiveness, efficiency, equity)	
Intermediate Outcome	The short and medium term effects of the investment, including changes in individual and organisational behaviour, norms and values (e.g. trained people applying new skills and competences)	**Variable** • Design to summarise process for review and revision • Design to specify delegated authority to implementing partner to revise budgets within financial years to reflect progress • Design to specify process whereby Activities can be added or dropped, with consequent impact on Outputs and Outcomes • Theory of Change to be held constantly under review to check "if-then-because' logic 
Output	The immediate results of activities (number of people trained)	
Activity	Actions undertaken and work performed (e.g. training)	
Input	Funds, technical assistance, accumulated knowledge, evidence, context awareness, political economy analyses	

Source: author

5.4. **Second, TWP practitioners, and the CoP, must redouble their efforts to provide examples and evidence of where such approaches have been effectively applied.** This is not the same as calling for evidence that TWP has led to success where traditional approaches have failed (the problem of course of the counterfactual), but it does require critical assessment of the circumstances in which a TWP approach was put in place, what it achieved, and what were the factors that led to the effective application of the process. Can such a body of evidence be collected and synthesised?

5.5. **Indeed, the challenge may be deeper than this.** There has to be a commitment to, and a patience for, funding research that can accompany and observe projects / programs / initiatives over the long term in order to have a real opportunity to observe what may have changed, how and why, and how TWP may have made a difference.

5.6. **Third, there needs to be a more conscious and explicit effort to apply TWP to current and urgent thematic issues of our time.** For the UK this may be climate change. For Australia it may be bio-security in its near neighbourhood or infrastructure provision in the Pacific islands. The task will be to demonstrate the relevance of TWP to the success of the investment – and thus to the reputation of the donor.

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Annex 1: The Original TWP 'Flyer'

The case for thinking and working politically:
The implications of 'doing development differently'[8]

Evidence tells us that domestic political factors are usually much more important in determining developmental impact than the scale of aid funding or the technical quality of programming. Although international development organisations have made extensive efforts to improve the technical quality of programs, in many cases, these improvements have not led to greater impact during implementation. Successful implementation usually happens when programs are aligned with a domestic support base that is influential enough to generate reform momentum, and overcome the resistance of those benefitting from the status quo. Too many times over the past few decades, we have seen projects fail because they demand changes that are not politically feasible.

These findings demonstrate that an understanding of political dynamics is frequently the critical missing ingredient in project design and implementation. Many influential thinkers[9] have looked at the difference between success and failure in development, and all point to the centrality of domestic politics. Admittedly, this conclusion does not necessarily help to predict how developmental change will unfold in different contexts, and it directly confronts the notion that some institutional models will always work better than others. However, we have learned that progressive change usually involves local political processes of contestation and bargaining among interest groups, and that development programs can significantly improve their impact by understanding and responding to these dynamics. Recent evidence indicates the importance of reform-oriented leaders, who find ways to make progress by facilitating local problem-solving and collaboration among wide-ranging interest groups.

Evidence on politically informed aid

There is now a persuasive volume of evidence demonstrating that programs focused on technical knowledge and capacity alone are insufficient to address development challenges that are rooted in deeply entrenched power structures, and bureaucratic norms that are shaped by these political dynamics. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that flexible, adaptive, politically smart programs can produce tangible results, well beyond traditional programs on the same issues. Recent case studies from the Philippines, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, India, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, have illustrated how these approaches have led to changes on major development challenges. While the number of cases is still too small for global, systematic comparisons, there is strong case-specific evidence that shifting to a more politically informed approach produces increased impact. Recent studies include:

- *The Almost Revolution: Development aid confronts politics* (Carothers, de Gramont, 2013)
- *Problem-driven political-economy analysis: The World Bank's experience* (Fritz, Levy, & Ort 2014)
- *Politically smart, locally led development* (Booth, Unsworth, 2014)
- *Built on Dreams, Grounded in Reality: Economic Policy Reform in the Philippines* (Faustino et al., 2011)
- *Adapting Development: Improving services to the poor* (Wild et al., 2015)

History teaches us that politics is intimately tied to inclusive economic growth, and as such, a major factor in poverty reduction. Meaningful and sustainable poverty reduction requires changes in social structures and in political institutions – changes that will be contested at every step. Every country has to find its own way to translate political power into change for the public good. This is true of all polities. A critical part of this process

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[9] See for example: Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2012) Why Nations Fail. New York: Crown Books; Matt Andrews (2013) 'The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development', New York, Cambridge University Press; Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont (2013) *Development aid confronts politics: The almost revolution*. Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment; Francis Fukuyama (2012) *'The origins of political order*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Francis Fukuyama (2014) '*Political Order and Political Decay*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Douglas North, John Wallis and Barry Weingast (2009) *'Violence and Social Orders*. New York, Cambridge University Press; and Dani Rodrik (2007) 'One Economics, Many Recipes', Princeton, NJ Princeton University Press.

is the routine, daily struggle over 'the rules of the game', which are shaped by emerging coalitions, political mediation, negotiation and compromise, and innumerable calculations of political risk and opportunity.

Meanwhile, traditional 'gap-filling' Official Development Assistance (ODA) is fast becoming out-dated. With the emergence of significant new resources from non-OECD donors, the private sector and philanthropists, aid 'recipient' countries have many more options than hitherto available for development financing and technical assistance. The influence that donors once sought to wield through conditionality and policy dialogue has largely diminished. Many partner governments are now far more assertive and sophisticated than in the past, in-part bolstered by the Paris, Accra and Busan agendas. Furthermore, with more than 50 per cent of the world's poor now living in lower middle-income countries, the critical development challenges for poverty alleviation are more than ever a result of domestic policy change and institutional reform rather than small sums of money to fill perceived capital 'gaps'. While technical knowledge and financing for development are rarely the key bottlenecks to development progress, these are precisely what traditional aid programs are designed to provide.

Over the past decade, development donors have increasingly acknowledged the role of politics, but mainstream operations are only now beginning to change. In the past few years there has been a step-change in the number of donor agencies undertaking analysis of political context and processes, and some adjustment to aid practices to reflect the need to be more responsive to local political economy dynamics. A growing number of donor policy statements clearly situate politics as a critical factor in developmental progress, and commit to programs that are more politically aware. However, the process of translating these insights and commitments into changes in mainstream development practice has been slow and contested. Despite the growing accumulation of evidence and bitter lessons, the majority of development programs continue to use traditional approaches.

However, there are now several efforts underway within the international development community advocating for fundamental changes to the way development assistance is conceived and implemented. Since 2013, there have been a number of new initiatives involving many of the leading thinkers, influential policy-makers, donors and practitioners. In October 2014, Harvard University hosted a meeting to consider ways of 'doing development differently'. The consensus document produced at this meeting – the *DDD consensus* or more affectionately, the 'Harvard Manifesto' – has been widely circulated, and many development leaders have publicly endorsed it.[10] Similarly, since November 2013, a group of senior officials from major donors, along with a few leading thinkers and researchers, have been working together to promote *thinking and working politically* (TWP) in development, with a particular focus on what donors can do to allow this to happen.[11]

Notwithstanding this progress, changing aid practices has proven much more difficult than raising levels of knowledge and awareness among donor staff, undertaking 'set-piece' political-economy analysis, and drafting more nuanced policy statements. The dramatic expansion of political-economy analysis over the past decade has not transformed the delivery of development programs, and has had a limited effect on development impact. This is probably due to the fact that much aid remains predominantly technocratic, inflexible, and averse to the types of operating approaches that could translate political-economy findings into

[10] http://buildingstatecapability.com/the-ddd-manifesto/
[11] http://www.twpcommunity.org

more effective development practice.[12] In-country front-line program staff are obliged to follow the (legitimate) rules and regulations of their parent departments – which rarely admit flexible and responsive disbursement of funds. Logical frameworks (the predominant management tool for program implementation) generally incentivise rigid, linear program logic, which does not reflect reality in developing countries and makes it difficult for program managers to adapt to changing circumstances. Collectively, these factors reinforce traditional development approaches, and create obstacles for development professionals attempting to do development differently.

So what does a 'doing development differently' agenda look like? The outline of what such approaches may look like is now becoming clearer. The aim of the Harvard meeting and the TWP initiative has been, in some ways, to formalise the progress being made, incrementally, donor by donor, country by country, project by project. The TWP and DDD agendas are driven by three core principles:

- strong political analysis, insight and understanding;
- detailed appreciation of, and response to, the local context; and
- flexibility and adaptability in program design and implementation.

Principle	Characteristics
1. ANALYSIS: Political insight and understanding	• Interrogate the project, and the sector with a relentless focus on power dynamics, interests, incentives, and institutions. • Be frank about where power resides and on whose behalf it is being used. • Move away from idealised models of development change, and start with contextual realities. • Recognise the multiple (and potentially contradictory) nature of interests at play. • Focus on problems identified and articulated by local actors, not outsiders. • Ensure (as far as possible) that locally-defined problems and proposed solutions are accepted as legitimate by all relevant stakeholders, thereby ensuring ownership.
2. CONTEXT: Responsiveness to domestic environment	• Work with and through domestic stakeholders, convenors and power-brokers (also referred to as 'arm's length' aid). • Understand the network of stakeholders involved and facilitate coalitions of different interests, rather than relying on a 'principal-agent' relationship with one Ministry / Minister.
3. DESIGN: Flexibility and adaptability in design and implementation	• Be guided by the program goal, and do not be overly prescriptive in how to achieve it. Strategy should set a clear goal, allowing for significant flexibility and iteration in the day-to-day efforts to make progress towards these goals. Clear goals should not translate into rigid project frameworks – they represent an understanding of what changes you are hoping to promote. • Recognise that politics are not static – continue to assess the local context, test original assumptions, and adapt programs based on new information and opportunities. • Merge design and implementation with a focus on a series of small 'experimental' or 'incremental' steps and monitor results. In this way, implementation and monitoring & evaluation become one concurrent process. • Periodically engage in 'review and reflection' exercises to critique and understand what is working and what is not – and stop doing what does not work. • Understand your own agency's political-economy – which issues can be negotiated and which ones cannot.

'Politically smart' development assistance combines political-economy knowledge with more responsive, adaptable and contextually relevant operations. These approaches are grounded in a growing body of

[12] Carothers and de Gramont, cited above, make a particularly strong argument on this point.

research and experience (see page 1). There is less reliance on aid conditionality and comprehensive institutional reform, and more emphasis on the need to build on local motivation and capacity, responding flexibly to events and opportunities as they arise. This includes removing any design `straight-jacket' stemming from program design tools that encourage prescriptive approaches.

Thinking and working politically' is neither a silver bullet nor a passing fad; it reflects a new resolve to learn from years of well-intentioned but often unsatisfactory aid practice, grounded in mistaken assumptions about the ability of external actors to drive complex processes of change by supplying finance and technical advice. The ambition should be to tailor aid programs to the growing body of evidence about how change happens and what kind of approaches work, and to strengthen the evidence base through better piloting, monitoring and evaluation.

Progress is needed across the broad spectrum of aid programs – from large 'traditional' sector programs, to small and nimble reform initiatives. The next critical challenge is to influence the practice of larger-scale programs that necessarily require greater structure and planning. This means integrating a political lens, allowing greater room for manoeuvre during implementation, and consideration of governance constraints in all development assistance programs – from health and education, to infrastructure and climate change.

Our goal should be to encourage political awareness in all aid programs, while creating space for a significant expansion of explicitly TWP (and DDD) programs. Indeed, it is probable that only a modest percentage of ODA funded initiatives will be fully iterative, adaptive and flexible – and these initiatives will be mainly in areas of policy, institutional or governance reform. However, TWP is not a 'governance' solution to be applied only to a narrow set of institutional issues (public financial management or civil service reform for example). On the contrary, TWP is an approach to improve delivery of any aid program that involves reform and behavioural change - it is as relevant to better delivery of health services or economic policy reform as it is to an anti-corruption initiative. TWP takes the naivety out of institutional relationships by understanding that change happens as a result of decisions that invariably have a political dimension.