



# PEA, PER, and an idea: 'Our World in Data... for Political Economy Research'

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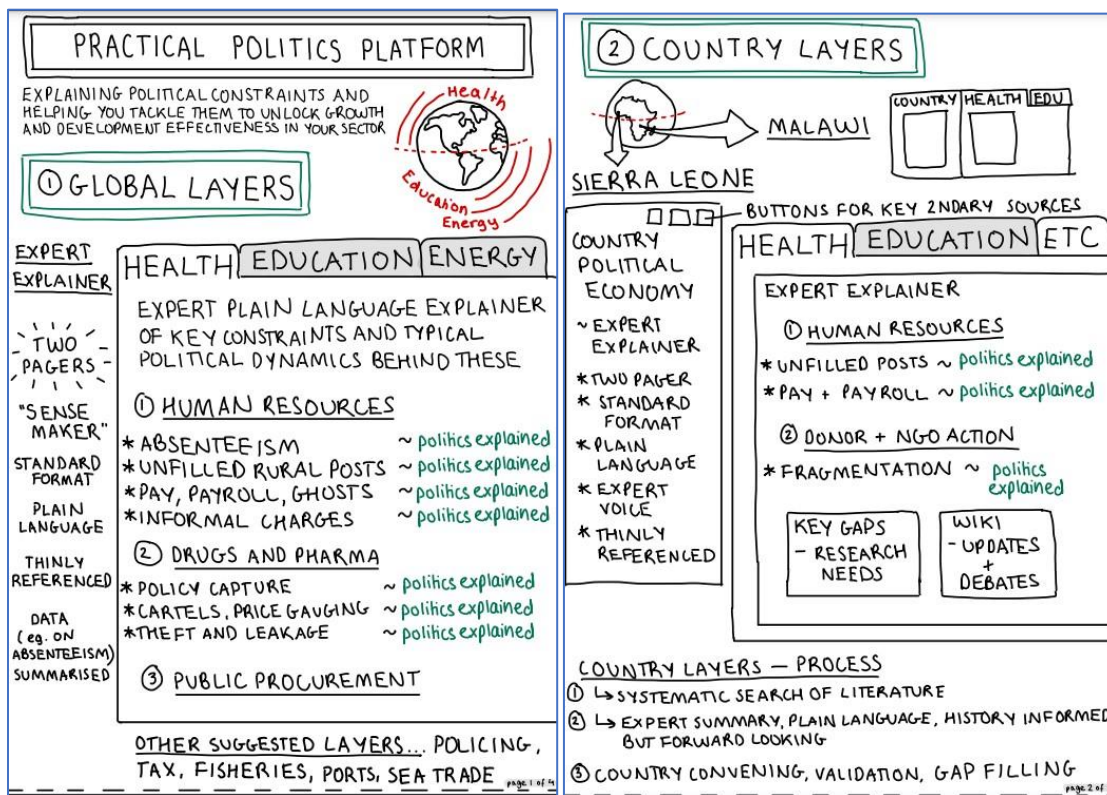
I'm drumming up support for a new initiative which I hope will get 'political economy' further into the mainstream of growth and development. The idea focuses on Political Economy Research ('PER'), but I hope it will also excite the 'PEA' crowd. Here is the summary version:

The *elevator pitch* is a 'Our World in Data – for political economy research'.

The 'Practical Politics Platform' will find, summarise, and explain high quality political economy research, across countries and sectors. As an open access public good, it will support any actor in growth and development to better understand, and address, 'political constraints', thereby unlocking effectiveness across sectors.

The platform aims to normalise and de-risk politically informed approaches and public policy debate, building demand for PER and 'open PEA', and increasing overall funding, particularly for experts in the global south. It aims to make technocratic approaches less and less tenable.

The 'wireframe' would look something like this:



Below is more explanation of where the ideas come from.

Please get in touch if you want to hear more – I can share the latest concept note, more graphics, and I actively seek your challenge, ideas, engagement. Help!

## Where has this come from?

Political constraints are like a rusty cable<sup>1</sup> running through my career – maybe the shadow of Cameron’s golden thread. But there has been unexpected political opportunity too – my zenith was in Bihar when service delivery and tackling graft became a re-election strategy for the Chief Minister, and DFID India’s Governance Team (which I led) was ideally placed to help.

Bihar also jump-started the Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) programme. UK Minister Justine Greening had said a firm no to the business case (‘my policy team say they know what to do and you say we need more research?’). She relented when I reminded her of the unlikely success she had seen on a visit to Patna. We promised her ‘more like that’ – with research telling us how to repeat it. ACE is now ten years old.

I am a PEA and TWP fellow traveller. My career began in health research, and ‘PER’ (the R is for Big R Research) is more my thing. Leading DFID’s Governance, Conflict, Inclusion and Humanitarian Research Team gave me a grip on ‘practical political economy’ research with a ‘political settlements’ framing – learning from programmes such as [ESID](#) and [SLRC](#), and developing a next wave – [ACE](#), [African Cities](#). I get a thrill when this research goes mainstream and informs big spend in growth, health, education, climate. ESID’s book on the politics of education and ACE’s work on [drug leakage](#), [absenteeism](#) are examples of breakthrough, but very large mainstream spending is still undisturbed by any variant of PER or PEA.

## PEA versus PER

When I say ‘PER’ people often hear ‘PEA’. In simple terms, this is how I distinguish between them – with some strengths and weaknesses in the supply of both.

PEA can be deployed quickly, address a priority problem, and help shape strategy that is more likely to be effective. But PEA is often a private service – not public, so may only inform the actor that commissioned it. Quality is not always baked in (no one in the TWP CoP does bad PEA, but there is some bad stuff out there).

PER may be more anchored in theory and existing evidence. The academic publishing system incentivises quality (through peer review) and delivers a public good – published, for all to use, not just the ‘buyer’.

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<sup>1</sup> The photo is of me after literally swimming into a rusty cable.

But there are problems – publication may take years, be paywalled, hidden in niche journals, written in impenetrable jargon, with no clear ‘so whats?’. The traditional research funding system incentivises novelty over utility, though expert research funders – like my old team in DFID/FCDO – can tackle these constraints. When I say ‘practical’ political research I mean plain language, policy relevant, action oriented, and public.

PER and PEA operate in a mutually beneficial system – PEA builds on published research, and many experts do a mix of both. Both PEA and PER can be criticised for being better at ‘breaking’ (criticism) than at ‘making’ (how to do better).

If we want PEA and PER to have greater uptake and be more influential, there are also clear demand-side challenges (which the TWP COP tackles): mainstream knowledge, skills, tools, risk appetite, norms. There is little sanction for technocrats that deliver repeated disappointment. Blame lack of political will and all that...

### The ‘P’ in Anti Corruption

In my time as Director of the [U4 anti-corruption resource centre](#), these supply and demand problems kept cropping up – donor staff asking if we could find usable political research on problem x in country y; how to commission PEAs; how to raise issues from a PEA with partners that were unaware of the PEA. Or the subject of it.

I also met development funders – old multilaterals as well as newer foundations - that were oblivious, or allergic, to talk of politics. However, change was visible – senior leaders had read Stefan Dercon’s [book](#), taken a PEA course, and were energised -- but expressed that they lacked the tools to truly ‘mainstream’ a more political effort, or were cautious about being ‘first movers’ in their sector in case this backfired.

### Building a practical political platform

On stepping down as U4 Director, I floated some ideas in a [podcast](#) and [blogs](#), and I have been working hard on this since. I’m talking to researchers ([Brian Levy](#) was the first to get in touch and offer support), PEA experts, platform builders, AI experts, prospective users (bilaterals, multi laterals, foundations, global programmes), and potential funders. I’ve learned a lot: each consultation actively improves the plan. The latest blog is [here](#).

The platform would address supply and demand sides in PER and PEA - including advocating (to funders and experts) that all new PEA has a public summary (views?!).

Overall, the ‘use case’ is clear – ‘if this existed, we would use it’.

Funding is tougher.

The dream would be a public good investment in an open access platform, with the aim of unlocking effectiveness across sectors, whatever the actor or source of funds. I'm particularly focused on trying to persuade foundations with this logic.

The reality might be building up from smaller country pilots, funded by those with a particular interest in that place and sector, and building up a common programme with a range of funders. We'll see!

I'm optimistic – though solitary hustling is exhausting. Fancy shaping/joining/co-hosting/funding a bold new effort?

I'm sure that you have a host of questions and challenges – who will 'own' the platform? Is there really enough research out there to search and summarise? Is this out of step with localisation and decolonisation? Does it risk gobbling up the fixed resources already used for this kind of work?

Let's talk!

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**About the author:** Peter J Evans is a freelance consultant. He was a DFID social development and governance adviser for two decades, and led DFID's commissioning team for governance, conflict, inclusion and humanitarian research before becoming Director of the U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre. He is '[Not that Peter Evans](#)' (the more famous American political sociologist).

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this reflection are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice.

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The Thinking and working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) is a global network of practitioners, researchers and policymakers in development and global affairs committed to promoting more effective policy and practice. The TWP CoP works to foster more politically aware approaches to understand how change happens and why, translate findings and implications emerging from political economy analysis into operationally relevant guidance, encourage more flexible and adaptable ways of working, and provide evidence-based insights that can stimulate innovation, sharing and learning in international development and global affairs.

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