

//UNPACKING CONTEXT: STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT ACROSS LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

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- **To identify the most promising leverage points, accountability efforts need to consider how powers and responsibilities are divided in practice across levels of government**
- **Systematic multi-level analysis and learning has helped T/A groups better define and adapt strategic priorities to target complex problems**
- **Multi-level analysis in the T/A, however, is often ad hoc. This kind of reflection about strategies and context should strategically engage relevant stakeholders for the design, implementation, and funding of interventions**

In November, **TALEARN**'s context practice group convened a series of related meetings on research into the role of context in transparency and accountability programmes; learning about and engaging with context at the local level; and tools for supporting CSOs that want to evaluate their interventions. Among those who shared their experiences were Walter Flores from **CEGSS**, Gertrude Mugizi from **PSAM**, Edward Premdas Pinto from **CHSJ**, Leni Wild and Pilar Domingo from **ODI**, Aranzazu Guillan Montero from **U4**, and Professor Lily Tsai from **MIT**. This note shares some of our findings from this meeting.

Many of our colleagues are struggling to unpack the "territorial regime"¹ in which they operate in order to find alternative entry points for their interventions, identify available levers of power, and adapt their strategies and tactics. A group of us had previously discussed the importance of reflecting on and adapting strategy in the context of G-Watch's work in the Philippine education sector. In the November meetings, we heard about the successes and challenges in improving health delivery in Guatemala and Malawi, and in combating corruption in public financial management in South Africa.

One 'Eureka' moment in our two-day conversation was realizing the concrete consequences of not considering the nature of the territorial regime. Not doing so means

our efforts may not be focused on where we can achieve real change. In other words, *our systematic failure to consider how the state is structured in complex systems may be limiting our ability to achieve impact, manage risks, increase the value for money of our interventions, and, potentially, our ability to mobilize people and resources.*

Below we summarize four examples of how our colleagues are learning to engage with multiple levels of government. We then present some key points from the discussion, before raising some questions that may help us continue a candid, thoughtful conversation.

Joy's strategic dilemma

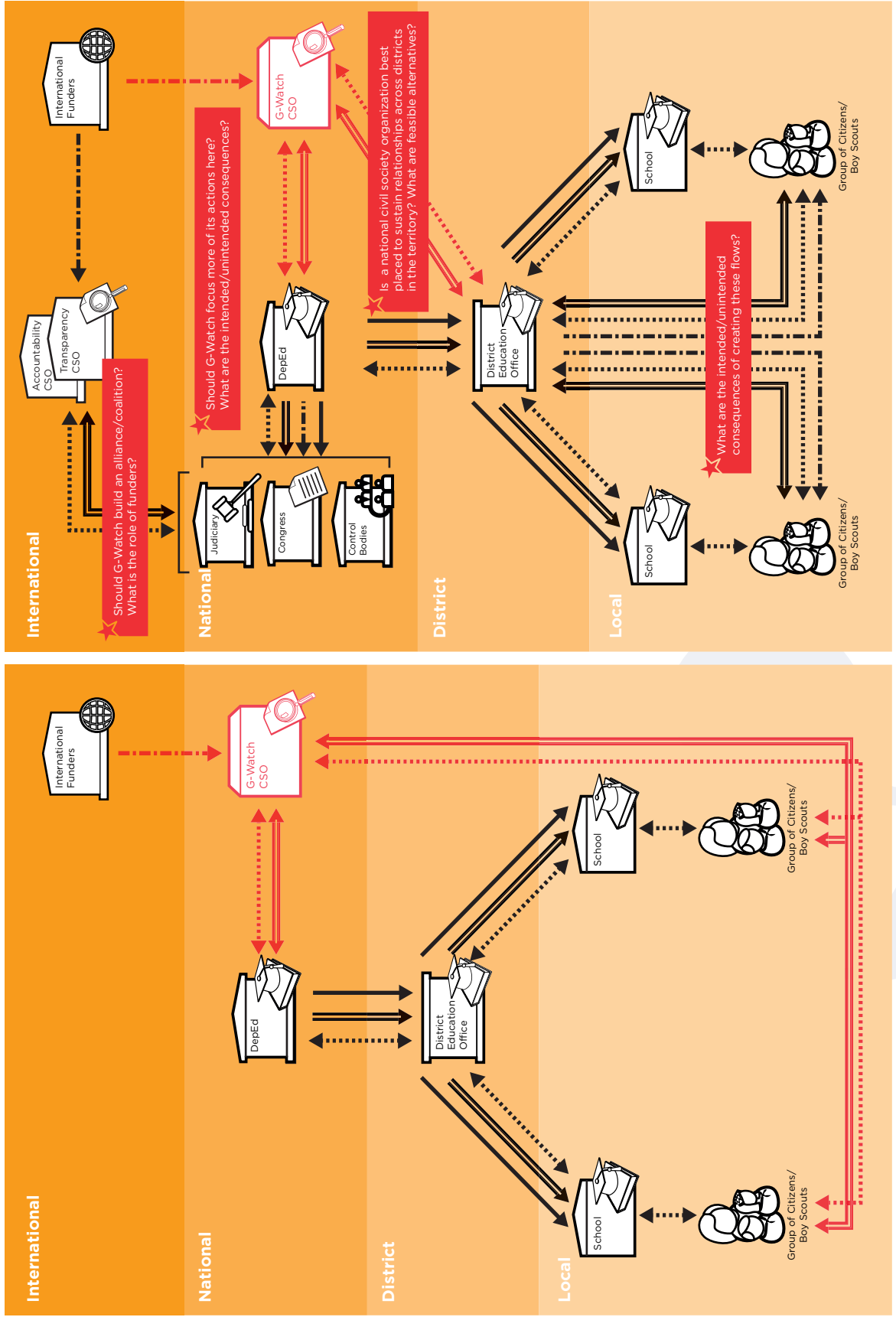
You may remember Joy Aceron of G-Watch's strategic dilemma in working to improve accountability in the Philippine education sector. G-Watch's Textbook Count programme used civil society groups with large-scale, nationwide, and grassroots memberships to monitor the timeliness and quality of local textbook deliveries throughout the country. While the programme made some immediate gains, it took a toll on G-Watch's limited resources, leading the organization to question the sustainability of its role. At a roundtable on state-society efforts to improve transparency and accountability, Joy asked for suggestions to ensure the sustainability and long-term success of Textbook Count.

Figure 1. Looking at the bigger picture

KEY DILEMMAS

- Who ensures the sustainability of the system?
- What is the entry point for G-Watch in the system?
- What are the intended/unintended consequences of alternative interventions?

A Pre-intervention diagnostic ———— **B** Intervention in action



Source: <http://www.transparency-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Strategic-Dilemmas-Context-FG-SR.pdf> adapted from Guerzovich, M. Florencia and Guerzovich, Yanina, *Political Economy System Maps: Political Economy System Maps: A Clear and Systematic Way to Present Systems of Transparency and Accountability Reform and Accountability Reform* (March 8, 2011). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1780935> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1780935>

References	
Existing Flows	Material
Existing Flows	Information
Existing Flows	Financial
Existing Flows	Power & Authority
Intervention Flows	Material
Intervention Flows	Information
Intervention Flows	Financial
Intervention Flows	Power & Authority
One-Way Flows	Material
One-Way Flows	Information
One-Way Flows	Financial
One-Way Flows	Power & Authority
Exchange Flows	Material
Exchange Flows	Information
Exchange Flows	Financial
Exchange Flows	Power & Authority

These discussions 'zoomed out' from the local level at which the Textbook Count intervention was primarily targeted to the broader governance context in which it operated. In doing so, it became clear that:

1. *the local level was just one of several possible entry points for the intervention;*
2. *targeting other levels and actors in the broader ecosystem - e.g. national auditing institutions - could help G-Watch adapt the programme to ensure its continuing effectiveness (see figure below); and*
3. *as conditions in the Philippines changed, so too should Textbook Count, in order to ensure that its approach was still appropriate to the local context.*

Zooming out from the local level at which the Textbook Count programme had been operating made it possible to see how the problem the programme sought to address was manifest across different levels of government. It also helped us think more systematically about which level of government would be best to target.

Describing complex contexts in the T/A field

Many of us have faced the challenge of describing complex contexts and interventions in systematic, attractive ways. Throughout this note we have relied on political economy system maps (PESMs). PESMs are a conceptual and visual tool to help policy-makers think about the problems affecting the production and delivery of public goods and services from the point of view of the system's political organization, as well as possible interventions to solve those problems.

These maps help to solve problems by transforming information about public goods and services production and delivery into a set of simple, strategic insights about the underlying political landscape (actors, flows and processes) upon which the system is based. In so doing, these maps can help us better understand the incentives and expectations at play in government systems and support reform processes.

Pulling together a PESH for education or natural resource governance forces us to look at the territorial regime. It also forces us to think about other silo-busting measures, such as those our colleagues at ODI took in approaching their research:

1. They had to be practical and easy to grasp, and design helped.
2. The technical world was not abandoned for the political one - both were mixed through actors, institutions, and flows (material, services, information, power), building on insights from different sectors.
3. Concepts and academic research were linked to practical experience.

Jesús's efforts to navigate the Guatemalan health system

Walter Flores described CEGGS's efforts to give disadvantaged Guatemalans access to quality health services. From Walter's presentation we learned about Jesús Cook, a local community leader who was concerned about the lack of emergency transport in his community after his town's only ambulance broke down.

Jesús engaged in a multilevel strategy to fix the problem through trial and error:

1. First, he encouraged local authorities to repair the ambulance. He was told that there was no funding available for the repairs, and that it was up to the provincial government to do something.
2. Next, armed with the knowledge that the Guatemalan government must provide emergency transport if it is to uphold its constitutional responsibility to guarantee life, he wrote a letter to the provincial government asking for funds to repair the ambulance.
3. After two more letters and two in-person visits, Jesús finally got the provincial government to pay for the ambulance's repair. However, six months later the vehicle broke down again, and the provincial government would not provide further funding.
4. Now Jesús went further up the chain of government, and applied pressure on the national legislature to provide sufficient funding for emergency

transport in the country. He continues to lead a popular, regular, and sophisticated advocacy movement (including protests, press releases, and press conferences) that brings citizens from poor localities into the capital in support of this cause.

Jesús learnt from his experience that different problems mean engaging with government at different levels, from the local, to the regional, to the national. What couldn't be accomplished at one level could conceivably be accomplished at another.

According to Walter, Jesús also learnt that tactics that work at one level may be different from those that work at another. He learnt, for example, that influencing his local government is all about developing personal relationships, but as you move up the chain, success depends less on these and more on demonstrations of force (e.g. showing that you can mobilize large groups of people in support of your cause).

Jesús didn't need a workshop or webinar to figure these things out. **He learnt by doing, and by trying to get around the roadblocks that the system threw in front of him. Luckily, his process of learning by doing can help those of us who face similar problems around the world.**

Gertrude's lessons

1. The level of government you decide to engage with should be chosen in relation to the objective of your intervention. In South Africa we work with systemic issues at the provincial level because the largest percentage of the budget is allocated to this level of government. In some other countries we focus on the district level because this is where the problems are.
2. There are a lot of inter-linkages across governance levels that influence service delivery. Rarely is a problem caused by only one level. Therefore, you must try to get some understanding about these inter-linkages in order to navigate its complexity.
3. It is very important to focus on better understanding incentive structures within and outside of government as well as across levels of government. Research into incentive structures should be conducted before an intervention to get into the 'why' questions.

Gertrude's strategic retreat in South Africa

Gertrude Muguzi shared another illuminating story from her experience with PSAM.

1. From 1999–2005, PSAM – operating in South Africa's Eastern Cape province – monitored cases of corruption and conflict of interest and pursued a strategy of naming and shaming and occasional litigation to combat it. **At a strategic retreat to review progress over that period, however, the organization's leadership realized that of the 691 cases they had monitored, only 10 percent had been satisfactorily resolved.** They decided that a change in strategy was needed. After participating in a government-led initiative to evaluate the performance of the provincial government yielded important insights into the systematic causes of poor government performance, PSAM decided to shift its approach to fighting corruption. **Starting in 2006, it moved from monitoring individual cases of corruption to compiling evidence on the root causes of bad governance. It shared its insights with stakeholders across southern Africa.**
2. PSAM has since worked with colleagues across southern Africa to adapt their approaches to their local contexts. They have developed a course on local accountability for civic actors, oversight bodies, and journalists, and have trained local trainers in country-specific versions of it. They have also worked with local partners throughout the region to map local legal and regulatory frameworks to assess how processes overlap and interrelate in different settings.

Among the many important lessons of the new systemic approach was the need to understand the incentive structures at different levels of government and how their processes overlap and interrelate. Gertrude summarized the main lessons PSAM had learnt as follows:

PSAM made a commitment to reflect on its approach and embrace possible change – something that is not easy for any organization. It realized that shifting its strategy might give it a better chance of creating the impact it wanted to achieve, and changed course accordingly. **Interventions sometimes fail, and the contexts in**

which we operate are ever-changing, but allowing for reflection and flexibility can increase our chances of learning from failure and adapting to changing circumstances. Evaluating the level of government with which you engage is one important way in which we can reflect and adapt as necessary.

ODI and the political economy of health delivery in Malawi

ODI, as part of its work on the politics of public goods and service delivery, has analysed the political economy of health service delivery in Malawi. At a joint T/AI-ODI event on comparative research, Leni Wild and Pilar Domingo presented their findings on why chronic stock outs of essential medicines have persisted for more than a decade. While they identify a number of weak points in the medicine supply chain (e.g. the monopoly dynamics created by centralization of the system), they also highlight features of the broader governance environment that interact with these technical features to reduce accountability in the system. The prevalence of patronage politics, for example, results in the awarding of contracts to and hiring of government cronies. As in the other cases we discuss, *the territorial regime has played a role in Malawi as well: ODI found that ad hoc and disrupted processes of decentralisation have contributed to policy incoherence, with unclear lines of decision-making and a lack of defined roles and responsibilities across sectors and administrative boundaries.*

So far ODI has come up with a number of recommendations. It has begun to advocate for 'problem-driven' approaches to political economy analysis, that is, approaches that explicitly diagnose the reasons for bottlenecks in service delivery, bottlenecks that may be a result of broader governance issues and/or sector-specific constraints (learn about the experience of The World Bank Group [here](#)). Programme strategies should be calibrated to address these bottlenecks, and they should put incentives and complexity at the fore, with a learning process that includes testing, iteration, and adaptation. Focusing on the issue of territorial regimes, a problem-driven approach might consider whether strategies are targeting the right level of government in order to achieve the desired change. It's worth keeping these recommendations in mind as we continue to think about what makes useful comparative research (see our companion piece on this subject).

There are consequences to our collective failure to learn

So far we have presented four stories: four different ways to learn about and adapt to complex contexts. All four - without prior coordination (also check out the work of our colleagues at IBP on this issue [here](#)) - point to *the importance of systematically considering territorial regimes in the diagnosis, design, implementation, adaptation, evaluation, and funding of interventions.*

A further interesting insight from our conversations came from colleagues who work or have worked in international non-governmental organizations discussing the dilemmas they faced when picking in-country partners. *They explained that while international non-governmental organizations weigh a range of variables when choosing local partners such as having national recognition or knowledge of local contexts, our colleagues generally do not consider whether their likely partners are working at the appropriate level of the system to contribute to the desired change.*

As we note above, there are consequences to not considering the nature of the territorial regime. What would have happened if Jesús Cook, for example, had only had the incentives, funding, and capacity to work at the local level? Would the authorities have responded? Would the problem with the ambulance have been resolved? Would Jesús (and others) have been disappointed and disempowered? Would they have believed that they had a chance to effect change? Would they have been easily mobilized for future transparency and accountability interventions?

Are you asking yourself the questions that Jesús asked in Guatemala? Where, when, and how are you likely to actually influence the decision-making processes you care about?

A proactive approach for strategically adapting to complex contexts

As discussed [here](#) and [here](#), there are calls from the field to start learning more systematically and collectively about the complex political systems in which stakeholders operate. This is a journey we hope will continue through candid discussions within TALEARN and other similar initiatives. Our own experience suggests that many people may find it worth talking in more depth about territorial regimes.

It's not easy to pin down the effect of context on transparency and accountability interventions. Contexts are characterized by an infinite number of variables; some of the more important ones have been noted [here](#) and [here](#). Examining one dimension at a time means understanding progresses only incrementally, but it does generate useful information that practitioners can use in future programme and strategy design. Another challenge that has arisen from our discussions is that **those contextual factors that activists like Jesús seek to understand when trying to effect change in a particular time and place are not always the same ones that funders seek to understand when deciding what percentage of their investments should go to transparency and accountability interventions in different sectors.** We hope that joint conversations like those in London will help us understand the value of engaging with and understanding context from both perspectives.

One part of examining issues around the 'territorial regime' that we particularly value is that it forces us to consider different stakeholders working within the same processes within the same picture.

In other words, **talking about territorial regimes has the potential to bust silos. As our colleagues from ODI put it, excessive fragmentation often gives us 'tunnel vision' and means we do not identify key actors and avenues for change.**

It is our hope that continued systematic and candid reflection (which is hard because it makes us examine challenges and failures more seriously than usual) will be used in real decision-making and rewarded through deeds, and not just talk. TALEARN's Incentives Group is one place we might be able to continue this conversation.

DICTIONARY:

1- *Territorial regimes* are the rules and institutions that govern the interactions between territorial units of the state (e.g., its states, provinces, or municipalities) and that specify how powers and responsibilities are divided between those units and the national government (Gibson 2008). They are very relevant to the delivery of public services (Falletti 2010; Eaton, Kaiser and Smoke 2010, and Gibson 2010). Among those factors they determine are the degree of centralization or decentralization of any given public service, and thus the scope of authority of national and subnational governments over policy design, implementation, funding, and evaluation (see http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1853666), as well as whether sub-national units can raise their own revenue or whether they need to rely on central government for resources.

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**The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of T/AI's members*

Interested in reflecting further on who's who and who needs to learn what to make strategic and programmatic decisions? This blog could be a good entry point: it presents a stakeholder analysis of the "cast of characters" often found in monitoring & evaluation work in development. What do you think? Does it apply to the transparency and accountability world? And, to the world of research?



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