// THINKING AND WORKING POLITICALLY IN THE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY FIELD

Brendan Halloran, Program Officer for Impact and Learning, Transparency and Accountability Initiative

- **Challenges in the transparency and accountability (T/A) sector are rooted in political dynamics between states and citizens, and thus must be addressed through politically-informed approaches**

- **The analysis of political factors has advanced over the past decade, but organizations still struggle to move from 'thinking politically' to 'working politically'**

- **'Working politically' in the T/A sector has concrete implications for both organizational approaches and how we understand change and impact, which must be rooted in nuanced understandings of political context and role of pro-accountability actors**

Political[1] Thinking: For What?

There is an emerging understanding that the problems of chronic poverty and structural exclusion are primarily political in nature, rather than technical problems, as many aid organizations have long perceived them. Indeed, even seemingly technical challenges, such as the delivery of public services are rooted in political issues. The political character of development challenges is even more apparent in the governance field, particularly in transparency and accountability interventions. Public institutions that can guarantee inclusive, responsive and accountable governance are shaped by power relationships, culture, interests and incentives, not just laws, processes and institutional forms. Furthermore, the processes by which transparent and accountable institutions are formed are deeply political in nature, often shaped by conflict and other forces of social change, rather than a linear process of formal

administrative and institutional reform based on 'best practices' and 'political will' (see also here, here and here). In this Think Piece, I will bring the emerging ideas from the debate on thinking and working politically to the T/A field, and outline several areas in which T/A interventions can incorporate these principles to deepen their impact.

For over a decade, aid organizations have been experimenting with analytical tools, such as Political Economy Analysis (PEA), to identify the political factors (including incentives, power dynamics, informal influence, institutional culture, etc.) that contribute to development challenges. PEA and other tools have evolved in recent years, thanks to pioneering work by ODI and the World Bank, among others, and have been applied in the T/A sector as well.

Indeed, many aid organizations are beginning to explore political thinking about development challenges. Thus, there is an emerging understanding of 'thinking politically' that focuses on both structure (formal and informal institutions, power relationships, networks of patronage and clientelism, etc.) and agency (networks and coalitions, pro-reform actors in government, external organizations) components of political dynamics. Thinking politically about governance challenges suggests approaches that build from what exists rather than ideals

DICTIONARY:

1. *Political: I should specify from the outset that I use the terms 'politics' and 'politically' broadly, to include formal and informal relationships of power between individuals and groups in society. This encompasses, but goes beyond, formal political processes and institutions.*

(for example, 'Good Enough Governance'), identify reforms with tangible political payoffs, and encourage external actors to seek to broker and facilitate collective action and problem solving by local stakeholders, rather than 'doing' institutional change work themselves (for more see ODI's emerging lessons).

Political Practice: Making Politics Practical

Although 'political thinking' has advanced considerably, translating these tools and approaches into practice ('working politically'), has been challenging. In many development organizations, the institutional processes and incentives are not well aligned with the tenets of working politically (even for institutions that have pioneered political analysis). Even T/A interventions with seemingly political objectives, such as strengthening citizen engagement and oversight in local government, are often carried out in an apolitical and technocratic manner. Furthermore, T/A interventions are often piecemeal (budget transparency, civic participation, freedom of information, anti-corruption programs), rather than a holistic approach that addresses the complex 'ecosystems' of political challenges related to governance failures (for example, in natural resources governance and social accountability).

This highlights the challenges inherent in thinking and working politically. In many ways, the movement to promote political analysis and politically-informed practice

is at a crossroads, with advocates seeking to spark a 'revolution', and others resisting such changes. For the T/A sector, this question is crucial. T/A work directly engages issues of public institutions and the relationship between citizens and states, which are at the heart of the debate between political and technocratic visions of social and institutional change.

Thus, the critical question is, how can thinking politically be translated into working politically in the T/A field, and what are the implications? I propose several areas and outline possible ways forward, focusing on *Organizational Approach* and *Understanding Change and Impact*. Yet it's important to note, that even with sophisticated political analysis and addressing the barriers to translating political thinking into practice, there is still no consensus on how this might look on the ground. Thus, my proposals are meant to be suggestive, rather than definitive, and put forward principals and directions, rather than step-by-step blueprints. The points below are meant to spark conversation, rather than propose a final word.

Organizational Approach

A politically informed approach to T/A, as discussed above, emphasizes a different role for external organizations, one of facilitating the conditions for change to happen, rather than 'doing' change themselves. What does this mean in practice for policy and programming?

Often, external actors pursue change through projects, which are often linear, time bounded (short term), and having specific aims and resources. Given their cause-effect logic, projects may involve the implementation of tools and best practices, potentially imported from other contexts where they were deemed successful, with only superficial analysis of whether they are appropriate to the contextual and political dynamics where they are to be carried out. Indeed, importing tools and best practices often substitutes for the analysis of local political complexities.

Yet, deeper change is generally the result of domestic processes, decisions and resources. The experience of the rural employment scheme in India demonstrates the political dynamics of implementation and the role of civil society in promoting inclusion and accountability of a formal government program, that were quite apart from any technical design issues. This case, and many others, highlights the fact that much of what influences the success or failure of T/A interventions is driven by contextual factors, and are related to political dynamics.

Deeper political analysis of structures, agents, change dynamics, and other contextual factors, combined with an 'arm's length' understanding of interventions, will more likely point to opportunities for convening, brokering and facilitating dialogue, problem solving and collective action, around strategic, feasible and locally-appropriate opportunities for change. Supporting broad coalitions of actors that cross the state/society divide, and include change agents and leaders representing diverse interests and constituencies, may be a promising role for external actors in some cases. Crucial to this role is an understanding of when to facilitate collaboration and when more confrontational approaches are necessary. This requires a nuanced reading of the political context. This also may entail understanding when partnership and dialogue are unlikely to yield results because interests fundamentally diverge, and then 'taking sides' with pro-reform actors who are engaged in a contentious struggle for change. The emphasis is then on both playing a convening role, and developing the capacities of local actors organizations, so that they can competently engage in change strategies involving state actors and institutions, through collaboration and/or contestation, as determined by their political analysis of leverage points and windows of opportunity. This requires a set of political capabilities for local organizations and actors that, according to Glyn Williams:

> *…provide the set of navigational skills needed to move through political space, and the tools to reshape these spaces where this is possible. A key distinction here would be a focus on uncovering the knowledge and performances required to (re)negotiate political space rather than trying to quantify levels of political capital in the abstract."*

External organizations have found success in developing the political capacities of local organizations, and supporting their political action to address change. The Developmental Leadership Programme has provided evidence suggesting a more general shift in this direction.

In terms of grant making, a recent presentation of a study on effective social accountability in Africa provided some key lessons for politically-informed support for T/A (ideas reinforced by the experience of another African initiative). Panellists pointed to a need to reconceive grantees not as project implementers, but rather as political entrepreneurs, with the credibility and capacities to build mutual trust and relationships among diverse actors. In the context of social accountability, though applicable to T/A work more broadly, presenters argued that the focus must not be simply on ensuring the proper delivery of services, but rather address the incentives and rules-of-the-game underlying deficient provision. This requires much deeper political analysis than a superficial scan of actors and problems. These lessons also challenge the idea of 'scaling up' interventions or tools, and especially of translating them to other contexts. What is to be scaled up or transferred, exactly, if successful accountability is a product of local actors, institutions and relationships? That said, we shouldn't conflate 'scale' and 'replication'; some thoughts on scaling up impact here.

Moreover, thinking politically about T/A points to limits in the effectiveness of many international initiatives, such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and Extractive Industry Transparency Initiatives (EITI), at least as both a starting and ending point for external actors (on OGP, see here and here). International initiatives may indeed have added value at the national level, but there is still much work to be done in understanding local impacts, and realizing them. But a clear message is emerging that the focus must not only be on laws, formal institutional processes, and best practices, but

also on the politics of realizing on-the-ground outcomes.

Understanding Change and Impact

At a recent gathering of funders, researchers and practitioners working in the T/A field, osted by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative, many of the questions and challenges raised were around understanding whether and how organizations were achieving their desired impacts. This issue has two closely related elements:

1. Articulating how an organization thinks it will promote change, perhaps through a theory of change (ToC)
2. Defining and evaluating impact and success

These are really two sides of the same coin: an organization sets out its 'best guess' about how change will happen, gathers information about changes and impact that occurs (or does not), and integrating that knowledge back into their approach through a continuous process of reflection, learning and strategizing. I discuss these elements of this continuum below.

ToCs set out the framework for the proposed approach. If our organization or project does A, then B will result (and, hopefully, why this should be the case). Political thinking and analysis should inform ToCs based on a reading of the political context and dynamics, and provide a framework for how an organization (local or external) can support change through a politically-informed strategy.

Many interventions in the T/A field have no ToC or are based on untested (and perhaps disproved) assumptions. For example, many organizations and projects base their work on the assumption that greater transparency and government openness will result in improved accountability. Yet this relationship is far from straightforward. Indeed, experience from CSOs around the world, demonstrates that these organizations adopt very diverse strategies as they seek to ensure transparent and accountable governance. Thinking politically about the actors, relationships, incentives and rules of the game around transparency and accountability allows for a more grounded assessment of the opportunity structure for action. Political analysis may reveal obstacles and opportunities to bring about

change. *Specifically, political analysis can unpack concepts such as 'political will', which can often be an 'analytical black box' that can undermine an organization's ToC by leaving important causal linkages unspecified or assumed* (see here). Thinking politically can also enable an organization to better understand the opportunities, incentives and barriers to citizen engagement around T/A issues, as well as what outcomes we can realistically expect from the participation of citizens.

As noted above, one of the challenges in thinking politically is that it must go beyond occasional PEAs or other comprehensive and resource-intensive analyses, to a more continuous reading of political dynamics to identify emerging windows of opportunity or potential obstacles. Organizations that think and work politically must have the analytic wherewithal to understand the political context and the adaptability to change course when new options or barriers emerge. However, this implies that:

> T*he kind of theory of change that is needed is not one developed in the abstract that reflects a notion of change processes as linear, predictable and rigid – as log-frames sometimes do. The point is, rather, that it is necessary to surface and make explicit the pathways via which complex initiatives, destined to take effect in complex circumstances, are expected to have their effect, and to continuously revisit this throughout the initiative, in recognition that social contexts and processes are always in flux, with emergent issues, unforeseen risks and surprises arising throughout. (McGee and Gaventa, p. 37)*

Thus, ToCs provide a framework for organizations to apply political analysis to guide and inform their interventions to contribute to change. This process is an ongoing one, with further analysis, as well as lessons learned from the implementation of the strategy, being brought into iterative reassessments of the ToC's assumptions about causal linkages (as the IBP's 'Super Duper Impact Planning Guide' makes clear).

As noted by Tiago Peixoto, the word theory is often misleading in the term Theory of Change. Hypothesis (or hunch) are often more appropriate given lack of evidence about the causal linkages embedded in most ToCs.

As discussed, an organization's ToC must be directly linked to their efforts to understand the impacts they are generating (or failing to produce). Principally, organizations attempting to think and work politically must integrate learning and analysis more continuously into their organizational

strategy and ToCs and must understand, and measure, their impacts in ways that explicitly acknowledge the political nature of these processes and outcomes.

As mentioned, thinking politically about interventions means engaging with complex and dynamic political factors that dictate the opportunities and constraints for improvements in T/A outcomes. Politically informed efforts must be adaptable to changing opportunities and constraints, and must reintegrate lessons and analysis into organizational strategy and ToCs. This understanding sets a higher bar for continuous organizational learning than the application of more linear, technical approaches with predefined inputs and outputs. A study of assessment and learning for social change framed the challenge thusly:

> Ongoing assessment or evaluation of efforts by those involved is important to know if efforts are bearing fruit and if new strategies and activities are needed. Continual critical reflection is the basis for active and shared learning that makes such built-in assessment useful. Such development processes have certain characteristics that confound those seeking to apply mainstream thinking on assessment and earning. It is a long-term goal that involves many actors and multiple types of activities, often requiring risk taking and precedent setting without clarity about a positive outcome. (Guijt, 2008)

The realities of thinking and working politically in T/A demand a more 'real time' and integrated approach to monitoring, evaluation and learning. This is in contrast to current 'gold standard' approaches to measuring the impact of external interventions, which often use experimental research designs to quantify the results of a given project, but only provide such data after the program has ended and complex analyses have been performed. These experimental approaches are likely overhyped and certainly do not constitute the only way of undertaking 'rigorous' examination of 'evidence'.

Rather than external evaluation using a specific and limited research approach that only yields evidence after an intervention has concluded, politically informed efforts require integrated, flexible and responsive learning tools that are based on a mix of methods, both qualitative and quantitative. Additionally, experimental approaches only answer the question of whether and

how much 'impact' can be attributed to an intervention; they say little or nothing about how and why those results were achieved. The realities of complex political challenges in T/A work and the need for adaptive responses require us to rethink how we understand results. This requires that organizations adopt new approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning, and more flexibly and iteratively integrate the results into their decision making processes and ToCs.

Conclusion: Thinking and Working Politically in T/A

In essence, what I have laid out above can be very simply stated as:

Thinking politically is not an analytical tool, but an approach to intervening in complex social and political systems.

Undertaking political analysis is only one component of a broader approach to contributing to change through politically-informed interventions. As an approach, thinking politically has implications for how organizations integrate ideas and processes across their organizational strategies, theories of change, and learning and evaluation approaches.

Transparency & ACCOUNTABILITY Initiative   TALEARN