



# Reflections on my experience as a governance advisor of thinking and working politically in Sierra Leone and Liberia

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## 1. Introduction

This paper for the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) has two mutually reinforcing aims: to track my TWP experience as a Governance Advisor and perhaps encourage others to embark on this exciting journey; and to add this learning to the growing body of knowledge on TWP. I broadly focus on how I was initially drawn to TWP, and why it is a useful approach to inform programming. Drawing on my experiences from Sierra Leone and Liberia, I highlight some of the enablers, opportunities, and challenges in operationalising TWP. I draw particular attention to how the conceptual language of TWP may be alienating, and how I have tried to make those concepts make sense to partner organisations that seek to bring change and transformation in their communities. I sometimes use the terms Political Economy Analysis (PEA) and Context analysis, Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) interchangeably, but generally refer to TWP as its scope is broader. I conclude with some practical recommendations to practitioners and signpost useful 'go to' areas.

## 2. Background

It has for several years now been recognised that development is 'political'. Even with the best of intentions and technical expertise, change has not taken place as expected due to what the development sector has conveniently termed a 'lack of political will'. As a practitioner with over 25 years' experience of working in national, regional and international development, I have received countless project proposals and log frames with the statement that 'there shall be political will to ensure the success of this programme' tucked into the assumptions section. It is only relatively recently that development practitioners have woken up to the need to unpack what they mean by 'political will'; and to understand how and why it can drive or undermine change. Development interventions and other international engagements are more effective when they are informed by a solid understanding of the context. There is also an emerging consensus that development should be 'politically smart', 'locally led' and 'flexible' (Booth and Unsworth, 2014; Rocha Menocal, 2014). So, if development actors genuinely want to combat poverty effectively and transform countries or communities we no longer ignore the role of politics in conceptualising, implementing and evaluating projects. This process is sometimes called the project management cycle.

In most cases, problems we seek to address through development interventions stem from the way political power is exercised, the rules influencing the economy, how different institutions work, and the incentives that motivate people. As Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2012, p. 68) put it, 'politics is the process by which a society chooses the rules that will govern it ... political institutions of a society are key determinants of the outcomes of this game'. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, p. 80) further argue that '[p]oor countries are poor because those that have the power make choices that create poverty. They get it wrong not by mistake or out of ignorance but on purpose. To understand this, you must go

beyond economics and expert advice on the best thing to do and, instead, study how decisions get made, who makes them, and why these people decide to do what they do’.

Political institutions determine who has power in society and to what ends it can be used. CAFOD’s development work seeks to rebalance that power and ensure a fair distribution of resources, access, and influence in the countries in which we work. Hence the fundamental need for TWP.

Inspired by this shift from governance work being merely technical to recognising the centrality of politics, I set out on a self-taught journey to understand TWP and its value in my work, and to explore how TWP could be useful for staff on a Monday morning as they make hard choices about programming. In this case, programming refers to the broad spectrum of day-to-day activities and interventions that CAFOD undertakes in its development, humanitarian, peacebuilding, and advocacy work.

### 3. Why TWP has gained traction in development programming.

Although its conceptual frameworks can sometimes seem off-putting or imposing, or might appear to be academic and only for clever brains (I discuss these misplaced perceptions below), PEA is increasingly viewed as an essential tool for understanding how change happens, and how to influence that change through more politically savvy and informed decisions. There is a growing recognition that development efforts will remain limited in what they can achieve unless we take the time to understand the politics to inform and direct our interventions towards where change is likely to happen.

The potential of TWP is evident in the fact that several donor agencies, including among others the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Dutch agency HIVOS, and USAID, have made it mandatory to undertake a robust PEA to inform projects, from the choice of interventions through to implementation. There is now a wide variety of PEA frameworks which, even if they use slightly different terminology, share important common conceptual features. These largely take the form of analysing actors, where power lies, interests and incentives, institutions. PEA is a problem-focused methodology which can be used at various stages of project management, starting from a country level to institutions, to thematic sectors – such as governance, water and sanitation, health, education, environment – or even a ‘stubborn’ problem, where everything has been tried in a project but it has still not brought about sustainable change.

The analysis also extends to specific issues or blockages in relation to a programme, project, or policy issue by seeking to identify what processes create, sustain, or transform relationships to lead to desired changes and why (World Bank Report 2017). As projects are implemented, TWP calls for a deliberate process of learning and course correction – and this has now become common in donors’ guidance on monitoring and learning. PEA blends well with other analytical frameworks such as conflict and gender analysis, making it a strong and holistic tool, or rather lens, that is easy to adapt.

## 4. My TWP journey

My 'Damascus conversion' to TWP was in 2017, when [Tom Aston](#), a former Governance Advisor at Care International, invited me to join a cross-agency learning group to share everything about PEA with governance advisors from leading development agencies, including CAFOD, CARE International, Christian Aid, Oxfam International and Plan International. At that meeting, [Helen Derbyshire, an independent consultant](#), talked about how PEA was being used to positive effect in the UK-funded State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) in Nigeria, a programme facilitating citizen engagement in governance.

This sharing reinforced the usefulness of TWP in programme management. The example from Nigeria highlighted how PEA seeks to address some of the questions we grapple with in managing a programme – such as who wants what, why, and how; and what they will do if they get (or don't get) it. That engagement played a huge role in igniting the TWP fire in me and the passion to broaden my knowledge. I realised that as a Governance Advisor in CAFOD, I had a technical bias in approaching my work on how to respond to issues such as programming on elections, human rights, women's rights, or economic justice, and that I had been expecting the magic wand of 'political will' to drive change.

## 5. The opportunity

At the same time as all this, I was also involved in a stocktaking exercise of our governance work at CAFOD, examining our delivery methodologies across our governance work to define our approach. I embraced this as a great opportunity to operationalise TWP and ensure that thinking and working politically would be at the heart of CAFOD's governance approach. My first hurdle on this journey, and one that would subsequently affect the entire TWP process, was how to do this – because I found that the TWP language, concepts and terms can feel quite alienating. I remember saying to a manager based in our country programmes in a one-to-one meeting something like: 'I am developing our governance approach, and I am advocating for all staff developing governance projects to anchor their interventions on a solid political economy analysis'. She looked at me and said, 'that sounds very academic... I can't even say it without biting my tongue?' The penny dropped. This was the voice representing the countries I wanted to influence and accompany to underpin all their PEA programming. I had no choice but to change the terminology from the tongue-twisting language of 'political economy' to simply 'context analysis' to get buy-in from country staff.

## 6. A guidance note – building from the known to the unknown

I then set out to develop a guidance note on context analysis for CAFOD (which is still being tested by country staff and an internal review). I ploughed through the TWP CoP and other networks focusing on applied PEA and engaged in a series of key dialogues with colleagues both in CAFOD and beyond. This process was fundamental to help adapt and adjust the content of the guidance note to suit the audience, namely CAFOD staff and partner

organisations. After a year, I had a draft guide that was 'a pick, drop, choose and mix', taking the best from various sources to suit my audience.

A crucial learning point from adapting the guidance was to build on existing tools with which staff were already familiar. Until then, CAFOD had been using what I would describe as a 'cousin version' of PEA called PESTLER (Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal and Environmental, Religious) analysis. PESTLER explores the key external factors that influence a country or thematic area, and it is usually used together with a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis. While PESTLER worked well, one of its limitations is that it led staff to produce long documents drawn from media reports, stating the obvious but offering no deeper analysis. In my experience, most of the PESTLER is usually rushed to meet and satisfy organisational timeframes for the authorisation of strategic plans. Few people read the analysis, and the reports just gather dust on bookshelves, with no real use for understanding where change is likely to happen or be blocked and take action from there. Nevertheless, the PESTLER does provide a good entry point in moving from the known to the unknown, as well as in demonstrating the need to go beyond merely collecting information on broad areas and taking the time to analyse what that information means in political terms, and then in making choices on intervention and programming approaches. The PESTLER therefore acts as a very useful entry point for TWP by demonstrating the need to not only state facts but also analyse and apply them to inform programming.

## 7. Testing the guidance

An opportunity to test the PEA guidance I was developing and how it would work in practice came in Sierra Leone and Liberia. At the time of my visit to both CAFOD country offices in 2019, there were two different processes going on at the same time that I decided to take full advantage of: the first, to design country governance thematic programme frameworks, and the second to strengthen the integration of advocacy into other thematic areas such as water and sanitation, women's empowerment, humanitarian and land-rights work. Hooking the analysis on these two processes enabled and motivated staff and partner organisations to envisage the immediate use of TWP: informing programme frameworks and focusing advocacy actions.

We adopted a dual approach to carry out the analysis, which involved hiring a local consultant to conduct a governance thematic PEA, as well as testing the guidance through a practice-based workshop with partner organisations, staff, and some external actors (critical friends) to sharpen the focus of the governance / advocacy programmes. The idea was that the partners would use the knowledge they gained from the guidance to validate the findings of the PEA conducted by the external consultant. Looking back, this approach and the input from local partner organisations significantly enriched the analysis by asking important questions, challenging some of the analysis, and providing alternative understanding and pathways.

## 8. On concepts and language

Getting PEA and TWP concepts across to staff and partners was no easy task. Have you ever been in a room where everyone speaks a language which you don't understand or have never even heard? That's how one of the participants described some of the TWP terms to me.

In the context analysis workshops that I facilitated in Sierra Leone and Liberia, I had a mixed group of participants that included non-governance experts, so not everybody was familiar even with some everyday governance concepts. So, I spent considerable time on going back to basic governance concepts such as accountability to bring participants to the same level and prepare them to absorb the conceptual terms in the TWP frameworks. Concepts such as 'actors', 'rules of the game', 'incentives', 'interests', 'power', 'resources for influencing', 'patronage', and 'linkages' were difficult to understand, not made any easier by the fact that many of them also overlap. It is therefore important to build in time for this. One of the things to look out for is to avoid being lost in the technical expert bubble. It is important to carry people along with you. The challenge was exacerbated by the fact that staff and partners were working on projects driven by log frames and pre-defined results. In such cases, it is not always clear what is the value-added of TWP because staff are mostly concerned about achieving the results agreed with the donors. So, what I did was to break down the concepts to make them more accessible, finding everyday settings that would make the terms easier to relate to and understand.

I used the analogy of an iceberg shown in Figure 1 to introduce the concept of PEA and other terms such as patronage.

Figure 1. PEA depicted as an iceberg.



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*Adapted from the internal CAFOD Context analysis guidance developed by Dadirai Chikwengo*

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What people see happening is the tip of the iceberg, but there is much more going on below.

So, for example, we might see someone being appointed to the Ministry of Agriculture. But what is below is the fact that the person who has been appointed is a president's friend or relative (cronyism, nepotism, patronage). I already had this as part of the PEA guidance I was developing, so it was useful to present it visually. The image generated a lot of interest and helped with making people feel more comfortable with the basic concepts.

Beyond the terminology, several participants also struggled with understanding the concepts underlying the different elements and layers of the PEA framework. The problem areas included the following.

*Levels of analysis:* The draft guidance presented different levels at which PEA could be conducted. However, these levels of analysis, from thematic to country levels, can be quite blurred in practice.

*Rules of the game:* It took quite some effort to explain what this means in understanding politics, and I used the rule of offside in football to capture it in a relatable manner. A team that has mastered that offside rule will use it to force the opponents into falling into the offside trap. This leads to frustration by the opposing team, which will commit more violations. One participant went further, pointing out that sometimes the players might not understand the game itself, let alone the rules – and that this can be true of politicians as well.

*Institutions:* This was a sticking point. In the context where I was testing the guide the term 'institutions' is used mainly to refer to academic settings – such as 'institutions of learning'. In PEA, institutions tend to be defined as 'rules of the game' rather than organisations. Distinguishing between formal and informal institutions compounded the difficulty. Corruption is a good example. To get focused I probed what type of corruption participants meant in order to be able to identify where change could to happen. The identification of formal policies or laws, such as the constitution, was not difficult, but participants found it harder to offer examples of some of the informal practices such as bribery. The concept of 'incentives' – or financial, moral, political, ideological, or other motivations that drive behaviour (World Bank Report, 2017) – also helped to reveal the complexity of identifying things that are not visible or put in writing.

*Actors and the need to avoid seeing them as single blocks:* In some of the workshop group discussions, for example, participants mentioned ministries, but they tended to do so as if a ministry were homogeneous, and without thinking about specific departments or issues at play. So, we had to do considerable prodding to get participants to think in a more fine-grained manner about what was going on within a given ministry, who were the different actors within it, what interests drove each of them, what policy or administrative legislation needed to be reformed and why, etc. Rather than trying to unpack the workings of an entire ministry or diagnose implementation of the whole policy, it helped to start small and grow by focusing on one issue at a time.

Even then, after having clarified all the terminology and with the aid of a PowerPoint, I realised after a few minutes of introducing the concepts that I was literally speaking to



myself. I was hung up on the theory of PEA and was missing the wood for the trees. One intervention that saved the day was to remove participants briefly from their day-to-day work and develop a case study based on current local issues. This really helped build understanding and to see how different concepts relate to one another in a practical manner. I quickly worked on a short example that sought to explain why a one-year-old baby I called Ibrahim (a common name in Liberia and Sierra Leone) died, weaving in concepts such as institutions, historical legacies, rent seeking, incentives, patronage, and so on (see Annex 1), and used that as a discussion point to bring PEA to life. The fictional case study was grounded in a context that participants could easily relate to, and it facilitated very rich discussions and examples.

In addition, to reinforce participants' understanding of PEA and the analytical framework, I used other 'old school' methods. I distributed old magazines and newspapers to each of the groups. I used flip charts to show each element of the PEA framework and asked each group to cut out pictures depicting each element of the analytical framework. We looked at different stories from the newspapers on some of the commitments that leaders had made and started a discussion on whether they had met those and if not, why not. That helped in fleshing out some of the concepts such as patronage, rent seeking etc. There were some interesting insights from the discussions, including, for example, the kind of influence that the life partners of MPs or chiefs exercise behind closed doors, getting them to behave a certain way or to push for a given a policy so that they can preserve their privilege. The case study and the ensuing discussions brought out how politics matter. Ibrahim's father, for instance, had a zero-contract job so he could not afford the hospital fees and the hospitals had no medicines ... even though the country is rich in natural resources. This led to partner organisations thinking about how their projects would track and influence government spending on funds acquired from natural resources.

The testing of the guidance provided the scope to inform a specific question from a PEA perspective: how we in CAFOD could strengthen our advocacy work. Undertaking joint analysis helped in enriching coordination between different partners, unearthed some of the reasons why advocacy was difficult, but also pointed to opportunities. Partners were able to go more deeply into actor analysis, identifying individuals and actors who could block or support changes, and to refine advocacy, alliance-building, and partnership strategies. This allowed a shift towards more specific and appropriate strategies. A positive unintended outcome was that this process also opened up opportunities for partners to work jointly on advocacy.

This was very helpful for our projects in Sierra Leone. For example, CAFOD had been carrying out Village Lending Saving Association programmes, but through the analysis we were able to see that a key area to bring positive change was to involve the formal banking system and advocate for exemptions on traditional collaterals such as property title deeds. We built this into the successor programme and established relationships with the banks to help women grow financially and obtain access to financial products.

## 9. Operationalising the PEA

PEA's usefulness is in its application in practice. It should not be regarded as an information-hoarding process but as a useful tool to inform programming that will help bring about the desired changes. It should be noted that the information generated can be overwhelming and sometimes 'off-putting', so there is a need to dedicate time for staff and partners to make sense of the findings and to discuss how to apply the analysis (see Annex 2). As part of putting into practice the knowledge gained from the workshop, process, I asked the participants to re-visit their existing projects and note what they could keep, change or 'keep an eye on', based on the information generated from the analysis. It was satisfying to see the shifts and changes that staff and partners highlighted and the commitments they made to adjust their strategies and approaches. Clearly there were some gaps, as there are with any process, but the dialogue and thinking helped point to where and how to find any missing information. The analysis produced some unexpected outcomes – for instance, it broadened the partner organisations' scope to engage with donors from an informed position on real political opportunities and challenges.

Overall, TWP has gained traction in CAFOD. As part of introducing our new 10-year strategy we have ensured that context analysis underpins the development of programme strategies and the underlying Theory of Change (TOC), including pathways and management approaches, are anchored in PEA. Vibrant dialogues have opened up, facilitating learning, and getting valuable insights from our partners while suggesting new strategies, new focus on partnerships and new ways of working that take full account of the role of politics. I have seen innovative strategies that demonstrate a deeper understanding of power, relationships, and institutions, which have fed into the development of TOCs, with clearly outlined and realistic assumptions and change pathways, and a robust understanding of potential risks. They say a product is as good as the process – so this is a very strong foundation towards developing interventions that will bring the desired changes.

## 10. Some PEA dos and don'ts

### a. Local knowledge and feedback

PEA can be undertaken in a variety of different ways. From my experience, I have found that, where resources permit and an organisation works in partnership with others, it is useful to opt for a dual process, involving both a local consultant and a partner-led process to undertake analysis and discuss findings and their implications. Such a joint approach allows staff to develop PEA skills and to retain knowledge.

### b. Validation and use of diverse sources

Triangulating insights and findings from the analysis is essential to ensure its quality and validity. Related to the lesson above, the quality and richness of analysis comes

from enabling dialogue and creating spaces where people can discuss information, share different points of view, and have their voices heard.

**c. Language**

Some of the conceptual language in PEA can be alienating. So, it is helpful to break down the concepts into their essential components and to explain them in a way that is accessible and relatable to everyday experiences – like the football example or the iceberg I outlined earlier – to carry staff and partners along.

**d. Flexibility and adaptability using PEA.**

It is important not to be too precious about the formal PEA framework, but to focus on the substance and the kinds of ‘why’ questions it seeks to address. If PEA is seen as a lens, then it becomes much easier to embed it into other existing frameworks, including gender analysis, stakeholder analysis, and outcome harvesting.

**e. Accompaniment / Good facilitation**

This may not sound important, but it is essential. A good facilitator is needed and equally continuous accompaniment of those embarking on the process is crucial in steering them towards the right course. Most of the valuable information comes through rich dialogues, conversations, and timely probing, so a good facilitator helps to foster creative thinking and to keep participants motivated and inspired – especially where the analysis is generating discouraging results.

**f. Relevance and value of PEA/TWP**

Efforts to socialise TWP work best where there is a clear hook and it can be made relevant to work that is already ongoing or being planned, rather than imposing PEA as one more layer of things that teams must do on top of everything else, they have on their plate. In the example I described above, our focus was on how we could influence actors more effectively through enhanced advocacy. CAFOD staff and partners were already thinking about how to enhance their advocacy, and so it was easier for them to embrace TWP principles. It is important to have a clear and answerable research question.

**g. Need for ongoing analysis.**

Context is not static. Our aim is to influence change, but since the context is constantly changing there is a need to update analysis on a regular basis and tease out the implications to adjust or adapt our programmes accordingly. Ongoing analysis and monitoring and learning are crucial to ensure that the findings and recommendations of the PEA become an integral part of our work.

## Conclusion

This short note shares my own TWP journey. This has been a rich and deeply personal experience, but I hope that it can help others who are keen to engage in understanding why politics matter to understanding and fostering progressive change. Above all, I have tried to show the importance of demystifying the perceptions that PEA is 'too academic' and can only be done by very clever people. Most of our staff may not necessarily feel confident in undertaking this kind of analysis, and our recruitment processes may not sufficiently emphasise the importance of these analytical skills. So, we need to do much more in terms of mentoring and coaching to support the uptake of TWP. Busy staff and partner organisations facing many competing demands may find it hard to make the time to go on a course, but structured coaching and mentoring on the job is more achievable. And that is precisely what I have sought to do over the years.

But the road ahead remains challenging, especially where resources to support development work have been dwindling. Donors understand the importance of using PEA to inform the work of implementing partners on the ground and of embracing TWP principles, including having the space to test, experiment and, indeed, even fail. But they have not sufficiently changed their own ways of working sufficiently to enable more significant uptake of TWP. Among other things, the development sector continues to be driven by fixed plans and log frames, which make the kind of flexibility and adaptability needed to respond to context even more difficult. In addition, buy-in from senior management, partners, and staff is paramount to build momentum and traction from below.

Despite the fact that the application of TWP is hard and sometimes contested, what is encouraging is that there is general acceptance on the importance of politics and context in effective development and growing networks and communities of practice to share experiences and learning.

## Annex 1

### Why did Ibrahim die? – A practical exercise

Ibrahim a one-year-old baby, is Lucy and John's fourth child. The family lives in a poor urban community in Greytown in Skyline. Skyline is a post-conflict country. The water under the shanty towns serves as the sewage and toilets for most of the families living there. The people get their water supply from deep wells. A few elites control the power in the area and not bothered about the water problems. They have an elected councillor and MP but it's not easy to see them as their local representatives are always making excuses on their behalf. This is because while things are failing, they continue to benefit from the patronage and bring water in bowsers to their households. John and Lucy and others are just grateful to have somewhere to stay in this informal settlement, despite being constantly threatened with eviction. A new presidential candidate who is keen on environmental issues is campaigning so hopefully he will get into power.

John is a daily wage earner in a construction firm. His family migrated to Greytown to try their luck in the city due to high poverty in their original village. However, life in the city has not been good for them either. Even though they budget for their expenses, they are still always buried in debts. They keep borrowing from a local money lender who charges high interest rates. There are no functional social services. John sustained injuries during an incident of political violence in his village and sometimes can't fulfil his duties at the firm so gets no pay.

All their four children are malnourished. They all have the same illnesses – they always have a cough, fever and diarrhoea, their tummies swollen like a drum. Tape worms emerge in their faeces, which Lucy believes is normal because she was told by her grandmother that tapeworms help digest food in the stomach. John worries because they are more girls who will not carry his legacy when he dies, which brings shame in their village. He still plans to try for more boys.

The children have not been immunised. The one who always gets sick is Ibrahim. He is the skinniest, palest, and always has diarrhoea. One day, Ibrahim contracts chicken pox. Lucy takes him to the nearest health centre, but they are not given free medicines. Lucy buys the prescribed medicines but when the prescription runs out, she can't buy replacements because she has no money. Health is not free.

When Ibrahim does not recover, he is taken to a provincial hospital because the community health centre will not admit him. The hospital demands a (US\$300) deposit. Fortunately, the Community, Insurer lends them US \$300, but with interest to pay. Because they are afraid that the hospital bill would rise further, the family decides to discharge Ibrahim from the hospital even though he is not yet well.

After one week of continuous fever and diarrhoea, Ibrahim becomes weaker, dehydrated, and eventually dies.

## Questions

- 1) Why is it relevant to Ibrahim's death that Skyline is a post-conflict country? Why do you think that historical legacies are important today?
- 2) Who do you think are the elites who control the power in Greytown?
- 3) What is the democratic set-up? There are elected councillors and an MP, so why don't they resolve Greytown's problems? What does this say about formal and informal institutions, such as patronage?
- 4) What difference might the election of a new president make? How would you exploit this opportunity to put environmental issues on the agenda?
- 5) Why do people move from rural areas to towns and cities, even if they end up living in places like Greytown? Why do Lucy and John borrow money although the interest rates are so high?
- 6) What do you think about Lucy's beliefs about tapeworms? Or about John's reasons to want a son, although they already have three daughters?
- 7) Why doesn't Ibrahim get the medication he has been prescribed? Is the health system a formal or informal institution, or a combination of the two?
- 8) Now you have read and analysed this story, why do you think Ibrahim died?

## Annex 2:

### Applying the context analysis in programming

Adapted from the CAFOD Context analysis guidance: Dadirai Chikwengo

#### ■ Suggested Questions for step 5



- Based on the context, what actions and entry points can the programme undertake to support change?
- What does the context analysis suggest about identified/current programmatic priorities, areas of focus and engagement, assumptions embedded in theories of change, choice of partners?
- How can we best support reformers?
- To what extent do potential strategies, theories of change, or interventions, programmatic indicators and/or expected outcomes, timescales, resources appropriate and reasonable considering the analysis?
- How can they be supported most effectively to do so?

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