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Using Action Research and Learning for Politically Informed Programming

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The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) is an international research initiative based at the University of Birmingham, and working in partnership with University College London (UCL) and La Trobe University in Melbourne.

DLP aims to increase understanding of the political processes that drive or constrain development. Its work focuses on the crucial role of home-grown leaderships and coalitions in forging legitimate institutions that promote developmental outcomes.

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Using Action Research and Learning for Politically Informed Programming¹

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'If we do not understand the relations of power that encompass the issues that we are concerned about, then we will generate solutions that have little chance of success' (Burns et al. 2012: 7).

The purpose of this paper is:

- To outline preliminary findings about the role that action research can play in helping to build more politically informed development programs, especially those that aim to promote and support transformational change. These findings suggest the need to think about this research and these programs in a more comparable way from the outset in order to draw out valuable lessons to help the 'next generation' of programs.
- To unpack what action research is and how the action research currently being undertaken by the the Pacific Leadership Program (PLP), the Coalitions for Change (CfC) program in the Philippines and the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) may help donors and other practitioners to better 'think and work politically'.

In its efforts to better understand and improve aid effectiveness, the international development community has increasingly and explicitly recognised the political dimensions and constraints of development and aid (Carothers & de Gramont 2013). As a result, donors and development agencies are attempting to design and implement more politically informed programming. The need for more politically informed programming emerged from decades of poor results in trying to promote and achieve transformational change, i.e. durable policy and institutional change. The challenge, however, remains twofold: how best to design and implement a new generation of politically informed programs and how best to assess how transformational change actually happens, including the contributions of aid (results) that demonstrate value-for-money for partner countries and donors.

It was in this context, that in 2011-2012, the Pacific Leadership Program (PLP)³, the Coalitions for Change (CfC) program in the Philippines and the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) started to experiment with a new form of 'action research' directed at politically informed programming. This kind of action research - focussed on the development-aid nexus - differs from established forms of internal monitoring and evaluation, external consultancy-based assessments and academic-style organizational ethnography in the following ways:

- It is solidly grounded in expert knowledge of the contexts (and countries) in which international development agencies and their partners operate;

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3 The Pacific Leadership Program (PLP) is an initiative of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) that recognises the central place of developmental leadership in securing sustainable outcomes. The PLP aims to build, apply and share knowledge on 'developmental leadership', that is, leadership involving collective action to bring about locally owned, inclusive change for the public good. PLP privileges supporting national and sub-national leaders and coalitions in addressing the developmental challenges they identify and prioritise. Its politically informed approach aims to help local actors realize their own reform and change agendas, focusing on monitoring smaller changes while working towards much longer-term transformational policy and institutional changes. Please see <http://www.plp.org.fj/> for more information.

- It is rooted in analytical frameworks drawn from established literatures and on-going debates on development among academics and development practitioners and integrates this with experience; and
- It is iterative and participatory, with regular opportunities for discussion, debate and collaboration with development practitioners and their partners.

This action research is designed to help development practitioners as they develop a new generation of politically informed programming⁴ – established within new and emerging institutional procedures, organisational arrangements and monitoring and evaluation techniques, and facing a variety of internal operational policy challenges, questions and constraints. Initial research testing this approach, looking particularly at coalitions for change, has been undertaken by independent researchers with in-depth expertise of the specific contexts within which international development agencies are operating (e.g., Sidel 2014; O’Keefe 2014; O’Keefe & Lee 2014). This work is, in many ways, nascent: in the Philippines, the CfC program is on-going, with some preliminary results recently published (Sidel 2014; Booth 2014). In the PLP programs (see p. 16), the work undertaken so far has been largely foundational: establishing baselines, understanding the context, preparing coalition case studies and so on (e.g., O’Keefe 2014; O’Keefe & Lee 2014), and plans to develop the action research are on-going. As such, this paper presents an approach that has been developed – and continues to be developed – iteratively, collaboratively and reflexively. In other words, this is not the final word on the approach, but rather – we hope – the beginning of a conversation with other practitioners and researchers.

Through recurring constructive engagement with development practitioners and careful documentation of development practices, this mode of action research is intended to help development practitioners and their partners identify and understand more clearly the contexts in which they are operating, the choices they are making and the consequences of their work practices and policy decisions, and above all, how national and sub-national change (including transformational change) is actually occurring. This approach rigorously documents, contextualises and explains the processes and outcomes of development programs as they unfold and the resultant changes (or not), so as to sharpen analysis, identify key lessons and improve program design, implementation and outcomes.

Box 1: Unpacking some key concepts

‘Politically informed programming’ involves the practice of thinking and working politically. According to Adrian Leftwich (2011: 2, 5-6), *thinking politically* is ‘the recognition that politics matters crucially for developmental outcomes at all levels and in all sectors’, and this includes the detailed inner politics of the state – including, for example, regimes, political parties, sectors and issue areas.

Working politically in development means supporting, brokering, facilitating and aiding the emergence and practices of developmental or reform leaderships, organizations, networks and coalitions, in the public and private fields, at all levels, and across all sectors, in response to, and in concert with, initiatives and requests from local individuals and groups. It means investing in *processes* designed to support the formation and effectiveness of developmental coalitions, sometimes over long periods, committed to institutional reform and innovation by enhancing not just technical skills (the conventional domain of capacity building) but also the political capacity of organizations in areas such as negotiation, advocacy, communication and the generation of constructive policy options. It may involve supporting processes which lead to ‘political settlements’ whether these be at the macro-levels or in specific policy sectors.

Thinking and working politically elevates the importance of understanding the formal and informal institutional contexts within which change and development occurs and tailoring and continually adapting assistance to national and sub-national conditions. As such it contrasts with the more constrained, technical and reductive programmatic approaches that had become dominant and have been criticised for dominating the identification of development priorities and the methods to achieve them.

Transformational change has been described by UNDP (2011: 9, emphasis in original) as ‘..the process whereby positive development results are achieved and sustained *over time* by institutionalizing policies, programmes and projects within national strategies. It should be noted that this embodies the concept of institutionally sustained results – consistency of achievement over time. This is in order to exclude short-term, transitory impact.’ In their review of the Australia-Asia Foundation partnership in the Philippines, Bazeley et al (2014: vi) describe ‘*transformational development*’ as ‘that which brings about fundamental change for the better in institutions whose reach goes beyond (hopefully far beyond) the direct influence of the development intervention itself. (Such change is often referred to as ‘reform’.) The value of the intervention is more than the sum of its parts. In leveraging impacts the scope and scale of which is far greater than the input, transformational development is also about effectiveness, efficiency and value for money’.

4 Sometimes referred to as ‘thinking and working politically (TWP)’.

As international development agencies and their partners begin to develop and implement a new generation of politically informed programming - that enables the 'thinking and working politically' that will promote transformational change - they will need to view orthodox political economy analysis (PEA) from a different vantage point and create new tools and approaches. This will involve:

1. Reorienting the focus onto their partners and the political-socio-power context within which they work:
 - Politically informed programming requires extensive on-going empirical knowledge and analytical skills of how local change actually occurs and go beyond those institutionally embedded within international development agencies and/or within partner organizations.
 - It requires understanding complex and evolving political and power processes, identifying affiliations and interests of diverse political actors, exploring windows of political opportunity and anticipating political outcomes and their implications.
2. Reorienting activities to focus on expressly political acts:
 - Politically informed programming entails engagement with political processes that are highly contingent to national and sub-national power structures, and are almost always fluid and contested. This involves iterative adaptation based on regular re-evaluation and re-calibration of tactics and strategies.
 - It involves enlistment of partners, encouragement of coalition building and establishment of working alliances amidst the interplay of diverse political interests. This potentially creates risks of analytical bias, partisanship, over-commitment, uncertain time horizons, or 'capture' for development practitioners and their partners.⁵
3. Reappraising risk and reframing monitoring and evaluation:
 - Politically informed programming usually means adjusting or even re-engineering established parameters for development assistance in terms of bureaucratic procedures, organizational structures and modes of monitoring and evaluation. The bureaucratic procedures of partners also merit careful consideration.
 - It often requires development practitioners to adapt or work around orthodox organizational structures, partnerships and subcontracting arrangements that can complicate and increase the risk profile of their work.⁶
 - It requires that development practitioners better understand and establish causal linkages between their own practices, the political processes in which they are engaged and the outcomes and implications of their work.

With this in mind, this approach to action research can help illuminate the practices and processes of the new generation of politically informed aid programs that specifically aim to promote and facilitate durable and legitimate transformational change (such as policy or institutional change) by better understanding the local political economy, taking a more flexible approach, and by placing a greater emphasis on supporting local leaderships and coalitions. Necessarily, at the outset, potential institutional solutions to locally intractable problems are uncertain and the time horizons for these types of programs need to be much more realistic and often (though not always) longer; than more traditional development programs.

As we move forward, the emerging action research approach should be integrated fully into whatever programming cycle underpins the donors' approach to politically informed programming. Three broad components (phases) to a programming cycle are generally followed while noting that different development agencies may have unique detailed variations:

- Analysis of context, identification and design of program (including modality choice)
- Implementation
- Monitoring and Evaluation.

Careful consideration will need to be given to the incorporation, design and implementation of action research at each of these phases for politically informed programming. It should be noted that while the long term goal of politically informed programming is to promote transformational change, the short to medium term output and process level results are also valuable and are likely to represent value-for-money.

⁵ It is important to note, however, that other more traditional approaches to aid can also have high risk of analytical bias, although these may be more implicit since they are more likely to operate within the standard consensus, rather than challenging it.

⁶ Following Bazeley et al (2014: 9), the risk we describe here is the 'risk of failure, or at least the risk that success is far from guaranteed', but we would add that this can also include other forms of risk, especially political risk (both to the program and from the program).

Monitoring and Evaluation of Complex Transformational Change

It is now generally recognised that orthodox approaches to programming and monitoring and evaluation struggle with the kinds of non-linear, complex processes associated with political change. Furthermore it is also clear that many of the questions that are being asked of attempts to promote and support developmental leadership and transformational change cannot always be answered by attempts to neatly analyse and summarise tangible 'results' (Roche and Kelly, 2012a).

This recognition has resulted in a number of calls to develop 'real-time' feedback loops that can provide richer and more dynamic information to allow for program adjustment and adaptation (see also Andrews, Pritchatt & Woolcock 2012). This is particularly important given the uncertainty and unpredictability associated with programming and 'intervening' in complex systems, and the importance of being able to seize critical junctures and opportunities (Roche and Kelly, 2012b).

The type of action research described in this paper provides an important complement to other approaches to monitoring and evaluation precisely because:

- It permits the more intangible processes around politics and changing power relations and collective action to be observed, revealed and validated;
- It provides real-time feedback to both the project/program actors themselves as well as to those who are seeking to support them, allowing for learning, reflection and adjustment; and
- It can allow for aspects of the relationship between a donor and a 'grantee' or 'partner' to be communicated, which the inherent power relations between them can often obscure.

Action Research in Development

Our approach draws upon but differs slightly from existing action research methodologies.⁷ Action research was developed by Kurt Lewin in the mid-1940s in order to address problems he perceived with social action (e.g. Lewin 1946; see also Dickens & Watkins 1999). Lewin conceived action research as a back and forth between deep analysis of a specific problem and a series of action experiments informed by research on the specific problem. It is this back and forth between in depth research on a specific issue and action based on this analysis that lies at the heart of the action research approach. Reason and Bradbury (2001: 1) define action research as:

A participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

While action research encompasses a broad range of approaches there are two central features that link them: the manner in which theory and practical solutions are closely inter-connected and challenge positivist claims, which hold that in order for research to be credible, it must remain objective and value-free. Instead, action research approaches 'embrace the notion of knowledge as socially constructed and, recognizing that all research is embedded within a system of values and promotes some model of human interaction, we commit ourselves to a form of research which challenges unjust and undemocratic economic, social and political systems and practices' (Brydon-Miller et al 2003: 11).

There are, however, a number of important differences between our approach and more traditional approaches to action research. Firstly, action research has typically been applied to areas such as education, health, anthropology, psychology, sociology and organisational management. There has been little concerted effort to apply action research to the development or public policy contexts – with the exception of community-based development, where action research has been extensively applied.⁸ The approach to action research described in this paper has specifically been designed to assist development agencies and their partners as they develop a new generation of politically informed programming to think and work politically in increasingly difficult contexts, in order to promote developmental and transformational change.⁹ As such, in terms of both the aims and the actors involved in

⁷ This section is not an attempt to provide a comprehensive review of action research's history, foundations or its many manifestations, but rather to put our own work in context. There are a large number of textbooks, insightful case studies and so on exploring action research, including several journals dedicated to the subject, if the reader would like to learn more (see, for example, McNiff 2013).

⁸ See *IDS Bulletin* 43(3), 2012, for an impressive set of recent case studies, for example.

⁹ It is not surprising that this programming/performance issue is most acute in more highly aid dependent, post-conflict and fragile/weak states.

these processes, our approach can be seen as operating at a more holistic and comprehensive level than traditional action research approaches. Furthermore, given the often difficult contexts in which development practitioners operate, our approach has been designed to recognise potential difficulties and to note the politics and power relations present in such contexts.¹⁰

Second, given the wide range of fields in which action research has been applied, there is inevitably little consensus in the existing literature on how action research should be conducted. This approach suggests a more systematic approach for undertaking action research in development programming, which is at the same time flexible and adaptive. In partnership with the Australian aid program and the Asia Foundation, it has been applied in South East Asia and the Pacific and is acknowledged to have both informed and strengthened existing programs and created new opportunities to find symmetry between the needs of partners and the strategies of development agencies.

Third, much of the existing action research literature has tended to focus on trying to address problems at an individual or community level. While this approach to action research has also been designed so that it can be adapted to promoting change at these levels, it also recognises that obstacles to development often lie at higher levels. Hence, our action research approach emphasises a sustained analysis of the broader political context in which development programs are implemented and the need to operate at all levels.

Fourth, in addition to emphasising individual-level change, traditional approaches to action research have tended to centre on promoting *democratic* change. Our action research approach seeks to help development practitioners to think and work politically under a range of regime types and facing a variety of political challenges, questions and constraints. In such contexts positive change often occurs through leaders and coalitions being able to implement policies that affect change. Sometimes this will be inclusive, sometimes not. Ultimately sustainable development is only ever the 'consequence of indigenously designed, locally appropriate and legitimate institutional evolution' (Leftwich 2009: 10). Local attempts to support progressive social change may see democracy - as outsiders define it - as a worthy ideal, but one which requires a range of hurdles to be overcome and conditions to be met. These conditions may be the priority but their contingent nature must be the focus of action research.

Finally, an important difference is that action research is typically done as part of a real-time conscious reflection by project/program actors themselves, rather than something that is done by outsiders. The approach that we suggest here provides a 'bridge' between current ways of working and the emergence of a deeper, widespread understanding of how to build more politically informed programs for transformational change. In this, there is an important role for external action researchers to act as brokers, facilitators and nurturers of a new way of thinking and working politically. But, as with PEA, it should not be seen as a substitute for project/program actors learning how best to 'think and work politically' themselves in the longer term (see Fisher and Marquette 2014).

In short, this approach combines theory and practice to enable development practitioners to think and work politically to bring about positive change. Furthermore, it is iterative and participatory, and based on constructive, critical engagement with development practitioners and their partners.

Our approach to action research¹¹

Our action research approach is meant to be flexible and adaptive to each unique 'interface' between an aid program and its local political and institutional context. As suggested above, circumstances will vary, and arrangements and contracts must be tailored to individual development agencies, their programmes and local contexts as appropriate. This section sets out an overarching structure for the research, as well as some guidance for the sorts of questions that researchers and practitioners may find useful. However, individual researchers and practitioners will need to adapt as appropriate.

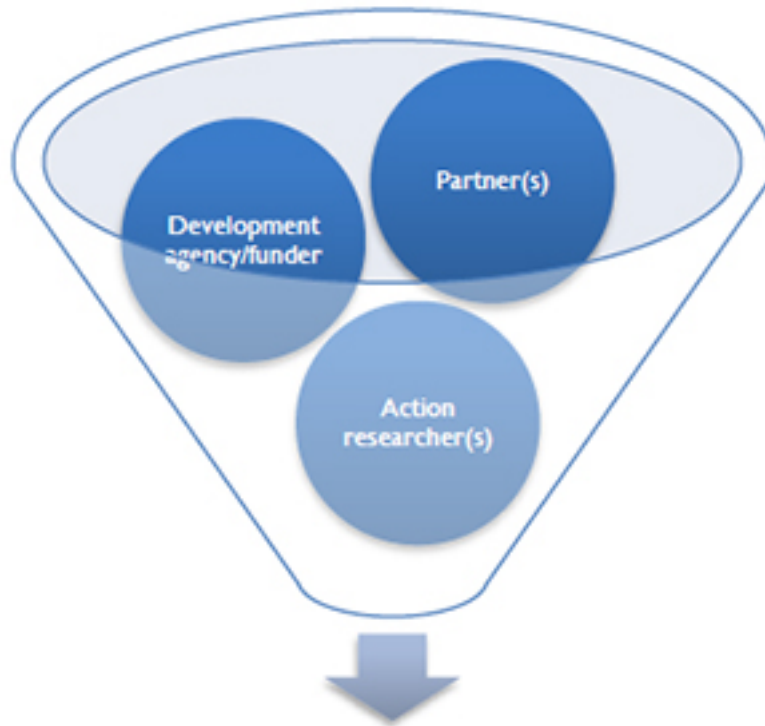
¹⁰ Having said this, an important footnote is that action research, along with any other participatory methods, 'can be co-opted and used instrumentally to reinforce the status quo' (Burns et al 2012: 4; see also Cooke & Kothari 2001). Action research is not 'value-free', nor is it inherently 'good', in the same way that more orthodox ways of working are not inherently 'bad'. There is still need to consider the politics and power relations of the *action research itself*, and not just of the program. As Pettit (2012: 12) points out, 'it would be naïve to assume that particular alternative research methods will be *inherently* more inclusive and progressive' (emphasis in original).

¹¹ Pettit (2012) argues that there is often too much emphasis placed on method when it comes to action research, which can hide some key power relationships within the research. Instead, he argues,

A better starting point for a progressive research strategy is to clarify the *political and transformative intentions of the proposed process*, and to reflect on *the power, positionality and roles of those involved*. The research-facilitator (if one is involved) is not neutral, but comes with certain positions, a standpoint, expectations and needs, and habitual ways of working with people and responding to social issues. The same is true for participants. Appropriate methods need to be identified, but this is no substitute for critical reflection on the power dynamics of the learning process and the actors involved (p. 12, emphasis in original).

We hope to have balanced the attention given here to method with attention given to issues of power; for these reasons.

Figure 1: Three key actors



Optimally, this action research combines:

- A high quality researcher(s) that is/are trusted by both program staff and local actors;
- An initial comprehensive analysis/understanding of the local political and institutional contexts and local leaderships, coalitions and change agents, preferably as an integral part of the donor's analytical and design process;
- Regular and episodic visits, with interviews, focus group sessions, and participant observation of the working practices of international development agencies (or other funders), their partners and the program in situ - aligned with a regular period of review and refinement designed into the aid program;
- Close, critical reading of internal documentation produced by international development agencies and their partners;
- Sustained analysis of the political context within which development agencies operate and programs are unfolding;
- Oral and written reports at regular intervals for internal discussion and debate; and
- Published summative reports for public consumption and broader policy-related consideration.

Action research is a critical component of a politically informed program's learning about what is working and what is not in terms of potential or actual transformational change. This means it has a readily observable sequence of activities and outputs that contribute directly to the program's outcomes. The outcome of action research is twofold: the object of the activity (say convening a meeting to alter legislation) and improved processes. In this sense, action research is designed as a component of the program's monitoring and evaluation.

The sequence of activities involves observation, consultation, analysis, advice and resultant program reaction. As such the process is rational; it involves reflection on activities as evidence of a process and then modifications in behaviour to improve the effectiveness of the process and future outcomes. However, it is important to understand this as a non-linear process. Action research involves the creation of intersecting feedback loops. The observation, consultation and action are continuous and overlap. There is no end point, but rather a snapshot of a given time. In addition there are feedback loops between the action researcher and partner; the action researcher and the donor/sponsor and, finally, the donor/sponsor and the partner. This makes the process highly fluid and dynamic, but also highly productive and effective in aligning the funder's development goals with those of the partner.

The feedback loop involves the explicit application of lessons to action. It is iterative and cumulative. Knowledge grows with experience, but it is recorded and reflected upon to improve outcomes and processes at all levels. A knowledge bank of observable experiences (actions and outcomes) is created for use by the participants. Propositions are tested

in action and evaluated. Lessons are learnt from successes and failures. Improvements are integrated into ongoing activities.

Action research is also context specific. The processes and principles can be generalisable but their application is specific to a particular context. The context drives the content of the activity, the dynamics of observation, consultation and action. As such, the following should not be seen in any way as a linear process, where one step precedes the next, despite perhaps giving that appearance. Changes to the context and to the program need to shape the process, not the other way around.

On-going nimble political analysis

Throughout this process, the researcher is engaged in political analysis. This may be formal in relation to particular events or agendas set by the partners or political system, but is just as likely to be informal, based on the researcher's own experience and expertise. The ability to feed on-going political analysis into the process is at the heart of our approach, and this means that the ideal researcher will already be very familiar with the context. Ideally, he or she would speak the local language(s) in order to converse with actors in their own language and to be able to acquire local sources and analyse local media. The political analysis must be closely targeted to the dynamics within which the partner and funder operate and their inter-relation. It must be flexible and adaptive and responsive to change. It must be reflexive of experience and able to shift focus quickly to respond to the needs of the partner and funder.

Documentary review (public & internal)

The researcher reviews both public and internal documentation in order to develop a sense for the programme, including its theory of change (if stated), its goals, key actors and so on. The researcher should look at the quality of the available documentation, as well as where there are clear gaps, in order to feed back to the team and to help strengthen this. Review of other relevant literature may also be necessary.

The documentary review sets the foundation for individual/group discussions.

Goal focusing

As part of the interaction between feedback loops with the partner and funder the real nature of declared goals and the 'art of the possible' within particular contexts is revealed. This can be a confronting process because expectations can be quite different from the outside looking in and vice versa. If these expectations are not aligned, reviewed and refocused regularly then gaps are likely to open up that can threaten the overall relationship between the sponsor and donor. This places the action researcher in a brokering and mediating role that must be both sensitive to nuances and highly adaptive.

Interviews (individual)

Interviews are designed to fill gaps identified in the documentary review, as well as to encourage critical thinking around the programme. This includes, for example, encouraging brainstorming on unintended consequences, counterfactuals, issues with internal leadership and so on.

- What is the coalition/project/program you are building? For what purpose?
 - How will this coalition/partnership emerge?
 - What do you envisage happening over the next 6-12 months?
 - Why did you choose to work with these particular partners? What would happen if you worked with others?
 - Why were you not doing these things without the coalition/partnership?
 - What is your theory of change? How would you explain it in layman's terms?
 - What would happen if you tried something different?
-

Facilitated group discussion	Rather than 'focus group discussions', these are internal meetings facilitated by the researcher as an insider/outsider, who has permission to ask tricky questions to the group. In our experience, the best meetings are those that are not too scripted or controlled by internal leadership (or by the donor/funder) and where there is trust, both within the group and between the group and the researcher. These discussions are confidential and will need to be designed in such a way that they contribute to the building of trust between the actors in the process, particularly early on. Any products of these discussions are owned by the group and used for internal learning and planning. Versions can be de-sensitised and used to publicise activities or provide lessons for other practitioners, but this occurs in consultation with the group to ensure that the sanctity of the action research relationship is maintained.
Internal reports (oral & written)	The first, and most important, audience for the researcher's analysis is the coalition/project/program itself, and an internal reporting strategy should be designed and adapted according to the needs of the programme. Typically this would involve a combination of pre-departure briefings and follow-on reports. The researcher needs to be free to include all observations and analysis in these reports, without censoring from the coalition, its leadership or the donor, but the reports would clearly be confidential and for internal use only. The researcher adds significant value through this process, as s/he is able to help explain the project to themselves, to help them understand their own internal processes better. S/he also uses these internal reports to help the coalition better explain their work to outsiders, including why it matters.
Internal collaboration, reflection & goal setting	As part of the on-going non-linear character of action research internal collaboration and reflection occurs regularly. This means that lessons can be learned and approaches adapted to account for shifts and changes in context and circumstances. This real-time flexibility and adaptability is particularly important in taking advantage of opportunities as they present themselves and in limiting fallout of strategies that do not work as originally planned.
Public reports	At the end of the programme, an overall report is written for a wider audience in order to pull out lessons that can help with future programming. This could still include some of the challenges identified in the internal reports, treated sensitively. Although this is not a necessary step, in terms of the individual coalition/project/program, it is necessary if a wider evidence base is to be built (see the section below on comparability).

The choice of researcher is key in this process. This is not consultancy as we typically know it, even though it may resemble it in some ways. The ideal researcher (or his/her organisation) is not dependent on the development agency for funding going forward, and so is free to ask difficult yet supportive questions throughout. S/he should know the context well, in order to: a) undertake the on-going (informal) political analysis; b) fit within the team as a credible insider/outsider; c) be trusted by the coalition/project/program partners as someone who is worth listening to; and d) is committed to the context for at least the length of the programme.

As an insider/outsider, the researcher will need to be 'separate but equal' and should not be subject to whims of the funder, in the same way a consultant typically may be. In the pilot projects, the researchers' organisations played an important role, beyond the research itself, in 'protecting' the researchers from politics internal to the coalition or the funder. This needs to be taken seriously by program designers because the flexibility and adaptability of the action researcher may not fit into orthodox relations. This highlights why the action researcher is independent. It also highlights why they are involved in the first place: if this role could be achieved affectively and sensitively by the development agency then there would be no demand for the brokering role of the action researcher.

The action researcher is placed into a role as an honest broker between the development agency and partner. Relations between these partners have generally developed over time and have often become habitual and transactional, sometimes to the detriment of achieving shared goals and, in particular, of supporting innovative intra-country approaches to development challenges. This approach to action research attempts to bridge this gap by inserting a carefully selected and trusted outsider into the relationship. The action researcher has credibility with both parties, deep contextual awareness and the capacity to assist both parties in the realisation of legitimate and progressive development goals. The action researcher should be an agent for change for both, yet captured by neither. The trust and independence allows bottlenecks to be sidestepped or overcome and efforts to be re-focussed on the significant development challenges that brought the parties together in the first place.

Towards comparative analysis

It is possible to undertake action research in development programs in a relatively ad hoc manner, with several country programs and individual projects using the action research methodology we describe here. Ideally, though, building comparability into the program design and bringing together a range of action research in order better to understand how and why different approaches to transformational change programming work in one context but not another, would provide invaluable lessons to improve programs over time. Viewing this process as one of mutual learning, as opposed to simply compiling and reporting information, may also lead to an internalisation of the action research process by coalition/project/program actors, reducing dependence in the future for outside researchers/consultants (though there may always be benefit, of course, from having a fresh outsider perspective).

Why is comparative analysis important?

1. At the outset, the action researcher should absorb the lessons from existing political economy and action research studies. While context matters, it is also important to see beyond the 'every country is unique' mantra (Levy 2011). There are general lessons about the key concepts and questions to consider.
2. After the fact, the accumulated knowledge should be compared and contrasted with other cases. This will show whether there are general lessons about when, why, and how different factors lead to success or failure. The latter is less well appreciated but probably more important for the generation of knowledge and better program design, implementation and outcomes.

Comparison is not just necessary for description but for understanding and explanation too. The methodology of theory construction has to be informed by variation and dissimilarity. If we want to be able to claim, with confidence, the case for the importance of a specific factor, variable, condition, context etc., we need to be able to show its effect across cases, but crucially that it co-varies with success.¹² This might be a simple linear relationship – i.e. the longer a program staff member is in post the more likely a successful outcome will follow – or it may be an inverted U-shape – i.e. the effectiveness of a coalition is reduced with too few or too many members – or there might be a conditional or interactive effect – i.e. successful women's leadership is conditional on labour force participation. But the general point is that in order to make confident and robust claims about success factors we need to build a comparative analysis.

At a minimum the action researcher should consider the following at each stage of the process:

1. Who are the key players or agents? What are their interests? Where are the coalitions and aligned interests?
2. What are the key institutions? Are they formal or informal? Do they enjoy legitimacy? Are they strong or fragile? How do they incentivise agents?
3. Where does power lie? Who are the powerful agents, powerful institutions, and powerful structural forces (economic conditions, configuration or class, caste, gender, demographic changes and urbanisation, or powerful ideas such as national or religion). How does power work: decision-making, by setting the agenda, by shaping what people think, domination or force, through cooperation or through resistance?¹³
4. What are the values, attitudes and ideas? Are they collectively held or individual? Do they inform interests or are in tension with them? How powerful are they?

A great advantage of the action research approach, as with other in-depth qualitative methods, is that it encourages an inductive¹⁴ approach. The researcher is freer to observe and explore novel avenues or issues that appear to be important for explaining the failure or success of the specific case. These may well turn out to be highly specific and do not help to generalise to other contexts, but equally they may well be an important additional element for future program design (and research) to consider. This also differentiates this action research approach from more orthodox PEA that tend to be deductive.¹⁵

¹² This means that it varies with another variable in a way that may be predictive.

¹³ In their introduction to a special issue on 'Action Research for Development and Social Change', Burns et al. (2012: 7) argue, 'Without an analysis of power, it is easy to get drawn to technocratic solutions'.

¹⁴ Inductive research is also sometimes known as a 'bottom up' approach. It aims to move from specific observations to broader generalisations and theories.

¹⁵ Deductive research, on the other hand, starts with generalisations and theories and then applies these to specific cases. In this way, it is more 'top down'; for example, if your PEA framework is based on economic theories that emphasize the role that interests and incentives play, the researcher will look for these, but may miss important factors that are not part of the theoretical model underpinning the PEA. With some notable exceptions, PEA studies rarely engage with the power dynamics of their own analysis, which are either underplayed or are presumed not to exist.

Challenges and Risks

No approach to development programming comes without challenges and risks, and the action research approach we describe is no different. We outline a few here, based on our experiences so far and reflections from Suva and Manila:

- Action research is resource intensive, particularly when compared to some more traditional forms of M&E. This is particularly the case when it comes to the time commitment involved from all actors. This means that this sort of approach may be more appropriate for particular types of programs, focused on transformational reforms, particularly until a wider evidence base exists with regard to its effectiveness.
- Action research is widely known but not necessarily widely practiced and finding skilled action researchers is a challenge. The ideal researcher needs to be highly knowledgeable of the cultural and political context while also understanding donor-recipient relationships, how aid works and the particular reform area. This ideal researcher may not often exist, especially in 'under-researched' countries, in post-conflict and fragile countries or where research itself is highly politicised. Compromises may be necessary, including working with more than one action researcher,¹⁶ but this of course increases costs and complexity.
- As we have noted, trust is absolutely fundamental to successful action research. The action researcher will need to be 'let in' to the thinking and decision-making in order to contribute substantively to these.
- If a program lasts for three to five years, for example, this is a long-term commitment on the part of the action researcher as well as the rest of the program actors. It may be difficult to sustain these relationships over time without significant buy-in from all. Given the nature of the research and the issue of trust, this is likely to mean a significant investment in time on the part of the researcher, more than is typical in more traditional research.
- Given that most of the 'outputs' of the research will be (and should be) for internal consumption, rather than for wider publication, this may make it difficult to engage with academic researchers who almost always have incentives to publish (or perish!). The researcher's incentives and interests should also be taken into consideration, in addition to the donor and the partners.
- There is a need to balance the various agendas, perspectives and interests of the programs, the researcher(s) and the local actors/coalitions. This is likely to be a tricky balancing act, especially over time.
- Research at IDS has shown that paying attention to expectations within the collaboration is essential, particularly with action research that is funded by development agencies: 'Donors may have different expectations from either facilitators or participants. For example: good work may need to develop more slowly than the donor requires; emerging issues may not stick to the core of what the donor wants to focus on; communities may want to work on issues which are not easy to measure...'; and so on (Burns et al. 2012: 3). How well these expectations are managed will have a significant impact on the quality and effectiveness of the program.
- The innovative and experimental nature of this action research approach to programming will also require new and innovative approaches to monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring and evaluation on M&E processes is not unusual in itself. However, the long term nature of the partnerships and confidentiality of outputs (noted elsewhere) pose challenges to evaluating the benefits of action research and will need to be factored into project design. This may also provide an opportunity to question some of the assumptions inherent in orthodox approaches to monitoring and evaluation (in parallel to the challenge that the action research itself poses).
- Finally, the researcher may need outside support, especially if the different actors' needs conflict and the researcher feels torn between program staff and local actors. This research may be among the most meaningful and exciting that the researcher has ever been involved with, but it may also be the loneliest and most challenging. Establishing support outside the program may be vital.

Examples of Programs that Are Using Action Research

Coalitions for Change (CfC) in the Philippines is an on-going program based on a partnership between the Manila offices of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Asia Foundation (TAF). The program began in October 2011 and is expected to run through 2017, thus partially overlapping with but also extending beyond the 6-year term of Philippine President Benigno "Noy" Aquino III (2010-2016). As its name suggests, CfC is designed to promote reforms and positive political change through a self-consciously 'coalitional' strategy, by encouraging and assisting

¹⁶ This is in fact the case for the Coalitions for Change program, where John Sidel (a Philippines expert) and David Booth (an aid expert) both add their own unique insights into the program (see Sidel 2014; Booth 2014).

in the formation of alliances between reformist elements in government, the legislature, elements of civil society ranging from advocacy groups to business organizations, religious institutions, community organizations, and social movements. The program thus assists the Aquino administration in its efforts to promote economic reform, good governance, and sustainable development in the Philippines, while supporting a wide range of other forces in Philippine society that are trying to promote positive change in the country.

Coalitions for Change in the Philippines was designed at the outset to focus on four areas for the promotion of reform: conflict management/mitigation, disaster risk relief/climate change management, education and subnational governance. To date, the program has thus been working on issues as varied and complex as the creation of a new Bangsamoro autonomous regional government in the majority-Muslim provinces of the southern Philippines, in-city relocation of informal settler communities living in areas vulnerable to flooding in Metro Manila, efforts to reduce congestion in primary and secondary schools in urban and suburban areas of the country, and the rationalization of provincial road planning in pilot provinces in the Visayas and Mindanao. CfC is highly adaptive in the face of shifting opportunities and imperatives, as seen in its role in supporting excise tax reform, electoral reform, and security sector reform over the past few years, and it is likely that the program will also be exploring new avenues for the promotion of a range of new economic reforms in the Philippines over the months and years ahead.

The Pacific Leadership Program (PLP) has identified and supported developmental entrepreneurs and coalitions in the Pacific at the regional level and nationally (in countries such as the Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu). Leaders of particular issue areas, such as climate change, sustainable development, green growth, political participation, and gender, have been identified and partnerships have been tailored to enhance their capacity to affect progressive developmental change. Coalitions include the Green Growth Leaders' Coalition, The Tongan National Leadership Development Forum, Women in Shared Decision Making (Vanuatu), and Women's Organic Farming/Local Economic Development Pilot (Solomon Islands).

There is an element of risk in supporting developmental entrepreneurs in politically sensitive and charged environments, especially when viewed from a narrow transactional approach. The PLP has had to learn, grow and adapt to meet the challenges of sponsoring politically informed programs in an environment where risk averse behaviour is rewarded and orthodox approaches are institutionalised as the norm. This calculated risk has been managed in various ways and the targeted application of action research has been one such strategy. Action researchers with deep knowledge of Pacific cultures and politics have been identified and embedded with select coalitions to maximise their capacity to achieve their aims. Partnerships have developed, trust has grown and a richer level of collaboration has been the result. The PLP's sponsoring of action research will provide a rich source of material for better understanding thinking and working politically and the importance of recognizing politics, culture and the calculated risks needed to sponsor dynamic developmental leadership.

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