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THINKING AND WORKING POLITICALLY: LINKAGES AND LESSONS FROM BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

June 2020

CONTRACT INFORMATION

This work is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under contract number AID-OAA-I-14-00014/AID-OAA-TO-15-00020 for the Biodiversity Results and Integrated Development Gains Enhanced (BRIDGE) Project. BRIDGE is funded and managed by the USAID Bureau for Economic Growth, Education, and Environment, Office of Forestry and Biodiversity.

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On the cover: Artisanal Fishing Boats, Saint-Louis, Senegal. Credit: Ji-Elle/WikiMedia Commons

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ACRONYMS

BRIDGE	Biodiversity Results and Integrated Development Gains Enhanced
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species
CLA	Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting
DRG/CSP	Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance, Cross-Sectoral Programs
FAB	Office of Forestry and Biodiversity
FBL	Fisheries, Biodiversity, and Livelihoods (Senegal)
IUU	Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
PEA	Political Economy Analysis
SFMP	Sustainable Fisheries Management Project (Ghana)
TNRC	Targeting Natural Resource Corruption
TWP	Thinking and Working Politically
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

BACKGROUND

The discussion about “thinking and working politically” (TWP) in pursuit of development objectives has gained wide currency among donors in recent years (Bazeley et al. 2013, Booth 2015, USAID 2018). In the biodiversity sector, the importance of TWP was reflected in [USAID’s Biodiversity Policy](#) (2014), which established the integration of conservation and development for improved biodiversity and development outcomes as one of its objectives. In a section discussing governance and power, the document stated that governance is “a key leverage point for conservation action,” and it noted the “overt and hidden dimensions of power.” Linking the two concepts, it observed that one of the keys to improving governance is “crafting strategies to enable stakeholders with different levels of power to work together.” The use of political skills to facilitate collaboration among diverse partners in order to reach programmatic goals is at the heart of TWP.

In 2015, the USAID Office of Forestry and Biodiversity (USAID/FAB) joined with the Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance, Cross-Sectoral Programs (USAID/DRG/CSP) in an integrated working group to discuss the intersections between biodiversity conservation and democratic governance. In 2016, the DRG Center released its field guide for Applied Political Economy Analysis (PEA) and, concurrently, the Africa Bureau conducted three political economy analyses on [biodiversity conservation in the context of extractive industries](#). In 2018, USAID/DRG published its guide for practitioners on [Thinking and Working Politically](#), and the following year USAID/FAB released a first [discussion note](#) on TWP that focused on strengthening PEA in USAID biodiversity programming.

In 2020, USAID/FAB worked closely with the Measuring Impact II and BRIDGE activities, and in coordination with USAID/DRG/CSP and USAID/FAB’s Targeting Natural Resource Corruption (TNRC) activity, to develop a supplementary guide for enhancing the practice of TWP in the Conservation Standards, the principles and practices used by USAID to design, implement, and evaluate biodiversity programming. That publication, “Technically Strong and Politically Savvy: Enhancing Thinking and Working Politically When Practicing the Conservation Standards at USAID,” provides practical “how-to” guidance for USAID staff and implementers who facilitate practices from the Conservation Standards as well as staff from other sectors, USAID implementing partners, and conservation practitioners in other organizations working on similar issues.

This second discussion note is aimed at increasing familiarity with the critical mindset of TWP, with attention to some of its key concerns, how they are reflected in biodiversity sector activities, and what their implications are for biodiversity programming.

I. WHAT IS THINKING AND WORKING POLITICALLY? ORIGINS AND PRINCIPLES

A steadily growing number of development analysts have joined in advocating the incorporation of TWP in carrying out development activities (Rocha Menocal 2014, TWP Community of Practice 2015, Teskey 2017). The call for TWP has analytic origins in influential arguments citing the pivotal role of politics in development (Leftwich and Wheeler 2011, Acemoglu and Robinson 2012) and is grounded in practical concerns resulting from the frequency of technically well-planned activities that have encountered unanticipated political obstacles and failed to produce desired project outcomes (Bourguignon and

Sundberg 2007, Easterly 2013, Hudson and Marquette 2015). Repeated experiences of political factors producing the paradox of “good program designs, poor program results” can be found across the entire spectrum of development sectors (Carothers and De Gramont 2013).

In the biodiversity sector, for example, reforms such as the adoption of improved fishing techniques or plans for forest conservation may receive public statements of support but fail to be implemented. Political actors may find it expedient to distribute benefits like subsidies or tax incentives to their political allies (and deny them to their political opponents) rather than undertaking environmental reforms in support of the greater public good (Bates 2014). TWP is a response to this sort of conundrum, based on the premise that effective development aid requires improved understanding of local political realities, strategic engagement with diverse governmental and non-governmental actors, and actions that work to support existing or emergent processes of change.

While analysts have different points of emphasis in discussing TWP, the TWP Community of Practice states that it rests on three core principles: 1) strong political analysis, insight, and understanding; 2) detailed appreciation of, and response to, the local context; and 3) flexibility and adaptability in project design and implementation.

Theories of change that incorporate TWP pay particular attention to power dynamics, local agents of change, and project objectives based on inputs that are iterative and adaptive. TWP promotes a strong awareness that project implementation is often complex and unpredictable, with realistic and viable solutions to difficult environmental problems requiring rapid cycles of experimentation and adaptation. Hence, TWP dovetails with and reinforces the collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) model used by USAID (Jacobstein 2017). This strong affinity with adaptive management is an important part of why TWP is gaining momentum within the agency.

2. TWP: NOT A METHODOLOGY, BUT A REORIENTATION IN APPROACHING DEVELOPMENT WORK

TWP is not a methodology but a reorientation in how development practitioners approach their work. TWP involves a commitment to maintaining awareness of the political environment in all its aspects— institutional, social, economic, and cultural—and how those different spheres of power may influence activity programming. By applying that outlook in a focused way to clearly define problems in biodiversity conservation, TWP can strengthen the feasibility and impact of theories of change and contribute practical inputs at each stage of design, implementation, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL).

TWP’s outlook recognizes that the everyday work of biodiversity conservation, which often focuses on contested issues like resource allocation, behavior change, and policy reforms, unavoidably intersects with politics and power relations. It also reflects a candid acknowledgement that navigating these political realities can be challenging. Power is often asymmetrical and skewed—a large majority of the countries where USAID works are ranked as partly free or not free (Freedom House 2019). Politics is about contestation, and reforms may be followed by non-implementation and persistent perceptions of winners and losers that can fuel further grievances. Change based on sound technical logic often comes into conflict with the interests of those who benefit from existing practices. As a mindset, TWP views

these kinds of political faultlines not as intermittent disruptions but as common features of the working environment that require consistent attention and demand appropriate adaptive responses.

This means that thinking politically involves looking critically at recurrent areas of focus and issues of power. For example, TWP includes paying close attention to the interests and incentives of key political and social actors, the performance of formal and traditional institutions, the influence of leadership and alliances, the administration of justice, and the negotiation of decentralized governance. TWP entails working intensively with key local influencers, civil society organizations, and communities to diversify and deepen coalitions in support of programming goals and the political reforms that are often needed to bring them about.

Table I provides: a) an illustrative list of common political faultlines encountered in biodiversity conservation and b) key areas of focus for the application of TWP in biodiversity conservation programming.

TABLE I. TWP AND BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION: COMMON POLITICAL FAULTLINES AND KEY AREAS OF FOCUS

COMMON POLITICAL FAULTLINES	KEY AREAS OF TWP FOCUS
Unequal access to resources	Power relationships
Competing economic interests	Resource users' incentives and power
Corruption and patronage	Abuse of public power for private gain
Resistance to implementing reforms	Incentives of influencers and mobilizers
Political interference in enforcement	Elite relationships
Environmental crimes and violence	Justice system: arrest, prosecution, and penalty
Central authority vs. local autonomy	Decentralization and co-management

TWP breaks down the silos of technical interventions and related political factors and views them as interdependent program realities that need to be managed jointly. This is in response to a recognition that individual stakeholders and groups often have mixed perceptions about the technical or political nature of activities. Technical changes in capacities, skills, and access to information about biodiversity threats produce shifts in local power structures that often have political reverberations.

3. POLITICS IS ALREADY PRESENT IN THE WORK OF BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

Politics affects all development sectors. Yet, as biodiversity conservation has gained increasing attention as a multifaceted development challenge crucial for livelihoods, food security, social stability, and national wealth (IPBES 2019; Roel et al. 2019), it has become more apparent that biodiversity programming is *especially* affected by the cross-currents of politics and power. This is readily observable when one examines some of the political factors that frequently affect fisheries, forests, and wildlife conservation.

FISHERIES

In West Africa, for example, political dynamics encourage or fail to constrain illegal fishing and overfishing that threaten fish stocks essential to livelihoods and national diets. Party politics perpetuate subsidies for motor boat fuel that contribute to overfishing, while enforcement and prosecution of illegal fishing is weakened by political interference that benefits the allies of influential power brokers. Brokered by local elites, the illicit licensing of foreign trawlers that unlawfully catch target fish of artisanal fishing communities creates strong disincentives for poor fisherfolk to obey the law. Politics and patronage at times inhibit and discourage the technical input of professional experts in ministries responsible for stewardship of vital marine fisheries (Standing 2015, USAID 2017, USAID 2020).

FORESTS

In the tropical forests of Central Africa, threats to biodiversity from illegal mining, logging, and land clearing often are not restrained by state authorities despite existing legal and regulatory mandates. Ethnic rivalries and discrimination are politically manipulated as a tool of power by incumbents to frustrate efforts to protect the environment. The prevalence of complex links between political figures and resource-based private companies mean that “elites seem to be always one step ahead of the regulatory measures aimed at improving transparency and accountability” (Integra 2017). Armed conflict and local power struggles drive internal migration that is a major threat to biodiversity and forests. Conversely, weak or flawed national governance increases the importance of working effectively with local authorities, traditional leaders, and affected communities.

WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

In Southeast Asia, tackling wildlife trafficking requires efforts to address core institutional weaknesses of legal frameworks and the clarification and coordination of overlapping bureaucratic mandates and responsibilities, including international obligations under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Supporting efforts to interdict and control the trade in rhino horn, ivory, pangolins, and tigers entails working effectively with multiple ministries, law enforcement agencies, crime units, customs offices, forest and park managers, agriculture and rural development officials, business associations, courts, and local government authorities. The management of these multiple institutional relationships, which often demands adroit political skills and judgment, takes place in a context where demand for wildlife is driven by traditional cultural beliefs that run counter to evolving legal systems that remain weak and ineffective. In Vietnam, for example, “the rate of convictions is less than one percent of those arrested” (Tetra Tech 2019).

These examples, based on reports from the field, demonstrate that biodiversity practitioners are called upon to think and work politically in complex circumstances on a daily basis. Much of the time and effort of biodiversity implementing partners and USAID staff are already devoted to navigating political issues. TWP is a response to this practical reality, bringing closer attention to problems that biodiversity practitioners often have already identified and helping to dig deeper into recurrent political bottlenecks that hamper biodiversity activities.

4. UNPACKING POLITICAL PROBLEMS WITH TWP: POLITICAL WILL, WEAK GOVERNANCE, AND CORRUPTION

One challenge in applying TWP that arises for biodiversity practitioners and other sector specialists is the question of how to connect political problems with technical interventions that fit programming needs and are within manageable interests. In practice, this means that political issues must be narrowed and targeted toward the right problems. How can issues arising from TWP be framed so that they are actionable?

One key aspect of this problem is the common pitfall of using broad terms or general labels for political issues in ways that can lead to weak or imprecise programmatic responses. Three examples of the kinds of political terms used frequently to identify political problems in biodiversity programming are: 1) lack of political will, 2) weak governance, and 3) corruption. Each of these terms can be usefully unpacked to help move from thinking politically to working politically.¹

POLITICAL WILL

“Political will” is a term that serves as a catchall to describe a lack of action on necessary or desired political reforms. From an analytic standpoint, and as a basis for action, simply noting a lack of political will has little or no utility. But it can be unpacked and disaggregated into component parts that bring the real underlying issues into focus. Some of the relevant questions include:

- What is the specific nature of the desired action that has been blocked?
- Whose will is in question? Is it individual or collective?
- Is the problem related to the intentions and interests of key actors, or is it a lack of capacity?
- What is the enabling environment? Are actions blocked by political or institutional constraints?
- Are reforms supported or resisted by political leaders, civil society, or the private sector?
- Is there commitment in terms of public statements or budget resources?
- Are there champions for reform within the political system, even if political will is blocked?
- Which stakeholders can be mobilized?

The application of straightforward diagnostic questions can help to open the black box of political will, clarifying the nature of the political challenge, identifying the key issues and actors, and suggesting options for activity managers. Clarifying questions of this type “constitute the practical backdrop to identifying where and how donors can direct their support to reinforcing political will” (Brinkerhoff 2010).

¹ More examples of common but imprecise political terms, along with sample question sets, can be found in Annex A of “Technically Strong and Politically Savvy: Enhancing Thinking and Working Politically When Practicing the Conservation Standards at USAID.”

WEAK GOVERNANCE

A similarly common, imprecise political term is “weak governance.” Governance is an overarching term that in the context of biodiversity includes how natural resources are accessed, managed, and used through the interactions and decisions of government, civil society, the private sector, and traditional institutions. As leading players, government agencies are in charge of “the process and capacity to formulate, implement, and enforce public policies and deliver services” (USAID 2013). USAID’s self-reliance metrics encompass important aspects of governance, including openness and accountability, inclusive development, and the capacities of government and civil society. These various components and aspects of governance can be explored through questions that help refine the understanding of what is meant by weak governance in specific contexts. These might include:

- What sort of governance is the focus of concern and who are the main actors—government, civil society, private sector, traditional institutions, or some combination?
- Is the problem related to the process of formulating policies or their adequacy?
- How is weak governance in this context linked to the implementation or enforcement of required actions by entrusted authorities?
- Is implementation hampered by lack of capacity or political interference?
- In what respects is the problem affected by inadequacies of inclusiveness or accountability?

The answers to these questions can help to focus concerns over weak governance and identify the possibilities and limits of specific programmatic actions within a theory of change. Spelling out tangible governance linkages to implementation facilitates the process of distinguishing between aspirational strategic approaches and more securely grounded best fit alternatives.

“A country’s self-reliance depends upon on how government, civil society, and the private sector manage and govern protected areas, as well as productive lands and waters, and by how well they combat the illegal and illicit exploitation of natural resources.”

USAID Environmental and Natural Resource Management Framework

CORRUPTION

Biodiversity conservation is negatively affected by corruption to varying degrees in most countries receiving biodiversity sector assistance. “Corruption” is a term applied broadly to bad conduct involving self-dealing, but it covers different specific behaviors. Transparency International defines corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.” The abuse of public power can take many forms (e.g., conflicts of interest, misappropriation, fraud, abuse of power, influence peddling, cronyism, or nepotism). Corruption may be the result of collective or individual actions related to processes, institutions, or sectors (Johnson 2015). Getting reliable information about corruption can be difficult, but these basic distinctions about types of actions, sites of the activity, and responsible actors help identify facets of corruption that can be queried to clarify the problems that are affecting biodiversity programming. Sample questions to get at these issues include:

- What is the specific form that the abuse of entrusted power takes?
- Who are the key actors and what are the levels or sites of the corrupt activities?
- What is the private gain and who benefits?
- Does it involve financial gains or political benefits and, if so, what are they?
- Who is affected negatively by the corruption?
- What are the implications of this form of corruption for activities?

Once the nature and risk of corruption is identified, TWP can include asking about the seriousness of the corruption risks in terms of both probability and impact. Based on that assessment, managers are better positioned to judge the costs and benefits of possible programmatic actions to alter or mitigate the corrupt behavior (Hart 2016).

BOX 1. TARGETING NATURAL RESOURCE CORRUPTION

Recognizing the threats posed by corruption to wildlife, fisheries, and forests, USAID’s Office of Forestry and Biodiversity supports the “[Targeting Natural Resource Corruption \(TNRC\)](#)” project. Led by the World Wildlife Fund, the project is implemented by a consortium of leading organizations in anti-corruption, natural resource management, and conservation. TNRC seeks to distill relevant anti-corruption knowledge, strengthen evidence on how anti-corruption efforts can help improve biodiversity outcomes, and support innovative policy and practices for more effective anti-corruption programming.

Recently, TNRC has sponsored [a learning series webinar and blog posts](#) on how TWP can help to unlock the political will needed to target corruption in environmental crime and resource governance by anticipating and assessing risks, identifying traps, limiting unintended harms, and thinking through sensitive issues involving human rights.

5. LESSONS IN TWP FROM CONSERVATION ENTERPRISES: BEST FIT AND SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMMING

One main lesson of past development failures from the TWP community of practice is that projects have often been unsuccessful because they tried to apply external solutions without fully recognizing that states and local communities must identify and solve their own development problems.

Conservation enterprises—businesses that support biodiversity conservation by providing benefits from the production and sale of related goods and services—provide more evidence for this insight. A synthesis of the [keys for success](#) for “Building a Conservation Enterprise” agrees that activities should “avoid situations where 1) outsider knowledge is perceived as correct, even when it is not, or 2) enterprises that may not be suited to the context are simply replicated because they have been perceived as being successful elsewhere” (USAID 2017).

Theories of change often fall short by implicitly assuming the presence of the institutional underpinnings or “enabling conditions” needed to make the provision of technical inputs and capacity building successful. While recommendations based on “best practices” may be elaborated on the basis of strong

internal logic, the political and institutional realities of individual countries are likely to require deeper consideration of what may constitute the “best fit” for programming activities. Even as innovation remains important, reforms need to “go with the grain” of the perspectives of motivated leaders and their preferences (Booth and Unsworth 2014).

The findings from both TWP case studies (Parks 2016) and conservation enterprises agree that the processes of institutional reform and locally driven change often require longer time frames than typical donor funding cycles allow. A systematic retrospective evaluation of 20 years of conservation enterprises and their theories of change provided evidence that helps to support this proposition. USAID analyzed six sites in different regions of the world where successful conservation enterprises have partnered with local communities and implementing partners for two decades. In each case, the role of implementing partners grew over time to include “alliances among groups of community organizations... [to] provide a collective voice to advocate for rights and policies.” Sustainability required “establishing legally recognized community organizations with rights over the natural resources needed for products and services” (USAID 2018b). Enabling conditions to successfully launch conservation enterprises included multiple steps requiring different forms of political coordination:

- Stakeholder alignment
- Community ownership
- Internal governance
- Compliance with government requirements
- Supportive policies
- Benefit sharing
- Resource use rights

While the specifics of these enabling conditions varied, each was contingent on reaching a workable consensus on the rights, responsibilities, and powers of the respective governments, businesses, and communities. The role of the implementing partner evolved over time in each case, with the deepening of the institutional context building the foundation for sustainability. In line with the longer time frame anticipated by a TWP perspective, the study found that “establishing and sustaining and achieving conservation outcomes” took longer than a conventional three- to five-year project cycle, and the successful examples of conservation enterprises were supported by complementary strategies in areas like land tenure and law enforcement (USAID 2018b).

6. LESSONS IN TWP AND PEA FROM FISHERIES SECTOR PROGRAMMING IN GHANA

Thinking and working politically (TWP) and political economy analysis (PEA) are sometimes used interchangeably, but they are distinct. TWP is a *mindset* that is committed to understanding local context, possibilities for change, and adaptive responses. By contrast, PEA is a *structured analysis* to

examine power dynamics influencing development activities. When conducted at timely junctures, PEAs provide evidence-based insights that support TWP.

BOX 2. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TWP AND PEA

Thinking and working politically (TWP) and political economy analysis (PEA) are frequently conflated and sometimes used interchangeably—but they are very different. TWP is a *mindset* that recognizes that political awareness is an essential skill for development practitioners. TWP is committed to understanding power dynamics, appreciating the political realities of the local context, recognizing the importance of local coalitions for reforms, and making necessary course corrections throughout the program cycle. By contrast, USAID’s Applied PEA is a *structured analysis* that examines power dynamics and the socioeconomic forces influencing a particular national context, sector, or development problem. It examines development challenges in an iterative, analytic process that updates findings and programmatic implications as the program cycle and surrounding political economy evolve. PEA findings can provide empirical support for TWP, but TWP is a mental disposition about how development works that is informed by day-to-day observations and interactions, as well as PEAs and the full range of other available sources of information.

A recent USAID Applied PEA of fisheries in Ghana provides a good example. In recent years, Ghana has faced a crisis of sustainability in its small pelagic fisheries, threatening the food security and livelihoods of a large segment of the population. While the technical solutions to the problems in these fisheries have been known for some time, the necessary actions have been caught up in political bottlenecks.

In September 2017, a pause and reflect workshop based on the Conservation Standards was co-hosted by USAID and its Sustainable Fisheries Management Project (SFMP) to review SFMP’s theory of change and identify questions for a mid-term evaluation ([Schuttenberg and Torrens-Spence 2017](#)). Specific questions were identified based on analysis of the SFMP’s theory of change, depicted as a results chain. Overfishing and illegal fishing by artisanal fishers were confirmed as the key threats to Ghana’s fisheries, but participants questioned the growing impact of illegal catches by foreign industrial trawlers on the recovery of the small pelagic fishery. They also developed questions around assumptions about the effectiveness of strengthening fishing associations to give artisanal fisherfolk a more meaningful voice, advocacy work with opinion leaders and policymakers to support needed reforms, and steps to catalyze greater effectiveness in the Fisheries Commission. The pause and reflect workshop benefited from the systematic analysis of the Conservation Standards, which captured the local implementers’ perspectives and insights, and made clear the need for a PEA.

To answer the questions that came out of the pause and reflect exercise, USAID implemented a PEA with an interdisciplinary team with backgrounds in fisheries, natural resource management, democratic governance, and economic growth, assembled from USAID/Washington, USAID/Ghana, local experts, a PEA consultant, and a logistical assistant. This shared field experience gave team members first-hand exposure to both the political issues identified in the questions from the mid-term pause and reflect and issues that emerged in the course of field interviews and focus groups. The PEA opened up a much deeper understanding of the problems and perspectives of women and men in the fishing industry and the political and power dynamics that acted as a brake on collective action.

Why were fisherfolk continuing to engage in numerous illegal fishing practices and resisting a closed season, despite a widely shared belief that fish stocks needed to be replenished? Fear of loss of income

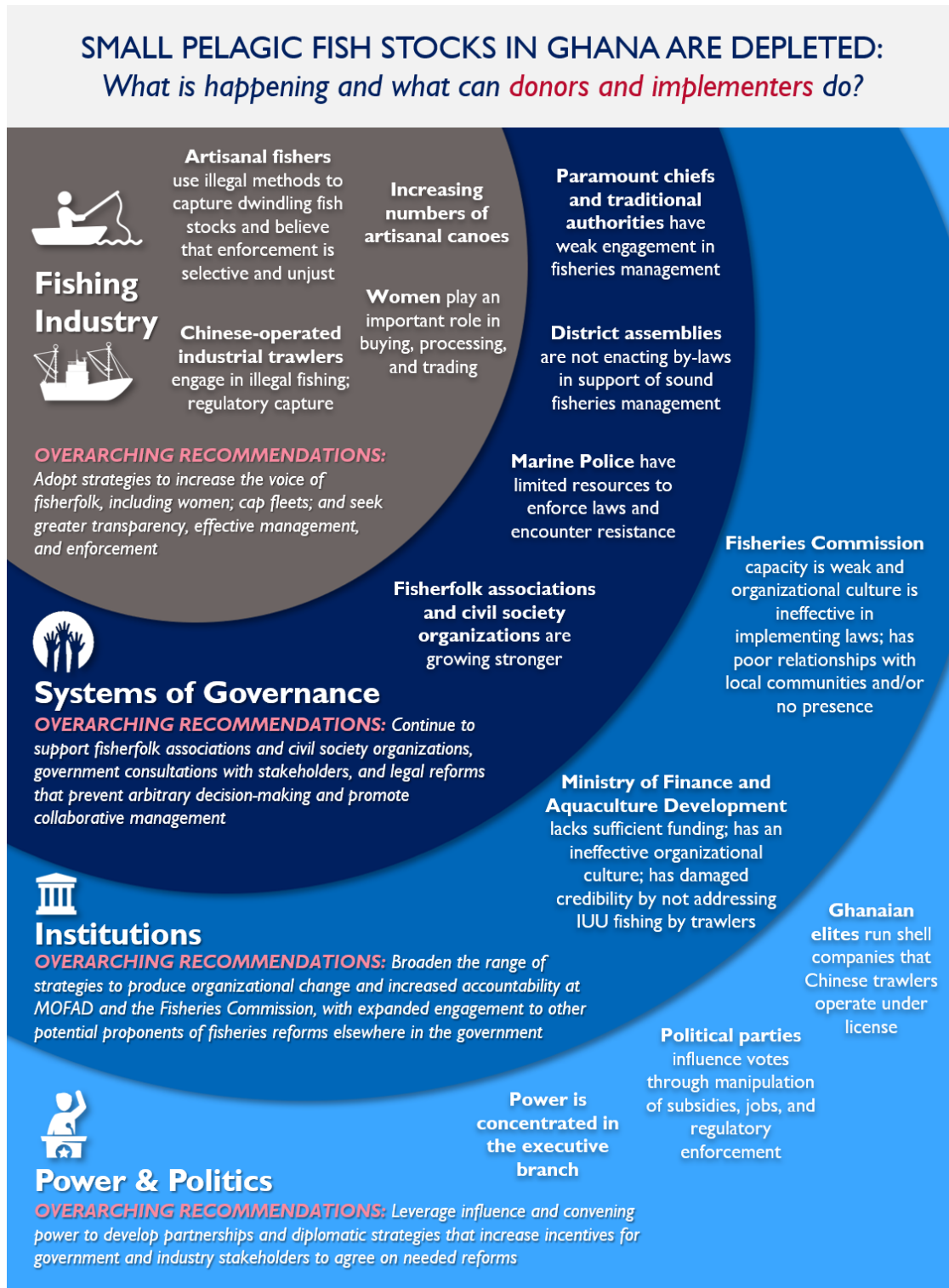
was one obvious and important reason, but it became apparent that corruption was another. Foreign trawlers, almost all Chinese, were operating illegally in artisanal fishing areas under ghost licenses sponsored and sold by powerful Ghanaian elites. (See the upper left and lower right of Figure 1.) Even when arrests were made, political interference meant that offenders received little or no punishment.

Although the problems with foreign trawlers were known, the PEA found they had taken on even greater symbolic meaning because they dramatized the essential unfairness of the situation. Poor artisanal fishers were being asked to cease their illegal fishing practices and agree to a closed fishing season to reduce overfishing, while politically powerful individuals were making money by fronting Chinese trawlers. Meanwhile, those same trawlers were allowed to catch large amounts of fish illegally with complete impunity. For artisanal fishers, this created perverse incentives for a race to the bottom to catch fish by any means before fish stocks were depleted even further by the trawlers.

The findings of the [Ghana fisheries PEA](#) are summarized in Figure 1, which shows the full suite of issues identified by the PEA in governance, institutions, and power and politics affecting the fishing industry, along with overarching recommendations. The PEA helped to clarify for the Mission the problem of lack of political support among artisanal fishers for necessary reforms and the challenge of illegal industrial fishing, while also engaging many of the key governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and identifying some of their less obvious perspectives and motivations. By capturing these issues at a level appropriate for effective discussion and follow-up actions—avoiding both oversimplification and excessive detail—the PEA was able to inform the Mission’s thinking and help socialize TWP in cross-sectoral discussions about fisheries programming among colleagues in Washington and Accra.²

² See the Appendix in [Discussion Note: Thinking and Working Politically and Strengthening Political Economy Analysis in USAID Biodiversity Programming](#) for other examples of how Applied PEA can make contributions to TWP throughout the program cycle.

FIGURE 1. GHANA FISHERIES PEA



7. LESSONS IN TWP FROM WORKSHOPS IN SENEGAL AND GUATEMALA: ALIGNING WITH THE LOCAL CONTEXT TO SUPPORT PROJECT GOALS

Much of the literature upon which TWP is based supports the importance of the principle of “strong and inclusive governance structures and capacities” as laid out in [USAID’s Environmental and Natural Resource Management Framework](#). The ability to engage in TWP and the development of coalitions in support of biodiversity sector reforms rely upon diverse relationships with key actors at all levels, both in and out of government. Collectively, the competing priorities and perspectives of government officials, civil society representatives, community leaders, researchers, and businesspeople compose the political system within which project activities take place. TWP includes careful consideration of the interactions and power dynamics among these various stakeholders and how they relate to the goals of specific activities.

Workshops at various stages of the program cycle (design, start-up, pause and reflect) offer key opportunities to use TWP to build a “diversified portfolio” of relationships that strengthen project activities and help to mitigate political risks. One of the distinguishing characteristics of TWP, according to [USAID’s TWP guide](#), is “greater attention to stakeholders outside the traditional comfort zone of donors.” But there is no one-size-fits-all approach to applying TWP to workshop planning and implementation, as that process needs to unfold with close attention to the specific political circumstances of the local context. Basic TWP questions do apply, however, to all workshop activities, including: 1) What are the main project goals of the workshop? 2) Whose participation is important to ensure inclusiveness? and 3) What is the proper mix of participants to stimulate open discussion, while also avoiding either conflict or self-censorship when sensitive political issues arise? Two recent workshops in Senegal and Guatemala provide examples of how these basic questions and the local context interact.

CONSENSUS AND CONFIDENCE-BUILDING

For the Fisheries, Biodiversity, and Livelihoods (FBL) activity start-up workshop in Senegal, the goal was to develop a shared understanding of the fisheries context, stakeholders, and opportunities and constraints, in order to ensure that FBL activities to reform fisheries management would be effective and sustainable. Senegal has a stable and generally low-conflict [democratic political system](#), with an improving business environment. [A PEA that was conducted two years earlier](#) for the previous fisheries project had already identified many of the main governance issues affecting the sector for the USAID Mission.

From a TWP perspective, this stable political context and accumulated experience meant that the workshop could have a modest scope, reaffirming a common frame of reference, building confidence and trust among participants, and validating a consensus on the project’s theory of change and initial activities. The workshop included approximately 20-25 participants representing the main institutional partners and decision-makers from key government agencies and civil society organizations. These comprised the core group of key actors whose cooperation would be important for launching project activities. Most of the participants knew each other and were comfortable exchanging candid opinions and points of view.

Three central challenges to improve the sustainability of artisanal fisheries in Senegal were addressed by the workshop participants: 1) strengthening stakeholder demand and engagement, 2) improving policy implementation, and 3) shifting toward decentralization through the empowerment of local artisanal fishing councils. For the first challenge, there was a strong consensus around the need for a more powerful shared narrative to alert the general public about the seriousness of threats to Senegal's fisheries. For the second, there was common agreement on the appropriate sequence of steps to advance the necessary implementing reforms. For the third challenge, however, which involved questions of rights and responsibilities, there were some areas of disagreement between participants from government and civil society on the proper steps and timing needed to move forward on decentralization. Given the overall goals of the workshop, and the existing relationships among the participants, these differing perspectives were identified and noted without the need for more extended discussions to try to resolve them.

In line with its goal of building consensus, the workshop was successful in ensuring that key partners understood and supported the rationale and plans for the launch of the project's activities. If a broader range of participants had been included, it might have brought in more diverse perspectives, but made consensus more difficult. Project managers had also already committed to expanding engagement with religious leaders and other groups as part of the consolidation of activities after the project start-up.

OUTREACH AND MOBILIZATION

The Guatemala Biodiversity Project start-up workshop took place in a very different context. Guatemala's complex and tense political economy, including problems of flawed governance, corruption, and narcotrafficking, was the backdrop to the workshop discussions. The workshop was carried out after an initial PEA had been conducted, approximately six months into preliminary project activities. Focused on three distinct pilot areas, ranging from sea turtle beaches to smallholder farms near the Maya Biosphere Reserve, the project aimed to work with government and local stakeholders to improve the management of the national system of protected areas. Project implementers intentionally applied a TWP lens to their approach from the beginning, including a key decision that the PEA's five teams would be exclusively composed of staff from implementing partners in order to allow them to build close relationships with local communities, thereby establishing linkages with a diverse network of key actors and reaching out beyond traditional information channels.

In line with the project goals of deepening outreach and mobilizing participation, the workshop had more than 90 participants, many of whom had been engaged through the PEA and had already provided feedback, resulting in adaptive changes to early project activities. Breakout sessions concentrated on the most important threats to biodiversity, but these often had evident linkages to the top-down style of governance and a culture of impunity in the justice system that has resulted in the overwhelming majority of cases of environmental crimes never reaching a resolution. In view of these higher-level structural problems of governance and the high sensitivity of many political issues, many participants emphasized the desirability of focusing on effective social coalitions at the local level and replicating examples of successful local practices.

Given the prior work that had led up to it, and its distinctive political context, the Guatemala Biodiversity Project start-up workshop built upon and was part of a cycle of consciously expanding partner engagement initiated by the PEA. The early focus on embedding TWP in staff development and planning facilitated the presentation of PEA findings at the workshop and the design of relevant

workshop themes and activities. Yet, at the same time, participants found it was important in workshop discussions to be mindful of the sensitivity of many political issues and to reflect that caution in project activities.

TWP IS ABOUT AWARENESS AND GOOD DECISION MAKING

As the workshop examples from Senegal and Guatemala illustrate, TWP is not about politicizing issues encountered in the development of project activities. Rather, it is about making good decisions based on a keen awareness of the politics of the working environment to support, broker, and facilitate “the emergence and practices of reform leadership, organizations, networks, and coalitions” (Laws and Marquette 2018). Workshops conducted at various stages of the program cycle bring these political considerations to the fore, both in terms of decisions about participation and the handling of political issues linked to biodiversity programming. TWP can help to identify and clarify relevant political sensitivities, generate the proper roster of workshop participants in line with project goals, and enhance the decision-making of workshop organizers with respect to the format and content of workshop activities.

8. THINKING ABOUT POLITICAL RISKS

The countries that program biodiversity conservation activities reflect a highly varied spectrum of political regimes that often include very distinctive sub-regions. All of these countries, whether tending toward democratic or authoritarian rule, are also subject to the winds of political change. This makes the practice of TWP both important and, in some instances, risky or even dangerous. It should be remembered that politics is about competing values and interests and always involves some measure of contestation and resistance. Soliciting input on the political context from reliable local experts and colleagues with first-hand political knowledge is an essential part of the due diligence of biodiversity programming.³

In countries with a semi-democratic or repressive political environment, biodiversity programming that directly or indirectly responds to political challenges can be expected to provoke strong resistance. USAID anticorruption programming has identified several lessons learned in such politically difficult circumstances, and they can be applied more broadly:

- Refrain from setting overly explicit political goals if there is questionable political will or tenuous stability.
- Avoid the appearance of imposing interventions on countries, and instead approach it as a collaborative effort to boost commitment and ensure local ownership.
- Avoid accountability and oversight interventions if enforcement and sanctions are not faithfully administered.

³ Even high-biodiversity countries like Brazil and Peru, which are ranked as “free” by Freedom House, have regions where illicit natural resource extraction is common and subject to recurrent episodes of conflict and violence.

- Refrain from mobilizing citizen concerns when the justice system or other complaint-handling systems have few ways of addressing grievances and following up on such cases.⁴

Political hazards can include not only risks to programmatic operations and the safety of staff and partners, but also the possibility of damaging broader donor relationships with the host country. Hence, an important function of TWP is to make clear-eyed assessments of project activities that should *not* be undertaken and no-go zones where projects should *not* operate.

9. TWP AND ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

TWP has emerged as a recommended practice at many development agencies in response to project failures linked to the complex and uncertain effects of politics and power. As a consequence, adaptive management based on TWP pays particular attention to 1) mechanisms for increased flexibility in donor procurement and contracting processes, 2) structured opportunities for learning and reassessment, and 3) the use of contextual and qualitative information to complement the collection of standard indicators.

Thinking and working politically takes time, effort, and resources. Project descriptions and applicant instructions in procurements can provide guidance that facilitates consistent political analysis in support of programs. Increasingly, donor procurements provide for inception periods that allow for PEAs and the early adjustment of objectives and outputs.

Biodiversity conservation programming has made pause and reflect exercises a standard practice for engaging project partners and assessing successes, failures, and implementation challenges. The scope for adaptive management in response to the findings of pause and reflect sessions may vary, contingent on the latitude allowed for the acknowledgement of failures when they occur and the flexibility to build upon successes and examples of “positive deviance.” Two possible pathways are sometimes identified. In the so-called “single loop” model, mid-course corrections are made to ensure that activities are adjusted to conform to revised workplans and targets. The “double loop” model is more far-reaching, as it includes the possibility of “questions regarding the appropriateness of the [project] objectives and activity targets themselves” (Brinkerhoff et al. 2018). From a TWP perspective, the flexibility envisioned in the latter case may at times be more politically realistic, but it may prove difficult or impossible for donors to accommodate given their own requirements and demands.

Biodiversity programming focused on promoting policy reforms and strengthening dialogue and collaboration among communities, resource user groups, and government representatives involves monitoring the progress of a series of processes. TWP, therefore, calls for greater use of qualitative evaluation methods that consider such issues as trust, relationships, and behavior change, and that employ techniques like [social network analysis](#), [most significant change](#), and [outcome harvesting](#). These methodologies can be supported by a more participatory approach to MEL that involves many of the project staff, country partners, and selected beneficiaries.

These sorts of qualitative approaches in support of TWP also have implications for the selection of key personnel. With managers and staff working more as enablers of local systems than as purveyors of solutions, there is a concomitant shift in roles and skills. These include facilitation, negotiation, networking, and deep knowledge of local relationships. Similarly, interdisciplinary teams that can apply

⁴ Adapted from [Practitioner’s Guide for Anticorruption Programming](#) (USAID 2015).

TWP to take an integrated approach to implementation are needed. Identifying the right kind of staff expertise in procurements can significantly improve the practice of TWP by implementing partners.

10. APPLYING TWP TO BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION PROGRAMMING: NEXT STEPS TO STRENGTHEN THE EVIDENCE BASE AND HARVEST LESSONS LEARNED

Over the past decade, TWP practices have drawn increasing attention from donors like USAID, the Department for International Development (UK), and the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as well as the World Bank, implementing partners, think tanks, and many non-governmental organizations. This trend can be expected to continue. At USAID in the biodiversity sector, the Office of Forestry and Biodiversity, working with the BRIDGE and Measuring Impact II activities, has been working to deepen the application of TWP in the planning, implementation, and adaptive management of biodiversity programming through the Conservation Standards.

As the examples provided in this discussion note show, TWP is already present in the everyday work of biodiversity sector practitioners and within USAID. But as those examples also suggest, a more conscious adoption of TWP has the potential to improve programming. Sharpening the understanding of political bottlenecks, unpacking poorly specified political challenges, and aligning workshop activities with the local political context can help the selection of interventions that will avoid serious political risks, and expand opportunities for adaptive management.

These examples reflect growing evidence on how TWP can make a positive difference in biodiversity sector programming. The evidence base, however, needs to be further strengthened. As a recent review of the integration of politics into development practice noted, there is a need to “compare a range of programs in different sectors and organizational contexts” to begin to draw more precise conclusions (Laws and Marquette 2018). The next steps needed to deepen the evidence base and harvest lessons from biodiversity programming should address several key questions and work areas. The principal questions include:

1. How has TWP been applied in recent biodiversity conservation activities, from project design to start-up, implementation, and MEL? What are the successes, failures, missed opportunities, and lessons learned from these experiences?
2. What are the results and lessons learned that are emerging from the enhanced application of TWP when practicing the Conservation Standards at USAID?
3. Does TWP have positive impacts on project outcomes? If so, what are they, and under what circumstances do they occur?
4. What are the circumstances under which TWP (or the misapplication of TWP) produces negative outcomes or unintended consequences?
5. Given the strong emphasis on the importance of local context in TWP, how is TWP different in biodiversity conservation in different parts of the world (e.g., Africa, Asia, and Latin America)?

These questions can be addressed by tracking, documenting, and assessing the application and impact of TWP when conducting applied PEAs and workshops (e.g., design, start up, and pause and reflect) as well as throughout project implementation and adaptive management. Clarifying the role and influence of local political economies on biodiversity activities highlights the opportunities and value of cross-sectoral collaboration with colleagues. Issues linked to biodiversity like co-management, livelihoods, and social stability overlap with democratic governance, economic growth, food security, gender, and health programming. TWP helps to illuminate and reinforce how biodiversity project challenges often have cross-sectoral roots that can be addressed more effectively with the benefit of teams working together.

As the use of TWP becomes more intentional and consistent in biodiversity programming, the capacity of practitioners to recognize and respond to political challenges and changing political circumstances should strengthen adaptive management and deliver more successful outcomes. USAID's commitment to deepening TWP in the biodiversity sector also has implications for other development sectors as it is providing a significant opportunity to test and document evidence on the core assumptions of TWP. These lessons can be applied well beyond the biodiversity sector to strengthen USAID's objective to support partners to become self-reliant and capable of leading their own development journeys.

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