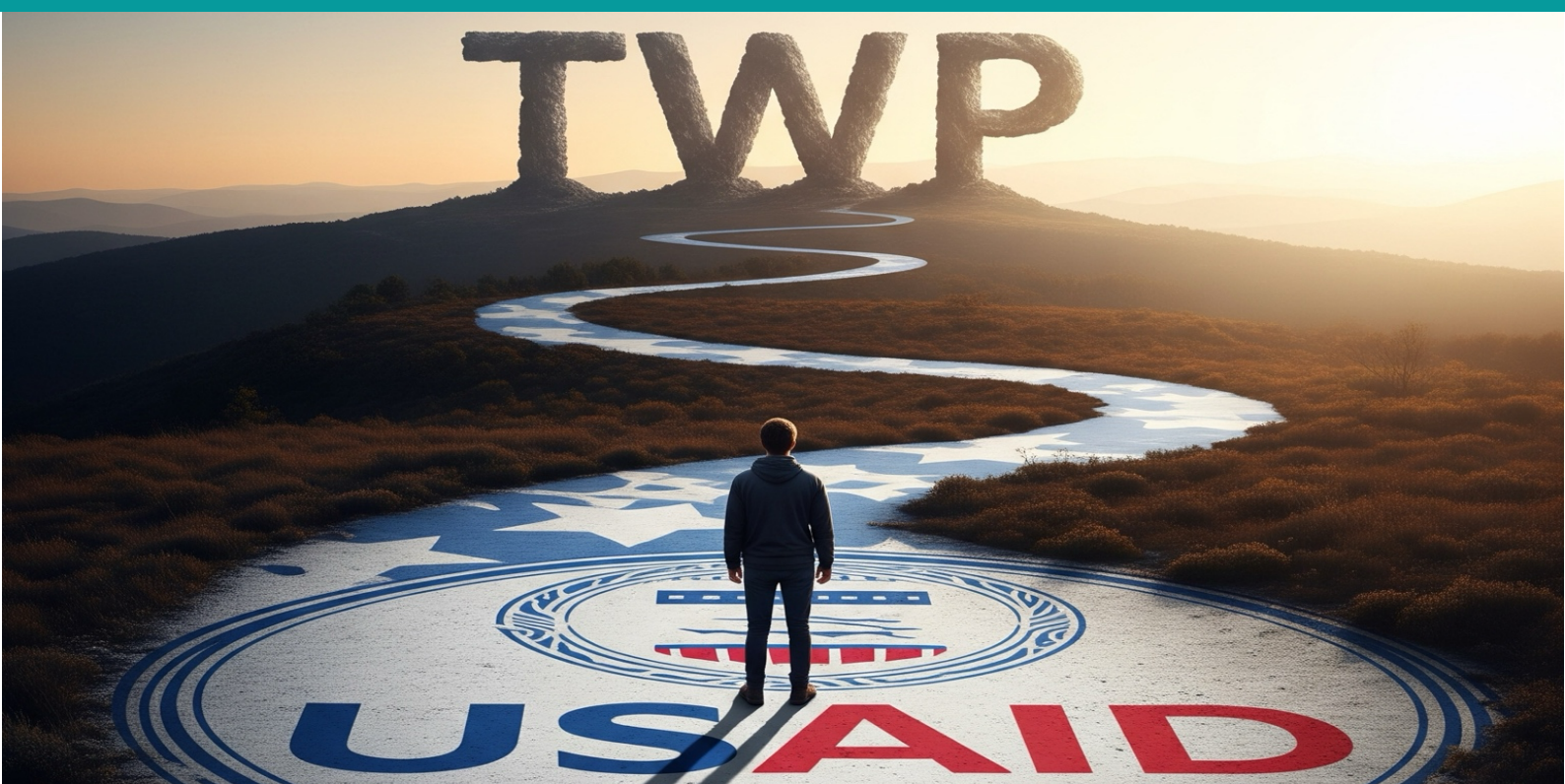


A personal reflection on Thinking and Working Politically at USAID: Achievements and what might come next

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Summary

This paper shares an insider's perspective on the spread of Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) across the US Agency for International Development (USAID), highlighting lessons learned along the way that are relevant even beyond the dissolution of the Agency in 2025.

USAID's experience illustrates both the opportunities and constraints of embedding political economy approaches within a large donor agency. It offers lessons for the wider development community about how to mainstream political insight, how to avoid diluting it into compliance, and how to link it to reform agendas such as localisation and systems thinking.

Key insights:

The main success factors that facilitated uptake of TWP within USAID include:

1. **Integration with existing frameworks:** TWP and Political Economy Analysis (PEA) were integrated into the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting model, which provided a home for political analysis and made it a routine part of programme management.
2. **A bottom-up, peer-driven approach:** Instead of being a top-down mandate, the TWP agenda was advanced by staff and partners sharing their experiences, which gave the approach credibility and fostered buy-in. The team deliberately resisted making PEA mandatory to keep it from becoming a "check the box" exercise.
3. **Resonating with local knowledge:** The TWP framework resonated with local staff and partners because it formalised what they already knew about their contexts. It opened the door to framing problems as contestation rather than technical knowledge transfer, giving them "permission to speak more honestly" about constraints and opportunities.
4. **Connection to other reform areas:** The initial PEA work was deliberately connected to other USAID initiatives, such as the Local Systems Framework and locally led development. This positioned TWP as a contributor to broader strategic goals.

Despite its relative achievements within USAID, TWP retains a sense of exotic or specialised expertise. In addition, the TWP community often doesn't recognise as kin similar efforts that embed substantially the same ideas. More significantly, TWP continues to conflict with parts of the mainstream development agenda. It isn't possible to simply take a routine project and add TWP.

To overcome these challenges, the author proposes three main avenues for future work by TWP champions and allies:

1. **Embrace complexity.** TWP should focus on contributing to long-term, systemic change rather than aiming for small-scale, easily measurable results. This means reorienting investments towards what fosters adaptive institutions and resilience, rather than simplifications that offer the illusion of control.
2. **Move from a tactical to a strategic use of TWP.** The TWP community should reinforce the distinction between short-term, tactical approaches and a more valuable, strategic use. This involves using a political economy lens to frame medium-term objectives and support meaningful outcomes without trying to control the paths of stakeholders or achieve specified milestones to signal progress.
3. **Rethink accountability through partnership and probability.** In genuine partnerships that involve joint learning and benefit both local actors and stakeholders in donor countries, accountability is naturally reflected in the willingness of stakeholders to continue their partnership. The focus of managers should then shift from measuring outputs of effort (e.g. showing how many people a project has touched) to assessing how much the odds of significant, meaningful change have improved.

1. Introduction¹

This briefing is aimed largely at those already converted to Thinking and Working Politically (TWP). Fourteen years after I joined the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), at which point I quickly began to engage in work on taking a political economy lens to development programming, it is worth reviewing the journey of TWP at USAID, and where it stands at the apparent end of the Agency's history. Some of the most important documents we produced are available on a new [dedicated website page of The Policy Practice's online library](#). I hope there is value to the audience in hearing an insider's account of this evolution, and that it offers insights for professionals and policy-makers. I conclude by looking at how I see the current agenda and propose three avenues via which TWP can improve what will remain of the development field.

2. How it all started

To start with, I'd like to set the scene in the early 2010s, when a small team developed a new applied political economy analysis (PEA) framework for the Agency to pilot as part of project design.

At the time, USAID was re-establishing a policy function (after several years in which its policy-making was run entirely through State Department) and recreating the process for articulating a theory of change to underpin a project, and then using this to manage adaptively. Brilliant minds in the Uganda Mission led by Lane Pollack and Stacey Young were crafting a framework for adaptive management – the [Collaborating, Learning and Adapting \(CLA\) model](#) – which would ultimately provide an ideal home for PEA. Rather than using a bespoke line of effort to gauge political economy realities over time, you could simply embed these questions in your annual learning workshops, pause and reflect sessions, scenario planning, learning agenda and other tools promoted as part of CLA. The project design team also embraced the idea that a PEA shed light on incentives and actors in ways that should be a routine part of good design, and it eventually became the only example of non-mandatory analysis included in project design training.

¹ The author would like to thank Laure-Hélène Piron and Sarah Swift for feedback on earlier drafts, and the entire TWP community for their ongoing efforts to pursue change in smarter ways, and for shepherding along the journey. He would like to acknowledge the following colleagues who shaped his views on TWP over the years: Alina Rocha Menocal, Tjip Walker, Laura Pavlovic, Florencia Guertzovich, Derick Brinkerhoff, Naty Renaud, Jelena Avramovic, Thoko Chisala, Meg Nalbo, Diana Cammack, Lisa Williams, Alan Hudson, Jaime Faustino, Kristin O'Planick, David Hoffman, and Sarah Swift.

By contrast, at this time, there was broad fatigue among development professionals regarding the idea of a single array of 'best practices' that could be imposed on every country or in every technical sector. However, at the same time, the push for value for money and greater empiricism had incentivised a push for **centrally controlled trials to 'find what works'** and then to scale up 'gamechangers' globally.

So, with the development community frustrated with the mixed performance of traditional approaches, models that argued that context was king, and that understanding it would yield more actionable insights and sustainable progress, came into conflict with models that argued that the missing ingredient was sufficient scientific rigour to distinguish, once and for all, the right techniques for any context. Still, there was sufficient fervour around the idea of **'doing development differently'** that PEA could ride the swells of those waves for a while.

Another factor driving the development of USAID's PEA framework – and contributing to its ultimate home within the then-Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG) Center – related to uptake of and experience around the DRG Strategic Assessment Framework. Colleagues in missions reported that, when they shared the findings of a DRG assessment, questions often emerged about the implications for other sectors. There was an interest then in developing a PEA tool that could reflect on the politics of other sectors, and perhaps ultimately drive interest in other sectors in using the tools and approaches of DRG within their own work.

Finally, the initial PEA work gained from its connection to systems thinking within USAID, especially in how the **2014 Local Systems Framework** defined sustainability for USAID as co-created by a number of actors in different forms of relationship with one another. (The last iteration of the policy was USAID's **2024 Local Systems Position Paper**).

The development of the initial PEA framework benefited hugely from the experiences of many of those who had worked with the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the World Bank and others – in particular Diana Cammack and Lisa Williams, whose overlapping fellowships at USAID allowed the cross-sectoral programme team to access a great depth of technical expertise as well as experience conducting PEAs in several countries. Under the stewardship of Laura Pavlovic, the team **finalised a framework** and found an interest in piloting it among the USAID Colombia staff.

From the outset, PEA and TWP felt like old friends to the staff who were introduced to the concepts. They often identified these ways of working as something people already did routinely without them coming under a specific name or framework – just as part of the art of development that one picks up if one has stuck with a career in

the discipline long enough. There was a sense that it was unpacking what informed local staff and partners already knew but had never been a formal way of working. Conducting a PEA offered them permission to speak more honestly about constraints and channels for progress. Given the chance to pursue it as part of the required adoption of some of the CLA approach, a number of missions sought information on conducting PEA but also on embedding it into materials.

We recruited a second fantastic PEA Fellow in Alina Rocha Menocal, currently the lead of the **TWP Community of Practice (COP)** globally. Alina helped us **refine our reference materials** and wrote important updates on ways to move from just thinking and more into **working in savvy ways**. Sarah Swift and I were tasked with leading and growing a global practice area, and **started to collect and share resources** on how other donors addressed the topic, how TWP related to other reform areas and building a COP.

3. PEA/TWP become USAID core practice

By about 2017, PEA was a tested practice, but broader questions on the TWP that it was meant to generate remained elusive, leaving us with questions on how to take it further. The team also recognised that it did not have central answers on how to pursue a TWP approach, and that forging a COP represented a question of mutual recognition as well as skills – as Laura would say, we needed to ‘build the guild’ of staff comfortable working in a TWP fashion.

We sought permission and funds from different offices to pull together an ‘Experience Summit’ around TWP, which we retitled ‘**Context-Driven Adaptation**’ for wider uptake, and which was a highlight of my USAID tenure. Using (limited) travel resources to incentivise it, we sent emails to staff around the globe, in every office, to ask if they wanted to join the summit and, if so, to describe what they would hope to share there. We selected participants from every continent, from backstops including health, governance, food security, monitoring and evaluation, contracts and financial management. Colleagues from Localworks and Local Solutions (two other reform areas focusing on locally led development who saw the connections to TWP) even recorded interviews and helped facilitate discussion. The Context-Driven Adaptation Experience Summit took place on 28–31 August 2017 in Thailand. We crowdsourced good practices and **captured many of these in tips that we could share and build into training materials**; these practices ranged from strategic planning to the details of solicitations and workplans.

The Summit also helped frame expectations for TWP as a part of Agency business rather than its own distinct set of tasks. This enabled uptake, and above all emphasised having the conversation around TWP at USAID be a lateral rather than a top-down one. Crowd-sourced **tips** drawn from staff praxis were provided as

examples not only of what should be done but also of what was already done within the ecosystem, helping convince others that it was not too risky to try them out. We would rely significantly on this broad-based, bottom-up idea over time in sourcing peer assistance for designs and guest speakers for trainings and workshops, and liaising with different offices to advance a TWP agenda.

The credibility of this approach also cannot be overstated: USAID's culture valued the credibility of peers who had tried something much more than Washington-based mandates of innovative ideas; demonstrating TWP as both effective and tried enabled much greater buy-in. While many policy teams sought to garner leadership buy-in in order to make their initiatives mandatory, our team deliberately resisted this. We feared that PEA as a 'check the box' exercise wouldn't actually spur different thinking about how change happens and how to support development. This made tipping points in terms of behaviour slower to reach, but more durable when achieved. This is one of the secrets behind the progress we were able to make.

In the years since the Summit, the core model of 'doing PEA' moved from staff-only into hybrid models with both staff and consultants or even commissioned solely from experts. We did, I think, manage to keep a strong emphasis on ensuring ownership by the USAID team managing the work, and relying on this information for design or adaptation – with everyone required to contribute to a shared conversation around what we were learning rather than setting themselves up to judge a consultant's report against their own understanding. We also **updated the PEA training**, shifting the focus away from simply what a PEA is and how to design and execute one into different ways that programming could embody working politically across the programme cycle. With an outstanding central case study built by Steve Edminster around a real situation in the Philippines, it became one of the most popular trainings offered by the Agency, and we were able to offer it two to three times per year in various locations, with each training sparking more ideas and seeding further collaboration with staff in various countries.

4. A global movement

During the period around 2015–2020, in the broader development space, acceptance of adaptive management as a bedrock aspect of programming continued to grow, even as it sat slightly uneasily next to pushes for stricter adherence to planned methodologies in order to allow randomised control trials to gauge the effectiveness of particular interventions. PEA and TWP fed into a larger debate around what it means to be 'evidence-based' and whether evidence could reflect context knowledge and local understandings, as well as the relative power of different techniques for learning to inform wider field approaches. The debates over what it means to learn in development – and how pathways to scale might be understood, either as replication of 'what works' or as systemic change around the diffusion of innovation – remain

open, from the days of the **Big Push Forward** to current debates over cooperation in the future. See, for example, debates over **what drives learning**.

At the same time, continued pressure from within the aid ecosystem, from both recipients and stakeholders in delivery, reinforced pressure to empower local leadership and support more locally led programming. The fit of TWP into the latter was clearer, because part of the value of greater local definition of problems and pursuit of solutions was clearly meant to be their ability to read context between the lines and operate in more savvy ways. Within USAID, as successive administrators pursued the journey to self-reliance and subsequently **an emphasis on localisation**, TWP remained adjacent to strategic and policy documents as a well-understood contributor toward those directions, at least on paper.

Within the broader TWP community, a couple of important threads looked at whether the community was too willing to accept working ‘with the grain’ without pushing for more transformational change, especially in **considering gender and power dynamics**, and in learning around the application of savvy programming over time in **programmes that build coalitions** or work on local governance over many years.

5. The final years: internal consolidation

Over the 2022–2024 period, we tried to take stock internally. Led by Jonathan Rose, the team investigated **the ways that PEA manifested in USAID solicitations** to see if we could better understand where we were having the greatest influence. We created a **rubric for reviewing solicitations** that went beyond whether they asked for a PEA and looked at various domains where they might apply its lens to the structure of the grant – to how they defined problems, assessed workplans, reviewed grantee staff qualifications and monitored context to manage adaptively. Based on this rubric, our team downloaded and scored about half of USAID solicitations issued over a three-year period. We were able to see data by sector and region revealing where the Agency’s strengths and limitations were, which showed us that, while there was fairly broad diffusion of the idea of PEA – the term was referenced in a majority of solicitations in some sectors, and was not uncommon overall – the broader score on supporting this way of working in problem definition, recruitment, workplanning, etc. was still quite low. We used this data in two ways:

1. We advocated with different key offices to consider how they could challenge status quo models to better embrace PEA findings and approaches.
2. We created a novel form of ‘PEA clinic’ that invited teams to workshop ongoing or planned portfolios with different experts to find practical shifts they could make.

Of course, our team wasn't the only driver of progress and uptake in the spread of TWP. We collaborated with the Forestry and Biodiversity Office as it developed an [excellent guide](#) to applying PEA to project design using the approach taken in conservation and biodiversity programming. We supported the Health Systems Strengthening Office to carry out applied PEA in health, including guides on PEA in [health supply chains and health systems strengthening](#). We co-trained with the Policy Office working on food security and brought PEA experts to annual gatherings of the market systems facilitation crowd (yielding some [good insights](#) for us as well) and of the education sector. Many of these materials and events were powerful, and all the more influential because people within sectors were telling their peers that this was an appropriate and effective way of working. Sadly, much of this knowledge is lost to the ether – we are gathering them together on a [new page of The Policy Practice online PEA/TWP library](#).

6. The USAID legacy: limitations and a forward agenda

So where does this leave TWP at USAID, as a legacy and as an agenda?

6.1 The TWP legacy

As a legacy, I think the effort to help USAID programming think and work politically can be seen as generating significant progress in a number of spaces, with real impact, while there is still a feeling that there is real ground to cover in terms of fully integrating with programming.

Political economy as a term and a type of analysis has become much more mainstream – from 'doing development differently' to 'doing development' – with more attention to related topics in publications and events both within and beyond the community. TWP is well linked with other reform areas, such as [locally led development](#) and [systems thinking](#), and uptake has moved forward in several sectors driven by their own leadership – perhaps limiting central visibility, as they advance using their own terms and reference points.

Still, there is a clear limitation to the scope of TWP, for a few reasons:

1. [It still has a sense of exotic or specialised expertise](#), within its language and tools, in part because these are not routine parts of learning development practice in many sectors and schools. People first encounter TWP in a work setting, where it is quite distinct from the technical assessments, needs-based trainings and normative approaches that form the core content of their practice.
2. [The TWP community often doesn't recognise as kin similar efforts](#) (such as [market systems facilitation](#)) that embed substantially the same ideas or pursue joint learning via the translation of terms.

3. **More substantially, TWP continues to conflict with some reform ideas in development** even though it aligns parts of the reform agenda – for example the unexamined assumptions in supporting ‘evidence-based’ approaches or the accountability to metrics and indicators. It isn’t possible to simply take a routine project and add TWP, as the process requires some unlearning or rethinking of parts of the theory of change, and the associated management and accountability for achieving results.

Thus, TWP is a story of great progress and entrance into the mainstream, but also lingering limitations on influence and impact.

6.2 A forward agenda

In terms of what comes next, I start with the assumption that work to drive development, and to do so in ways that are lasting and sustainable, will remain a focus for many around the globe, in many country contexts. Whether there is robust US government funding in support of these efforts or not, the purpose and values that drove so many of us to dedicate our careers to international development endures, and in such efforts it will be vital that change agents think and work politically.

There are three main avenues that I hope future work will take to build on the journey so far:

1. **TWP’s fit into complexity.** TWP can help in properly defining effective assistance as that which helps contribute to systemic change that will sustain over time. While the push toward empiricism in evidence-based interventions has been welcome, we have to reckon with the reality that outside contributions are small. Rather than define down the pond until we can ensure we make change in a puddle, we need to figure out how to support meaningful contributions to sea-changes.

At USAID, I have long felt that we have struggled to properly articulate ‘**what the work is**’. I question whether we’ve known what our most important outcomes have been even as we have run ourselves ragged driving projects forward. Missing from the scene now are many former loose international networks of experts on a variety of topics, who I think represented a vital form of capacity toward global peace, well-being and prosperity. Properly orienting investments in international cooperation toward real value propositions – rather than simplifications that feel comfortable because they offer the illusion of control – will open space for TWP as part of a better focus on what fosters adaptive institutions and resilience.

2. Moving from tactical to strategic TWP. Investments in systemic outcomes informed strategically by a political economy lens are both valuable and invisible to transactional paradigm. I would posit here that the TWP community should more strongly reinforce a distinction between tactical and strategic use (see Box 1 on the next page).

While taking a short-term result as a given target and then understanding incentives and power dynamics to improve the likelihood of realising it can be effective, TWP as a tactical approach is limited in its value because it doesn't look at how power dynamics might shape larger **development bargains**. Considering political economy in framing medium-term objectives requires approaches beyond those envisioned within the constraints of USAID, and certainly beyond the limitations of foreign aid as a short-term tool of diplomacy that now is evident.

The case for a political economy-informed consideration of medium-term goals, where the aim is to add heft and dynamism to reform agendas or movements supporting meaningful outcomes, without seeking to dictate or control how those groups pursue their paths, is one that the TWP community should be louder in making, as gaps in the realigned landscape begin to show.

Box 1: Tactical vs. Strategic TWP

Tactical TWP

- **Focus:** Short-term results within a project's immediate objectives.
- **Approach:** Uses political economy insights to navigate obstacles, adjust activities, or improve the odds of success for predefined outputs.
- **Example:** Adjusting outreach strategies for a health campaign after recognising local power brokers' influence.
- **Value:** Pragmatic, can show quick wins, demonstrates relevance of political analysis.
- **Limitation:** Risks becoming transactional — improving delivery without questioning whether the right goals are being pursued.

Strategic TWP

- **Focus:** Medium- to long-term systemic change, often beyond the boundaries of a single project.
- **Approach:** Frames development objectives through a political economy lens, identifying reform coalitions, entry points, and pathways for institutional resilience.
- **Example:** Supporting a coalition of local actors to renegotiate governance arrangements around land rights, even without certainty of immediate outcomes.
- **Value:** Positions aid as a contributor to meaningful political bargains and adaptive systems, not just short-term fixes.
- **Limitation:** Harder to measure with traditional metrics; requires rethinking accountability around partnerships and probabilities of change.

Why the distinction matters: Tactical TWP makes programmes smarter in the short run. Strategic TWP ensures development efforts contribute to deeper transformations in power, institutions, and resilience. Both are needed, but conflating them risks limiting TWP to incremental fixes rather than systemic impact.

3. Accountability through partnership and probability. Of course, there are challenges of accountability in strategic TWP use, with USAID always having preferred simple, countable metrics, even where those metrics haven't been particularly valuable or where they have biased programmes toward short-termism. Political economy insights might suggest that connecting certain actors, or strengthening their engagement across new lines, will generate platforms for learning and adaptation that help resituate agendas and reforms – which lots of evidence suggests is valuable for how institutions co-evolve and adapt.² Real accountability will come from stakeholders in donor countries feeling really truly invested in partnerships with joint learning that benefits their own efforts to address complex challenges. Rather than using traditional ways of measuring accountability for this work, such efforts might be better held accountable through brokering partnerships including stakeholders in donor countries, while framing work as being about *joint discovery and learning in spaces of relevance to both*. Rather than emphasising how many people a project has touched, we need to get into a space of discussing *how much we've improved the odds* of more significant changes – altering probabilities of meaningful change rather than offering certainty of accomplishing the trivial.

Putting these avenues together, by centering TWP practice around partnership with stakeholders, and embracing complex theories of how change happens, we can contribute meaningfully to the odds of significant change – allowing TWP to be part of a strategic shift towards local realities and mutual accountability.

² Ang, Y.Y. (2025). Adaptive Political Economy: Toward a New Paradigm. *World Politics* 77(1, suppl.), 51-67. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/wp.2025.a954433>.

About this Policy and Practice Brief and The Policy Practice

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