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The Beginner's Guide to Political Economy Analysis (PEA)

Author

Alan Whaites

Senior Adviser and Head of Profession, National School of Government
International (NSGI)

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This guide is accompanied by materials to support a beginner's training exercise and these are available from NSGI.

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Introduction

Over the last two decades aid agencies and academics have been on a journey of lesson learning and adaptation in relation to 'politics.' This journey has been driven by a determination to improve impact in all areas of development, but for some time it was particularly associated with work on public sector reform. Now, however, there is an increasing expectation that Political Economy Analysis (PEA) should be part and parcel of designing and implementing any programme or activity (and a brief history of the meandering journey of development actors on PEA can be found in The Policy Practice's Briefing Paper 11 – see below).

DFID in the UK is fairly typical among large development organisations in running an excellent course on political economy analysis, complete with 200 pages of resources and various online videos and case studies (and this type of course is recommended for those who want to take their exploration of PEA further). Even so, PEA is not just for those who have 'done the course and bought the T-shirt,' it is something that can be absorbed and implemented quickly by everybody. Indeed, the growth of interest in PEA is a reminder that this can look like a complex and daunting field and so this guide aims to offer an entry-point for all those who want to use PEA in their own work.

In doing so, this guide borrows from the best materials that are available while also adapting some approaches by incorporating wider ideas on politics and institutions. This guide affirms that there should never be an official 'orthodoxy' for PEA and so the emphasis here is on questions, prompts and ideas to help thinking and practice. There is also an attempt to clarify jargon wherever needed, while recognising that The Policy Practice (TPP) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) have produced a more complete glossary of PEA terminology.

The note will instead focus on 'the essentials' of PEA as they relate to the following questions:

- ❖ Why do we do political economy analysis, and what is it?
- ❖ What kinds of issues and ingredients are often included in a PEA?
- ❖ How do we make sense of the different varieties of PEA?
- ❖ What tools are out there to help us conduct a PEA?
- ❖ What is *thinking and working politically*?

Section One: Why do a PEA and What is it?

The original interest in political economy analysis arose from the realisation that highly technical (usually input-based) development programmes often did not work very well. In particular donors would rally around a reform process, providing technical advisers and funds, only to see the planned changes stall and disappear this would usually be written off as a lack of 'genuine political will.'

Over time development actors realised that understanding why the drive for change was missing (or where it might actually exist) required a better picture of what those with power wanted (and did not want). It also meant finding out what factors make change possible. PEA therefore helps us to unpack all the issues previously lumped into the 'political will' box, so that we can consider the factors to which we must adapt and those that we can try to influence and change.

PEA can also help us to identify entry-points for politically smart interventions and many formal studies try to outline potential 'pathways for reform.' Even so, a potential source of criticism of PEA is the tendency to use it as a 'passive' resource, to inform a single part of the programme management cycle (usually design) or to explain failure. Section five below explains one way to avoid this problem by using a methodology for actively 'managing' the implications of the political environment. PEA can therefore help to explain the environment in which we work, it can also enable us to work differently; and we can summarise our understanding of the concepts through the following three questions:

What is Political Economy Analysis?

PEA is the attempt to find out what is really 'going on' in a situation, what lies behind the surface of the immediate problem, for example whether competing interests exist. Usually this is formulated with (and clouded by) jargon around power, rules of the game, formal and informal systems etc, all of which boils down to trying to understand the 'lay of the land.' PEA is therefore part of the process of being 'politically smart' in our work, which is not the same as being partisan (committed to one set of political actors over another).

Do I need an expensive consultant to do PEA?

Frankly you don't even need a cheap one! PEA is something that can be a natural part of the way in which we all work, much of it hinges on how we inquire into the issues on which we are working i.e. asking who wants what, why and how?.

What if I don't like politics?

Then you are probably not alone. Politics is often a catch-all term for things that can include simple human nature, how people negotiate with each other and decision-making processes. DFID's guidance uses a good, and fairly standard, definition of politics as being about *determining how resources are used*. However the important point is that if we work in development then inevitably we are already involved in political processes and may unintentionally be shaping those processes. PEA therefore helps us to peel back the layers of our 'political' context.

Section Two: Ingredients for a PEA

A little later we will look at different varieties of PEA and how they have been grouped together. We will also consider (mercifully briefly) the bewildering array of PEA tools, touching on the fact that PEA may be formal with clear objectives and Terms of Reference (ToRs) etc, or informal and instinctive (the everyday approach).

But first it is helpful to explore what kinds of issues people explore when undertaking political economy analysis. Some of these issues may never surface explicitly in the analysis because they are ingrained in your understanding of the background and context of a country. However whether we are doing quick and dirty analysis or something much bigger, the elements in the table below will be important considerations, because they shape and influence the nature of the context.

This table is adapted from work produced by ODI/TPP for the DFID PEA course, along with the 2017 World Development Report, an Effective States and Inclusive Development (ESID) Research Centre briefing paper and other guidance notes (see the bibliography below). PEA guidance varies in how these issues are grouped and described, but in substance these elements will be present as factors to consider. Ultimately, however, there is no right or wrong approach when it comes to understanding how or why humans create and/or resolve problems, and for that reason the elements are a guide, not a template:

Elements	Description
Structural and contextual	These are the background issues that shape the political and institutional environment, such as the health and structure of the economy, demographic pressures, and regional factors. These do evolve and change (youth bulges, urbanisation, natural resource discoveries), but they are hard to influence and often (although not always) change over years rather than months. These are therefore the issues to which we must normally adapt in our work, and include in both our short and long-term planning.
Bargaining processes.	<p>This is a far more difficult area to study, particularly for those from outside the context involved. Hence explanation is required....along with some key jargon to consider.</p> <p>Most approaches to PEA include a need to understand how 'real process' works, how formal/informal processes sit together and how people operate within their systems and political/organisational cultures. This is second nature to those on the 'inside' for whom there is usually no 'informal' or 'formal' system; for these stakeholders there is just 'the system,' the way things are.</p> <p>To help us explore these issues many PEA guides talk about 'rules of the game' or 'institutions' (see the jargon junkie box below). Essentially these are questions of how deals get done, or become blocked. It can be helpful to think of this as how bargaining takes place, including the various influences on</p>

bargaining and those who bargain. Bargaining can be seen as the mechanism for actors to engage with each other, and problems arise when it is unbalanced and works poorly (see Collective Action Problems below). Bargaining may be formal (including through constitutional mechanisms) or informal. Box 1 offers a World Bank definition of 'bargaining processes.'

Bargaining processes happen at all levels and will be shaped by the commitments that constrain those involved, or by their level of influence and status (the factors that give people influence might be seen as their political collateral). When we look at the factors that shape bargaining, particularly the variables that **confer** or **constrain** influence, we often find that they are two sides of the same coin. For example, a relationship with a constituency which confers status and power (being its leader) may also bring obligations and expectations. There are many factors (such as 'identity' e.g. religion, ethnicity, region, and personal relationships) which can impact on our room to manoeuvre in bargaining processes. There may also be significant differences in how bargaining processes work related to gender, and how women affect bargains, and are affected by them.

Another helpful concept related to 'bargaining' is the idea of '**elite bargains**' or '**political settlements**,' the often unwritten understandings between powerful actors that help to avoid conflict through a consensus on the distribution and organisation of power (which may include a consensus on how power changes hands). These bargains can be dynamic, inclusive and changing or relatively stagnant and exclusive (and may try to control those outside the bargain through force).

When bargaining processes fail this may be due to a *disequilibrium* and the 2017 World Development Report discusses why a disequilibrium may emerge, and identifies some of the ways in which they can change. One aspect of these issues may be '**collective action problems**,' and a large study of [Power and Politics in Africa](#) identified that these lie at the heart of many development challenges. Collective Action Problems are where the level of multi-stakeholder agreement and effort required for change to happen is difficult to achieve. Too often when we blame failed reform on lack of 'political will' the underlying story may actually be that those with the 'will' cannot overcome the hurdle of collective action problems. This means that having a counterpart Minister (Prime Minister, or President) sign-off on a reform programme does not necessarily mean that sufficient 'will' exists for change to happen.

Terminology on 'rules of the game' or 'institutions,' features in many PEA tools and aspiring PEA anoraks can see the 'jargon junkie' box below for an explanation of some of the variations of concepts.

<p>Stakeholders</p>	<p>Again this set of elements is often described differently, particularly as 'agents,' drawing on a set of development thinking around 'agency' (for example in DFID's Drivers of Change tool).</p> <p>Stakeholders include those with power who participate in bargaining processes, those who are excluded from the processes, and networks and constituencies who may be connected through association with each other and elites. Sometimes we refer to organisations as 'stakeholders' (such as a political party, trades union or business group), but it is also important to remember that organisations have their own internal political economy and bargaining processes. Also, some stakeholders can traditionally be excluded from PEA, and as a consequence not be recognised within programme or policy responses (e.g. too often gender issues are ignored, see: Gender - the power relationship that Political Economy Analysis forgot?).</p> <p>Stakeholders may be winners or losers from a proposed change, or from the current status quo. They do not, however, necessarily act rationally and they are not just driven by their own financial interests. <u>Stakeholders are the embodiment of a complex map of influences, beliefs and commitments (just as we all are).</u> Stakeholders also have very different levels of influence and these may bear no relationship to formal roles or hierarchy.</p>
<p>Incentives and ideas</p>	<p>Incentives and disincentives feature heavily in the PEA literature and are not just about financial wealth or wielding power. Incentives can be very simple (money), or far more complex (the desire to leave a beneficial legacy). They can be highly destructive (harmful beliefs – such as prejudice), or entirely neutral (the desire for status and kudos can be either good or bad).</p> <p>Incentives and disincentives are normally in tension with each other, we all of us weigh up the 'pros and cons' of issues, even if we don't do so explicitly and consciously. Beliefs and ideas can be a very powerful form of incentive that shape aspirations, processes and relationships.</p>

Section Three: Varieties of PEA

This is a good time to look at the variety of ways in which PEA is approached through different tools. By referring back to the elements described in Section Two, we can see that most of the PEA tools consider all of the issues in the table, but that they do so with different weight and emphasis. For example some tools (such as network mapping or Everyday Political Analysis) are far more concerned with stakeholders, while others (such as Drivers of Change) have a greater focus on incentives and bargaining processes.

PEA tools can also be categorised by the scale/level to which the approach is applied. Drivers of Change approaches have often been used for macro, country-level analysis, whereas 'problem driven' tools (used by the World Bank) have been more often applied at a sector level (Oxfam's approach also has a clear fit with sector level issues). DFID's guidance, for example, uses this 'macro-to-micro' way of grouping the tools and explains how different approaches can complement each other at different 'levels' of analysis. ESID categorises the levels based groupings as:

- ❖ Issue specific to illuminate a policy or programme issue;
- ❖ Sector level, to identify barriers and/or opportunities;
- ❖ Country and context.

However with relatively little adaptation most of the approaches can be applied to a wide range of issues/situations. PEA can therefore relate to any host of issues, and the challenge is firstly to refine the question and scope, and then to identify the tools and approaches that offer the best fit for generating the analysis.

Section Four: More Tools than a Garage

Any attempt to identify the best methodology for a PEA process quickly reminds us that there is a bewildering array of individual tools available. These are explained in a large number of guidance notes and some of these are listed in the bibliography below. Some of these tools are not really meant for individual use, but others lend themselves easily to the individual practitioner wanting to build PEA into their normal work. An example of a 'practitioner friendly' tool is 'Everyday Political Analysis' (EPA) published by the Developmental Leadership Program. Others take time, for example USAID's very clear and practical note on 'Applied PEA' places an emphasis on literature reviews as part of the process and several successive steps within the overall assessment.

However this note is not going to repeat advice available elsewhere, nor will it offer a long list of 'brand names.' Instead it suggests that users focus on the types of questions that they would like analysis to answer. This helps when judging which of the various tools might work best. Helpfully ESID have produced a note on 'making PEA useful' which outlines how PEA can differ based on whether the user just wants to generally understand what is going on, help navigate their way towards programme delivery, or to influence and change the course of wider events (how things work).

ESID suggest simplifying our approaches, even when looking at daunting problems, such as long-standing collective action problems. These issues might involve complex bargaining

Box 1:

What the WDR 2017 says about Bargaining:

Policy making and policy implementation both involve bargaining among different actors.

Who bargains in this policy arena and how successfully they bargain are determined by the relative power of actors, by their ability to influence others through control over resources, threat of violence, or ideational persuasion (de facto power), as well as by and through the existing rules themselves (de jure power). Power is expressed in the policy arena by the ability of groups and individuals to make others act in the interest of those groups and individuals and to bring about specific outcomes. It is a fundamental enabler of, or constraint to, policy effectiveness.

The distribution of power is a key element of the way in which the policy arena functions. During policy bargaining processes, the unequal distribution of power (power asymmetry) can influence policy effectiveness. Power asymmetry is not necessarily harmful, and it can actually be a means of achieving effectiveness, for example, through delegated authority. By contrast, the negative manifestations of power asymmetries are reflected in capture, clientelism, and exclusion. WDR 2017, Governance and the Law, The World Bank, (page 7)

processes, multiple stakeholders and competing interests, but they could still be explored through a fairly simple and intuitive set of questions. As a result they suggest that we dig into problems in quite straightforward ways, including having a 'one hour conversation' approach in which we try to explore questions that relate to the areas involved. Table 2 borrows ESID's very simple one hour idea and offers headline points of inquiry on the elements above. However, this is not a tool (there are too many already); one hour questions need to be framed around the issues of interest, and then adapted (including being phrased sensitively and conversationally).

Element	Issues to explore when we construct our 'one hour PEA' questions
Structure	<p>What are the big economic issues facing this country/sector?</p> <p>How does government spend its money and why?</p> <p>What are the major contours of society - ethnic, religious, young/old and gender?</p>
Bargaining	<p>How inclusive or exclusive are bargaining processes? Are any groups marginalized? What is the role of women?</p> <p>What is the 'currency' of bargaining, the mechanisms through which influence happens (e.g. loyalty, patronage, rents)?</p> <p>How 'big' does the bargain need to be for action to follow? For example, if the Cabinet agrees to something, can change still be stalled by officials, civil servants etc? When does a bargain become enforceable?</p> <p>At a macro-level we might also want to know: what kind of political settlement are we dealing with (stable/unstable, inclusive/exclusive etc) and what are the major influences and constraints on it?</p>
Stakeholders	<p>Who are the stakeholders? How do they organize? Why are they involved?</p> <p>How do the stakeholders relate to each other, including beyond the obvious?</p> <p>How do the stakeholders see these issues?</p>
Incentives	<p>What are the big incentives that might encourage change (debt relief, legacy, security for certain groups)?</p> <p>What are the big disincentives?</p> <p>What do we know about how the trade-offs between incentives and disincentives are normally weighed?</p>

Some of the questions at the heart of the issues may be contentious and hard to pose, and this can lead to a reliance on perspectives from those with whom it is easiest to talk (e.g. other donors, NGOs etc). The risk of second hand bias is therefore high and so it is best to aim for as open a conversation as possible with all interlocutors. PEA processes can tie themselves in knots by being very coy about purpose and role, and ultimately this also

makes it harder to have frank discussions with counterparts about the results, or to share analysis with other development actors.

Equally, the one hour approach can make it too tempting to read from a list of questions in a very task orientated way, and there can be a fine line between being frank, blunt or rude. Hence it is important to take time to **make this a real conversation**, with introductions and customary courtesy. Using conversations as the basis for everyday PEA depends on a willingness to give space to counterparts to offer reflections that might not seem an exact fit to the question asked – but nevertheless provide insights into the day to day realities of the context.

With all approaches, even quick ones, **history is important**. What has been tried and failed, and why did it fail? And so whatever tool is used there needs to be a willingness to find out from others their experience from past processes. This should include viewing previous failures as a useful guide, knowledge that might make all the difference. It is also sometimes through history that we build up a picture of structures, and even bargaining processes.

By extension this makes **reading** important. There are often background pieces available from think tanks or donor bodies, and commercial sources such as the Economist Intelligence Unit. There may also be previous PEA materials offering insights into how others have seen the situation previously. This is all material that helps to provide a 'triangulation' of views, trying to check one set of inputs against others. Triangulation can help guide the process of refining questions and conversations as a PEA process evolves, particularly in testing important insights and ideas by diplomatically playing these back to counterparts to gauge wider views.

Section Five: Not a tool but a way of life...Thinking and Working Politically

Some recent innovations in PEA (such as Everyday PEA) reflect a trend away from analysis as a major enterprise done at regular intervals (e.g every three years during a planning cycle) towards a more continual and iterative process. This shift is partly because large formal studies have often had no discernible influence on programmes, they became siloed and were 'weeded out' of decision making processes as programmes moved towards approval.

This trend coincided with the rise of 'iterative and adaptive' thinking, which called for development to become more agile and flexible. These ideas are often associated with [Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation](#) and the related Doing Development Differently movement. The potential to combine these ideas with politics found a home in a Community of Practice that had emerged to consider implications of 'coalitions of change' programmes in contexts such as The Philippines. These programmes had tried to see politics as an issue to be actively managed, not just something to be understood.

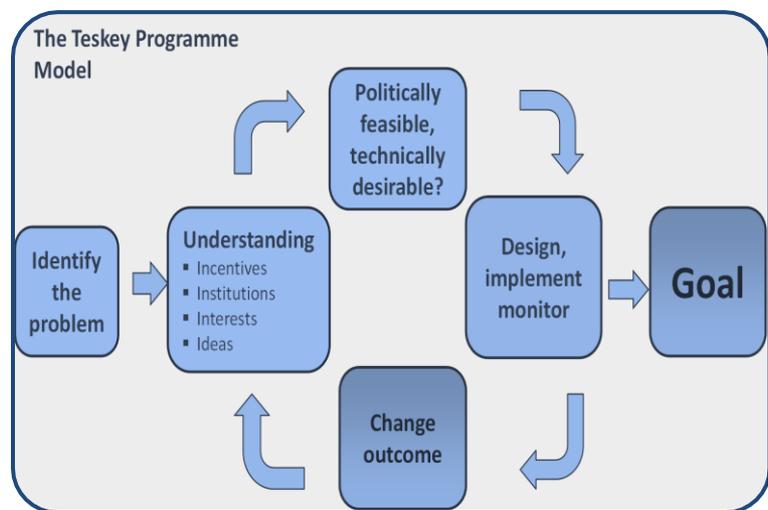
This **Thinking and Working Politically** [Community of Practice](#) advocates continual engagement with the political environment to help a programme navigate through problems. TWP is therefore rooted in actors integrating political analysis into everyday work in order to manage activities with the realities of the context in mind. This approach is not the same as passively accepting local political realities, but rather working intelligently and proactively with the context in order to deliver better development results. TWP builds on evidential work on 'Politically Smart' development, and the group has proposed 'TWP'

programme management.' Graham Teskey, chair of the TWP Community of Practice, has linked TWP ideas to other thinking on development, comparing the approaches as:

	Doing Development Differently	Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation	Thinking and working politically
Features emphasised	Use locally legitimate institutions Use <i>partnership</i> not <i>principal agent</i> ideas Focus on real results	Relentless focus on a specific problem Make many small 'bets' Learn and adapt as you go	Recognition of competing interests Engage with reformers / pro-poor coalitions. Based at all times in political economy perspectives: country / sector / programme / issue
Common features	Context is everything <i>Best fit</i> rather than <i>good practice</i> No blueprint – rather flexible, responsive, adaptive programming Real-time learning Long-term commitments with staff continuity Enabling, not doing		

This thinking led to a model of how to manage projects and partnerships through a continual process of reflection and change. Here PEA cannot be limited to the design stage of any activity, but instead is a spur to adaptation. Some programmes therefore try to actively record/capture everyday political analysis (e.g. through project diaries) and then feed it into a cycle of implementation, monitoring, learning and adaptation.

Ultimately the implication of TWP thinking is that tools/varieties of PEA are far less important than actually doing PEA and using the results, hopefully with PEA becoming instinctive and accessible. If PEA is a part of everyday work then politics should move from being a catch all terminology of blame ('it was lack of political will that killed the programme...') to a core part of more flexible approaches designed to navigate through challenges over time.



Section Six: Conclusion

Sue Unsworth, one of the great proponents and innovators of PEA, made a point to donors that is relevant for all development actors:

'No-nonsense practitioners looking for firm guidance about what to do may instinctively reject this as too abstract, but thinking differently is an essential starting point for acting more effectively. In particular, thinking about political context and processes of change

shapes donor language, behaviour, expectations and priorities, and so influences what they do and how they do it. Without a change in the way they think, donors risk rapidly reverting to a technocratic default position'

That different way of thinking starts when we accept that PEA is not carried out simply to satisfy our curiosity. A few years ago I gave a speech at a meeting of development political scientists, and I asked how many had worked as PEA consultants, with around 75% of the audience raising their hands. I followed this with a question about how many had been commissioned to help prepare political strategies, and not one had. This disconnect between PEA and strategy is a challenge for all practitioners. Most of us, however, may not have the opportunity to construct a strategy for overall political engagement, but we can use PEA actively in our own day to day roles.

The operational challenges for development actors in using PEA have been discussed by Heather Marquette and David Hudson in their paper *Mind the Gaps*. They argue that 'there is a gap between PEA and frontline working, programming and implementing. For too many staff PEA is something that is done by outside specialists and exists in long and detailed analytical documents; it is not a living and breathing process woven into everyday practice.' Hopefully we can all change that.

And finally – the Jargon Junkie Box

When thinking about 'bargaining processes' we are often looking at how organisations are formally structured, regulated and managed and also how things work at a more human and informal level. This has led to some of the most confusing jargon issues in political analysis. For example the term 'institutions' is often used as the label for the rules/norms, yet many papers looking at organisational structures are called 'institutional analysis,' and global policy commitments use the term institutions for both norms and organisations. To try to bring its technical terminology closer to both global policy documents and normal usage, the DFID Governance cadre has adopted this working definition: *Institutions include organisations, norms and rules: they provide the systems, rules and processes (formal and informal) that enable or hinder human activity. Institutions are usually driven by power, shaped and given direction by incentives and norms. The impact of these drivers determines the degree to which institutions reflect inclusion, accountability and effectiveness.*

Many guides to PEA also prefer the term 'rules of the game' for these types of issues. So why not stick with that terminology? Overall the 'rules' terminology can be misread as implying a linear and even predictable view. If I am a civil servant in Malzambistan and I want to get transferred my approach could be described as following informal 'rules of the game' i.e. I understand what is expected of me in order to influence the process and get a certain decision. But that terminology implies something relatively clear, understandable and fixed. In reality I am more likely to engage in a fluid process where the rules shift constantly and may differ greatly depending on an enormous range of variables, hence the preference above for the terminology of 'bargaining processes.' Even so, the 'rules' language is much loved by academics, and allows them to talk about 'games within rules' and to draw analogies with football, rugby etc, and so don't expect it to disappear anytime soon.

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