

Pathways of Change

The missing link between analysis and action

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Teza tea plantation, Burundi. Photograph by G. Williams with AI modifications

Summary

Before deciding how to influence change, it is essential to understand how change happens. Most significant and sustainable change is driven by domestic political, economic and social dynamics, with external change agents (development, investment and diplomatic partners) playing a supporting rather than a determining role. This brief presents the Pathways of Change framework, which separates two parts of a theory of change: pathways of change, which explain how a desired outcome might plausibly come about through changes in context and actor behaviour; and intervention strategies, which set out how external change agents can support, accelerate or nudge those pathways. It shows how to build and stress-test pathways for coherence, plausibility, timescale and durability, and how to design interventions around entry points, bottlenecks and comparative advantage, drawing on examples from renewable energy in Ghana and European Union trade diplomacy on Thai fisheries. Treated as working hypotheses to be tested and refined through adaptive programming, pathways of change provide a practical link between political economy analysis and action.

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1. Introduction

How does change actually happen? This question is relevant in any country context where actors seek to understand or influence processes of political, economic and social change. Pathways of Change is an analytical framework that addresses this question as a starting point for designing interventions that are more likely to support change effectively. The framework is applicable across a wide range of contexts and problems. This brief focuses on the kinds of problems encountered in development programming, diplomacy, trade and investment in low- and middle-income countries and is applicable to a wide range of change processes, for example governance and economic policy reforms, as well as the promotion of gender and social inclusion.

Practitioners now have a growing set of approaches for understanding and influencing change, from political economy analysis (PEA) to thinking and working politically and adaptive management. Logical frameworks and theories of change have helped them think more systematically about their interventions. But in day-to-day programming, these tools are often used in ways that merge two different questions: how change is likely to happen and what an external change agent can do to support it (see Box 1).

This Policy and Practice Brief explains the Pathways of Change framework as a way of informing politically smart decision-making. It starts from the premise that most significant and sustainable change is endogenous – in other words, it is driven primarily by domestic political, economic and social dynamics, while external change agents (defined in this paper as development, investment and diplomatic partners) typically play a supporting rather than a determining role. The framework makes a clear separation between pathways of change, explaining how change might plausibly occur, and intervention strategies, describing how external change agents might seek to support, accelerate or influence those processes.

Box 1: Logframes and Theories of Change

Development practitioners use a range of tools to think about how change happens and how external support can contribute to it. The most widely used are logical frameworks and theories of change. Both are valuable but, as commonly used, neither gives much space to the political, institutional and behavioural processes through which change actually occurs.

Logical frameworks are primarily management tools. They are useful for clarifying objectives, defining indicators and monitoring progress. In practice, however, they often present change as a linear sequence of activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts that an external change agent can plan and control. This can obscure the fact that most significant changes in policy, institutions and behaviour are driven by complex interactions between domestic actors in a shifting political, economic and social context.

Theories of change are meant to explain the causal processes linking interventions to outcomes. Good practice guidance stresses context, assumptions and the role of other actors. In practice, however, many programme theories of change are intervention-centred: they start with what the programme will do and work forward to the results it expects. This implicitly treats the external change agent as the main driver of change rather than as one influence among many. Explanations of how change happens become tangled up with descriptions of what the programme intends to do. As a result, too little attention goes to the independent dynamics of the political system, the incentives facing key actors or the contextual shifts that determine whether reform is feasible.

Pathways of change can contribute to good practice in the use of theories of change by starting with an analysis of what change is possible given the political economy context. Theories of change can include and build on these insights by describing how programme interventions work with these change processes to achieve desired outcomes. The key insight is that separating pathways of change and intervention strategies as distinct parts of the theory of change can improve conceptual clarity and operational effectiveness.

2. Defining pathways of change and intervention strategies

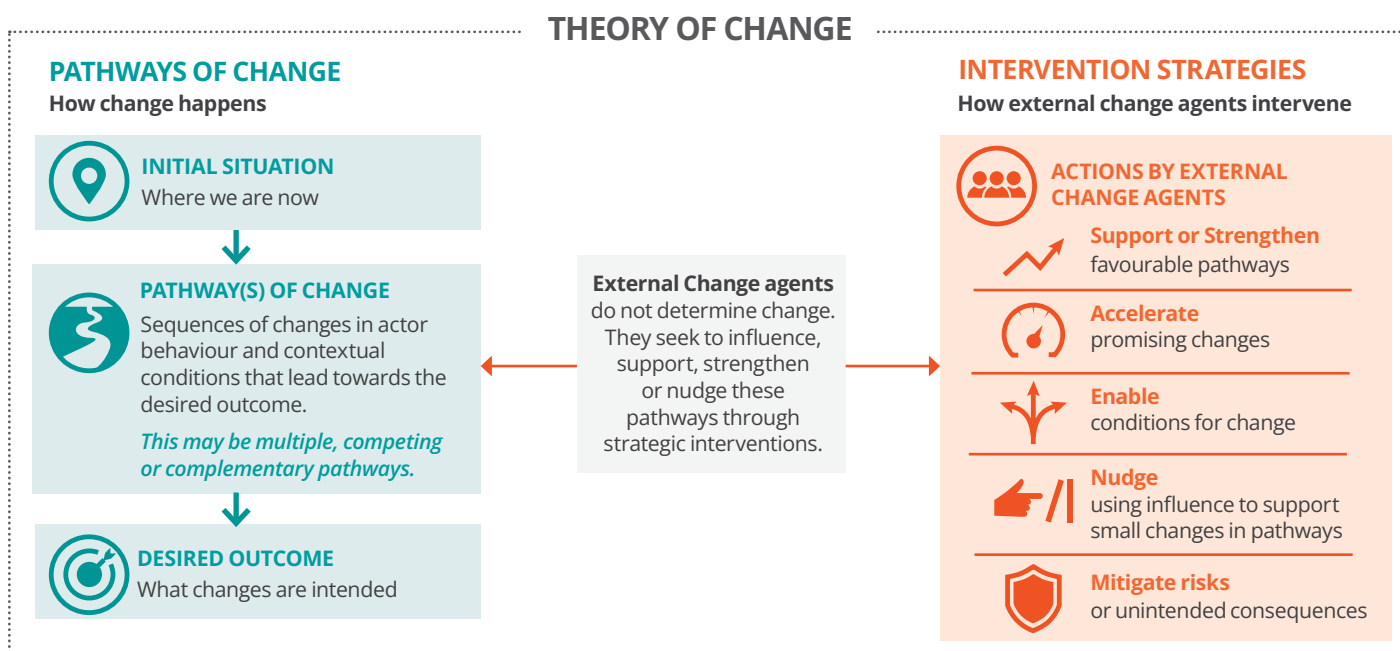
Pathways of change and intervention strategies are an integral part of The Policy Practice's framework for applied PEA. They bridge the gap between analysis and action, addressing the common criticism that PEA provides insightful explanations of why countries often pursue bad policies (e.g. because of rent-seeking, political clientelism, inter-elite competition and policy capture) but fails to provide practical suggestions on how these constraints can be addressed. The two concepts can be defined as follows:

1. **A pathway of change** is a plausible causal explanation of how a particular desired outcome might come about. This is explained as a causal chain or sequence of changes in the behaviour of actors (individuals, organisations, groups or sections of society at large) and contextual conditions. In most cases, these changes are driven by endogenous processes arising from the domestic political economy.
2. **An intervention strategy** is a set of actions through which an actor interested in supporting change seeks to support, accelerate, enable or nudge (i.e. encourage small shifts in) a pathway of change, or mitigate risks associated with it. Intervention strategies can be formulated by any actor, but are typically used by development partners, diplomats, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society. They often include activities such as training, policy dialogue, technical assistance and finance for local organisations.

Consider a typical development programme (e.g. public sector reform). Funders and implementers might well undertake extensive contextual analysis to understand the problem being addressed (e.g. patronage-based recruitment). Programmes often move quickly from such an analysis to proposing solutions or interventions (e.g. merit-based recruitment), without first considering how change might plausibly occur. This creates a risk of interventions failing to gain traction, producing only temporary results, being reversed or generating unintended consequences (e.g. reforms could be blocked if they weaken patronage systems). First identifying plausible pathways of change, and then designing intervention strategies around them, can reduce these risks and improve the prospects for sustainable impact (e.g. ways to introduce gradually some merit-based incentives in a patronage system).

Figure 1 presents a simple representation of the two concepts – pathways of change and intervention strategies as two distinct parts of a theory of change.

Figure 1. The core framework: Pathways of Change and Intervention Strategies



While pathways of change are driven by endogenous processes arising from the domestic political economy (e.g. key actors changing their behaviour or changes to domestic policy), such changes may be triggered by external trends or shocks, known as exogenous change, that are generated outside the domestic political economy. For example, change processes are often triggered by exogenous factors such as pandemics, climate change, technological innovations, international conflicts, shifts in commodity prices or changes in international policy. These exogenous triggers then force domestic actors to respond in new ways, leading towards or away from the desired outcome. For example, climate change may alter rainfall patterns. This, in turn, could trigger responses by governments, businesses, communities and other stakeholders that might work together to enhance long-term resilience. An exogenous shock is therefore not itself a pathway of change. Rather, it alters the context within which domestic actors operate, potentially triggering new behaviours and subsequent changes that constitute a pathway of change.

3. Building pathways of change

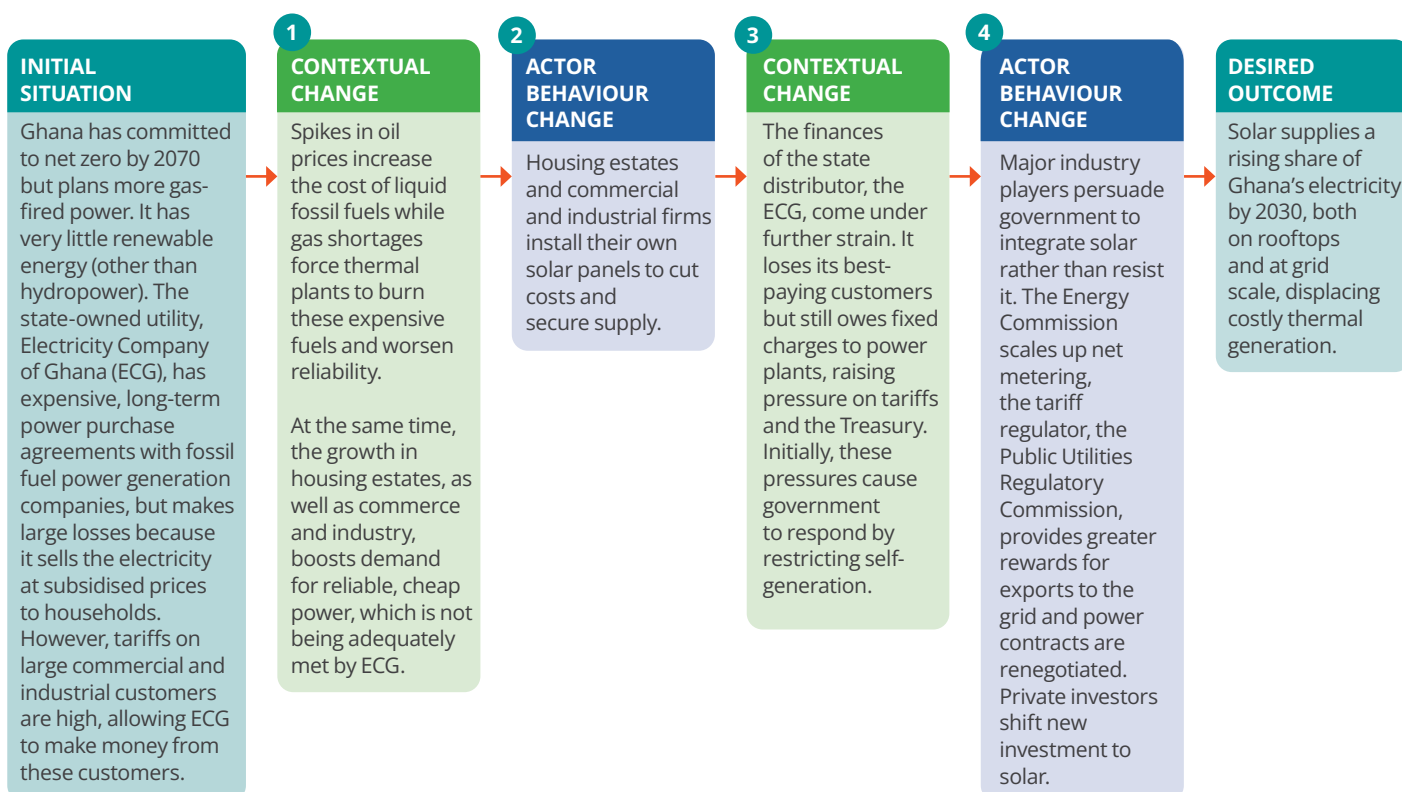
Pathways of change are built from a connected sequence of changes in the context, changes in incentives and changes in actor behaviour, whereby each connection describes a plausible causal connection. In some cases, the pathway may be initiated by a change in the context; in others, actor behavioural change can be identified as the first step.

Figure 2 presents a worked example of a pathway of change concerned with the development of renewable energy in Ghana. Ghana has committed to net zero by 2070. However, its energy mix relies heavily on electricity generation from oil and gas, as well as hydroelectricity. Although solar generation has obvious potential as a source of renewable energy, its contribution to the power generation mix has so far been very small.

The pathway illustrates one plausible sequence of behavioural and contextual changes that could contribute to a significant increase in the share of renewable energy in Ghana.

Three building blocks are required to construct a pathway of change: (i) the initial situation, (ii) the desired outcome and (iii) a causal pathway, consisting of a series of changes in context and changes in actor behaviour.

Figure 2. An example of a pathway of change: boosting renewable energy in Ghana



1. **Initial situation:** Every pathway begins with a clearly defined initial situation. This should normally be derived from the problem analysis, which describes the political economy problem that the pathway seeks to address.

In Figure 2, the initial situation is that Ghana has committed to net zero by 2070. But it is planning further expansion of gas-fired power rather than investing in renewable energy, such as solar. Note also the different situation of the state-owned power distribution utility, Electricity Company of Ghana (ECG), which loses money on electricity sales to most households as a result of low tariffs, but makes money from the higher tariffs charged to commercial and industrial customers.

2. **Desired outcome:** Every pathway should also define a desired outcome that describes the change being sought.

In Figure 2, the desired outcome is that solar supplies a rising share of Ghana's electricity by 2030. Defining both the initial situation and the desired outcome helps establish the scope of the pathway and provides a basis for assessing whether the pathway is plausible.

3. **Causal pathways:** In this case, the causal pathway connecting the initial situation to the desired outcome consists of a sequence of changes in context and resulting changes in actor behaviour as follows:

Step 1: Changes in context. Pathways are often triggered by changes in context that shape (and are shaped by) actor behaviour. These contextual changes may be changes in institutions (such as laws or social norms) or shifts in market conditions, technologies, environmental conditions or international relations.

Figure 2 shows the two contextual changes that are shifting actor behaviour. First, shortages of gas, together with increases in the price of liquid fuels (owing to the 2026 war in the Middle East), are raising the costs of traditional fossil fuel generation. Second, there is rapid growth in demand for cheap, reliable power from housing estates and industrial firms.

Step 2: Changes in actor behaviour. These shifts in context change the incentives for key actors in the energy sector in Ghana. Housing estates and industrial firms can now save significant sums by installing their own solar panels (and even batteries), displacing some of the power received from the state-owned electricity utility. In general, the change in actor behaviour may result from shifts in incentives, interests, influence, ideas, relationships or patterns of cooperation and conflict between actors.

Step 3: Changes in context. The changes in actor behaviour give rise to a new context. Now housing developers and commercial and industrial firms are investing in self-provision, but this is causing further losses for ECG as it loses sales to its profitable customers. Initially, the government responds to this by limiting self-generation with solar.

Step 4: Changes in actor behaviour. The new context now prompts further changes in actor behaviour. Influential commercial and industrial firms, keen to retain the opportunity of self-generation with solar, pressure the government to embrace and integrate solar, pointing to the overall savings that it provides to the economy. This leads to a shift in government policy to encourage solar development and find alternative mechanisms for solving the revenue challenges of ECG.

The first response to these changes is an attempt to suppress them. But the new opportunity has created stakeholders with a vested interest in reform, who then act to try to lock in a change that benefits them. This sequence of contextual changes and actor behavioural responses may be sufficient to bring about the desired outcome, that solar supplies a rising share of Ghana's electricity by 2030, and so the pathway is complete.

In many instances, pathways of change are much more complex. They consist of a sequence of changes in context and corresponding changes in behaviour of key actors. Sometimes, a pathway can be initiated by an actor behaving differently from the established pattern of behaviour (e.g. through a strong push from political leadership to support energy transition backed by fiscal incentives), which itself may change the context facing other actors, leading to changes in their behaviour. Pathways of change therefore typically consist of a logical sequence of contextual changes and changes in actor behaviour that lead to the desired outcome.

4. Stress testing pathways of change

For any given problem it is possible to develop multiple pathways of change. To narrow down the selection to the most viable pathways of change it is essential to test each against several criteria. These include:

1. **Coherence:** Are the steps in the pathway of change logically connected? Does the pathway make sense?
2. **Plausibility:** Is the pathway of change consistent with the PEA? What is the likelihood that the contextual change will happen, given what we know about long- and short-term factors and actors' incentives? How probable is it that actors will change their behaviour in the way described? How might actors opposed to change (spoilers) block the change pathway?
3. **Timescales:** Over what timescale is the pathway of change likely to materialise?
4. **Durability:** Is the movement towards the desired outcome likely to be sustainable or could it be quickly reversed in a changed context?

Table 1 applies the stress-testing criteria to the pathway of change for renewable energy in Ghana.

The stress-testing exercise indicates that this pathway towards a significant expansion of renewable power in Ghana is plausible and could produce a substantial and durable change, suggesting that it may offer viable entry points for external support.

Table 1: Stress-testing the Ghana renewable energy pathway

Criteria	Assessment
Coherence	High coherence. Each step follows from the previous one, and the government response in step 4 provides the link from private installations to a national outcome.
Plausibility	Moderate plausibility. Self-generation is already happening. The key uncertainty lies in steps 3–4: whether commercial and industrial firms have enough leverage to overturn restrictions, given ECG's losses, its fixed obligations to power producers and pressure on the Treasury.
Timescale	Short-to-medium-term. Steps 1–2 are already under way, but the policy shift and contract renegotiation in step 4 are likely to take several years.
Durability	Moderate to high durability. Once infrastructure has been built it will permanently change the structure of energy provision in the country.

Additional contextual factors matter. It is important to recognise that the pathway of change outlined above is a simplification. In reality, multiple additional contextual factors may support or impede a pathway of change. These may affect the plausibility, speed or strength of a pathway without forming part of its core causal chain.

The stress-testing exercise should explicitly consider the impact of other contextual factors. It is essential to consider what these could be and how they could affect the criteria in Table 1. In the Ghana example, an additional contextual factor might be drought, since this could reduce hydropower output. This might make the government more willing to incentivise greater generation by households and firms to minimise the demand for additional expensive fossil-fuelled generation.

The PEA can help determine which additional contextual factors may be relevant. If they are sufficiently important to disable or greatly support a pathway of change, then it may be necessary to redesign the pathway of change to include them as a more central element in the causal chain.

5. Designing intervention strategies

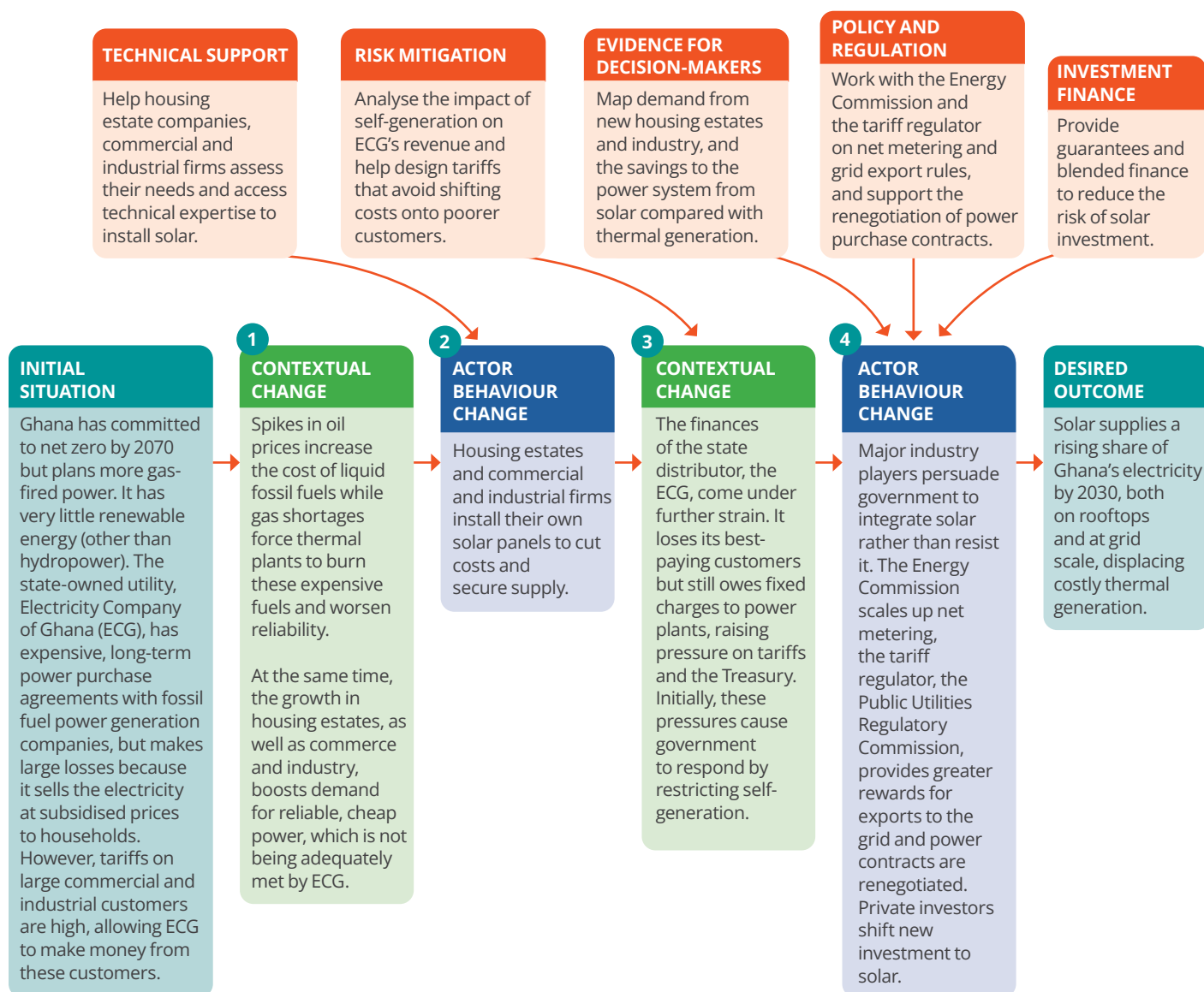
Intervention strategies describe what external actors can do to support plausible pathways of change. Intervention strategies that are aligned with plausible pathways of change are more likely to be effective than those that are not.

The following guiding questions can be helpful in developing intervention strategies:

1. **Entry points:** Within the pathway of change, are there any viable entry points for an external change agent to support or influence the pathway itself? There may be no viable entry points, in which case this provides a clear message to consider alternative pathways of change and intervention strategies.
2. **Do-nothing option:** If no viable pathways or entry points can be found, it may be better to do nothing rather than pursue ineffective interventions.
3. **Small or large bets:** Given levels of uncertainty about pathways of change, is it more strategic to focus on many small-scale interventions that can be rapidly scaled up or down, or is there sufficient certainty to justify placing resources in a few larger-scale interventions?
4. **Bottlenecks:** What are the most impactful interventions that could address particular bottlenecks in the pathway of change? There may be particular points or connections in the pathway of change where support can be particularly crucial to activating or strengthening the pathway.
5. **Comparative advantage:** What are the areas of comparative advantage of the external change agent and where are they best equipped to make a meaningful contribution to supporting the pathway of change? This could be in terms of their reputation, track record, financing, technical expertise, political influence, etc.
6. **Coordination:** How can support by different external change agents with particular financial, technical and diplomatic competences be coordinated? In many cases, such coordination is required but hard to achieve.
7. **Sequencing:** How should interventions be timed and sequenced? Some interventions may be necessary to support early or later steps in the pathway of change.

Figure 3 replicates the Ghana renewable energy pathway above but now includes orange boxes illustrating possible intervention strategies. These are deliberately shown outside the pathway itself but connect to the specific elements of the pathway that they are designed to influence. The examples of intervention strategies shown in the diagram include helping housing estate companies and commercial and industrial firms assess their needs and access technical expertise to install solar; analysing the impact of self-generation on ECG's revenue and helping design tariffs that avoid shifting costs onto poorer customers; mapping demand from new housing estates and industry, and the savings to the power system from solar compared with thermal generation; working with the Energy Commission and the tariff regulator on net metering and grid export rules and supporting the renegotiation of power purchase contracts; and providing guarantees and blended finance to reduce the risk of solar investment.

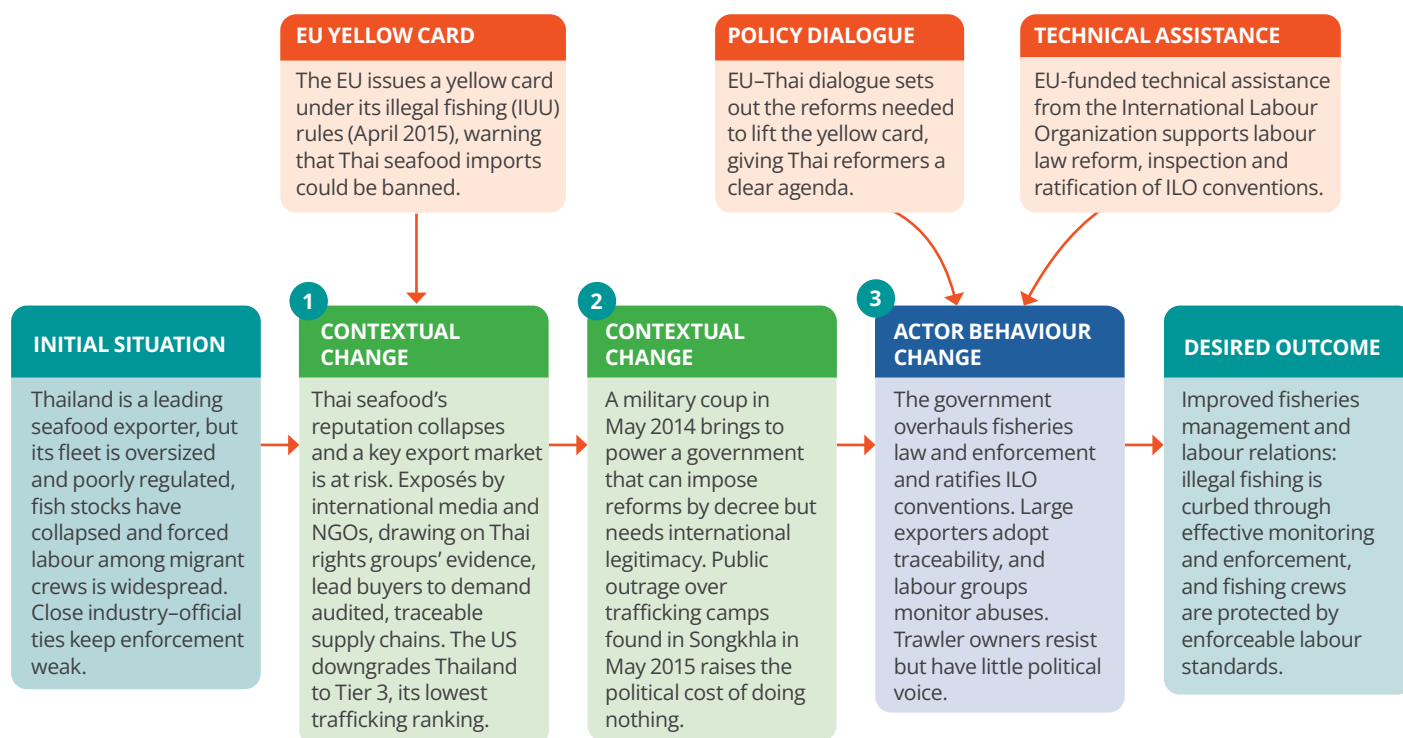
These interventions would need to be further prioritised, sequenced and coordinated between development partners according to their respective competences and comparative advantage.

Figure 3. How interventions support a pathway of change

6. A second example: diplomacy and trade

The pathways of change methodology is designed to be applicable to a wide range of change processes, including international relations and domestic political reform. A second example illustrates its application to diplomacy and trade. It also demonstrates how pathways of change can be triggered by external factors and actions taken by international partners, but that the essential steps in the pathway of change are still driven by domestic stakeholders.

The example shown in Figure 4 relates to improvements in fisheries management in Thailand, where domestic NGOs, human rights groups and international media had raised serious concerns about unsustainable fishing and the use of forced labour. The pathway of change was initiated by the collapse in the reputation of Thai fisheries caused by exposés in the international media, drawing on evidence from Thai rights groups. In particular, the European Union (EU) issued a 'yellow card' threatening loss of market access unless reforms were undertaken. The pathway of change indicates how these external interventions from the EU – a mixture of carrot and stick approaches – helped support a pathway of change driven by domestic actors. This illustrates the point made earlier, that exogenous changes may create a context that forces domestic actors to behave in new ways, setting off a new causal chain. The key insight is that the EU yellow card did not reform Thai fisheries; Thai officials and industry did, once their incentives had changed. Notably, some reforms were rolled back in 2025 once the conditions that were driving them had weakened, illustrating the importance of the durability criterion.

Figure 4. Pathways of change and intervention strategies applied to Thai fisheries

7. Developing and adapting pathways of change and intervention strategies

Pathways of change and intervention strategies are best developed as the final steps of a comprehensive PEA of the problem being addressed. It is often useful to synthesise the main findings emerging from the PEA, particularly the key blockages preventing change, as a starting point for identifying possible pathways of change. A workshop setting is an effective way to develop and stress-test pathways of change and to generate ideas on intervention strategies (Box 2).

Box 2: Developing pathways of change in a workshop setting

An effective way to develop pathways of change is through a structured workshop involving participants with practical knowledge of the sector and its wider political economy context.

- The process begins with a synthesis of the main PEA findings.
- This is followed by a facilitated discussion of potential (and realistic) changes in the context and actor behaviour that can be linked together as a pathway of change.
- The pathways are then stress-tested against the criteria outlined in Table 1. Participants should be invited to challenge each other on the strengths and weaknesses of particular pathways.
- Only after plausible pathways have been identified does the workshop discuss intervention strategies and the role that external change agents might play in supporting them.

A good workshop process generates a set of testable hypotheses about how change might occur and how it might best be supported. However, even where PEA is robust and participants are highly experienced, considerable uncertainty will remain. Complex political, economic and social systems are inherently difficult to predict. Multiple pathways may be possible; unforeseen events may alter incentives and relationships, such that interventions that appear promising in a workshop setting may prove ineffective in practice. What pathways provide is a way of thinking about how change happens in this context, which can help external change agents use resources in line with a well-informed understanding of what change may be possible and how it can best be supported.

For this reason, it is recommended that pathways of change be treated not as fixed predictions but as working hypotheses that are continually tested and refined through implementation.

This requires an adaptive programming approach, as part of which external change agents regularly reassess whether pathways are unfolding as expected, whether intervention strategies remain relevant and whether new opportunities or risks are emerging. Learning and adaptation are integral components of the pathways of change framework rather than separate activities.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems have a critical role to play in this process. Conventional M&E approaches often focus on tracking programme outputs and outcomes while paying insufficient attention to the causal processes through which change occurs. Testing pathways of change requires additional monitoring of whether key behavioural and contextual changes are taking place, whether assumptions remain valid and what contribution interventions are making to broader change processes. This evidence can then be used to refine both pathways of change and intervention strategies, thereby improving their applicability and effectiveness over time.

8. Conclusions

The central argument is simple: before deciding how to influence change, it is essential to understand how change happens.

Pathways of change provide a structured way of thinking about the behavioural and contextual changes that drive development and other change processes. Intervention strategies then help change agents identify how they might support, accelerate, enable or nudge these processes, while mitigating associated risks.

By separating change processes from interventions, the framework encourages greater realism about the role of external change agents and a stronger focus on domestic political economy dynamics. It also provides a practical foundation for adaptive programming, enabling organisations to test assumptions, learn from experience and continuously refine their approach as circumstances evolve.

Further readings

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About this Policy Brief and The Policy Practice

The Policy Practice is a network of development professionals who take a political economy approach to supporting positive change in developing countries. We undertake strategic and policy work including political economy analysis, programme designs, reviews and evaluations. Our multidisciplinary approach uses the political economy perspective to understand the processes of socioeconomic change and their effect on the implementation of development programmes.

This paper is part of a series of Policy and Practice Briefs that share our insights in a changing world.

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