

ECDPM Meeting on Thinking and Working Politically in Development Post 2015

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Introduction

On 8 May 2015, the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) hosted its third annual meeting of the ECDPM Board of Governors, the Management and the institutional partners of the Centre. The topic of this year's meeting was "Thinking and Working Politically in Development Post 2015".

The aim of the meeting was to identify the benefits and risks of more politically informed approaches to development and to look into the practical implications of thinking and working politically (TWP) for development agencies and practitioners.

The seminar that was organised under Chatham House rules brought together some 40 participants. Special invitees this year were the experts of the Community of Practice on Thinking and Working Politically¹, as well as senior staff of the EU and some bilateral development agencies.

The meeting was structured around two sessions lead by four of the invited speakers. The first session attempted to find answers to the question of why it is important to think and act politically in a systematic manner. The session looked at the implications and expected benefits of such approach. It also assessed the progress made so far and the way TWP could be further promoted in development agencies.

- Mr. Graham Teskey, Principal Governance Specialist at the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, elaborated a perspective from the Community of Practice on Thinking and Working Politically (TWP).
- Dr. Adebayo Olukoshi, Representative of the Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) in Addis Ababa, outlined an African vision of TWP.

The second session dealt with ways in which TWP could be better supported and integrated in the day-to-day work of development agencies. It also identified the major challenges to adapt this approach in the practices of donor partner institutions.

- Ms. Dominique Dellicour, former EU Ambassador to Senegal, exposed a concrete case of TWP with the EU Political Economy Analysis of Senegal.
- Mr. Carl Michiels, Chair of the Management Committee of the Belgian Technical Cooperation, discussed how this new approach could be integrated into the concrete practice of an executing agency.

This short report summarises the key points that resulted from this discussion.

1. The crucial importance of thinking and working politically in development? (the "Why")

- **TWP: old wine in new bottles?**
Some participants were deeply convinced that the political dimension had always been present in the development processes. While it might be true that political awareness is not new among the various players in the "development business", more systematic approaches to deal with the politics were mostly lacking. In other words the novelty lies in the fact that we are becoming more explicit

¹ Graham Teskey, Duncan Green, Alina Rocha Menocal

about it. Political economy analysis is now done in a more systematic and thorough manner, rather than the quite informal and ad hoc approaches of the past

- **Looking beyond the facade of formal political processes.**
In the past, the political focus in development has usually been limited to building a better understanding of the formal political institutions. More in-depth and structured political economy analysis was lacking which sometimes led to a predominance of rather technocratic approaches that insufficiently take account of the crucial role of politics that can “break or make” development. Therefore looking beyond the facade of formal political processes can help getting a better feel of the political realities. This type of analysis can in turn help identify the key incentives and opportunities for change.
- **Mainstream TWP in development.**
Based on the growing recognition of the potential benefits of TWP it is crucial to systematically mainstream TWP in development processes. To that end, political economy analysis is an important tool to understand the key drivers for change and to then adapt institutional systems with evidence-based and realistic solutions.

2. The practical implications of TWP for development agencies and practitioners (The “How”)

Taking proper account of political realities in the development work is increasingly acknowledged, but what does this mean in practice?

Building on previous experiences, here are some key lessons and concrete recommendations when implementing the TWP approach in the day-to-day work.

- **Bring the “unusual suspects” to the table, beyond the formal official institutions.**
Inclusiveness and multi-stakeholder approaches are fundamental ingredients for a comprehensive political economy analysis. Rather than restricting the debate to elites and officials, TWP aims to broaden the perspectives and to involve all actors and stakeholders, including the groups in society that have been excluded from the development processes.
- **The “donor” is also part of the picture.**
Being inclusive also means that it is important to make a power analysis of both the “recipient” as well as the “donor” side in the partnership. Whether intended or unintended, donors, directly or indirectly, play a role in the public policies and politics of the partner country. If well done TWP tells us as much about the developing country as about the donor practices.
- **Locally owned, locally rooted.**
Applying a joint approach is key when thinking and working politically. But more importantly change should be driven from within. Local ownership and leadership of the process are crucial to address problems that are salient to the domestic actors themselves, instead of being selected exclusively by external donors. To that end, an in-depth knowledge of local situations is needed. Undeniably, TWP proves to be a very useful tool to understand the political dynamics of a country.

- **Move beyond “obsession” for logframes and results measurement.**
If donor agencies want to TWP, they will need to understand that reform and development happen in a non linear way. Flexibility and adaptability are key when designing and implementing a programme. Therefore, instead of a mechanistic use of logical frameworks with sometimes rigid indicators, outputs and outcomes, the adoption of more adaptive and incremental approaches would be desirable.
- **Don’t forget action.** While a thorough power analysis undoubtedly helps understand the drivers of change, clear practical measures should emerge for policy makers. Indeed they should get a fast and comprehensive feedback so as to capitalise on the evidence collected. Therefore development professionals at the forefront of TWP point out the urge to avoid producing too much analysis at the expense of clear action points.
- **“Thinking and working politically is about a mindset everyday”**
TWP requires an inclusive and flexible way of working with due respect for the local context. This requires attitudinal changes. Modesty, common sense, patience and honesty are critical as these help to identify political traction, possible windows of opportunities and margins of manoeuvre for change. However one also has to be sufficiently opportunistic when the momentum for change needs to be seized. Lessons of experience also point to the importance of investing in long-term partnerships which generally tend to offer a better return and a higher success rate.

3. TWP is a risky business

While thinking and working politically has been recognised by many donors as an essential key factor in development, it remains a major challenge to change the concrete practice of donor agencies:

- **Fears to lose political and economic interests.**
Getting into the heart of the political economy systems in developing countries could also cause nervousness in donor countries. TWP also works as a kind of a mirror of donor practices and “the complicity” with political elites in poorly governed developing countries. Indeed TWP requires donors to question their way of working and to confront themselves with their own political agendas and incoherences.
- **Resist the spending pressure.**
TWP also risks to slow down the disbursement pressure and donor need to show quick and tangible results. TWP requires a very different way of doing development: less prescriptive with a more winding and bumpy road to results. The focus is less on spending money but more on allowing time to arrive at sustainable results. This also requires more flexibility and creativity to better deal with changing circumstances instead of a rather mechanistic use of bureaucratic procedures.
- **Find (and wait for) the right “critical juncture”.**
Too often donors act along set timeframes, and leave when their project is completed. TWP stresses the need to wait for the right “critical juncture”, to materialise and to stay engaged in the long term.

- **Build adequate human resources.**

TWP requires appropriate skills. Hence the importance of human resources management, training and learning. If serious about TWP donor agencies should look for “*different profiles and skills for the people employed with the aim of forging them in something different*”.

4. TWP: a new narrative for development?

Changing practices takes time. Yet, several successful stories show that thinking and working politically can provide unique windows of opportunities.

The case of Senegal demonstrated the value of the Political Economy Analysis tool to identify key actors, political traction and potential areas for change. The large and intensive consultation of many key actors greatly improved the understanding of the real political and economic world behind the formal statements and policies. This made it possible to better assess the chances and obstacles to governance reforms. The restitution of the findings to all key stakeholders after the process also contributed to a more open and informed debate in the media and civil society.

However, on the other hand, the political economy study on Senegal also illustrated the difficulty to change mentalities in the development sector and beyond. Whereas the EU delegation recognised to have greatly benefited from the analysis in terms of adapting their practices on the ground, the EU headquarters deployed more reluctance to adopt this perspective.

The case of Senegal is not an isolated case. Participants outlined other examples of TWP with processes which enabled the creation of local coalitions based on momentum for change. Naturally, this TWP approach needs to be further tested in the field but it points out that understanding political dynamics is critical for the development of better adapted and comprehensive programmes.

As SDGs are currently hotly debated at the highest political level, the post 2015 reflection should not lose sight of the importance of acting politically when implementing development projects on the ground. As Stefan Dercon, DFID Chief Economist emphasised, “*Politics is too important for development in general to be left to political scientists and governance advisors only - we all need to think about it when we act.*”

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