

Tips for Better Use of Advisory Councils

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](#).

One common way to improve the responsiveness of programming to context is to build into the structures of projects and activities advisory bodies where local stakeholders can give periodic feedback from their observations of both programming and context. This document is an effort to compile some good practices in setting up and using these bodies.

Setting Up Helpful Advisory Councils

1. The most valuable stakeholders to participate in an advisory council are often those who are *outsiders to the particular development effort*. If your council is composed of subgrantees, cooperating government partners, and others involved in implementation, not only is their feedback potentially biased, but their perspective will likely be limited by the same facts that implementing partners are already aware of. Others with a stake often have roles that are more general (for example, community leaders not affiliated with a particular sector, scholars not attached to a particular reform).
2. The most insightful stakeholders tend to be those who are *practiced at observing and making inference*. Researchers in universities and think tanks or journalists are often better able to hear and capture broad trends than the “doers” who tend to catalyze change and get involved in programming. A mix of both “observers” and “doers” makes for a more useful advisory council.
3. Useful feedback requires *diverse perspectives*. This means not only diverse individuals (by gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, class, or other salient factors) but those whose field of vision covers things others might miss. A local church pastor, labor union leader, market trader, or head of a trucking company will all be able to “see” things that are obscured from others. This is particularly valuable around power dynamics that may be hidden or difficult to detect. A diversity of voices is also a diversity of skills. Leveraging the skills of council members to educate yourself and to share knowledge and abilities across your advisory council can have a large impact on cohesion of the group, and perceived value of continued participation.
4. An effective advisory council is made up of *members who share a common purpose, but not a shared understanding of the solution*. Lack of consensus on how to solve a problem is a better starting point because it mitigates groupthink, but lack of commitment to a common purpose will undermine any efforts.
5. Make space to *acknowledge interests* held by different stakeholders. Diverse advisory body members should have different, sometimes competing, reasons to tackle a given problem. Acknowledging each other's interests, and the varied interests represented on the council, can bring a group together to find ways forward that are mutually beneficial.

Celebrate their active participation, as well, to keep them engaged over time and ensure that various members weigh in, not only the most outspoken.

6. Use *political economy analysis (PEA) as a starting point*. If you have conducted PEA to inform a program, a great use of that PEA is to communicate in more depth why and how you think the program will work, and how you understand relevant wider conditions. The domains of the PEA can help to structure feedback - is a new fact a new “here and now” or a shift in the underlying “rules of the game” - and, boiled down, PEA understandings can spark useful discussion. The DFID [SAVI](#) program in Nigeria used its initial PEA to ask potential partners to describe “[why the glass is half full](#)” in applications to collaborate, based on their existing understanding of dynamics from their PEA - simple language to get at the same idea.
7. Put forward an *indicative theory of change (TOC)*, and don't hold to it too tightly. Any theory of change is improved by incorporating the power dynamics in a system into its language, and often the TOC and workplan are starting points for advisory council feedback. The more you see the TOC as an initial hypothesis, to be adjusted as more is learned about local realities, the more you will set up feedback to be useful and actionable. See more in the [recommendations to DFID](#) on their Zimbabwe Business Environment Reform project, which note that “DFID Zimbabwe should consider stipulating an indicative ToC in the BC, and building into the programme the expectation that the ToC will both drive and reflect critical thinking and learning, as pathways to change crystallise during the roll out of the programme.”

Getting the Most Out of Advisory Councils

8. Make sure to *get and use some data that the group can help you make sense of*. Much more than simply monitoring data at output level, a good advisory group can be made great when empowered to inform your learning agenda and help determine which data you need to answer the questions posed to it. Importantly, their discussions to make sense of different data - and how it looks to different stakeholders - may be as valuable as the conclusions they reach, so be sure to share data, early enough for members to review in advance, and then make sense of it collaboratively. The [Liberia Accountability and Voice Initiative](#) 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” and directed it to inform the “commissioning of topical research and synthesis exercises.”
9. Frame the task as *issue exploration and problem solving, not debates or advocacy*. An impressive amount of research indicates that our brains process differently when we're exploring an issue together than when we're arguing in support of conclusions we've already reached. An advisory body will be much more useful if its members are curious and view disagreement and uncertainty as interesting, rather than a problem to be beaten back or an opportunity to argue for favored positions. The language you use to involve them and in setting up discussion can make or break their usefulness in how it explains the purpose and process of their reflections and feedback. A great comparison

of these two frames, and what they invite, shows the difference (taken from this [article on pitfalls](#) in small group thinking). Note that one of the biggest drivers for an advocacy rather than exploration frame is when funding is at stake - this reinforces the point above that the best advisory board members shouldn't have a financial stake in the program.

Figure 1. Advocacy versus Inquiry in Small Group Processes

	Advocacy	Inquiry
Concept of decisionmaking	A contest	Collaborative problem solving
Purpose of discussion	Persuasion and lobbying	Testing and evaluation
Participants' role	Spokespeople	Critical thinkers
Pattern of behavior	Strive to persuade others Defend your position Downplay weaknesses	Present balanced arguments Remain open to alternatives Accept constructive criticism
Minority views	Discouraged or dismissed	Cultivated and valued
Outcome	Winners and losers	Collective ownership

10. Ask about *wider trends as well as programming*. Those closest to the work often know plenty about how the work is going; the advisory body tends to bring in other areas that are important but not foremost in implementers minds. For example, in the Zimbabwe civil society strengthening program (CSSP), their "reference group" was asked to speak to bright spots and blind spots in programming, but also to wider social, economic, and political trends that might bear on the programming space. This helped them keep programming relevant in a changing context.
11. Ask about *power dynamics*. Some of the best insights from advisory groups are around how key players are changing positions, or how political will towards certain issues is ebbing and flowing. Don't just ask about easily-observable changes; ask about the underlying incentives and way that things work in practice - that's the real value of local stakeholders' advice. This is facilitated by using PEA domains and findings as a starting point for future discussion.
12. Ensure that the group knows its role - the best takeaways from an advisory body are *memorable and true, but not actionable*. The advisory council will function best when its job is to describe how the context is changing and, from their perspective, how programming is interacting with it. Outsiders who are not expert in the programming should not be asked to provide practical recommendations of what to do - they should be synthesizing the information about what the programming is responding to, for immediate use, not for publication. It is the role of the Mission and implementers to determine what to do with the information and how programming needs to change. For example, in the Zimbabwe CSSP, their reference group findings were a short (two-page maximum) set of bullets describing key trends to adjust to. These bullets contained no

background to explain them to folks further from the process, nor recommendations for what to do in programming. Their only audience was the management team and its decision-making, and their input purely descriptive, which kept the feedback narrow and focused.