



Monitoring and Evaluation in Thinking and Working Politically

Webinar Report

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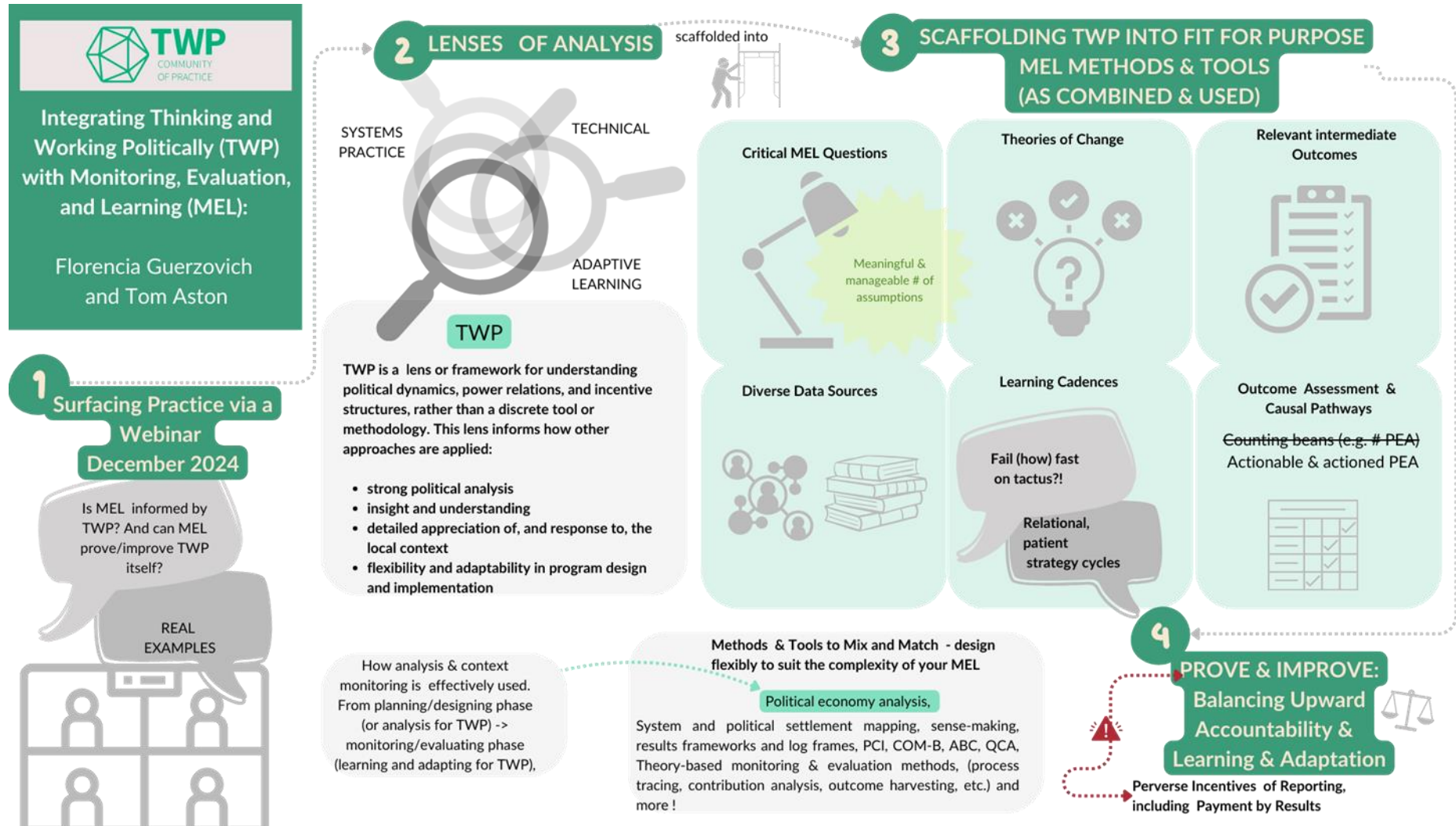
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Acronyms

CAFOD	Catholic Aid for Overseas Development
COM-B	Capacities Opportunities and Motivations
CESC	<i>Centro de Aprendizagem e Capacitação da Sociedade Civil</i>
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
GAPP	Governance Accountability Participation and Performance
GPSA	Global Partnership for Social Accountability
GAH	Governance Action Hub
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
LEARN	Leveraging Education Assistance Resources in Nigeria
MEL	Monitoring Evaluation and Learning
OPM	Oxford Policy Management
PACE	Partnership for Agile Governance and Climate Engagement
PEA	Political Economy Analysis
PERL	Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn
PbR	Payment by Results
PMEL	Portfolio Monitoring Evaluation and Learning
QCA	Qualitative Comparative Analysis
R4D	Results for Development
TWP	Thinking and Working Politically
UBEC	Universal Basic Education Commission
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VfM	Value for Money

Integrating TWP with MEL: A Visual Summary of the Webinar



1. Introduction

In December 2024, Florencia Guerzovich and Tom Aston convened a [webinar on Monitoring and Evaluation in Thinking and Working Politically](#) in collaboration with the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP). The webinar brought together a diverse range of organisations, programmes, and experts with varying backgrounds and experiences, all united by a common interest: how to integrate TWP in Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) systems more effectively in development projects and programmes that are funded by international agencies.

The objective of the webinar was to share examples, insights, and lessons about how those working in this field are exploring innovative ways to monitor and evaluate the contribution of TWP to programming.¹ The facilitated discussion encouraged webinar participants to move beyond abstract prescriptions and engage with practical examples. This allowed for a valuable exchange of experiences and lessons from a variety of initiatives that aim to promote development through more politically informed approaches (see Box 1). While covering a wide range of cases and experiences provided valuable breadth, participants also expressed a desire to delve deeper into specific approaches, methods, and tools.

The webinar aimed to serve as a starting point for a conversation on MEL and TWP. It focused on fostering a shared understanding rather than providing in-depth technical guidance tailored to specific organisational needs. The rich experimentation currently underway in international development work provides a foundation for ongoing discussions and exchanges that may also serve to address these more specific needs.

Box 1: Projects and Programmes Discussed in the Webinar

- [Western Balkans Rule of Law Initiative \(WBROLI\)](#), Chemonics
- [Governance Action Hub \(GAH\) in Colombia](#), R4D
- [Uganda Governance Accountability Participation and Performance \(GAPP\) Program](#), RTI International – *Finalist of the USAID Case Competition*
- [POTENCIAR](#) programme in Mozambique, Chemonics, FHI 360, *Centro de Aprendizagem e Capacitação da Sociedade Civil* (CESC), COWI, and Institute for Development Studies (IDS)
- [Read and My Community Participates in How is My School Doing in the Dominican Republic](#), World Vision
- [Big Bet on Nigeria in Nigeria](#), EnCompass LLC

¹ Laws and Marquette argued in 2018 that much of the evidence to support more politically informed approaches to development was anecdotal (Laws & Marquette, 2018, p. 32). More recent scholarship, however, suggests that the evidence base for the increased value of politically informed approaches has been strengthened (Aston et al., 2021; Jacobstein & Swift, 2022; Piron et al., 2021; Serpe et al., 2022).

- [Leveraging Education Assistance Resources in Nigeria \(LEARN\)](#), Creative Associates – *Runner up of the USAID Case Competition*
- [Partnership to Engage, Learn and Reform \(PERL\)](#) in Nigeria, DAI Global, Palladium, and ODI
- [Facility for Oil Sector Transparency and Reform \(FOSTER\)](#) in Nigeria, OPM

One of the most valuable aspects of the webinar was the **exchange of real-world examples that illustrate how organisations have attempted to integrate TWP and MEL in practice**. These examples grounded the discussion and provided concrete ideas for participants working in the field by presenting emergent trends and lessons from practice. Creative Associates, DAI Global, EnCompass LLC, the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA), Integrity Global, Mathematica, Oxford Policy Management (OPM), Palladium, Results for Development (R4D), RTI International, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) all made key contributions. Other organisations including Catholic Aid for Overseas Development (CAFOD), the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and Pact, among others, also made valuable inputs in the plenary session (see the Annex for a list of participants mentioned in this Report and their respective organisation/affiliation). In addition, the conversation shared insights from two of the finalists of the 2023-2024 [Thinking and Working Politically \(TWP\) Case Competition](#) organised by the USAID Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) (for more on the competition, see Box 2).

Box 2: Want More Inspiration?

It is still difficult to access and share cases where TWP has been applied effectively, in the sense of using political insights to reflect and inform action in practice. USAID's DGR Bureau held its first Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) Case Competition in 2023-2024, in order to collect and disseminate examples where TWP has led to significant outcomes and impact. The case competition represents a step towards making the insights gained from TWP more accessible to the wider development community, creating an evidence base that shows the practical application of TWP in diverse contexts.

Learn more about the winners, runners-up, and finalists here:

<https://www.drglinks.org/twpcasecompresults>

This report frames and synthesises the main points discussed in the webinar, highlighting key themes and pointing towards directions for future engagement. These include:

1. **Integrating TWP as a lens across a whole project or programme, not as a standalone tool:** TWP is a lens or framework for understanding political dynamics, power relations, and incentive structures, rather than a discrete tool or methodology. This lens informs how other approaches are applied, including other related frameworks such as systems practice and adaptive learning.
2. **Scaffolding TWP in ‘fit-for-purpose’ tools and methods:** It seems vital to make explicit efforts to support teams as they pick, combine, and adapt different MEL tools and methods so that it is easier to use TWP as a lens through which other approaches can be applied. To enhance TWP, it needs to interact in a productive way with other components of programme and organisational MEL systems which might not have been designed with power and politics in mind. A TWP-informed MEL system places special attention to infusing political thinking into the following key elements of monitoring, evaluation, and learning:
 - a) Critical MEL Questions
 - b) Theories of Change
 - c) Relevant Intermediate Outcomes
 - d) Diverse Data Sources
 - e) Learning Cadences
 - f) Outcome Assessment and Causal Pathways
3. **Balancing upward accountability with the need to foster learning and adaptation:** Most development organisations need to navigate reporting requirements as part of their political economy. Some of these requirements can at times create perverse incentives that undermine efforts to think and work in ways that are aligned with TWP principles. On the other hand, other organisational and/or programmatic requirements can open up space for deciding how to use tools and ‘work with the grain’ without undermining TWP.

Where possible, the report complements the webinar discussions with other debates and examples that provide additional insights and illustrations for broader learning. It introduces a broad set of MEL tools and approaches, without delving into all of them, or the different ways in which colleagues understand and apply them. For those interested in learning about unfamiliar MEL terms, the Better Evaluation website is a good starting point:

www.betterevaluation.org

2. Key Themes from the Webinar

2.1 TWP as a lens, not a standalone tool

While TWP has historically been closely associated with political economy analysis (PEA), it is more than PEA or other forms of analysis. PEA, which can be thought of as the thinking part of TWP, is an analytical approach used to understand the underlying reasons why things work the way they do and to identify the incentives and constraints affecting the behaviour of actors in a relevant system. The working part of TWP is intended to keep the understanding that everything is political front and centre, and encourage individual staff and teams to purposefully reflect on what an understanding of how change happens and how implies for the work that they do and how they do it, test assumptions on a regular basis, and design and implement interventions accordingly. The knowledge and understanding that stakeholders acquire through learning (including insights from PEA and reflection sessions, among others) then enables them to adjust and adapt in response to contextual realities on the ground as needed.

2.2 Getting beyond PEA as a consultant-produced product

Webinar participants raised concerns about the risk that PEA becomes a box-ticking exercise, where reports quickly become outdated, left to gather dust on shelves without informing strategic programmatic decision-making.

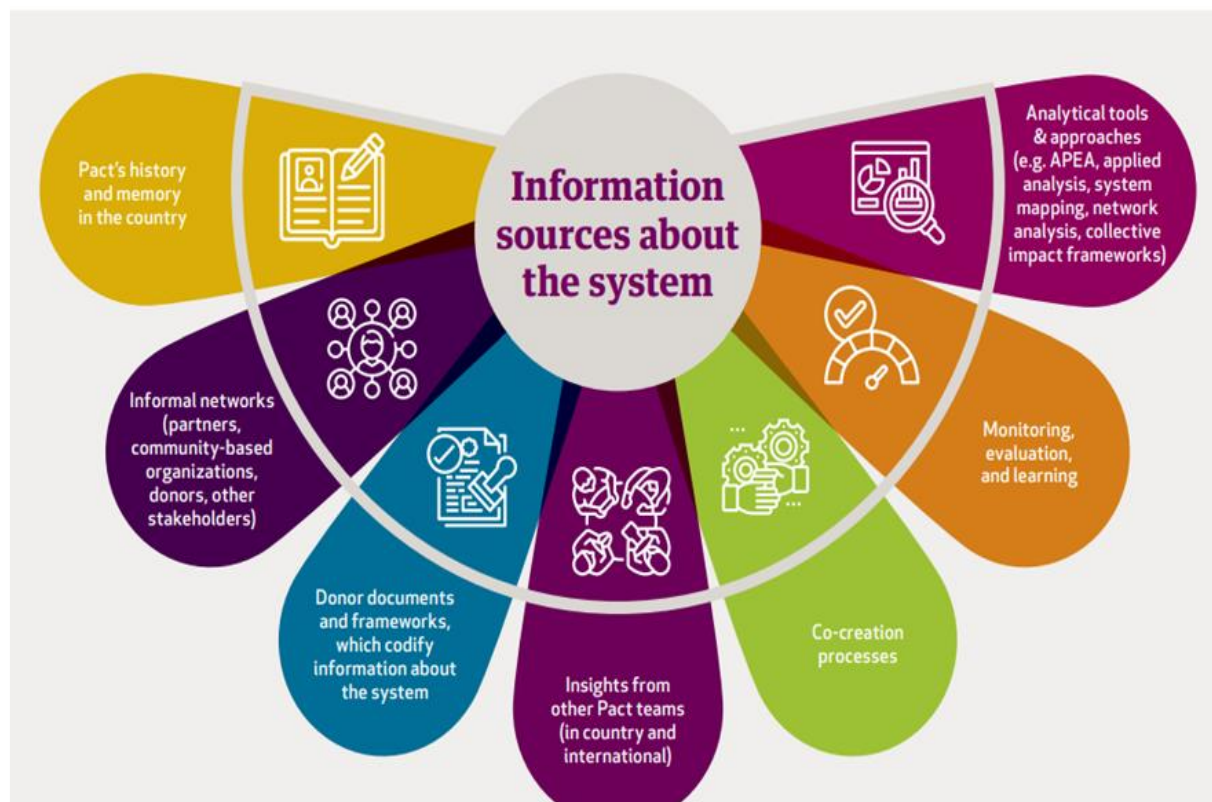
A crucial question emerging from the webinar discussion centred around how political analysis can effectively inform context monitoring and strategic decisions to adapt or stay the course. Several participants noted that embedding PEA within a broader systems mapping and analysis framework could enhance its practical application. Søren Haldrup from UNDP advocated regular informal ‘huddles’ to continuously reappraise context and maintain relevance. Jorge Flores from the Governance Action Hub (GAH) highlighted the wealth of informal information that can complement more formal PEA. He pointed to the importance of processing and making sense of this information as part of ongoing context monitoring, referring to the use of a learning log that GAH uses to achieve this. As Drew Koleros of Mathematica explained, PEA provides value by shedding light on power dynamics, the mental models driving actors’ motivations, and the formal and informal rules shaping social norms. This contextual understanding strengthens the ability to analyse key relationships and structures that influence change. Box 3 illustrates how Pact systems practitioners approach this challenge using a holistic approach, which includes PEA but is not limited to this source of political insight and information.

Box 3: Practical Example: Systems-Aware approach to Social Accountability

Pact's Systems-Aware approach to Social Accountability provides a possible way forward to work with teams and surface political analysis, drawing on what teams already do. In a publication on how to harness practitioners' insights for more responsive governance (Guerzovich & Keevill, 2023), Pact outlines what matters for teams to have a 'holistic' and politically informed lens of the system: 'Developing a strong understanding of the system in which a project works and effectively integrating this knowledge into implementation increases the chances that local actors will sustain the interventions' (Guerzovich & Keevill, 2023). Effective programming does not require using PEA per se. What is needed is considering which combination of tools, including PEA, might improve and increase a specific team's knowledge to understand what political dynamics are at work in a local system and how they may affect prospective interventions. Figure 1 maps other tools that can complement and, at times, replace PEA.

In Pact's framework, however, other principles and practice guide the use of the diverse information emerging from informal networks, institutional memory, monitoring data, and analytical work, among others. Other principles include a 'right fit' approach, system orchestration, and adaptive management.

Figure 1: Tools in Pact's guidance that can complement or supplant PEA

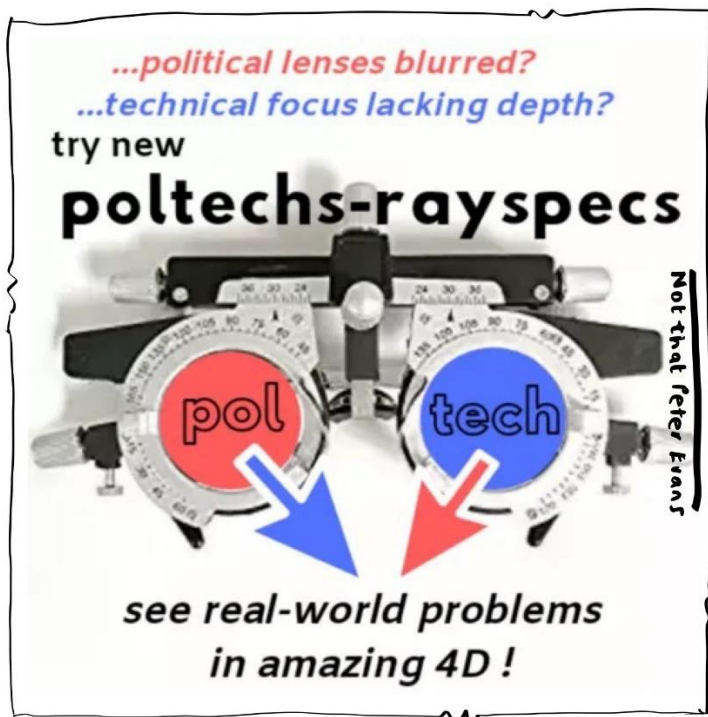


Source: Guerzovich & Keevill (2023)

Building on participants' insights, the Webinar reframed TWP as a lens for understanding change – a practical 'how-to' – rather than a prescriptive methodology or a 'what'. This shift emphasises the versatility of TWP in informing various approaches to navigating political contexts.

A TWP lens offers a multifaceted and dynamic framework for analysing challenges and identifying opportunities, combining political and technical considerations to create more realistic assessments and actionable entry points for change (see Figure 2). By tailoring strategies and MEL practices to the specific complexities of on-the-ground realities, this approach fosters more adaptive and effective interventions.

Figure 2: Lenses



Source: [Not that Peter Evans](#) (2023)

TWP is a versatile and adaptive approach. Organisations can embed TWP principles – political analysis, contextual awareness, and adaptability – across programme design, implementation, and MEL, without having to rely on rigid methodologies and formal analysis. This integrated approach ensures that political and technical realities are addressed concurrently, enabling more relevant and sustainable engagement with local governments, civil society, and other stakeholders. Box 4 illustrates how these principles can be operationalised in a real-world setting.

Box 4: Practical Example: Uganda Governance Accountability Participation and Performance Program

The Uganda Governance Accountability Participation and Performance (GAPP) Program – a USAID and FCDO /RTI programme (and a finalist in the USAID TWP Case Competition) aimed at improving transparency in local governance in Uganda, using TWP to map out power structures and identify political motivations blocking change. After undertaking an applied PEA, the team realised that a history of corruption and favouritism had fostered two coalitions (one for and another against reform) that were at a standstill. This insight informed informal conversations with key stakeholders who co-produced a shift in strategy, focusing on engaging senior and middle management in ways that built trust and buy-in for problem-solving. A fit-for-purpose MEL system would not be set up merely to track budget processes. Rather, the project's MEL system incorporated regular political analysis and stakeholder mapping to understand shifting power dynamics. During the TWP CoP Webinar, Eva Matsiko (RTI) noted that it was important to ensure that donors engage with implementing partners because the latter were better placed than other stakeholders to identify opportunities and entry points to close the loop between learning and action. This is another example where the PEA was a part of a TWP process rather than being an end in itself.

2.3 Integrating TWP with other approaches

The examples showcased here reflect the importance of viewing TWP not as a separate methodology or tool but as a framework that informs and guides how we go about all aspects of development work, from strategy development to outcome assessment to the range of tools needed to achieve specific goals, in ways that are attuned to realities on the ground.

As the webinar helped to highlight, the participants' general perception is that TWP can inform and strengthen various other tools and methodologies (such as Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA)² and adaptive development or systems thinking) depending on the situation. Many colleagues discussed how their practices reflect how this specific TWP lens helps them navigate commonalities and differences as they weave tools and methodologies using all these approaches at once. While CLA tends to be framed in language that is more technical and less politically charged, Sarah Frazer (RTI) argued that TWP delves deeper than adaptive management approaches –not only exploring why change is or is not occurring, but also investigating the underlying factors, such as stakeholder perspectives, power dynamics, and the incentives and barriers that shape political and social processes. TWP provides a richer analysis of complex systems and is especially useful when examining why certain reforms succeed or fail (also see Box 5).

² Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) is a USAID (n.d.) approach, which the agency defines as 'a set of systematic and intentional practices that help improve development effectiveness. Strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management link together all components of the Program Cycle'. For more information, see : <https://www.usaid.gov/evaluation/collaborating-learning-and-adapting-cla>

Box 5: Synergies Between TWP, Local Systems Thinking, and CLA

In this two-part episode of the 'Systems Practice in International Development' podcast series, Rachel Leeds, David Jacobstein, and Monalisa Salib from USAID discuss with Nepal's Portfolio Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (PMEL)'s team differences between TWP, local systems thinking, and CLA, as well as ways to build synergies across these approaches in practice:

[From Systems Thinking to Practice: How USAID is Embracing Humility and Relationships to Do Aid Differently – Part 1.](#) *Systems Practice in International Development Podcast.*

[From Systems Thinking to Practice: How USAID is Embracing Humility and Relationships to Do Aid Differently – Part 2.](#) *Systems Practice in International Development Podcast.*

There are different ways to advance the integration of TWP and MEL:

- **Awareness and capacity building:** Several webinar participants noted the importance of training and coaching staff on how to incorporate TWP as a lens rather than as a tool or method. This helps staff shift their mindset to consider political dynamics throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation of a project or programme, rather than as a one-off.
- **Integration:** Some organisations have experimented with explicitly integrating TWP into MEL processes. These pilots have allowed teams to test and refine how political considerations can be incorporated into project/programme MEL systems. FCDO's PMEL in Nigeria and Nepal are trying to go down this route – listen to them in this [two-part episode of the Systems Practice in International Development](#) podcast series (see also Box 5).
- **Innovation on standard processes:** Some organisations have used their capacity to challenge the dichotomy between results-focused indicators and adaptive learning, working in ways that seek to overcome viewing these as either-or, or mutually exclusive, approaches. Some teams, for example, have focused on the fact that the tools themselves may not be the problem, but rather how they are applied. A log frame can include tick-box indicators as well as indicators that (along with other activities) can be useful for assessment and learning. Examples of these might include, among others, a mid-point report, a summative evaluation, or a supervision exercise to focus a team's attention on compliance or adaptation. The challenge often lies in creating the right incentives within existing frameworks.

2.4 Scaffolding TWP in 'fit-for-purpose' tools and methods

While TWP serves as a framework for understanding political dynamics, it must be supported by fit-for-purpose tools and methods that enable the MEL system to work and make TWP insights actionable in that context. The goal is to extract actionable insights from real-world experiences, and sometimes this means blending methods that can be applied at different scales – from large programmes to small, resource-constrained ones.

The challenge is not just identifying appropriate methods, but rather effectively combining different methodologies and analytical tools (see Aston et al., 2021). At the webinar, Dadirai Chikwengo from CAFOD introduced the concept of ‘scaffolding’ TWP by bolting it on top of a foundational layer of governance and development practice, emphasising that TWP requires complementary approaches. For instance, integrating actor-based change maps helps track relationships and shifts within systems without framing these tools exclusively as part of the TWP agenda (Wood, n.d.). Scaffolding TWP allows for smoother integration into broader programmatic and MEL frameworks and encourages programme teams to engage with TWP concepts without feeling burdened by additional complexities. Chikwengo’s experience suggests that blending TWP with other analytical tools based on what country offices need and what they find useful can help them monitor and reflect on their political engagement more effectively, without making the process overly formalised or disconnected from broader objectives. The same applies to the use of the Capability, Opportunity and Motivation (COM-B) behaviour change framework in Christian Aid and Integrity (Christian Aid, 2021), among others. At the webinar, other participants shared examples of how they have scaffolded TWP into other critical components of MEL systems (e.g. MEL questions, theories of change, intermediate outcomes), even if they did not have the scaffolding or used a different metaphor to describe what they have been doing in practice.

TWP can be scaffolded on top of some or all of the six elements of a MEL system that the following section addresses in turn.

3. Critical MEL Questions

TWP can directly inform the critical questions that MEL systems pose, particularly regarding how power dynamics and stakeholder incentives affect a programme’s contribution to outcomes. For instance, instead of simply asking whether a project achieved an output (e.g. how many reports were produced?) or outcomes (e.g. was new legislation informed by those reports?), TWP-informed MEL might ask what (or who) is blocking the achievement of outcomes or what makes them sustainable (or resilient) given the current political economy, as well as reflecting on unintended consequences and negative externalities (e.g. who might lose out from a new policy). Similarly, the question for assessing the value of TWP from a MEL perspective may be whether PEA was used, how, under what conditions, and to what effect in terms of ways of working, rather than whether it was produced, as discussed in the previous section. Teams need to regularly revisit and tailor these questions based on evolving realities.

a) Theories of Change

Theories of change are about the [process](#) of achieving a shared understanding and about reflecting on [assumptions](#) about how or under which conditions change happens, and to what effect – who

stands to win or lose. Critical thinking is of the essence. **TWP can help to inform the development of theories of change.** It can do so by **embedding political considerations directly into critical assumptions** about the relationships between an intervention and its context and how different factors affect prospects for change. A TWP lens can help ensure that local political and economic realities inform a given theory of change, rather than imposing predefined assumptions from the outside. TWP can provide a scaffolding to the theory of change process by incentivising critical thinking and reflective action about how specific agents can contribute to change, rather than merely codifying an abstract diagnostic and set of prescriptions. In the case of the GAH in Colombia (see Box 10), in addition to its political settlement analysis and system maps, the team has a learning log which has been built around identifying changes in the context and the key assumptions that the initiative means to address – although reducing the number of assumptions to a manageable set has been challenging in practice, as there are many unknowns at the early stages of an initiative.

b) Relevant Intermediate Outcomes

It is essential to track outcomes, particularly intermediate ones (early signs of behaviour changes) for TWP-informed MEL. Traditional MEL focuses on a combination of easily quantifiable performance metrics that in and of themselves might not be all that meaningful (e.g. number of beneficiaries, project budget expenditures, or number of PEA reports produced) and high-level impacts that are often extremely ambitious but not directly linked to the performance metrics. This leads to an incomplete understanding of a programme's effectiveness and may result in the misdiagnosis of problems and how they might be addressed given political circumstances, misallocation of resources, and/or a failure to adjust strategies based on political realities or shifts. Most importantly perhaps, there is also a risk of doing harm. In recognising that intermediate outcomes that account for shifts in power, stakeholder behaviour, and policy processes over time matter – even if they can be difficult to quantify in the short term – TWP seeks to better inform decision-making (Box 6). See Box 7 for a discussion of what can be a controversial intermediate outcome: learning.

Key Point: Change and setbacks are common in political processes, and this needs to be recognised in MEL frameworks. 'Success' is often patchy and uneven, especially in politically complex contexts, and the process of change is likely to entail difficult tensions, dilemmas, and trade-offs. Measuring progress therefore requires adaptive and context-sensitive monitoring and evaluation approaches that can take this kind of uncertainty and fluidity into account.

Box 6: Practical Example: [Leveraging Education Assistance Resources in Nigeria](#)

During the webinar, Toun Akinsolu and Leesa Kaplan (Creative Associates) shared their experience in [Leveraging Education Assistance Resources in Nigeria \(LEARN\)](#) (runner-up in the USAID TWP Case Competition), focusing on the application of TWP within a results-based financing model for early-grade reading reforms. LEARN's approach involved conducting a political institutional analysis of Nigeria's education system, specifically within the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC). The project sought to understand the internal dynamics and mandate of UBEC to ensure alignment with Nigeria's national reading framework. A TWP lens emphasised the simultaneous consideration of an intervention's fit within the existing education system and its potential to catalyse meaningful change. In this context, it was useful to focus MEL not just on tracking enrolment rates or test scores, but on whether and how the intervention was directly engaging with stakeholders across departments to muster support for shared reform objectives.

Box 7: Controversy: Should Learning be a Performance Matrix?

There was broad agreement among webinar participants that learning is an integral element of TWP, and that it is central to achieving significant and/or sustainable change. From a MEL perspective, this requires thinking about how local stakeholders' learning – including their informal, context-driven insights – can eventually lead to higher-order results. Various webinar participants, however, shared concerns that making learning a programmatic performance metric might turn it into a compliance activity, an afterthought, or a way to justify expenditure, which could stifle organic political analysis and adaptive change. Laura Adams from Pact remarked that if a donor includes learning and adaptation as a programme-wide objective rather than as part of the MEL plan, that can make a big difference: it signals to stakeholders that the donor will reward a reflexive and adaptive approach to development work, even if it departs from agreed plans.

c) Diverse Data Sources

TWP requires a wide range of data sources, including qualitative and informal insights that can capture the nuances of political dynamics, how these influence the achievement of positive and negative outcomes, and what the implications might be for how projects and programmes are designed and managed. The discussion and examples throughout this report illustrate a broad range of data sources that can be used as well as different tools that can be helpful in capturing and analysing the data (Box 8). At the webinar, Haldrup (UNDP) took up the opportunity, and proposed the following path forward:

"I see an interesting 'tension' between the types of 'intel' that good TWP relies on: people on the ground having the connections, fingerspitzengefühl [intuitive feeling], and gut instincts that allow them to get and absorb a variety of (often anecdotal) information and act on this in a way that helps them navigate and leverage the political context vs formal regular monitoring and evaluation based on systematic data collection (often quantitative), formalised evaluation rubrics, etc. There is obviously alignment here – if MEL systems and procedures can create spaces for regular problem-

driven sensemaking that allows teams to reflect on what is happening based on a variety of more/less structured quant and qual data.”

Box 8: Practical Examples of Sources of Data

- Niki Wood (Chemonics) shared an example from the work of Chemonics in the Western Balkans. She noted the importance of developing **observational evidence** tools to capture intangible changes in language, how connections are made, and how relationships expand.
- Michael Moses (EnCompass) built on the notion that the most important aspect of methodologies is not the specific tools themselves but how they are used and how they enable collaboration. Santiago Cunial (UNDP) agreed. Moses offered the example of Big Bet in Nigeria, where participatory systems mapping, outcome mapping, and rubrics were adapted to ensure that partner organisations working on social accountability at the ground level are empowered to contribute to the process.

When tacit knowledge is systematically captured, it can both help inform analysis for course correction, and an inductive or deductive approach also can help challenge, revise, validate, or question organisations’ theories of change. Box 9 provides an example.

Box 9: Practical Example: Social Accountability 3.0

In a meta-analysis looking at 20 years of social accountability work, Guerzovich and Aston (2023) took stock of evidence and tacit knowledge by using a systems lens and discussed where the sector might go next (which they call social accountability 3.0). They developed a database of 157 initiatives implemented by civil society organisations (CSOs) around the world and practitioners’ lived experiences. In their review, Guerzovich and Aston (2023) maintain that academic debates tend to present practitioners’ options in binary terms, contrasting what they refer to as 1.0, or minimalist, and 2.0, or maximalist, approaches to social accountability. They argue that this binary is inaccurate and misleading, and that it masks practitioners’ diverse ways of working and the range of feasibility considerations that inform them. Indeed, the authors find that work in the last decade looks more like a mosaic. This mosaic was observable by opening the analysis to a broader range of evidence, including not only the sample of cases that scholars use but also grey literature (such as evaluations) and tacit knowledge, and reflecting more critically on scholars’ assumptions. According to Guerzovich and Aston (2023), these insights are informing new theories of change, debates, and programming.

Learning Cadences

Learning Cadences refer to the regular intervals or rhythms at which different types of learning activities, reflections, and knowledge-sharing occur within a project or organisation. A critical aspect of TWP is creating adaptive learning cadences that allow teams to reflect on the political context and to

adjust their strategies accordingly. As Haldrup (UNDP) suggested at the webinar, feedback loops are essential in ensuring that MEL systems are not static, but adaptable and reflective of the shifting political environment (see Box 10). This may call for embedding reflection sessions about specific issues (e.g. pause and reflect or problem-driven sensemaking based on diverse sources of data) at key points throughout the project cycle. Obviously, the relevant and feasible cadence for meaningful learning is not the same across all aspects of programming or all contexts. Many webinar participants, including Aston, pointed out that **real-time learning** is often a myth – what is considered ‘real-time’ learning may in fact be quite slow and dependent on context and capacity (see Box 11).

Box 10: Practical Example: Flexible Monitoring Tools in GAH

Building on his experience in Colombia of working on energy-transition programmes (see Box 1), Jorge Flores (GAH) emphasised the importance of flexible monitoring tools, including systems maps, rubrics, and indicators, as well as ongoing PEA, all of which can help facilitate dialogue among stakeholders. Flores stressed that the dynamic, informal information that gradually emerges can help teams to track and understand how the system is shifting and their evolving role in it.

One desirable result from TWP efforts is increased credibility and trust-based relationships across project or programme stakeholders (Rocha Menocal & Piron, 2023) and actors in a system more generally. Relationships take time to build. They are inherently interdependent and are part of shared experiences, and this reality makes them ‘sticky’ (Guerzovich & Aston, 2024).

At the webinar, Cathy Shutt (independent MEL expert) also highlighted that the experience of POTENCIAR in Mozambique illustrates the potential risks of the ‘fail fast’ approach, particularly when working on complex issues like social accountability. It is detrimental to simply sever relationships with partners when challenges arise, as discussed in a recent [learning event](#) about the project. If building trust and fostering collaborative relationships with local partners is crucial, abruptly ending these relationships based on short-term setbacks could undermine a programme’s long-term impact and damage the credibility of the implementing organisation(s). This raises important questions about the appropriate timeframe for assessing progress and determining whether an intervention needs to be adjusted or even discontinued, keeping in mind the need to make such decisions with great care and consideration given the potential consequences these could have on partnerships and relationships.

Time and timing matter. Shutt argued that adaptation based on PEA ‘isn’t always easy to justify early on in the programme. It takes a high level of political savviness to differentiate between when to pull out of an intervention vs. when to change strategy but remain in an intervention’. Many processes of change are also gradual, adaptive, and uncertain. They may **come in fits and starts, experience long periods of stasis, regress or have setbacks, and then they may have a breakthrough (like a J-curve), but this is not a given**. Alix Wadeson offered an example from Guerzovich and Aston (2024) in the Dominican Republic. In 2011, the World Bank supported a series of collective-action efforts, including seemingly modest training on social accountability.

This training helped to plant the seeds for loose relationships among actors committed to embedding social accountability approaches into their work. Over a decade, this relatively small network expanded, adapting the approach to the education sector. Some of the network’s members implemented social accountability processes through two World Vision projects – one funded by USAID and another by the World Bank’s GPSA – that strengthened participatory school-based management. Notably, the GPSA project facilitated the co-creation of an innovative protocol between civil society and national authorities in 2023 – with several of the

same key stakeholders who had maintained long-term relationships which unlocked those doors when it counted. This highlights the uncertain and non-linear nature of change, making it difficult to plan with rigidly defined indicators or build in all the steps within ongoing rapid learning loops. Instead, we must find ways to document, reflect, and learn about how change happens that are appropriate to its fluid and dynamic nature.

Part of the trick of balancing the tensions in a particular MEL effort is timing learning cadences to respond to different types of questions (see Table 1).

Box 11: Tension: Rapid Testing or Not?

Webinar participants brought attention to a tension between TWP and the agile development ideas of rapid testing and fast failure approaches incentivised in some systems and adaptive management practice. Jacobstein (USAID) and Guerzovich cautioned that quick learning cycles often emphasised in contemporary development practice may not be feasible or may clash with the medium-term, deeper, more relational, and context-dependent nature of TWP work.

Realistically, documentation and reflection often take place during retrospective quarterly or annual reviews. This approach may be the most practical way to avoid overburdening local teams with excessive documentation requirements that could potentially hinder their core work. The concept of capturing 'real-time' data on evolving strategies can very often be somewhat of a myth. Identifying and documenting crucial decisions and their underlying rationale can be challenging in real time. Determining the appropriate level of detail for recording these processes requires careful consideration and relies heavily on the sound judgment of the MEL team.

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Understanding the many questions that are relevant for decision-making in projects and portfolios often requires time for reflection and a deeper grasp of strategic and relational outcomes.³ Furthermore, it necessitates an appreciation for the more incremental, politically sensitive processes that TWP aims to foster. Quick reflection and feedback loops may not be the most appropriate tools to help gain these insights. Other evaluation methods may be more suitable, such as less frequent exercises like mid-term, real-time, or ex-post evaluations.⁴

Table 1: Learning Cadences: Addressing different types of questions for different learning moments within a programme/project

<i>Types of Assumption</i>	<i>Questions teams should reflect on</i>	<i>Frequency with which teams should address questions</i>
Operational or Implementation	<p>1. What - Are we doing things right?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Focus: Primarily on the implementation and operational aspects of the programme/project/portfolio activities. 	Regularly (whether consciously or not).

³ A relational outcome is the result of an interaction or relationship between two or more individuals or entities. It focuses on the quality and nature of the connection itself, rather than on specific tasks or goals achieved.

<https://hayleyleverblog.wordpress.com/2024/01/26/relationships-as-outcomes-and-processes-what-value/>

⁴ For more on evaluation methods, see <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/methods>³ For more on evaluation methods, see <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/methods>

Causal	<p>2. How – Are we doing things in the right way?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus: Delves deeper into the effectiveness and appropriateness of the programme / portfolio approach. 	<p>When significant changes are expected to happen. The learning may be highly structured (e.g. biannual or annual), or less structured – reflecting on learning after a period of effort, such as through an intense period debrief or an after action review following a key moment in the programme.</p>
Paradigmatic and Prescriptive	<p>3. Why – Are we doing the right things, given our organisational identity and values?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus: Examines the alignment of the activities with the organisational mission, values, and identity. 	<p>It is probably not feasible or strategic to do this more than once a year because it can be quite disruptive to do so, e.g. asking these questions might imply significant changes in partnership arrangements, or in areas of engagement, among others.</p>

Source: Adapted from [Aston, 2020](#)

d) Outcome Assessment and Causal Pathways

In the webinar, Koleros (Mathematica) explained how understanding the current system dynamics, including actors’ relationships, power dynamics, and informal rules, provides insights into potential entry points for change. His approach focuses on causal pathways and understanding how different actors contribute to shifting systems. Unlike traditional evaluations, which count discrete outputs like policy changes, Koleros emphasised the importance of measuring structural and relational changes over time using causal pathways (Box 12).

Box 12: Causal Pathways

‘Causal Pathways approaches focus on the direct and indirect relationships between causal factors and changes (intended, unintended or unchanged) in a system. ...Understanding the pathways and the mechanisms driving change (or preventing it) can inform decisions by funders, implementers, and people affected directly by the interventions. The discovery of causal pathways is inherently about finding mechanisms by which change is happening (or is prevented). Mapping these mechanisms makes visible what different stakeholders understand about the causal pathways, how different causal mechanisms are interlinked, and where causal factors have had influence within these pathways. Examination and assessment of causal pathways can help reveal new opportunities to address systemic problems and make visible how different perspectives understand the changes taking place.’

Source: [Britt et al., 2022](#).

[Outcome Harvesting](#) and [Process Tracing](#) are two methods which are increasingly applied in MEL processes that seek to explore causal pathways and the complex and dynamic realities of development interventions. Outcome Harvesting excels at capturing unexpected and unplanned outcomes, while Process Tracing is strong on understanding the underlying causal mechanisms that drive those outcomes. As with other methods, these two can also be, and often are, [combined](#) (Smith & Kishekya, 2013).

Several contributors mentioned Contribution Analysis, which is often used as a theory-based frame and process. As Niki Wood from Integrity reflected in a [LinkedIn post](#) after the event, 'I find Contribution Stories or case studies with a contribution flavour to be valuable in explaining these changes, and it seems that many of us have arrived at the same conclusion'.

Box 12 discusses rubrics – an approach that nearly all webinar contributors mentioned. A rubric is a [framework](#) that sets out criteria and standards for different levels of performance and describes what performance would look like at each level. As with other methods and tools, rubrics alone may not be sufficient to understand causal pathways and outcomes, but it can be very useful to [combine with other tools](#) as part of a more effective MEL approach (Guerzovich, 2025).

Box 13: Practical Example(s): Rubrics

[Rubrics](#) are a form of scale with descriptions which denote different levels of performance. UNDP, USAID, GPSA, Chemonics, Encompass LLC, and R4D are all using rubrics to assess progress in some of their more complex programming, such as governance or institutional-strengthening programmes. Rubrics are a good fit for complex programming because they are flexible and versatile.

Both Jacobstein of USAID and Wadeson (Independent MEL expert) argued that rubrics were helpful for defining gradual or intermediate changes, early signs and maturation, rather than seeing change as all-or-nothing or absolute. This is especially important given that achieving transformative change in short timeframes is at best unrealistic. This greyscale, which is also found in fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), is important when there are levels of performance or achievement are contestable.

USAID has been developing a [Rubric for TWP](#) to support periodic work planning or pause-and-reflect moments. Jacobstein argued that the rubric was helpful in structuring the grading of thinking and working politically, i.e. what constitute different levels of performance, and the kind of evidence colleagues might need to demonstrate effectiveness. The assessment goes beyond simply evaluating activities and efforts. It delves deeper into how USAID staff and partners will know if they are on the right track, making progress towards their goals.

As for GPSA, as Wadeson explained, the initiative developed a [rubric](#) (Guerzovich, 2024) to better understand scaling and sustainability, with a focus on identifying realistic levels of change in short projects. A [causal pathway logic](#) was embedded into the tool (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Scale up For Sustainability - A Relational Rubric



Source: Adapted from Wadeson and Guerezovich, 2023

Wood (Integrity and previously Chemonics) further noted that Chemonics found rubrics extremely helpful in the context of the Western Balkans. In the region, the diversity of institutional scenarios across countries was incorporated into the rubric, rather than assessing all countries against the same benchmark. Wood argued that it was essential to create a rubric as a guiding frame because it allowed the programme to judge different degrees between not doing thinking and working politically at all and applying it in a manner that is fully appropriate. Programme staff employed contribution and evidence rubrics on key criteria such as plausibility and used this as a launchpad to discuss evaluation findings such as levels of contribution as a team and with the donor.

By ensuring that TWP is embedded or scaffolded across these interrelated MEL systems components, organisations can use the lens to guide more thoughtful and politically informed decision-making.

4. Balancing Upward Accountability with the Need to Foster Learning and Adaptation

Underpinning the discussion about selecting the most appropriate MEL tools and methods to assess impact in programming is a broader concern. Most development organisations need to navigate complex political economy dynamics between pressures for upward accountability and the mandate to experiment, learn, and adapt. While MEL functions require programmes to prove the value of their work and related activities to their donors, and for public bodies ultimately to their tax-paying public, these same functions are also intended to enable learning – to improve programmes’ additional value – at least on paper. While some [experts](#) (e.g. Guijt, 2011) have argued that these two priorities are compatible, in practice, ensuring they complement each other requires careful design of incentive structures and reporting frameworks. As Fraser from PERL (see Box 1) highlighted in the webinar discussion, a significant tension often arises between two competing objectives: generating valuable learning products, and using learning to influence ongoing planning and decision-making. The questions, needs, audiences, and levels of publicity of products labelled as ‘research and learning’ [often vary, even if they can be easily conflated](#). This tension can manifest itself in competing for resources, with limited time and budget being pulled in different directions. It can also lead to a disconnect between the production of valuable learning products and their effective uptake in programme improvement.

Many organisations struggle to identify MEL tools that could capture both traditional outputs and political dynamics. There are concerns that using political insights may overcomplicate or dilute the effectiveness of established tools. For example, consider a health programme aiming to increase access to maternal health services. Traditional MEL might focus on indicators like the number of women receiving antenatal check-ups or the percentage of births attended by skilled health professionals. Integrating political dynamics would require considering factors like the influence of local power structures on access to healthcare or the potential for political interference in programme implementation. This added layer of complexity can make data collection more challenging and may require significant adjustments to existing MEL systems, budgets, and staff training, among others.

Balancing these competing priorities require TWP-informed MEL teams to be creative in how they apply what appear to be rigid MEL tools, particularly in ways that align with TWP – inhabiting a [‘zone of creativity’](#) (Muhereza, 2024) that requires mixing predictability and uncertainty rather than inhabiting either extreme. This entrepreneurial and customised way to think about MEL may involve working within the constraints of formal reporting structures as well as finding ways to align them with critical political insights. Some webinar participants mentioned how they have adapted traditional MEL tools to incorporate political dynamics more explicitly. This has included, among other things, incorporating TWP-relevant indicators into log frames, or integrating qualitative and quantitative methods in ongoing analysis. For example, the GPSA included in its portfolio and project-level results frameworks

functional equivalent measures for issues such as ‘Percentage of grants in which civil society actors, citizens and public sector actors involved in the project demonstrate improved capacity to engage meaningfully and collaboratively together’.⁵ Some organisations also supplement quantitative data with systematic tacit knowledge and narrative reports that capture how political dynamics have influenced outcomes. This has allowed them to communicate political insights effectively to donors without solely relying on hard or structured metrics.

At times, the constraints imposed by tools and incentives for upward accountability (especially those associated with reporting) can prove too onerous or even become insurmountable to achieving any meaningful learning. In such cases, pressures for upward accountability can generate incentives that become fixated on short-term quantifiable results and are not conducive to deeper learning and adaptation. Ultimately, this will have a considerable impact on programmatic decision-making, including in terms of what work should continue and be scaled up, what should be cut, what other things might be fruitfully tested or not, etc. Several contributors called particular attention to how donor requirements related to Value for Money (VfM) and Payment by Results (PbR)⁶ shape incentives that are not aligned with TWP principles and the complexity of change processes (see Aston & Rocha Menocal, 2021, in relation to PERL, for example). A TWP lens helps to highlight how essential it is to rethink how MEL systems for upward accountability work in practice in order to avoid or mitigate the risk of generating perverse incentives and, perhaps most importantly, negative or harmful unintended consequences (see Box 14).

Box 14: Practical Example: Learning within PERL and PbR

Shutt (independent MEL expert) noted that, early in the PERL programme (see Box 1), PEA was used to inform decisions on what activities to engage in and where to reallocate resources based on their (perceived) value and relevance. This was featured under PERL’s VfM analysis of programme efficiency. The PERL MEL team argued that this kind of analysis, intended to identify where there was likely to be more/less traction to do something (for example at the state vs the national level) had saved thousands of pounds.

More qualitative research undertaken over time to explore how whether and how PERL functioned as a thinking and working politically programme, as it was originally and explicitly designed to do, has shown that PbR in particular considerably reduced the scope for TWP (see, for example, Aston & Rocha Menocal, 2021; Piron et al., 2021). While PERL was a highly effective programme that achieved important outcomes and sustainable impact, there is general agreement among staff and observers alike that it managed this *despite* a PbR system which generated incentives that limited the space and scope for risk-taking, deeper learning (especially in terms of the how and the why elements of learning discussed earlier in this report), and ensuing

⁵ For additional examples, see Wadeson and Guertzovich (2023).

⁶ VfM is a framework to assess the use of resources and the achievement of outcomes by looking at a programme’s economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and equity. PbR is a funding model widely used in international development whereby disbursements depend on the achievement of outcomes/results that have been predefined and pre-agreed, rather than simply funding inputs or activities. The intention in part is to shift financial risk from the donor to the implementing partner, under the assumption that this will increase accountability and effectiveness - though evidence suggests that it often does not and that this can in fact prove counterproductive.

adaptation. At the webinar, Julia Stoyanova from the FCDO said that, building on the evidence emerging from PERL on the detrimental impact that PbR can have on programme implementation, including in relation to TWP principles, PERL's successor programme, the Partnership for Agile Governance and Climate Engagement (PACE), no longer operates under PbR (see also FCDO 2023). The FCDO team is working to embed actionable learning into the results framework of the new PACE programme in Nigeria. Actionable learning will be part of the programme's annual review and will encourage teams to engage in deeper learning, by among other things giving them more space to reflect and improve based on evidence.

5. Conclusion

Building on the webinar we convened in December 2024, this report examined the integration of TWP into MEL systems, emphasising the need to align political insights with programme strategies. We have illustrated various practical examples of efforts to integrate a TWP lens in MEL, including to monitor and evaluate TWP programming. We also highlighted ongoing challenges to do this more consistently and systematically, and possible ways to work around such difficulties as identified by a diverse set of experts from around the world who joined the webinar and are working at the intersection of both practices.

The discussion illustrated the nuances involved in integrating MEL and TWP in international development programming. TWP provides a valuable lens for understanding political contexts and driving change. Its integration with MEL systems is progressing in practice within a broad range of organisations and contexts. By asking participants to share their experiences and case studies, the webinar connected separate threads of practice, and helped to identify trends and promising areas for joint action and ongoing exploration.

At the core of the discussion was the notion that TWP, as a lens or set of principles to think in more politically aware ways and work differently as a result, should be less about specific methods and tools and more about sensing and understanding *how* change does or does not happen and what the implications might be for ways of working, including creating space and incentives for meaningful learning and adaptation. Adopting a TWP lens in MEL activities should help ensure that key relational and incentive-based considerations are based on flexible and context-appropriate interpretations that suit organisational conditions, and the problems that specific programmes aim to address.

When TWP is scaffolded onto a MEL system, rather than being treated as a separate entity, it can significantly improve the fit of that system's components to support politically savvy programming. As we have shown in this report, it is possible to use and mix and match various tools that can be

adapted to integrate TWP and MEL more effectively. The key lies in how those tools are used in practice and whether and how they enable an integration of TWP principles in interpreting and assessing how progress can be achieved in complex settings and programmes. Real-world examples illustrate how different political and organisational contexts can open opportunities for different (re)combinations that serve to prove (the value of) and improve (the quality and substance of) diverse international development initiatives. As the webinar discussion showed, in some cases colleagues have been able to work creatively to navigate tensions between reporting requirements and the need to test assumptions about how change happens, learn and adapt based on political insights.

The kind of energy and experience that emerged from convening the webinar may help to move practice forward and to mobilise additional support and resources to address ongoing challenges related to the need to shift organisational mindsets, promote cross-organisational learning, generate more realistic donor expectations, and think more thoroughly about incentives and how they align with what is needed to bring about meaningful and sustainable change. Let the conversation continue!

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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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