

POLITICALLY INFORMED APPROACHES TO WORKING ON GENDER EQUALITY IN FRAGILE AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED CONTEXTS

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Foreword

Sustainable peace, inclusive institutions and gender equality are rightly at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Around the world, conflict, fragility and gender inequalities erode people's opportunities to fulfil their potential and undermine our prospects for sustainable development. These challenges also reinforce each other: societal norms that discriminate against women can fuel conflict and violence, and conflict and fragility in turn multiply the burdens faced by women and girls. The global COVID-19 pandemic has harmed health, social, and economic well-being worldwide, but has further highlighted these interconnections, showcasing the heightened risks for women globally, and particularly those living in conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

In recent years, the international community has increasingly recognised the linkages between gender inequality, conflict and fragility. This recognition is reflected in an increase in the official development assistance committed by members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in support of gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. However, more can and must be done to ensure that resources are used effectively to achieve meaningful progress towards gender equality, sustainable peace and development in fragile settings.

Aware of the immense stakes and challenges involved, the OECD-DAC Network on Gender Equality (GenderNet) and the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) have jointly prepared a series of policy papers to guide the integration of gender equality into donor programming in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. These present new research on effective approaches and provide concrete implementation recommendations for using a gender lens in programming. The policy paper at hand is part of this initiative.

GenderNet's goal is to improve policies and practices to strengthen gender equality in development programmes and to secure girls' and women's rights, thereby contributing to the delivery of Agenda 2030. The network consists of gender equality managers from the development agencies of the DAC's 30 members in addition to observers from UN Women and other UN organisations, the World Bank, regional development banks and civil society organisations (CSO).

INCAF is a network of the DAC and key multilateral agencies working in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. By encouraging lesson learning and promoting good practice among its members, INCAF works to achieve policy commitments and behaviour change among international actors at headquarters and field levels to deliver better results in fragile settings.

Three policy papers have been published as part of the joint initiative between the two OECD-DAC networks. The first one was the OECD Development Policy Paper "*Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Fragile and Conflict-affected Situations: A Review of Donor Support*" published in October 2017. The aim of this study is to improve understanding of how development partners can address gender equality in their strategies and initiatives on conflict and fragility. Two operational policy papers have followed this donor review, to address identified knowledge gaps and provide practical tools for programmes and policies to contribute to achieving gender equality and sustainable peace, and to realising the vision of Agenda 2030. The first of these was "*Engaging with men and masculinities in fragile and conflict-affected settings*", published in March 2019. The second is this paper on politically informed approaches to gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

CSO	Civil society organisations
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
FCAS	Fragile and conflict-affected settings
FEDO	Feminist Dalit Organisation
GBV	Gender-based violence
INCAF	International Network on Conflict and Fragility
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MAMPU	Australia Indonesia Partnership for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation and learning
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PEA	Political economy analysis
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
TOC	Theory of change
TWP	Thinking and Working Politically
V4C	Voices for Change

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Executive summary

This policy paper provides guidance on how to adopt politically informed approaches to gender equality programming in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The DAC Policy Networks undertake collective analysis and action to improve the effectiveness of development co-operation through better evidence-based policies, practices, and shared learning among experts. This work is intended primarily for staff of donor organisations or other agencies working in fragile contexts who are responsible for designing and implementing programmes focused specifically on gender equality, or other sectoral programmes that take account of gender related dynamics.

The introduction begins with an explanation of why a sound grasp of the political economies of fragile contexts is needed to advance gender equality. It describes how politically informed approaches emerged in response to weaknesses in traditional development programming and how they are particularly suited to work on complex problems such as gender inequality, as well as complex contexts such as fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The paper goes on to discuss the main opportunities and challenges involved in implementing politically informed approaches to work on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, examining why different aspects of these approaches are important, the extent to which they currently feature in donors' work on gender in these settings, and providing examples of good and less good practice.

Section I discusses the key elements of politically informed donor programming on gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. It highlights the importance of recognising the complex interlinkages between gender inequality and fragility, seeking solutions to locally defined problems and targeting the underlying drivers of gender inequality. Furthermore, it highlights the need to support women and girls as agents of change, by strengthening their individual and collective capacity for voice and influence. It also stresses the need to engage a wide range of stakeholders and institutions, including those involved in sustaining discriminatory norms, when seeking to tackle gender inequality. Finally, this section stresses the importance of a multi-dimensional approach that addresses the interconnected constraints and opportunities for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment across multiple sectors, as well as the need to take account of the myriad ways in which gender identities intersect with other identities and patterns of exclusion.

Section II examines the main organisational systems, practices and tools that are required to implement a politically informed approach to gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. It focuses primarily on those that are most relevant at programme level, while recognising related implications for wider organisational structures and practices. This section argues that politically informed programming on gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts requires robust analysis and evidence generation, as well as realistic theories of change that are based on solid analysis and evidence. It makes the case that adaptive programming, with analysis, solutions and expected results that evolve flexibly during the life of a programme, is of particular value in working on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, where both the problem and context are highly complex. It also argues for alternative approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning that shift the focus from reporting on the delivery of outputs to identifying what works. This section goes on to discuss the necessity of building staff capacity to work on gender equality,

and offers suggestions for how this can be done. Finally, it outlines the importance of adopting funding and partnership models that support women's organisations to advance their own agendas and that foster relationship building among different groups.

The concluding section argues that while politically informed approaches to gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts have great potential, adopting them can involve significant shifts in donors' focus and practice. However, it also stresses that these shifts can be undertaken gradually, in small steps, and with a focus on organisational learning. The conclusion places emphasis on the need to expand the existing pool of evidence and lessons on politically informed programming on gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, arguing that donors can usefully help to contribute to the existing knowledge base in this area by documenting and sharing their experiences.

Introduction

Gender relations are deeply political power relations. In fragile contexts both patterns of gender discrimination, and opportunities for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment, are connected to wider fragility and conflict dynamics and to broader contestations over the distribution of power and resources. Hence, promoting gender equality requires understanding and working with the political economies of fragile contexts through a politically informed approach. This is increasingly relevant in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has heightened the existing inequalities and structural vulnerabilities that impact women and girls, and fragile and conflict-affected contexts. As with all disasters and crises, the impact of COVID-19 is greater on the poorest, and poverty is increasingly concentrated in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Around 1 billion people live in slums and populous suburbs in developing countries, including in fragile contexts (World Bank, n.d.^[1]). For most people living in those contexts their livelihood is dependent on the informal economy, meaning confinement measures will likely have a devastating effect on their ability to make a living. To a larger degree they live day-to-day; the poorest are unable to stock food and other essential goods even for a few days. The poorest people, relying on the informal economy, have to balance between the risk of infection if they venture out to earn daily income and the certainty of food shortages if they keep confined.

The implications of the crisis go far beyond health and food security systems. In fragile contexts, those systems are not weak in isolation. Different dimensions of fragility amplify systemic weakness. In that respect, the COVID-19 pandemics highlight the multi-dimensional aspect of fragility, and the importance of supporting countries building system resilience across all dimensions of fragility, based on a sound politically informed approach (World Bank, n.d.^[1]).

A number of different strands of work on politically informed approaches to development have emerged in recent years, including thinking and working politically¹, doing development differently, and problem-driven iterative adaptation, among others. While there are important differences between these strands, they share a common understanding of the limitations of traditional development approaches and the value of a more politically smart approach. In particular, they recognise that traditional development approaches are often ill-equipped to deal with complex development challenges as they offer blueprint or highly pre-planned solutions that assume linear, mechanistic pathways of change. Indeed, traditional approaches are often too idealistic for fragile and conflict-affected contexts; they have the luxury of planning behavioural and institutional changes over relatively long time frames, in contrast to the typically short planning horizon in more fragile settings. Furthermore, they tend to be based on a limited understanding of the context, one that overlooks important political dynamics and underlying constraints. The result often fosters isomorphic mimicry, where institutions “pretend to reform by changing what policies or organizations *look like* rather than what they actually *do*” (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2012^[2]).

The alternative to such traditional approaches is a politically informed approach that recognises that some development problems are intensely political and complex, and that solutions are not obvious or predictable at the outset, but must be discovered through ongoing analysis, strategic action and experimentation. There are two core elements to a politically informed approach: political understanding; and working in politically astute ways (Booth and Unsworth, 2014^[3]). The first requires an analysis of power

relations and the functioning of the political and socio-economic system. The second involves working out how to negotiate barriers and use opportunities within this system, and identifying the best tactics and relations to use in order to achieve the desired change. Politically informed programming tends to include: strong and ongoing political economy analysis (PEA); a problem-driven approach; an explicit theory of change; structured learning with rapid feedback loops and potential for programme adjustments; and working with a wide range of actors.

While the community working on politically informed approaches to development did not initially pay much attention to gender issues, this is now changing. Indeed, in recent years the TWP community has begun to generate significant analysis on gender, power, politics, and the way these are conceived by development actors.² There is also increasing awareness of the value of a gender lens to the TWP agenda. For example, there is a recognition that “understanding gender relations and inequality could improve the TWP approach. Equally, importing TWP thinking into gender equality work could ensure gender analysis becomes increasingly sophisticated...Working together, we could land joint positions on how to conceptualise power more broadly” (Moyle, 2015^[4]). However, despite this progress there remains potential for far deeper and wider engagement between these two development agendas.

A politically informed approach has great potential value for strengthening work on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts and contributing to the transformation of both patterns of fragility and gender inequalities. Gender inequalities tend to be deeply rooted, highly political, complex problems, which are tightly bound up with a whole variety of interests, attitudes, norms and behaviours. Meanwhile, fragile and conflict-affected contexts tend to be complex, fluid contexts in which power and resource access are highly contested and both the political stakes and risks are high. Given this causal and contextual complexity, gender equality problems in fragile and conflict-affected contexts cannot be addressed effectively through a pre-planned solution that assumes a linear and predictable pathway of change.

For donors and implementing partners, adopting a politically informed approach to their work on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts offers great opportunities. Fragile contexts often experience profound political and socio-economic change processes, which can provide entry points to support significant transformations in relation to gender equality and women’s empowerment. Moreover, such political work on gender can help to support sustainable transitions from conflict and fragility, as gender equality struggles in fragile and conflict-affected contexts often make visible and contest some of the core drivers of fragility, such as structural inequalities.

However, adopting politically informed approaches also involves significant challenges. It requires taking risks by working in new ways and across traditional silos, with a wider set of partners, and on politically sensitive issues, without being able to predict what results will emerge. It also requires a flexible and pragmatic approach that takes advantage of emerging opportunities as they arise and that accepts, and even welcomes, risk. Such approaches can be organisationally challenging, as they are radically different to current development practice. As (Booth and Unsworth, 2014^[3]) note, both donors and implementers tend to have “a focus on achieving direct, short term results based on project designs that over-specify inputs and expected outputs; pressure to spend, that makes relationships with partners aid-centric and allows insufficient time for iterative learning; and squeezes on expenditure deemed ‘administrative’ which, when coupled with high staff turnover, impede the acquisition of in-depth political knowledge and the application of skills”.

1. Key elements of politically informed approaches

This section identifies some of the key elements of politically informed programming approaches to gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, which emerge from an examination of existing evidence. It discusses why these elements are important and the extent to which they are currently included in donor work in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. It also offers lessons learned on both good practice and less good practice in relation to each element, drawing on an extensive literature review.³

1.1. Recognising interlinkages between gender inequalities and fragility

Over the past decade, the donor community has made important progress in addressing the gendered impacts of conflict and the importance of women's inclusion in peacebuilding. However, this community still pays little attention to the manner in which gender inequalities relate to wider patterns of fragility. This includes how gender discrimination and opportunities for women's empowerment relate to factors underpinning fragility more broadly, such as: the nature and limits of state authority; competition between rival elites over political settlements; patterns of clientelism and corruption; violent or identity-based politics; and unequal, inaccessible and dysfunctional markets. It also includes paying attention to the manner in which the rapid social and political change that takes place in some fragile and conflict-affected contexts can lead to a fluidity of gender norms and roles that can be built on to advance gender equality.

This failure to recognise the linkages between patterns of gender inequality and patterns of fragility results in: gender issues being overlooked within programmes that address fragility; gender equality focused programming being disconnected from wider donor efforts to build stability and resilience; and in missed opportunities to promote women's voices and interests within the contestation and change processes that take place in many fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Indeed, a recent study of gender equality programming in fragile and conflict-affected contexts found "serious weaknesses in donors' understanding of: how political economy factors and power relations shape conflict, fragility and gender relations; what these factors and connections mean for trajectories of political and social change in fragile situations, including changes in gender norms and power relations; and what this implies for programme objectives and approaches" (OECD, 2017^[5]).

Examples can be drawn from different countries. In Nepal, for instance, there was a lack of attention to how struggles over women's rights related to wider contestations between identity-based elites over the post-conflict political settlement. This meant that many international actors did not recognise how these tensions related to Nepal's relationship with India and the status of the ethnic Madhesi population along the border, and how they undermined women's demands for equal citizenship status in the new Constitution (Desouza, 2015^[6]). Likewise, in Burundi, it is important that donors recognise that the importance of land access as the basis for power in an extremely unstable political settlement is a major reason for elite resistance to providing women with equal inheritance rights in line with constitutional provisions on equality (Care, 2018^[7]). A politically informed approach requires investment in understanding such complex, context-specific linkages between gender inequalities and fragility; the opportunities and

risks they create for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment; and the implications for pathways of change that donors can meaningfully support.

Learning from a women's leadership programme in Bangladesh illustrates the importance of recognising the specific risks and barriers that local fragility dynamics pose for politically active women. These include polarised party politics, high levels of political violence, weak rule of law, and the dominance of male-led patronage networks within political life (OECD, 2017^[5]). The programme in question sought to mitigate these challenges by working to reduce inter-communal tensions; engaging with religious leaders; holding regular discussions of these risks among women's collectives; and building linkages with law enforcement agencies, local political leaders, media and the local administration. Programme implementers reported that these activities contributed to lower levels of political violence in their areas compared to neighbouring ones. Moreover, the programme also adapted its focus over time, in recognition of how different types of political engagement created different levels of risk for women in this fragile context. It began by supporting women to gain experience and confidence in internal local government and informal committees, and then went on to support women's election in local government through reserved seats. After enabling women to build up their experience and confidence through participation in these political channels, the programme supported women candidates to compete for the most influential political positions, where the hostile and violent political environment is most extreme.

In Afghanistan, donors supporting legislation against gender-based violence (GBV) recognised that the manner in which women's status in society was caught up in political contestations over the nature of the state, combined with highly personalised politics and very limited space for women to mobilise, created a major barrier to advancing women's formal rights through parliament. This led them to adopt a strategy of working behind the scenes, working around personalised politics and parliament, and taking advantage of international pressure to promote the adoption of a Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women through a presidential decree (Larson, 2016^[8]).

1.2. Working on locally defined problems

As discussed above, gender inequalities in fragile and conflict-affected contexts tend to be characterised by both causal and contextual complexity. Donors working on these programmes should not, therefore, assume that related challenges are fully understood or that solutions are already known or can be transferred from other contexts. Donor interventions in support of gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts could benefit instead by beginning with searching questions to identify and understand the most pressing gender problems and what drives them, and by mapping out potential pathways of change given prevailing social, political and economic conditions, before examining what role they can play in supporting change. Within this context, it is important for donors to take into account the potential impact of any intervention or engagement with change agents, including so that they can mitigate against possible backlash from those who may feel left out or disadvantaged as a result. It is important to keep the principle of doing no harm front and centre to avoid inadvertently entrenching support for discriminatory practices or norms, or creating resentment or harmful social cleavages within one group or another.

Local stakeholders are best placed to identify the most critical gender problems in their context, as well as to identify existing opportunities for change, and the merits and perils of different strategies to address them. It is therefore important that donors understand their role as supporting locally-owned and locally-driven processes to identify gender equality challenges and solutions, rather than providing an externally identified solution. This can require a significant shift in approach, as donor interventions are often based on pre-conceived ideas that typically involve reform of social or political arrangements. In addition, it is also important to remember that the priority partner of a country programme is normally the state itself. Therefore, programmes should take into account and align with the state's priorities. Co-ordination

between external donors and other actors that does not consider these country-owned priorities may risk contributing to the fragility of the state.

Who gets to define and prioritise a given problem is inevitably contested, even in the most stable contexts. Problem definition is particularly highly contested in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, where social cleavages are deep, political stakes are high, and the problems weigh heavily on those affected. In such contexts, it is particularly challenging for donors to negotiate the dilemma of which gender equality problems they should address, and there is a risk that the most powerful or visible women's organisations will prevail in defining the agenda. Donors can help themselves by recognising the above, being realistic about the change processes they are engaging in, and recognising the need to work with multiple actors and organisations in an inclusive manner, thereby avoiding being 'captured' by one group or another, or indeed one silo or another.

Post-conflict Colombia, where competing interests led to disagreement over which gender-related priorities to focus on as part of the peace process, illustrates the difficulty. Advocates for justice for women as victims of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), displaced women's right to property, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights all competed with one another for attention (Domingo and Desai, 2018^[9]). Donors would benefit from an understanding of these contestations and the interests that lie behind them in order to better inform their decisions about what to support. This requires a strong knowledge of local context and stakeholders, and a focus on relationship building and consulting the widest possible range of stakeholders.

A Women, Peace and Security programme in Nepal illustrates the benefits of placing a strong emphasis on local and well-informed problem definition. This programme included a long multilevel inception phase involving district- and national-level consultations, gender and conflict situation analysis, a local needs assessment, and an analysis at sub-sectoral level in order to identify and understand the most pressing challenges affecting different groups of women and potential options for addressing them. This enabled the programme to successfully engage with multiple local actors and avoid blueprint planning (OECD, 2017^[5]).

1.3. Addressing the underlying drivers of gender inequality

Evidence suggests that donor programming frequently focuses on the symptoms rather than the underlying causes of gender inequality (O'Neil, 2016^[10]). This is partly because the symptoms of gender inequality are often more visible and easier to identify, as well as easier to measure and hence more amenable to traditional programming approaches and reporting mechanisms. For example, programming in support of women's political participation in Malawi has largely focused on building women's capacity to enter politics, without recognising or addressing the lack of demand for women in politics, which is due to widespread misconceptions about women's abilities and roles (O'Neil, 2016^[10]). Programming has, therefore, focussed on just *one* cause of women's lack of political power - their lack of access to political positions and processes - rather than addressing the multiple, deeper causes.

The underlying causes of gender inequality are inevitably difficult to identify, understand, and overcome. Without a concerted effort to do so, donor programming will have limited impact in terms of transforming these inequalities. This kind of effort requires donors to invest time and resources in working with local stakeholders to understand the underlying drivers and how they relate to the broader political economy context, to map out potential pathways to change these drivers, and to identify how donor interventions can most usefully support such change.

Deep-rooted discriminatory gender norms are a key underlying driver of gender inequalities. However, in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, such norms are often overlooked in gender equality programming in these contexts, which tends to focus instead on capacity building and institutional reform (OECD, 2017^[5]).

Addressing discriminatory gender norms is challenging for donors as it requires engagement with a wide set of stakeholders, including those with a role in generating and sustaining unequal gender norms; working in alternative ways that do not fit well within standard programming mechanisms; and accepting that progress will be slow and non-linear (Wright, 2014^[11]). Recent evidence suggests that long-term engagement that goes well beyond typical three- to four-year programme cycles is most useful in supporting a shift in gender norms (NORAD, 2015^[12]).

A programme in Sierra Leone that aims to reduce teenage pregnancy demonstrates the value of addressing underlying drivers as well as the immediate symptoms of gender inequality. While most programming on this issue focuses on providing girls with information and skills to avoid pregnancy, this programme recognises the importance of social norms. These norms encourage GBV and legitimise sex with young girls, limit girls' autonomy and decision-making power, and reduce the value of girls within families, thereby acting as underlying *drivers* of teenage pregnancy. The programme works with chiefs, community leaders, religious leaders and male household heads to address the norms, attitudes and behaviours that fuel the problem.

1.4. Supporting women as active agents within change processes

Fragile and conflict-affected contexts often undergo profound political and social change processes, whether as part of peacebuilding, state-building, democratisation or other types of reform. These processes can provide important opportunities to address gender inequalities, empower women, and embed women's rights within a newly emerging political settlement or reformed institutional landscape. It is therefore critical that women are active agents within these change processes. Donors can play an important role in supporting them in this endeavour, both by adopting a gender lens within broader support to peacebuilding, state building or reform processes, and by ensuring that programmes specifically focused on gender equality and women's empowerment effectively link women to wider social and political changes that are taking place.

Support for women and girls as active agents in change processes should be provided at multiple levels and across different branches of state and within institutions. It must involve supporting women's meaningful participation in both formal and informal decision-making spaces, with a recognition that much of the negotiation over change processes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts takes place through informal spaces and networks to which women have limited access. It is therefore important to support women's participation and influence in the most crucial foundational decision-making moments of peacebuilding and state-building, such as the negotiation of peace deals or new constitutions, in addition to their participation and influence in ongoing day-to-day formal and informal political life.

It is also important to recognise that in all fragile contexts there are already women activists working in astute ways at multiple levels to promote gender reform and women's rights, and that donors should support them to advance their existing agendas within the context of political change processes. This can be undertaken in a variety of ways and it is important that donors undertake robust analysis and consult with women in order to identify which actions and what kind of support would be most useful. Related actions can include advocating for formal commitments to inclusivity in change processes; supporting women and girls to demand their inclusion; establishing appropriate channels for women to engage in change processes; incentivising male leaders to include more women; including gender experts in technical work around political processes and reforms; and supporting women-only spaces. It is also important that donors seeking to support women as active agents recognise and address the multiple structural constraints that prevent women from accessing and influencing change processes. This could include encouraging internal reform within political parties, promoting measures to address gendered political violence, or seeking to reduce economic barriers to women's participation.

A peace leadership programme in Myanmar provides learning on the importance of a politically smart approach to supporting women as active agents in a fragile setting. The programme trains and supports women to actively contribute to peacebuilding, while also using gender analysis as a lens through which to understand Myanmar's wider political landscape. Strong local knowledge and broad networks have enabled the programme to identify and support diverse women with potential to become peace leaders, while the use of a gender lens has allowed the programme to understand and respond to the specific gendered challenges faced by women in positions of power. Moreover, a politically smart work approach has allowed the programme to support women to identify opportunities and strategically frame gender issues in ways that gain most traction. For example, the programme supported the leader of an ethnic women's organisation to re-position herself as politically relevant on a wider set of issues beyond gender equality; this enabled her to become the chair of a nationwide group that advocates for a more inclusive peace process (Siow, 2018^[13]).

1.5. Strengthening women's individual and collective capacity

Strengthening women's capacity for voice and influence can be crucial in supporting them to become active agents that influence decision-making and shape gender outcomes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Donor programming on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts often involves a strong focus on capacity building for women's organisations and women leaders. For a variety of reasons this approach often has limited impact. This is because such capacity building is frequently disconnected from wider change processes; is short-term with unrealistic expectations of results; does not take full account of context-specific constraints and opportunities; focuses on a small range of elite, urban-based women's organisations; and is based on assumptions about what interests women should voice.

A politically smart approach to strengthening women's capacity must begin with an understanding of the plurality of women's identities, interests and organisations in any context. There needs to be an understanding of the multiple change processes that they may seek to influence at different levels, both formal and informal, and the prevailing opportunities to do so. Capacity building support must be tailored to these context-specific factors and link women in meaningful ways to existing processes and institutions. Indeed, as (Coomaraswamy, 2015^[14]) argues, offering capacity building as a road to inclusion in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, when this is not linked to wider meaningful change processes, is often just a way of continuing women's exclusion.

Collective strength is crucial to amplifying power and evidence suggests that women's groups are most influential when they can overcome divisions and their political marginalisation to develop a joint position (Paffenholz, 2015^[15]). Given this, an important goal for donor support should be to develop a strong and diverse women's movement, working with both elite and grassroots women's organisations to foster broad coalitions of women, and encouraging these coalitions to develop a common political agenda. Evidence also suggests that alongside the strengthening of women's collective capacity, it is important to foster women's individual capabilities and empowerment. This is in recognition of the fact that women's ability to participate in collective action is profoundly shaped by their wider capabilities and access to resources, such as education, health and employment (O'Neil and Domingo, 2016^[16]).

Capacity strengthening should take place at national, subnational and local levels and seek to link women across these to enhance the representativeness of national women's organisations. It should be focused on both senior women, and younger and marginalised women, and should also take place across different domains. While there tends to be a strong focus on building the capacity of women in formal politics or CSOs, it is also important to strengthen their capacity in bureaucracy, education, the legal system and the private sector, as a means of promoting women's interests. The manner in which results are understood and measured in this area is also critical. Too often such programming measures results in terms of the

numbers of women trained, rather than monitoring how these women have used the training they received and what *impact* this has had.

Strengthening women's capacity can take a range of forms, including by building their leadership skills, their capacities for strategic action and influence, and their ability to access and navigate important decision-making arenas and actors, as well as their technical knowledge and skills in relation to legal or other issues. It is also important to support women to frame their demands in politically smart ways in order to minimise opposition and generate wider societal support. This framing of taking politically informed approaches to development co-operation can involve drawing on local ideas or informal systems, such as customary and religious traditions or cultural practices, in order to demonstrate the value of gender equality goals to broader goals that are of interest to power holders, such as economic development. Such politically smart framing is evident in the manner that a Moroccan women's movement, which advocates for reform of the personal status law, responded to opposition from conservative Islamists. The movement reinforced its use of religious language and Islamic frameworks to make a case for reform and developed media campaigns to build public sympathy for its cause, particularly among men (Castillejo and Tilley, 2015^[17]).

The Australia Indonesia Partnership for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (MAMPU) also used politically smart programming to build collective capacity and support a strong and diverse women's movement. MAMPU works to strengthen broad-based coalitions led by CSOs, to influence government policies, empower poor women and improve their access to essential services. While MAMPU focuses on delivering a range of specific and measurable outputs to improve women's access to services, the programme's approach to achieving this has had a transformative impact on women's and gender-interested non-governmental organisations (NGO), CSOs and mass member organisations in Indonesia more broadly. By including these organisations in programme design from the outset, strengthening links among and beyond partners in relevant sectors, and focusing on consistency of vision and understanding, MAMPU is supporting the gradual emergence of a broad-based and increasingly powerful movement advocating for women's empowerment in the country (Derbyshire et al., 2018^[18]).

1.6. Engaging with a wide range of stakeholders

Politically informed work on gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts requires engaging with a much wider range of actors than those who are typically involved in gender equality programmes. This should include actors who can support change as well as potential spoilers, across multiple levels and spaces. Identifying this wider group requires a broad approach to stakeholder mapping that identifies all those whose ideas, interests and actions shape gender relations and can therefore influence change, and that looks beyond those with the most visible forms of power, to less obvious sources of influence. Working with a wider group of stakeholders that includes non-traditional partners (e.g. organic civic groups, the private sector) inevitably requires donors to be willing to take risks, to be flexible in their ways of working, and to find creative ways to collaborate with organisations that work in different ways or have limited capacity.

The Irish NGO Trócaire initiated the "SASA! project" as a partnership between the Ugandan Catholic Church and the Ugandan women's organisation Raising Voices, which uses a community mobilisation approach to prevent violence against women. Trócaire identified an opportunity to facilitate a partnership between the Catholic Church and Raising Voices and was able to draw on its own identity as a faith-based organisation to successfully bring on board the leadership of Uganda's Catholic Church. Crucially, this enabled Raising Voices to adapt and use its "SASA! project" mobilisation methodology at the diocesan level (O'Neil, 2016^[10]).

In addition to engaging with a wider range of stakeholders, a politically smart approach also involves supporting the development of broad coalitions and alliances among stakeholders with some degree of

shared interest in the specific gender equality goal being addressed. Depending on the context and objective, these coalitions can be more or less formal, can be restricted or inclusive, and can range from being entirely pragmatic to being principle based. Ideally, such coalition-building should be combined with building strong relationships with individuals who act as key gatekeepers and power holders across a range of formal and informal spaces and institutions.

In Tonga, the Pacific Leadership Program has provided support to a coalition of women's organisations calling for the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, in the face of significant public opposition. By providing adaptive leadership training, support for strategy development, research and analysis, as well as space for reflection, the program helped the coalition to engage with a broader range of women, to identify and utilise key junctures for influence, to develop allies among power brokers, and to build trust with religious women's organisations that had previously opposed the coalition (Siow, 2018^[19]).

While donors increasingly recognise the importance of working with men and boys to address harmful gender identities and relations, evidence suggests that in practice gender programming in fragile and conflict-affected contexts generally does not engage with men, beyond male officials or others whose co-operation is required for programme implementation (OECD, 2017^[5]). A much more effective approach is to work in a politically smart way with an expanded range of stakeholders on gender equality goals, from male community members right up to the level of the policy makers and institutions that reinforce patriarchal gender norms. By doing this, programming is better able to address the manner in which gender identities can act as barriers to the realisation of women's rights and empowerment (Wright, 2014^[11]).

There are examples of programmes that have successfully engaged with men on gender and women's rights in the private sphere in fragile states. In particular, these have focused on engaging with male partners to promote a better understanding of and play a more supportive role with respect to women's sexual and reproductive health, and to challenge norms and attitudes that fuel SGBV. However, there tends to be limited engagement with men on gender issues in areas that are more public and overtly political. For example, the (OECD, 2017^[5]) documented a governance programme in Nepal that provided extensive support for women's political participation. Despite having a separate strand that worked with male political party leaders on wider democracy issues, the programme failed to engage with these male politicians in a systematic way about the importance of women's political participation. Keeping the 'gender equality' and wider 'democracy strengthening' strands of this programme separate in this manner meant that women's political participation was effectively siloed as a 'women's issue', and was not understood or presented as an integral part of building effective political parties and a political system.

1.7. Adopting a multi-dimensional approach

There is strong evidence that donor funding and programming on gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts tend to be siloed by sector (Coomaraswamy, 2015^[14]), with donors frequently not taking sufficient account of the ways in which either patterns of gender inequality or gender equality gains can be mutually reinforcing across a range of sectors. Examples include the manner in which improvements in women's security can strengthen their ability to participate in political life, or how legal measures that advance women's rights can also improve women's economic opportunities. A politically smart approach involves addressing multi-dimensional and interconnected constraints as well as opportunities for gender equality and women's empowerment across sectors. It requires recognising that women's empowerment cannot be achieved by separate gender departments, policies or programmes working in isolation, but requires working with and through 'mainstream' development sectors using a feminist lens.

Building on and reinforcing gender equality gains across different sectoral programmes requires that people working on relevant programmes have a political understanding of gender and women's empowerment and the ability to apply a feminist lens to their work. In practice, gender mainstreaming in

sectoral programmes is often undertaken in a tokenistic or instrumentalist way that strips the politics out of the gender equality agenda. Involving gender experts throughout the life of a programme, rather than just during the design phase, can be helpful in maintaining a politically smart gender lens.

A programme supporting institutional strengthening and reform of the Election Commission of Nepal illustrates the benefits of politically informed gender mainstreaming (OECD, 2017^[5]). The programme successfully supported the Electoral Commission to incorporate gender issues into all its structures, policies, strategies, budgets and plans at both national and local levels. It also built capacity and commitment on gender equality among commission staff to create the conditions necessary for the new gender-sensitive institutional and policy framework to have an impact.

Programmes in which gender equality is the primary objective are more likely to recognise and address the interlinkages between different areas of gender equality and women's empowerment, for example, by combining elements on livelihoods, women's political voice and GBV in one programme. However, such programmes also need to be effectively linked to broader and bigger donor sectoral strategies and programming, including those intended to address fragility and conflict. This is frequently not the case. For instance programming on women's livelihoods is often undertaken in a 'stand-alone' manner instead of being connected with broader economic recovery agendas or programmes.

As illustrated above, in addition to working across multiple sectors to promote gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, it is important to work at multiple levels. For example, there is evidence regarding the value of building linkages between macro-level processes such as security sector reform and the local level work of women's networks on issues such as disarmament and community peacebuilding (Womankind, 2011^[20]).

Programming in Bangladesh illustrates what a multi-dimensional approach entails. A food security and nutrition programme there combined resource transfers and livelihood development for women with behavioural change communication and activities aimed at shifting unequal gender norms and practices such as early marriage and women's lack of household decision-making power that perpetuate food insecurity (OECD, 2017^[5]). It also supported women by strengthening their social networks and engaging with local leaders, male relatives and mothers-in-law on issues related to violence against women, recognising the importance of these factors to food security outcomes.

1.8. Working with informal institutions and rules

Informal and customary institutions and rules tend to play an important role in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, frequently dominating those that are more formal. Informal institutions often have significant control over issues that have a detrimental impact on women's well-being, such as community norms, personal status laws, or access to local resources and services. While relevant institutions and rules vary widely between fragile contexts, they frequently play an important role in perpetuating discriminatory gender norms and women tend to have little access to or influence over them. Given this, it is critical that donors seeking to advance gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts understand and engage with them. This can be extremely challenging, but a politically smart approach can help.

As a starting point, it is important for donors and other actors from local organisations, governments, and the private sector to take into account the relationship between informal and formal institutions. This includes, for example, the manner in which informal networks and interests shape access to and influence within formal political spaces or services, and the implications of this for different categories of men and women. It is also important to pay attention to any disconnect between formal and informal rules. Even when women are able to influence formal decision-making processes or advance formal gender equality reforms, this may not be matched by a real shift in power relations if the *informal* rules do not shift as well. In Guatemala, for example, an inclusive peace process resulted in comprehensive rights being guaranteed

to women and indigenous people, but these are made largely meaningless by the continued existence of exclusionary informal power relations (Castillejo, 2014^[21]). Finally, donors working in this area need to understand how informal rules are generated and sustained and in whose interests. A strong PEA that goes beyond formal patterns of power and resource access can help to improve understanding (see Boxes 1 and 2).

While it is important that programmes engage with informal institutions and rules, this has to be undertaken in ways that promote women's rights and interrogate discriminatory narratives about tradition or customs. This is particularly critical where the state delegates authority over certain areas or issues to traditional institutions, a practice that is relatively common in post-conflict contexts as a means of supporting stability. Such interdependency between formal and customary institutions can result in the customary exclusion of women being carried into the formal sphere and in discriminatory customary institutions being strengthened through state support. Learning from Afghanistan illustrates the challenge. Donors' emphasis on security there resulted in them supporting an increase in powers for traditional, local councils (shuras) to administer justice. This was despite the fact that Afghan women's organisations had highlighted the potentially problematic relationship between non-state, locally administered justice and women's rights (Wimpelmann, 2013^[22]); (Larson, 2016^[8]).

A Peace and Development Programme in Ethiopia provides learning on positive engagement with traditional and informal actors. The programme recognised the significant influence and reach of religious and clan leaders, and sought to involve them in work on challenging harmful traditional practices in ways that helped ensure buy-in and sustainability. Through capacity building and dialogue, the programme highlighted conflicts between harmful practices and religious principles and successfully worked with leaders to support wider social mobilisation within their communities. The approach proved effective in addressing gender inequalities and transforming attitudes (OECD, 2017^[5]).

1.9. Taking account of intersectionality

A politically smart approach requires an understanding of how gender identities intersect with other identities and patterns of exclusion within a given context. This enables programming to take account of the complex ways in which identity markers such as class, religion, ethnicity or sexual identity shape gendered experiences and related opportunities for advancing gender equality.

While such an 'intersectionality lens' is important for gender equality work in any context, it is particularly critical in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, where group identities are often highly prominent and politicised, and may have been the basis for extreme discrimination or violence. Indeed, in many fragile and conflict-affected contexts women's civil society itself is riven with identity-based or ideological cleavages that affect broader society and impede full and effective representation. Supporting a diverse set of women's voices and interests requires donors to ask how different aspects of fragility, or different elements of political change processes, relate to gendered group interests. For example, how does the multi-faceted discrimination faced by Afro-Colombian women position them in relation to the implementation of the peace agreement in Colombia? Or how can indigenous women in Nepal best articulate their interests within new federal political structures?

A strong and comprehensive PEA and stakeholder analysis, with the widest possible consultation, can help donors understand how best to address intersectionality within their programmes. Ongoing monitoring of the actors and institutions that programmes engage with and how programmes have an impact on different identity groups is also needed. Flexibility is required in order to adapt programmes to address gaps that such monitoring might reveal, and respond to changes in broader political and social dynamics that affect intersectional identities. For example, growing discrimination against a particular identity group may reduce the ability of women from that group to benefit from a programme. In some countries, donors have largely lacked the capacity or tools to recognise the plurality of the women's movement and its

relationship to wider ideological positions, operating as if there were one unified women's movement (Domingo, 2011^[23]). Evidence suggests that donors have yet to fully consider the diversity of women's identities and agendas, which may include a range of women's groups.

The work of Nepal's Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO) shows the benefits to external actors of recognising and working on intersectional identities and overlapping forms of discrimination. Dalit women in Nepal have very limited space to promote their interests as elite women tend to advocate for measures to address gender-based discrimination, while Dalit males focus on measures to address caste-based discrimination. Recognising this, FEDO addresses violence against women and girls and works to promote the inclusion of Dalit women in peace-building and democratic processes. Working at multiple levels (local, district, national and regional), it has adopted a three-pronged approach, focusing on: providing capacity building for Dalit women; lobbying and advocating for pro-Dalit women policies; and increasing accountability among Dalit leaders, policy makers, government institutions, political parties and women's organisations to promote the interests of Dalit women. It also involves a savings and credit element, recognising the importance of Dalit women's economic empowerment in strengthening their power within the family and community (Womankind, 2015^[24]).

Notes

¹ Thinking and working politically refers to ways of operating that are politically smart as well as politically informed. The development community has tended to focus on producing good analysis, while operationalising related insights has been more challenging.

² See, for example, Koester, D. 2015. *Gender and Power*. DLP Concept Brief 04, Birmingham: DLP, or Browne, E. 2014, *Gender in Political Economy Analysis*. GSDRC Helpdesk Report. Birmingham: GSDRC.

³ Programmes cited in this policy paper are all affected by conflict and fragility but may fall outside of the OECD's fragility framework. See OECD. 2018. *States of Fragility 2018*. Paris: OECD.

2. Implementation of politically informed approaches

This section identifies the main systems, practices and tools required to implement politically informed approaches to gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, with a primary focus on the programming level. It discusses why these factors are important and the extent to which they currently form a part of donor work on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. It also offers examples of both good practice and less good practice in implementation.

2.1. Robust analysis and evidence generation

Comprehensive and ongoing analysis and evidence generation are central to politically smart ways of working. Such analysis allows programmes to be based on a contextually relevant understanding of how gender reforms can be fostered and sustained, as well as an appreciation of opportunities, allies and drivers of resistance to such reforms.

PEA can be a central tool in generating this understanding. Used by an increasing number of donors, it is intended to provide insights into how patterns of power and political and economic arrangements shape a given problem as well as the possibility of change. A variety of different PEA tools exist, although it is increasingly recognised that the process of conducting the analysis and the manner in which the findings are used are just as important as the tool itself. While PEA should, in theory, look at all elements of power, including power dynamics in relation to gender, in reality such analysis is often undertaken in a gender-blind way, with a narrow focus on male-led institutions, elites or interest groups and the most visible forms of power.¹ This can result in an incomplete understanding of a problem, as well as serve to reinforce exclusionary power relations.

When PEA does recognise gender as an essential dimension of all power relations, it can offer a more holistic diagnosis of a given problem and identify change pathways and agents that would not otherwise be visible. To provide such insights, PEA must include an examination of how and why men and women experience power, politics and economics differently; how and why gender norms shape broader institutions, interests and ideas; and what potential allies and avenues exist to promote gender equality (Pact, 2019^[25]). By illuminating the political complexities of processes for enhancing gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, gendered PEA can help to avoid over-simplistic or blueprint narratives about how change happens (see Boxes 1 and 2).

Box 2.1. Gendered political economy analysis

A gendered political economy analysis “explicitly examines how gender and other social inequalities shape people’s access to power and resources and what this means for feasible pathways of... change” (Haines and O’Neil, 2018^[26]). It should involve a practitioner-led and participatory approach, with a focus on ensuring that gender issues and women’s perspectives are integrated throughout the process, findings and use of the analysis. It does not necessarily require developing completely new PEA tools, but rather a shift in how these tools are used.

Key elements of gendered PEA:

- **Gain an understanding of gender power dynamics:** The analysis should be based on a recognition that gender relations form a pervasive system of power with implications for all political, economic and social arrangements. It should focus on understanding these power dynamics – including those that are related to specific development problems.
- **Identify a broad range of stakeholders, including less obvious ones:** In identifying stakeholders, the analysis should look beyond those with the most visible forms of power. It should examine less obvious sources of power and how these affect the positions of different stakeholders in relation to the development problem being addressed. In particular, the analysis should look at the power or interests of different groups of women in relation to the problem.
- **Understand how gender shapes motivations and actions:** The analysis should examine how the social, political and economic factors that shape stakeholders’ motivations and behaviours in relation to the problem affect men and women differently. It should look beyond formal rules, to examine how social, cultural and economic structures and norms, as well as values and beliefs, drive motivations.
- **Identify how pathways of change affect different groups, including women:** In identifying potential pathways of change, the PEA should examine how these different courses of action will affect both different groups of women and broader patterns of gender inequality. Likewise, it should explore how women can actively contribute to shaping and driving change.
- **Be inclusive and consult a broad range of experts:** The PEA should emerge out of an inclusive process that brings together different areas of expertise, including on governance and gender. It should include programme staff in the production of the analysis, drawing on their knowledge and ensuring their buy-in, and seek inputs from female targeted beneficiaries of the programme and women’s organisations.
- **Keep updating the analysis:** Finally, the analysis should be repeated regularly throughout the life of a programme to understand changing conditions, test assumptions, and reflect on whether the programme activities are contributing to objectives.

Source: Drawn from (Haines and O’Neil, 2018^[26]), Putting gender in political economy analysis: Why it matters and how to do it, Practitioners’ Guidance Note, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/536c4ee8e4b0b60bc6ca7c74/t/5af2c7721ae6cfb413502ac9/1525860213046/GADN+Briefing_PuttingGenderInPEA_FinalMay2018.pdf

In addition to PEA, there are a number of other analytical tools that are frequently used to inform donor programming in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, including security and technical economic analyses. These are often highly technical in focus and frequently overlook issues of power and politics, as well as patterns of gender inequality and gender power dynamics. Such analyses would benefit from a stronger and more politically informed integration of gender issues by, for example, asking what gendered

experiences of insecurity mean for efforts to build security more broadly, or what the different positioning of men and women in the economy means for economic recovery.

Many donors use gender analysis as a tool to help ensure that programmes are gender sensitive. Such analysis examines “how power is distributed between women and men, how it operates, who can use it and for what purposes” (Browne, 2014^[27]). In other words, gender analysis illuminates the “system which shapes everything around us” (Browne, 2014^[27]). Critically, power can take different forms: it can be visible (“observable decision-making mechanisms”), hidden (“shaping or influencing the political agenda behind the scenes”) or invisible (covering “norms and beliefs, socialisation, ideology”) (Oxfam, 2014^[28]). Furthermore, it can have different expressions: it can be “power over (the power of the strong over the weak...); power to (the capability to decide actions and carry them out); power with (collective power, through organisation, solidarity and joint action); [or] power within (personal self-confidence, often linked to culture, religion or other aspects of identity...)” (Oxfam, 2014^[28]).

However, in reality gender analysis frequently lacks this broad approach. It tends to focus strongly on social norms or formal laws, and not to deal with wider governance systems and the political interests and incentives that influence gender relations and outcomes for women or how political economy affects men and women differently. Moreover, gender analysis is frequently undertaken to satisfy bureaucratic requirements, as an add-on activity undertaken by a gender expert who is external to a programme, rather than used as a fundamental analytical lens that informs programming and is owned by programme staff. Furthermore, while PEA and different types of gender or power analysis have a critical role to play in programming, all too often these analyses are one-off studies undertaken at the design stage of programmes. If such analyses are to meaningfully inform politically smart programming, they need to be embedded throughout the programme cycle and regularly revisited and updated. This is particularly important in fragile contexts, which often experience rapid change, as well as in tackling complex gender equality problems where many political and power factors are at play. In addition, those responsible for implementing programmes should be actively involved in undertaking the analysis, with appropriate expert support. Analysis generated by programme staff is much more likely to be relevant to programme needs and to be owned and used within a programme than is analysis produced by an outside expert.

Such analysis and evidence generation is crucial at programme level, in addition to the development of strong organisation-wide knowledge management systems as a means of building wider donor capacity to work in politically informed ways. In particular, knowledge about working effectively on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts that is produced at headquarters should be disseminated at country level, while lessons emerging from gender programming in-country should be fed back to headquarters and shared across sectoral and country programmes and staff. This kind of approach can help support donors to build up an in-house body of evidence on ‘what works’.

An Empowerment, Voice and Accountability for Better Health and Nutrition programme being implemented by Palladium and the Centre for Communications Programmes in Pakistan illustrates the value of strong analysis that underpins gender programming (Siow, 2018^[29]). The programme seeks to strengthen communities’ capacities to hold local government to account for reproductive, maternal, new born and child health and nutrition services. The programme began with a robust mapping of the existing landscape of NGOs, CSOs and other actors, using grassroots level mobilisers who could navigate these networks using their local knowledge and identify indigenous grassroots initiatives to align with. This helped to avoid duplication and alignment with elite-captured organisations. The programme’s approach is informed by regular power and change analyses that encourage staff to consider formal and informal, visible and invisible power relations in the context of their work. Although the mapping (and related analysis) was initially undertaken by technical staff based in the capital and teams based at the provincial level, it is increasingly being passed on to district level staff through training, and some community groups are also starting to use it.

Box 2.2. Sida's Power Analysis

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency's (Sida) Power Analysis is an example of an analytical tool that is useful in understanding gender power dynamics. This analysis addresses the social, economic and political dimensions of power and their relationships to one another, examining the role of formal and informal actors, structures, institutions and norms. It explicitly recognises that understanding the identities and relationships that create particular socio-cultural hierarchies, including gender, is useful in informing interventions and identifying obstacles to change.

Examples of gender questions from Sida's Power Analysis:

- How do gender norms reinforce power relations?
- How does gender intersect with the distribution of formal and informal power in society in the public sphere (political institutions, social institutions, rule of law, the market and economy) and the private sphere (domestic life and family, intimate relations)?
- What can be said about women's situation in general and about particular groups of women (such as women who do not co-habit with men, whether they are single mothers, widows, or non-married women), as well as about particular groups of men who may be disadvantaged by dominant ideas about masculinity?
- Is legislation gender neutral, or do particular laws reinforce and sustain subordinate or discriminatory gender roles?

Examples that can help deepen understanding of gender power dynamics:

- What kind of formal and informal power is being exercised, how is it exercised, how is this understood or perceived, and by whom?
- How do power relations and connections affect the positions that people occupy?
- How do power relations shape policy outcomes?
- How do belief systems and cultural practices legitimise and reinforce power structures?

Source: Drawn from (Petit, 2013^[30]), Power Analysis: A Practical Guide, https://www.sida.se/contentassets/83f0232c5404440082c9762ba3107d55/power-analysis-a-practical-guide_3704.pdf

2.2. Realistic theories of change

Politically smart programming on gender involves developing robust theories of change (TOC) that explain how a programme is expected to contribute to solving a specific gender inequality problem in a way that is both politically feasible and technically sound. Separating out theories of change (how a programme will contribute to change) and pathways of change (the assumed process by which change will occur within the context) is important to ensure realistic programming. TOCs should be based on solid analyses, evidence and data, and should make explicit all the assumptions they contain about causality, context or implementation.

The main steps towards developing a solid TOC are: identifying the problem and its underlying causes; mapping out stakeholders with an interest in the problem; examining different pathways of how change might happen, in order to understand the implications and feasibility of each; identifying which pathways of change the programme is best placed to support; and finally, working out what strategies or actions the programme will take to support the desired change.² Local actors are best placed to provide insights into

the problem in question, relevant stakeholders, and potential pathways for change, as well as to identify different options for supporting change and related risks and opportunities.³

It is important that TOCs do not over-specify solutions to gender inequality or under-estimate what is needed for meaningful change to occur. Changes in gender norms and power relations are inevitably slow and non-linear and may require longer-term engagement, beyond typical three- to four-year programme cycles. It is also important that TOCs are not viewed as a pre-fixed route to an outcome, but are understood as a ‘best guess’ about how change will happen that needs to be regularly revisited. In particular there should be ongoing monitoring to reflect on the validity of assumptions within a TOC, as well as flexibility to adapt strategies and activities, where needed, in order to stay on track to achieve higher-level objectives.

In rapidly changing contexts such as fragile and conflict-affected contexts, TOCs can help programme managers to articulate their hypotheses about what changes *might* occur in a given context. In this manner, programmes can be viewed as ‘experiments’, according to Vogel: “Some will succeed, others will fail, but all generate positive learning about the interactions between context and initiative” (Vogel, 2012^[31]).

One possible strategy for donors is to pilot lots of small projects in ‘a safe-to-fail mode’ and to see what changes occur over time and what is scalable, noting that the TOC process should be one of continuous monitoring and feedback loops, adaptive strategies and using windows of opportunity as they arise (van Es, Guijt and Vogel, 2015^[32]). Incremental TOCs may be useful in addition to an overall TOC on the basis that a ‘continuum of results’ can be expected from any intervention (Babitt, Chigas and Wilkinson, 2013^[33]). Above all, TOCs should remain flexible and be used as a *guide* to making sense of emerging social changes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Learning from Sierra Leone indicates that TOCs governing programming to prevent teenage pregnancy there tend to be limited and unrealistic. As discussed above, research shows that most programming is based on TOCs that assume that if girls have more information, confidence and access to sexual and reproductive services, they will be able to avoid pregnancy (Denney, 2016^[34]). This approach does not address *why* girls engage in early sex or do not use family planning, and the factors that shape their decision-making. In particular, this type of TOC assumes that targeting girls for interventions will change teenage pregnancy outcomes, failing to take account of girls’ limited power and agency and the wider political economy and normative environment in which they operate.

In contrast, Ligada, a programme supporting sustainable solutions for urban female economic empowerment in Mozambique has a robust, evidence-based TOC that serves as a guide for programming and is continually tested, rather than being used as a ‘locked-in’ road map. The programme began with an eight-month inception phase in order to define its scope and identify the types of interventions that might work best across different pillars. This included research and meetings with a wide range of local stakeholders and influencers. An overarching TOC was developed that outlined different pathways to test women’s and girls’ access to jobs, with the aim of taking the more successful ones to scale. The programme also developed a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system that draws on different methods to gather qualitative and quantitative data, and includes built in ‘learning moments’ to assess and reflect on the TOC (O’Neil, 2016^[35]).

2.3. Adaptive programming

A focus on flexible and adaptive programming is a core feature of a politically informed approach and is particularly useful for tackling complex development challenges. Adaptive programming is based on a recognition that knowledge about a problem and its possible solutions is never complete. This means that analysis, proposed solutions and expected results cannot be presumed from the start. Instead, adaptive programming seeks to test out different strategies and assumptions to identify what works best (see Box 3). While adaptive approaches are being increasingly adopted across a range of development contexts,

they can have particular value in programmes seeking to tackle gender equality problems in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

An adaptive approach begins with an initial hypothesis of how change will happen, articulated in a robust and evidence-based TOC, which is tested and revised as necessary throughout programme implementation. It involves a multi-pronged focus, including: ongoing monitoring and feedback on the experiences and impacts of programme implementation; regular reflection by the programme team on progress, the validity of the programme's assumptions, and whether strategies and activities are contributing to high-level outcomes; and flexibility to readjust the TOC, strategy and activities in response to feedback, new information or a changing context.⁴ At the same time, the approach should not be too prescriptive or formulaic. As discussed above, a fluid approach that involves listening and understanding the local context, rapid feedback loops to inform flexible management decisions and trialling of different types of intervention is recommended.

Evidence suggests that donors do not yet commonly use adaptive programming to test different ways of empowering women or to change their approach based on learning about which programme activities work more or less well (O'Neil, 2016^[35]) This is in large part because such programming requires conducive institutional conditions that are significantly different to the systems and practices that are commonly found within donor and implementing organisations. It requires teams with the necessary skills and interest in learning, and, in particular, for M&E skills to be embedded within teams. It also requires strong communication and collaboration (within the programme team and across functional areas such as M&E and finance), as well as rigorous monitoring and feedback mechanisms and sufficient time and resources allocated for learning and reflection. Decision-making mechanisms may need to be different for adaptive programming, with decision-making power delegated to staff as close to the ground as possible, recognising that they will have the best sense of when and how programmes need adapting.

Adaptive programming also demands clearly agreed processes for changing plans, budgets and interventions, as well as an appetite at various levels to take appropriate risks. For more effective programming, it is important for donors to have a culture of some level of risk taking for the purpose of adapting and improving outcomes, and in turn to support implementing partners to be creative, to trial different kinds of programming, to learn from these trials, and to adapt. A shared understanding of the risks involved and flexible funding for trials in volatile contexts are essential. This demands better and more clear communication with partners about shared risk than is found in traditional development programming. Finally, accountability within such programmes can look very different to normal accountability mechanisms, with a focus on what is *achieved*, not on whether a pre-set plan was delivered. Donors wishing to incentivise partners to develop adaptive programming on gender problems should offer long-term programming horizons and partnerships, flexible funding, mentoring, and creative thinking about results

It is important to note that adaptive and flexible working on gender equality may not always be explicitly recognised and documented by those involved, or be a purposeful component of programming. For example, an evaluation of UN Women's support for women's leadership in peace and security (Domingo, 2013^[36]) found that core features of politically smart, adaptive work – such as brokering relations between different stakeholders at multiple levels, or flexible approaches to maximise windows of opportunity and respond to the volatility of fragile and conflict-affected contexts - were part of an implicit TOC in some country offices. However, these features were not captured in planning or reporting frameworks and lessons from them were missed.

In reality, an adaptive approach on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts may require both a greater amount of staff time, a specific set of skills, and expertise that may not be available. Therefore, some donors may want to consider introducing adaptive *elements* to their work on gender in more limited or incremental ways, by including an adaptive strand within a broader programme. This can help to create space to test out different assumptions and learn about how change happens in relation to the particular

gender problem(s) that the wider programme is seeking to address. Another option is to encourage implementing partners to include some element of adaptive programming within their proposals for work on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Alternatively, donors may try out adaptive programming to tackle a particularly ‘thorny’ gender equality problem where there is not enough knowledge about potential pathways of change.

Box 2.3. Adaptation can take different forms

- **Tactical adaptation:** Continual tweaking of interventions in response to feedback. Many programmes already do so through monitoring.
- **Strategic adaptation:** More profound course-correction, in response to learning or feedback that questions the appropriateness of the project outcomes, target group or location.
- **Sequential adaptation:** Trying one approach, and altering it or trying a different approach in response to learning and feedback.
- **Multiple experiments:** Initiating a number of small and different interventions simultaneously to see which one - or combination - works best.

The Voices for Change (V4C) programme in Nigeria successfully adopted an adaptive approach to norm change in relation to gender equality. V4C’s working TOC is based on the belief that social norms are a primary barrier to women’s empowerment. The programme seeks to identify new ways to change these working with a wide range of stakeholders. V4C has a 20-year horizon, with the first four-year programme being used to test what does and does not work. It began with a one-year inception period for research and engagement with stakeholders to identify areas of potential social norm change. V4C tests out approaches to behavioural change with a ‘fail fast and scale fast’ philosophy – by testing, monitoring and gathering feedback through multiple channels, and then either adapting, iterating and scaling up, or else dropping particular approaches depending on feedback about what is working. The TOC is reviewed by programme staff twice per year, as a result of which output and outcome level indicators are altered to ensure that overarching outcomes and impacts are achieved (Siow, 2018^[37]); (O’Neil, 2016^[35]).

2.4. Monitoring, evaluation and learning that supports politically smart working

Strong monitoring, evaluation and learning is the backbone of politically smart work, and is crucial for capturing and responding to feedback on what works in advancing gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. However, evidence suggests that managers of gender programmes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts often use monitoring, evaluation and learning primarily for administrative accountability purposes, rather than for testing assumptions and learning (OECD, 2017^[5]). Evidence also suggests that MEL within gender programmes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts tends to have a strong focus on output level indicators, such as how many women have participated in a training course. This focus on measuring quantitative results makes it difficult to track meaningful progress towards gender equality objectives and provides little incentive to document lessons about process and ways of working, or indeed any learning that is outside the limited results frame.

While such an output-focused approach to measuring impact and results is common across the development sector, it is particularly inappropriate for work on gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected contexts due to its complexity and the fact that pathways of change cannot be mapped out precisely in advance or neatly measured along the way. This is especially so as changes in gender norms and power relations can take a generation, meaning that a programme’s higher-level ‘successes’ and the robustness of assumed causal connections cannot be tested within a conventional programme period.

It is clear that politically informed programming on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts requires fundamentally different approaches to measuring impact and reporting on results.⁵ A starting point for this can be to shift the overall question for which implementers are held accountable from ‘did we do what we said we would do?’ to ‘did we do what worked?’ This shift can enable implementers to measure and report on results in ways that are more meaningful. As noted above, given the long time frames and complex pathways of change involved in changing gender norms and power relations in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, it can be useful to break down an overall ToC into smaller elements, so that programmes can identify realistic timeframes and indicators for each step towards a larger goal. A focus on reporting on processes, in addition to relationship- and decision-making elements of a programme, is also valuable. While these tend not to be part of the logical framework underpinning a programme, and so are not usually reported on, they can be crucial for achieving positive outcomes. It is advisable to use mixed research methods to measure progress wherever possible, both quantitative and qualitative, including non-traditional methods⁶ such as stories of change, micro-surveys or beneficiary assessments (see Box 4).

It is important to recognise that MEL systems themselves need to be flexible. Programmes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts may simply not yield the kind of data that would be available in more stable environments. A pragmatic focus on using what may be short-term opportunities to gather accessible data that are essential to understanding progress and supporting change should be the priority.

Box 2.4. Alternative approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning

In recent years, new approaches to monitoring and learning that are suitable for politically smart, adaptive programming have been developed. These include:

- partnering with researchers to undertake ongoing action research with a particular focus on assessing, for example, changes in power relations;
- using social network analysis, changes in social norms and outcome harvesting to assess the evolution of relationships over time and the ongoing collection of data to be able to tell a more complete story of change;
- building in social accountability processes or feedback loops to provide more real time data, particularly from beneficiaries that programmes are seeking to assist;
- increasing use of realist evaluation and qualitative comparative analysis methodologies to be clearer about the underlying mechanisms of change in particular contexts, including through the use of participatory methods.

Source: Adapted from (Roche and Kelly, 2018^[38]), Monitoring and evaluation for adaptive programming, <https://www.devpolicy.org/monitoring-and-evaluation-for-adaptive-programming-20180918/>

In sectoral programmes where gender is mainstreamed, it is particularly important to include meaningful gender-related indicators to avoid policy evaporation, in which a gender analysis is carried out at the beginning of a project but not incorporated into its design, or in its related learning and reporting. Gender experts should be involved in developing these indicators and in carrying out related MEL activities to make these exercises more meaningful. This can also help to avoid a situation where, for example, quantitative results, such as the number of women participating in an activity, are misinterpreted as indicating that gender equality outcomes are being achieved.

An evaluation of UN Women’s global work on peace and security (Domingo, 2013^[36]) provides an example of MEL that was unable to meaningfully capture, understand and assess the contribution of interventions to any meaningful changes. Evidence suggests that: programmes lacked a clear and logical TOC against which progress could be understood; log-frames were often over-ambitious and lacked a clear progression

from inputs to outputs, outcomes and impact; assumptions tended to be formulaic and unrelated to the specific context; and reporting in annual reviews was most frequently against outputs.

In contrast, the OECD (2017) documents how a programme supporting civil society in Ethiopia adopted a comprehensive approach to MEL, using a variety of monitoring tools such as Stories of Change, Ladders of Change, Capacity Change Scales, and a semi-external results review. These methods have helped to capture a more complete picture of how change happens across the range of the programme's projects, including by placing value on qualitative as well as quantitative impacts.

2.5. Staff capacity on gender

As discussed above, politically smart work on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts requires donor staff to combine thematic and technical expertise with strong contextual understanding and the ability to work adaptively. It also requires strong relationship-building skills and strategic advocacy and analytical skills. It is therefore critical that donors invest in these diverse abilities and skills across their organisations, as well as recognising and rewarding them within organisational incentive structures.

Politically informed work on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts demands a combination of dedicated gender expertise and strong gender capacity among other staff at country level. However, in practice there is frequently a significant mismatch between donor commitments on gender and donor staff capacity to deliver on the ground. In order to work successfully on linkages between gender inequality and broader political and fragility dynamics in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, it is important both to build up the gender capacity of sectoral experts and national staff responsible for sectoral programmes, and to ensure sufficient fragility expertise among those implementing gender programmes. Regular gender training is key to ensuring that all staff in fragile and conflict-affected contexts understand how gender is relevant to their sector and are aware of the complex connections between gender and fragility in their given context.

Having dedicated gender expertise at country level is critical in a number of ways: to ensure the quality of all gender related programming; to recognise and take advantage of opportunities to advance gender equality; and to ensure that programmes do no harm to women. Ideally, wherever possible, each donor country office should have a senior gender expert with both the political skills and mandate to continuously integrate gender across all key elements of programming (including partner selection, analysis, programme design, MEL, etc.). This means moving away from the use of gender focal points, who generally do not offer the necessary expertise, seniority, time, high-level access or skills to facilitate politically smart work on gender. It also means moving away from reliance on the ad hoc use of external consultants who are also unable to provide sustained or institutionalised gender inputs (OECD, 2017^[5]).

However, it is clear that for some development agencies and country offices, having a dedicated gender expert is not possible. In such cases, other systems can be put in place to ensure that programming is still informed by gender expertise. For example, a development agency could provide a dedicated regional gender expert to programme managers. This person would be familiar with country programmes and could be called on for inputs at critical moments. Donors may also wish to pool their expertise by jointly contracting a roster of local gender experts who provide ongoing support, as needed. Where the only option for institutional gender expertise is a gender focal point, regular training, support from headquarters, and regional level exchanges with other focal points can help these individuals to become stronger gender advocates within their country offices. Appointing a senior manager within a country office as a 'gender champion' can also provide high-level backing for gender issues and for the person or people tasked with promoting them. It is important to note that gender experts within donor organisations can adopt a politically smart lens to advancing a gender equality agenda within their own institutions by building allies among non-gender colleagues, including by reframing issues, collecting evidence on what can be done differently or what works, and seizing opportunities for incremental change.

The issue of gender capacity is also important in the partnerships that donors establish, as in practice many donors delegate responsibility for gender mainstreaming to programme implementers. However, evidence suggests that gender-related capacity rarely features among the priority selection criteria for potential partners, especially in the mainstream sectoral programmes that make up the vast majority of gender equality-focused aid (OECD, 2017^[5]).

2.6. Partnerships that empower women and advance gender equality

International funding plays a vital role in supporting women's organisations in fragile and conflict-affected contexts to mobilise and have influence. However, there is increasing evidence that some donor funding models - in particular challenge funds⁷ or short-term funding for priorities and projects set by donors – do not always contribute to women's empowerment or the advancement of gender equality goals. Indeed, they can establish perverse incentives and actually undermine the development of politically strong women's organisations and movements. In particular, such funding models can make it difficult for women's organisations to build their organisational capacity or political agenda; undermine the ability of women's organisations to be responsive and flexible; undercut the development of sustainable women's movements; de-politicise women's activism; encourage competition rather than coalition building among women; and privilege elite voices.

This suggests that it is critical for donors in fragile and conflict-affected contexts to move towards long-term partnership funding or core funding models that can nurture the development of strong and sustainable women's movements. It is also important for donors to engage with a much wider range of women's organisations and movements, beyond those that are most easily accessible to donors and meet their bureaucratic requirements. Doing this can require working with appropriate intermediary organisations that have grassroots networks, as well as developing creative mechanisms through which a wide variety of women's organisations can access funding. Funding should be aimed at supporting women's organisations to advance their own agendas and fostering relationship-building between different types of women's organisations - particularly those operating at national and grassroots levels.

Identifying locally grounded, legitimate women's organisations can be difficult for donors in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Women's CSOs in such contexts may be new with little track record or indeed, may be highly politically affiliated. They may also have limited capacity, lack the administrative structures that donors look for, or be hard to reach because of security constraints. Strong political and stakeholder analysis can help donors to negotiate these challenges and identify the most relevant local partners, as well as understand and support - rather than divert - existing feminist mobilisation at multiple levels. Such analysis can also help donors to understand how the political economy context - including the shrinking space for civil society that is found in many fragile and conflict-affected contexts - shapes women's ability to mobilise. Small step-by-step funding mechanisms combined with regular reflection on progress, the provision of expertise to women's organisations, and support for organisational development can all help to mitigate the risks posed by weak organisational structures and limited capacity within women's organisations.

Critically, donors can also adopt funding and programming approaches that encourage partners of women's organisations to work in politically smart and adaptive ways. This can include discretion for a partner to spend on activities that it believes will make the biggest difference to high-level outcomes, rather than requiring it to deliver and report on a strictly pre-determined set of outputs. Indeed, surveys undertaken as part of The Institute of Development Studies' research programme consortium, Pathways of Women's Empowerment, found that "what works (...) is a regular, dependable source of income that is at the discretion of the organization to spend on activities they believe to be most effective in making a difference" (Cornwall, 2014^[39]).

As we have seen, the OECD (2017) documents how the long-term donor support since 1998 to a sub-national women's NGO in Bangladesh has helped to foster strong and sustainable local level women's mobilisation and activism. This support was used to help rural women to set up groups, which then became independent organisations, and to promote local women's collective and individual leadership. These local women's groups went on to engage in local dispute resolution and local government, including by putting women forward to become members of committees and to stand for elections. By providing long-term support and including the organisational capacity of this women's NGO as a specific outcome area in successive phases of the programme, the donor invested in the organisation's sustainability and long-term impact.

3. Next steps for implementation

As this policy paper shows, a politically informed approach has great potential value for strengthening work on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts and contributing to the transformation of patterns of gender inequality and fragility. It has the advantage of bringing a wider range of perspectives to bear as well as taking advantage of emerging avenues to social change via a wider range of – often informal – mechanisms and structures. However, working politically on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts involves a significant move away from more traditional donor programming approaches and practices. A shift is required in terms of understanding how gender, power and political economy factors interact in fragile contexts, and the implications of this for the problem to be addressed, the stakeholders to engage with, and the sectors and levels where work is required. Likewise, a transformation is required in terms of ways of working, from conducting gender analysis and developing realistic TOCs, to programme design, flexible monitoring, evaluation and learning, capacity building and partnerships.

It is important to stress that organisations that want to adopt more politically informed approaches to gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts do not need to change overnight. It can be a gradual process, with a focus on intra-organisational learning and experience-sharing about working in new ways. Possible examples of first steps include the following: trying out a more politically informed and adaptive approach to a gender equality problem within an existing programme; strengthening the use of gendered PEA across a particular sector; providing capacity building for country office staff to better understand the context-specific interlinkages between gender and fragility dynamics; or changing the way that partnerships with women's organisations and support for women's mobilisation are conceived and structured.

So far, there is a relatively limited set of documented examples of politically informed programming on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts that can provide lessons and guidance for organisations that want to adopt these approaches. However, as the TWP and policy communities working on gender equality continue to step up their dialogue and engagement, and as further research in this area is undertaken, more examples, lessons and insights will undoubtedly emerge. Moreover, as donors try out these ways of working, they can also help contribute to the growing knowledge base on the subject by documenting and sharing their experiences and insights.

Notes

¹ Evie Browne notes that “it’s not in doubt that the political economy of most countries is male-dominated, and that states and governments tend to be patriarchal. But it’s rare to find a political economy analyst who uses this as part of their analysis, unless they have an explicitly feminist perspective” (Browne, 2014^[27])

² Babitt offers a useful overview of the “qualities of a good theory of change”, namely: a clear conceptualisation of impact and pathways to it; coherence/logic; plausibility; being grounded in context; being specific enough to be tested for validity; and dynamism (Babitt, Chigas and Wilkinson, 2013^[33]).

³ For more analysis on the value of TOCs for gender work and how to develop them see HIVOS, 2014. *Gender and Theories of Change*, The Hague: HIVOS, or Valters, C. 2015. *Theories of Change Time for a radical approach to learning in development*. London: ODI.

⁴ For more information on adaptive programming, including guidance on how to develop programmes, see Bond, 2016, *Adaptive management: What it means for CSOs*. London: BOND, or Faustino & Booth, 2014. *Development entrepreneurship: how donors and leaders can foster institutional change*. London: ODI.

⁵ For more guidance on MEL for politically smart, adaptive programming see: Ladner, D. 2015. *Strategy Testing: An Innovative Approach To Monitoring Highly Flexible Aid Programs*. Working Politically in Practice Series, Case Study 3. San Francisco: Asia Foundation; Batliwala, S. & Pittman, A. 2010. *Capturing Change in Women’s Realities, A Critical Overview of Current Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks and Approaches*. Toronto: AWID; Callaghan, S. & Plank, G. 2017. *LASER synthesis paper: Learning, monitoring and evaluating: achieving and measuring change in adaptive programmes*. London: DFID.

⁶ For a review of a wide range of evaluation approaches and methods, see Better Evaluation website (2019), <https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/approaches> (accessed 03, September 2019).

⁷ Pompa quotes the following definition of challenge funds, as reportedly shared by the UK Department for International Development, the Inter-American Development Bank and the Canadian International Development Agenda: “a competitive mechanism to allocate financial support to innovative projects, to improve market outcomes with social returns that are higher/more assured than private benefits, but with the potential for commercial viability”. See Pompa. C. 2013. *Understanding challenge funds*. London: ODI.

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