

## **Tips on Learning from Context**

### **Formal and Informal Approaches to Understanding the Local Political Economy**

*These tips are part of a series of tips and resources to support context-driven adaptation in programming. For other resources, see the Context-Driven Adaptation Collection at <https://usaidlearninglab.org/context-driven-adaptation-overview> (internal staff version at <https://programnet.usaid.gov/collection/context-driven-adaptation>) or the Google Doc versions [here](#).*

Successfully adapting your programmatic efforts and policy engagement to the context depends on maintaining your understanding of that context. Given this, continuous learning and feedback loops--not only about your programming, but also about the environment you are working within--are important components of USAID's work.

Since our environments are *always* changing, in ways big and small, this can be intimidating. One can imagine a scenario where learning consumes the limited time and budgets available, especially for small programs. The question becomes: *How can we learn enough, at the right times, to limit missed opportunities and warning signs, while avoiding being consumed by data collection and analysis that never influences our work?*

This document capitalizes on the experiences of USAID staff as well as emerging learning from other donors and researchers to highlight a range of approaches--formal and informal, time-bound and continuous--that can support ongoing learning within the operational tempo of a busy Mission team or Operating Unit.

### **Context Monitoring**

Context monitoring refers to the systematic collection of information about factors and conditions *outside* of the Mission/Operating Unit's control that could impact results achieved, whether positively or negatively, and is recommended for all missions. While all aspects of the context cannot be captured in terms of indicators, incorporating context indicators within [Mission Performance and Monitoring Plans \(PMPs\)](#) and [Project and Activity Monitoring Evaluation and Learning \(MEL\) Plans](#) is an important option for embedding context monitoring within mission processes.

While performance indicators are typically associated with targets, for context indicators it may be useful to have triggers (see template for [Context Indicator Reference Sheet \(CIRS\)](#)). Triggers highlight points at which some kind of action or review may be called

for, such as a revision of targets, a shift in programming, or further analysis to better understand why the context has changed in ways that were not anticipated and what this implies for programming. An example used in the CIRS is an agriculture program with the context indicator of average precipitation in depth (mm per year). The trigger for that indicator is a change of 10 percent or greater in either direction. The rationale for using that trigger is that it would be a deviation from the norm (no more than 3 percent change within the last 10 years), which would be anticipated to drastically affect crop yields – triggering a reexamination of end-of-project targets.

[USAID/Guatemala's 2012-2016 strategy](#) offers an example of how a Mission can incorporate context monitoring in a PMP. For instance the PMP tracks the Freedom House score on Political Rights to gauge the context around DO1 (citizen security), and follows the national prevalence of stunting in children under five for DO 2 (economic growth and social development). Additionally, the Mission monitors context at multiple levels within its current Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) plans including a focus on phenomena at levels different from the intended focus of the programming. In other words, some activities are intended to work with local communities, but national-level factors could heavily influence the success of these local activities. For instance, while an activity intended to reduce conflict targets the community level in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, heightened instability at the national level could affect the success of the local-level programming. Given this, the mission included national-level indicators (e.g., [V-Dem indicators](#), others) to monitor context for local-level programming.

[Political Economy Analysis \(PEA\)](#), discussed further below, is a tool to improve understandings of the incentives and power dynamics that are driving behaviors and outcomes. PEA can serve to highlight the significance of particular issues, trends, and key points of uncertainty, i.e. where some degree of change is inevitable, but the scope and impact of that change remains unclear. This is the particular focus of the “Dynamics” component of USAID’s [PEA Framework](#), which considers features which are in flux within society, and which may result in change, whether positive or negative. Ongoing context monitoring that includes a focus on these identified points of uncertainty can be part of operationalizing that analysis going forward. Examples of context indicators which may reflect on and impact political economy factors include:

- The price of gold (or other minerals, commodities, etc.) on international markets

This indicator can be a signal of relative economic stresses for the impacted country/region, leading to a consideration of how other conditions and programs may be

impacted. In another context, the price of a commodity may also reflect the extent of the incentives surrounding illicit trade in that commodity, suggesting a different set of possible actions.

- Percentage of new university students who belong to lower castes

Where lower caste individuals have traditionally had limited access to higher education or better employment opportunities, this can provide some indication of evolution, and trigger greater investigation on how the rules of the game with respect to inclusion are shifting.

- Rate of population change in a city/region

Migration and urbanization within society can both be the result of major changes in society, and the source of numerous other potential changes, both positive and negative.

- Median age of the population in a country, city or region

The “youth bulge” which characterizes so many developing countries is the classic example of a Dynamic within the PEA framework referenced above. As a country’s population trends younger, a range of social norms and understandings - for example, of historical events - change. Opportunities and stresses change, making this a potentially meaningful indicator in a number of contexts.

### **In-Depth Applied Political Economy Analysis (PEA)**

Some issues within the context are crucial to ultimate results, but defy capture within easily collected indicators. Context indicators may also point to phenomenon that are not well understood, making it challenging to consider appropriate responses. In these cases, it may be worth investing in periodic [applied Political Economy Analyses \(PEA\)](#) to establish a deeper understanding of the context and how it changes over time. PEA studies can be undertaken by Mission staff, implementing partners, or through external consultants supporting mission and implementer efforts.

For example, USAID/Mexico’s Transparency Rapid Response Project was set up to be flexible and adaptive in response to opportunities related to Mexico’s new anti-corruption reforms, including the creation of new government institutions across all 32 states. As a new program area for the Mission playing out in a complex federal

system, the Mission and its partners needed to develop in-depth knowledge of the various actors and systems at play. Written into the activity's work plan was an initial PEA and a PEA after a year of implementation. Implementing partner staff participated in both PEAs, alongside a staff member from the Mission's Office of Integrity and Transparency. This has enabled the partners and USAID to develop a more nuanced and shared understanding of the issues through direct engagement with a range of stakeholders. This collaboration has also helped ensure that PEA efforts remain targeted to work-planning needs and has facilitated the incorporation of findings within programming.

Another example comes from the USAID/Zimbabwe's Civil Society Strengthening Project (CSSP), implemented by Pact. When a midterm review of CSSP identified a need to refocus its efforts, the team reorganized staff to invest more heavily in mainstreaming of applied PEA. Through an iterative use of applied PEA, project managers receive real-time information to guide work planning, sub-grant proposal evaluation, etc. Project research and M&E teams met weekly to discuss local and national contextual factors affecting programming, drawing on regular monitoring conversations, press, and other inputs. Every six months, the CSSP team conducted a more in-depth PEA to consider whether program indicators remain appropriate, given the fluidity of Zimbabwe's socio-economic and political environment. Finally, the CSSP team developed understanding and capacity around PEA with local partner organizations, through publications and events, including "Pact Alerts," intended to ensure awareness among CSSP partners about relevant political economy issues.

### **Rapid Approaches to Applied Political Economy Analysis**

In recognition of limitations on the time and resources to undertake in-depth applied PEA exercises, a growing number of development practitioners are experimenting with approaches to rapid, "light-touch" PEA--sometimes following a more in-depth initial effort-- that seeks to check assumptions and build some depth in understanding with limited additional effort.

#### **The "Two-Day PEA":**

Following a more in-depth initial PEA study supported by USAID/Washington, the USAID/Colombia Mission sought to deepen and expand upon those understandings through periodically conducting what they called the "Two-Day PEA". The Mission Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) team worked with implementing partners to identify a short list of informants for a given region. Over two days, a four-person team (split into two pairs) would conduct interviews and then reconvene to

discuss their findings and analysis, focused on identifying key actors in the region, their incentives, and the perception of the signing of a peace agreement, among other topics. Upon returning to Bogota, the team would write a report synthesizing the findings to share with the mission, and then use the findings to adapt activities to better reflect the local context.

### **Everyday Political Analysis (EPA):**

The [Development Leadership Program](#) (DLP) at the University of Birmingham in the UK developed a framework that they call [Everyday Political Analysis](#) (EPA), designed to respond to the needs of front-line staff looking to make rapid but politically smart decisions (Hudson, Marquette, and Waldo, 2016). The approach involves two steps: First, understanding interests: Why are people doing what they do? And then, understanding change: What space and capacity do people have to effect change?

Each step is supported through a series of yes/no questions, which become increasingly subtle. They can be done individually, or with a group, but some measure of triangulation (even if only with a colleague) is encouraged in order to check underlying assumptions. The idea behind EPA is not to replace formal PEA but to supplement it--to clarify where questions can be addressed based on existing knowledge and understandings, and to identify when a more formal PEA will likely be most useful. It is designed as an approach to help staff begin to work politically, with the understanding that as time goes on, it may become a more intuitive process.

### **One Hour Conversation; One Day Workshop; One Month Consultancy:**

[The Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre](#) (ESID) based in the University of Manchester in the UK, produced a briefing paper grappling with the question of how to adjust PEA in a pragmatic fashion on a scale that makes sense to the needs (Yanguas, 2015). The paper suggests a “fractal approach” addressing a common set of intuitive questions, first with a one-hour conversation, which may (or may not) lead to a one-day workshop, which again may (or may not) lead to a one-month consultancy to conduct a formal PEA. For instance, for a project-level conversation, questions might address the experience of prior interventions, sources of demand (or lack thereof), potential to work with opposition actors, and structural constraints to change.

The approach is grounded in an understanding of the inherent challenge in making formal academic political analysis useful for practitioners. It encourages development actors interested in PEA to start small--getting support from political economy experts to

identify key questions and trusting development practitioners to work through them, and scaling up analysis as needed.

## **Tracking Subjective Understandings**

Perhaps the most accessible approach to learning about and reflecting on changes in context is simply to talk to people. Regularly asking questions, reflecting on the understandings different people have on issues that impact our work, and tracking how those impressions change over time can be a modest but meaningful step in deepening a shared understanding of context over time. One option for this is to formalize and track conversations that already take place within mission teams.

However, as with any individual perspectives, these insights do not offer an objective truth. Moreover, USAID mission staff may not reflect the broader country population in critical ways (socio-economic, ethnic, religious or geographic). Thus, limiting learning activities to within USAID heightens the risk of creating an “echo chamber”--or a convergence of perspectives that do not reflect the broader context, calcifying gaps in our understandings. To mitigate this, efforts at informal conversations and observations that go beyond the Mission can be extremely helpful.

Discussed below are approaches--both internal and external to the USG--that have been identified by a number of Missions to capturing subjective understandings and their changes over time.

### ***Internal to USAID***

#### **The “Gut Check”:**

As a complement to activity-level monitoring, USAID/Indonesia’s DRG team engages in a broader, subjective tracking of the context around DRG issues in Indonesia, building on team member’s understandings and interactions. During team meetings each week, the team reflects on the news, their interactions with partners, and conversations with the public. Based on this, they arrive at what they call a “gut check” assessment of Indonesia’s current status related to focus DRG subsectors, asking “Did things this week generally get better, get worse, or generally stay about the same”?

The DRG team finds that this effort, tracked over time (see image below) helps them to answer some of the questions that other monitoring efforts do not: Regardless of program performance, what are the trend lines in the areas key to USAID’s efforts in Indonesia? Are things getting generally better or worse? Where trends are identified,

they can then be a launching point for reflecting on how well they are understood, and how important they may be to future programming, potentially becoming a launching point for further reflecting and analysis as needed.

### DRG Weekly "Gut Check"



### “Tea Talks”:

The Democracy and Governance Office at USAID/Nepal has another approach to capturing and using the subjective understandings of their team and others. For 45 minutes each Monday morning, the DG team gathers with the Embassy political section and others in the Mission to reflect on their political analysis for this week: What do they expect to be issues this week? What is likely to progress or not?

The Office has found that this process helps them to digest the past week’s events, and to consider what they mean looking forward. This understanding not only contributes to the work of the DG office, but is also shared in Monday’s weekly senior management meetings to influence the work of other offices. Finally, the practice helps build skills in regular political analysis and a regular practice of engagement with stakeholders: staff are challenged to come to the table Monday morning with fresh information information from their most recent conversations with different actors.

### *External to USAID*

### “Community Walks”

Citizen security efforts in Honduras are built upon partnerships with the central and local governments, civil society, and the private sector, informed by the methodology of [Crime Prevention through Environmental Design \(CPTED\)](#). This includes the [Projects Executed by the Community \(PEC\)](#) model, implemented under a government-to-government agreement with the Fondo Hondureño de Inversión Social (Honduran Social Investment Fund - FHIS). Interventions include physical and social infrastructure, support for youth, and multi-stakeholder community cohesion activities. Given the complexity of the portfolio, the scope of the partnerships involved, and the dynamism of the environment, the Mission and partners recognized the need for a broader set of approaches to monitor not only the status and effect of interventions, but the evolution of the context, and the perception and articulation of needs.

One of these approaches involved “community walks”--periodic walks through the neighborhoods where activities were being implemented, bringing together community members, local government, and civil society groups for grounded conversations on the context and evolving needs. The Mission and partners also sought to ensure that monitoring incorporates the voices of the youngest beneficiaries, working with children in school programs to have them draw their community as it is, and how they would wish it to be.

These approaches have helped to build a more grounded and nuanced understanding of the situations confronted by the community, enabling incorporation of a broader range of voices within the monitoring process, as well as observation of details that would likely be overlooked in formal reporting channels. Further, the visibility of Mission and FHIS personnel walking through the communities has its own value in demonstrating commitment to local stakeholders, thus helping to both monitor the context holistically and to reinforce the partnerships involved in making change.

### **Advisory Councils**

Another approach to broaden our exposure to views outside of the “usual suspects” is through use of an “Advisory Council”--a body of local stakeholders (representing diverse perspectives, backgrounds and skill sets) who are not implementers or participants that convenes on a periodic basis to provide ongoing feedback on programming and context. Diversity of perspectives includes not only the factors of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, class, but also of experiences networks, and knowledge. For instance, the head of a local church will be aware of different aspects of the environment than that of a local trucking company. Both may have value, and exploring them in combination may help illuminate more subtle norms or power dynamics.



One example of the use of advisory councils is the [Liberia Accountability and Voice Initiative](#) (LAVI). LAVI required its implementer to set up an advisory council to “provide a collective platform for updating the problem analysis and determining how best to adapt to evolving local dynamics and new knowledge gained from real-time monitoring and evaluation.” The advisory council was also asked to inform the “commissioning of topical research and synthesis exercises.”

For more on this approach, see [Tips for Better Use of Advisory Councils](#).