**Enabling Context-Driven Adaptation in Strategies**

*What is context-driven adaptation?* Context-driven adaptation means programming that reflects an understanding of power dynamics and social forces that influence development outcomes. It is also referred to as “thinking and working politically” (TWP) and is often grounded in political economy analysis (PEA). Look at USAID’s Thinking and Working Politically Through Applied [PEA guide](https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/thinking-and-working-politically-twp-through-applied-political-economy-analysis-pea-guide) and the [context-driven adaptation collection](https://programnet.usaid.gov/collection/context-driven-adaptation) for more information.

*How does political economy connect to a CDCS?*  USAID’s strategic direction has always considered power dynamics, often framed as political will. Attention to this has been reinforced by the Journey to Self-Reliance guidance, and by the Country Roadmaps. Country Roadmaps use a suite of indicators to sketch a picture of each country in terms of commitment and capacity. Commitment in particular is a reflection of the underlying power dynamics across a government and a society. The Roadmap doesn’t explain commitment, but highlights a need to unpack this issue and how it manifests across a Mission’s planned portfolio. A political economy perspective helps focus attention on why the patterns are as they are, where those underlying forces may be enduring and/or in flux, what constraints and opportunities this implies for effective programming, and how USAID can seek to reinforce commitment over time.

*How can I best enable context-driven adaptation in a CDCS?*

1. *It’s a way of working, not a set of answers -*  A political economy perspective requires understanding that effective programming is about working with the grain of a dynamic context. While a single PEA can provide a useful snapshot of the situation, context-driven adaptation requires USAID staff and partners to regularly update contextual analysis and learn and adapt interventions in response to those contextual realities. PEAs should not be seen as a primary source to define sectors or areas for work, though they may shed light on those questions, and they should not define who USAID will partner with. Rather, they inform how USAID expects to make progress against its strategic directions, and help to ground strong theories of change and to test the assumptions undergirding them. Within a CDCS, seek to authorize context-driven adaptation as part of the fabric of the USAID approach. For example, the recent Uganda CDCS lists a set of principles including holistically applying Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting, and maintaining a problem-driven focus in which all programming analyzes and adjusts to the local context.
2. *Ground strategy in understanding of incentives* - A starting point for context-driven adaptive strategies is to analyse power dynamics and incentives that resonate across the strategy. This can draw from the Country Roadmaps, but *requires explaining why* the Roadmaps show their specific patterns of commitment, rather than having the Roadmap itself serve as the explanation. This should help the CDCS to address not only the country needs, but also the feasibility of progress and where it can build on existing domestic pressures for change to reinforce self-reliance. For example, prior to laying out its areas of work and approach, the draft Ukraine CDCS describes the context as follows:

*More broadly, Ukraine’s political system and media environment -- representing freedom of expression, political participation, and other cornerstones of open government -- have been co-opted by pervasive oligarchic networks... who quickly established patronage networks that instrumentalized public institutions to work on their behalf rather than for the country itself. Ukraine’s oligarchs sit at the apex of political, economic, and media monopolies that prevent newcomers from entering or truly competing in the system: they control most major political parties, own major TV stations and many smaller ones, buy judicial and legislative influence to inoculate themselves from prosecution, and limit the development of non-politically connected businesses, creating a considerable brake on Ukraine’s self-reliance.*

This language helps frame the ensuing areas of work as requiring attention to patronage issues and incentives in order to succeed, priming TWP as a cross-cutting approach for every sector of the strategy.

1. *Commitment will manifest differently in different sectors and places* - Don’t confuse the topline picture with the rules of the game in all cases. In many contexts with limited commitment or political will, significant progress may be possible on particular topics even as it is frustrated on others. While describing the foundational factors in the CDCS, provide sector examples where known, and invite the Project Design process to identify specific dynamics and incentives for their project purpose. The draft El Salvador CDCS emphasizes tailoring programming to a set of urban areas, while the draft Ukraine CDCS describes work to combat corruption and highlights health care as an area where particular approaches can fit with existing levels of commitment: “USAID will focus resources on a key area -- healthcare -- where corruption is pervasive, but meaningful structural reform is achievable. This will not only enable more efficient use of government resources, but also engage the private sector in creating a modern health system, representing an important early opportunity for USAID to demonstrate a redefined relationship with the GOU: one where meaningful commitment to reform and targeted capacity-building can be system-transformational and represent an early opportunity for strategic transition.”
2. *The world is dynamic and processes of change uncertain* - Acknowledge that there will be contextual changes over the course of the strategy, and that that all is not knowable in advance. USAID resources can catalyze or accelerate meaningful social change, but not cause or control it. Focus on “what more could we be doing” grounded in the realities of the political economy of the sectors or issues. Where appropriate, build understanding of power dynamics and incentives into Monitoring and Learning Plans. The 2016 Zimbabwe CDCS flags a series of potential scenarios that all are shaped by potential shifts in political and economic trends, and frames areas of emphasis as needing to respond to which scenarios move forward. The Ukraine CDCS notes that “USAID will emphasize Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) among Mission staff, implementing partners, donors, and other stakeholders throughout the life of the strategy. The complexity of Ukraine’s integrated strategy demands thorough and iterative examination of the soundness of development hypotheses and dynamic operating environment to ensure that the Mission is advancing progress towards its DOs and Ukraine’s self-reliance.” Indeed, one of their lessons from their earlier CDCS was the need to ensure flexibility in the new CDCS to absorb changes in the context, using scenario planning, mid-course stocktaking, and other pauses for reflection to inform the need for CDCS-level strategic adjustments. Expecting change and acknowledging uncertainty strengthens the emphasis on being adaptive and closely tracking the context.
3. *Authorize honest conversations during the life of the strategy* - Be curious and open to diverse staff and stakeholder perspectives. Make clear in the strategy that USAID expects to make adjustments and to embrace appropriate risk in pursuit of impact. Through investments in broad context monitoring, learning, reflection, and flexibility, a CDCS should make clear a hunger to find ways to perform better throughout the life of the strategy. For example, the draft Ethiopia CDCS identifies as cross-cutting learning questions “is the USAID investment in systems strengthening effective in supporting the achievement of development results/goals?” and “how can USAID best empower citizens to contribute to building effective and accountable systems and institutions?” Answering both of these questions will require considering programs’ fit to context, and being honest around what is working or not and why.
4. *Power takes many forms* - Although PEAs can be useful to unpack incentives and power dynamics, they are not the only means of analysis. Require due attention to power dynamics in gender and other analyses, and for those analyses to speak to each other regarding how power manifests. For example, based on robust gender analysis and on a labor market assessment, the Zimbabwe CDCS highlights ways in which Zimbabwe’s economic decline does not affect men and women equally. It identifies power disparities around access to and ownership of land, household decision-making, and norms and practices in wage labor that are cross-cutting issues. Ensuring that any assessments help inform understandings of power dynamics - and that they point out not just what should change, but considerations around feasibility, opportunity, and opposition to efforts at change - can ensure a consistent political economy lens, and attention to inclusion as well.
5. *Expect and reward savvy programming* - Staff and partners should be accountable for being familiar with their contexts, taking appropriate risks, and staying on top of their situations, and should be recognized when they do so. Technical offices should collaborate where challenges require cross-sectoral synergy to address. Other Mission teams and mechanisms - such as for monitoring, evaluation and learning - should help enable teams and partners to analyze incentive structures and adapt programming appropriately. Strategy language can encourage this behavior by recognizing and appreciating a shared investment in development outcomes. The Senegal 2015 CDCS review emphasized this lesson, as it “highlighted the importance of building and maintaining synergy among activities to address cross-sectoral challenges...To reinforce collaboration among sectors at both the design and implementation phase, the Mission instituted the practice of regular “Synergy trips”, where a cross-section of Mission staff conducts site visits and meets with beneficiaries, partners and local authorities in a specific region. Lessons learned from these trips have improved intra-Mission collaboration, as seen in the recent launch of an integrated, cross-funded activity that will increase the capacity of local government to respond to citizen demands and strengthen community participation in service delivery management in the health, education, WASH, and agriculture sectors. The Synergy trips have also improved information sharing and strengthened working relationships with local GOS authorities.”
6. *Strengthen local capacity to think and work politically - part of meaningful self-reliance is savvier local actors promoting development outcomes.* While immediate programming benefits when it is implemented in a way that observes and adjusts to shifts in context - particularly incentive structures and power dynamics - over the long term, effective development programming must empower local actors to more routinely implement their own efforts in similar ways. This can be thought of as developing the capacity of local actors to design and manage context-driven, adaptive programming. Local actors likely already work this way, even if without labeling at such, so begin by tapping into local ways of working, but with an intention to strengthen their effectiveness as a part of the strategic approach.