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DISCUSSION NOTE: THINKING AND WORKING POLITICALLY AND STRENGTHENING POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS IN USAID BIODIVERSITY PROGRAMMING

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INTRODUCTION

BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND POLITICAL ECONOMY CHALLENGES

Biodiversity conservation is a central development issue. Biodiversity provides benefits that sustain livelihoods and make important contributions to national economies. Diverse ecosystems provide a stock of natural assets including water, forests, soil, fisheries and wildlife that enhance resilience in the face of shocks. Biodiversity also bolsters the security and stability of communities and helps to sustain their identity, social relations and cultural values.

According to political theorist Robert Dahl’s classic definition, politics is “the authoritative allocation of values” among contending interests.¹ Power is commonly defined as the ability to get what is wanted, or to produce desired change. Political economy seeks to understand and explain how formal and traditional institutions affect and reflect political, economic and social incentives and decision-making. It provides the context to illuminate how collective outcomes like production and resource allocation are determined. Because biodiversity is so fundamental to economic life, resilience, social stability and national security, development projects undertaken in support of biodiversity inevitably intersect with these cross-currents and the turbulence of politics, power relations and political economy.

Practitioners working on environmental issues encounter these intersections of politics and biodiversity programming in very tangible ways. Common examples include:

- Failures to implement or selective enforcement of environmental legal regimes
- Regulatory capture or rents advancing the political/commercial interests of elites
- Clientelism and party politics unjustly against or in favor of specific groups in natural resource management
- Weakness of environmental ministries/agencies vis-à-vis other government agencies
- Institutional conflicts between government bureaucracies and traditional forms of authority
- Overlapping and disputed access, user rights and tenure for land and water
- Disputes over access and use of forest and marine protected areas
- Conflicts between biodiversity, livelihoods and development plans/infrastructure
- Threats to biodiversity from extractive industries (mining, logging)
- Conflicts between communities over scarce resources (fisheries, forests, grazing)

¹ Politics is used here and below in its broadest sense, encompassing such areas as political economy, political sociology and political culture.

- Rights of indigenous people and protection of cultural patrimony
- Wildlife trafficking linked to criminal or terrorist networks

The prospects for achieving successful implementation and desired outcomes of biodiversity conservation projects are complicated by these complex political, social, cultural and economic interactions and their environmental impacts. Often they present barriers to institutional reforms or forms of collective action that are widely believed to be appropriate and necessary. Or they may present specific, unanticipated obstacles to the implementation of technically sound biodiversity projects. Alternatively, biodiversity projects may provide important opportunities for forging or strengthening coalitions and alliances for reform that help to surmount institutional bottlenecks and improve democratic governance. For development practitioners, in either case, they pose the challenge of how to analyze, understand and respond to the multifaceted linkages between biodiversity conservation and politics.

This guidance note provides biodiversity sector specialists with an understanding of thinking and working politically (TWP) and how political economy analysis (PEA) can promote TWP and sharpen the tools already used for design and adaptive management in the biodiversity sector. It provides: 1) an introduction to TWP and PEA, 2) an overview of entry points for PEA in biodiversity programming, 3) next steps planned to advance learning and the application of TWP and PEA in USAID biodiversity programs and 4) an appendix with examples from nine countries to show how PEA has been applied to biodiversity projects in different contexts.

USING SITUATION MODELS AND RESULTS CHAINS AS RESOURCES FOR TWP AND PEA

In recent years, USAID has adopted a set of practices to promote collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) as a way to operationalize the concept of adaptive management and flexible and informed decision-making (see [USAID's Discussion Note on Adaptive Management](#)). On a related path, USAID's Forestry and Biodiversity Office uses a set of adaptive management tools based on the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation to design and implement technically sound programming.

The Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation provide a set of coherent and consistent practices that help biodiversity teams be systematic about planning, implementing, monitoring and learning from their conservation initiatives. USAID has adapted and applied these tools to align with the USAID program cycle and Agency policy (see [How-To Guides](#)). Situation models graphically represent a problem analysis of causal relationships among drivers and threats in the current context that affect clearly identified biodiversity project focal interests. Results chains visualize and graphically depict the causal logic of the strategic approaches and preliminary results within a theory of change. Results chains can be further elaborated to define elements of a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) plan that promotes measurable and practical mechanisms for project learning and adaptation. Taken together, situation models, results chains and MEL plans ensure that biodiversity projects are well-defined, logically interrelated, results-oriented, credibly evaluated and supportive of continuous learning and adaptive management.

In balancing analytic complexity and the need for clarity as a communication tool, however, situation models and results chains seek only to be “reasonably complete” and do not attempt to cover all of the factors and contingencies that may affect project activities. These limitations and the need for flexibility

are noted at each stage of Open Standards practices. For example, situation models can be used “to identify additional assessments needed to complete the context or problem analysis.” Results chains document the project assumptions and envision the conditions under which it is believed strategic approaches may or may not work. The design of MEL plans is intended to help implementing partners “identify, understand and communicate unexpected results or developments” and identify questions and assumptions that should be revisited over time to inform adaptive management.

The need for additional information and unpacking of assumptions, along with anticipation of problematic consequences or events, is frequently reflected in the language and postulates of situation models and results chains. Why is there “inadequate political will and social trust” to address wildlife crime? Will “improved data collection and capacity-building” be used by policymakers for “improved environmental enforcement?” What are the options when “violators have strong socio-political networks?” What is the proper response to “unmanaged cultural beliefs/practices” in marginalized indigenous communities? Who are the key stakeholders and alliances in “establishing a consensus of civil society, communities and the private sector for new conservation models?” What are the systemic forces and incentives that cause repetitive “low prosecution and corruption,” even when governments and agency personnel change over time?

The common thread of these and similar questions is that they indicate the need to consider the influence and effects of politics, power relations and political economy. Politics affect development not just in biodiversity but in other development sectors, including health, education, agriculture, disaster management, humanitarian relief and others. To address these challenges, thought leaders in the international development community have increasingly advocated over the past decade for a development practitioner culture of thinking and working politically and the use of political economy analysis to illuminate and help explain the key political constraints and enabling conditions that affect the implementation of project activities and their desired outcomes.

THINKING AND WORKING POLITICALLY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS

There is a growing consensus among researchers and analysts from foreign assistance agencies, multilateral donors, academia and civil society that development interventions often fail or produce suboptimal results because political realities have not been sufficiently taken into account (Carothers and De Gramont, 2013). A recent wave of papers has discussed the theory, evidence and frameworks for responding to this concern (Dasandi et al., 2016). The term “thinking and working politically” (TWP) has emerged as the overarching organizing principle for this body of work.

The TWP community of practice ([TWP CoP, 2015](#)) proposes three core principles to describe what TWP means for development programming: 1) strong political analysis, insight and understanding, with a focus on institutions, interests and incentives; 2) nuanced appreciation of, and responses to, the local context, working through and empowering domestic networks of stakeholders and coalitions; and 3) flexibility and adaptability in project design and implementation, punctuated by planned exercises to pause and reflect for critical assessments of project activities.

The following [post](#) by David Jacobstein describes how TWP meshes with CLA in support of iterative learning and USAID’s efforts to improve and increase organizational effectiveness: “TWP encourages

active understanding of context in an ongoing way. It promotes programs that align with domestic momentum to generate reform and a willingness to work with partners to help navigate political obstacles. Practitioners build coalitions, frame issues and shift incentives so that actors change their behavior in ways that unblock or enhance development results. They keep their finger on the pulse of how the politics around a result are shifting, and adjust their programming to new opportunities and new knowledge.”

While TWP is a mindset and strategic orientation, PEA is a methodology developed to analyze the politics of how and why things happen, along with their implications for project activities. Donor agencies and implementing partners are using PEA to increase their understanding of how power dynamics influence resource management in specific contexts. These findings can inform strategic plans, modify program design or adjust and adapt project implementation (USAID, 2018a). USAID has implemented PEAs in a variety of sectors, including health in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, governance in Latin America and education and biodiversity conservation in Africa.

USAID’S APPLIED POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS

USAID’s Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG Center) serves as the home for [USAID’s Applied PEA Framework](#). The Applied PEA Framework is a structured, field-based approach that examines power dynamics and the socioeconomic forces influencing a particular political area of interest (regional, national or local), sector or development problem. USAID’s Applied PEA Framework provides step-by-step guidance for conducting a PEA baseline study and offers practical advice on how to incorporate PEA as an ongoing process as the project cycle and surrounding political economy evolve. Analysis from the Applied PEA Framework supplies empirical support for TWP, deepening learning, expanding possibilities for collaboration and helping USAID project activities adapt through a process of experimentation and adjustment.

A regional, national or subnational Applied PEA investigates the main political factors driving development outcomes at each respective level, while a sectoral PEA explores influences acting on particular thematic areas like biodiversity, health or education. A problem-based PEA examines the political forces that complicate or block specific reforms or project activities. A PEA should also identify opportunities and actors (“bright spots” and “development entrepreneurs”) that can drive change (USAID, 2018a).

USAID’s Applied PEA Framework includes a rigorous gathering of information, including a literature review to avoid duplication of existing analyses and to ensure the best use of time available for field research. Field-based interviews with key informants, in tandem with daily team debriefs, provide the basis for the Applied PEA’s core findings. This synthesis of qualitative and quantitative empirical information provides insights into realities on the ground and how they relate to their broader context.

Time and effort are needed to define the PEA research questions and the practical steps for field research. The time required for fieldwork varies according to the scope and depth of the inquiry and the resources available, but many problem-level Applied PEAs can be done with about two weeks of field work. The field research should be an opportunity for intensive engagement on key research questions and team dialogue that steadily deepens and strengthens the PEA analysis and TWP. Box I describes the formal steps of an Applied PEA.

Box I. Steps of an Applied PEA

PEA STEP	TIME REQUIRED
1) Identify purpose and prepare a detailed statement of work: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the main focus? • Who should read, receive, discuss and act upon the findings? 	8-12 weeks prior to field research
2) Confirm PEA team composition: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the available resources? • Will the findings be used to explore or facilitate program integration? • Given the PEA purpose, what is the proper mix of team members, e.g., mission staff, USAID/Washington staff, project implementers, local experts, consultants, logistical support staff? 	6-8 weeks prior to field research
3) Complete a literature review based on scholarly research, governmental and nongovernmental reports and media sources, with identification of remaining gaps.	4-6 weeks prior to field research
4) Produce proposed research questions, initial draft program agenda and interview guide.	2-3 weeks prior to field research
5) In-brief for mission and sector leadership on research questions and itinerary.	1-3 days before field research
6) Hold an Applied PEA workshop in-country to finalize research agenda and questions.	1-3 days before field research
7) Conduct the field research.	2 weeks (or longer, if necessary)
8) Analysis and team synthesis of data.	2 days
9) Out-brief for mission and sector leadership on preliminary findings and recommendations.	After the conclusions of field research and prior to departure of international team members
10) Report on preliminary baseline findings.	2–3 weeks following field research of PEA team
11) Prepare final report.	4–6 weeks following field research of PEA team
12) Consider implications and further learning.	Ongoing

Source: Adapted from [Learning Lab Guide to Applied PEA](#)

POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS ENTRY POINTS FOR USAID BIODIVERSITY PROGRAMMING

Applied PEA helps to operationalize and sustain the process of thinking politically about a problem, while the Open Standards methodology provides a series of openings to support the practice of working politically. Integrating the critical thinking and analysis of PEA with the logic and rigor of situation models and results chains makes it possible to address challenges in the biodiversity sector in a holistic, analytically robust and politically informed way.

Because of the complementarity of these methodologies, a PEA can be useful at *any* point in the project cycle. The key challenge for development practitioners is to be clear about *why* a PEA would be helpful at a particular juncture and exactly *what* the problems (or research questions) are that the PEA is meant to address.

For example, within the biodiversity sector, a PEA can:

- Frame or complement a situation model to help **sharpen initial project design**
- Critically examine a results chain to revisit assumptions, clarify relationships, identify off-ramps and explore scenarios to **inform implementation or shifts in project direction**
- Help to calibrate or chart out a path forward in light of **unexpected MEL results and bottlenecks** or if a **follow-on set of project activities is under consideration**

Practitioners should also be aware that different entry points and the precise nature of the problem to be explored may call for different Applied PEA team composition. For example, an Applied PEA conducted at project start-up may provide an opportunity to instill TWP practices in project implementers and jump-start relationships among partner organizations and target communities. A mid-term PEA based on specific questions raised by a revised results chain may call for input from consultants with specialized knowledge. The use of a PEA to help move toward more integrated biodiversity programming may be enhanced by the participation of USAID staff from different units in the mission and USAID/Washington. Decisions about team composition should be carefully considered, discussed and resolved as early as possible in the PEA process.

Summarized below are some basic ways that USAID can integrate Applied PEA and TWP to support biodiversity conservation. PEA not only improves biodiversity programming but also contributes to enhanced governance of natural resources for broader development goals. For example, combating wildlife trafficking and environmental crimes is likely to align with and reinforce key dimensions of the overall governance approach in the country development cooperation strategy (CDCS).

Country Strategy: A variety of analyses inform a mission's CDCS. Applied PEAs can play a complementary role to other analyses through the examination of national-level factors that drive outcomes or institutional issues that reach across sectors. In Uganda, the insights from a countrywide PEA on the health sector spurred interest in PEA work in the biodiversity sector. A PEA can also be incorporated into other, required analyses to strengthen integration of political considerations in sectoral analyses. At the start of the CDCS process, all missions are required to conduct an analysis of tropical forests and biodiversity in the FAA 118/119 analysis. Examining the countrywide structural

constraints and threats to tropical forests and biodiversity, framed within the context of political economy insights, can help identify drivers of biodiversity loss and explain how addressing these drivers could contribute to CDCS development objectives.

Project and Activity Design: Situation models and results chains underpin the development and design of biodiversity projects and activities. The problem analysis, visualized in a situation model, helps contextualize problems and highlights likely strategic pathways to particular outcomes. The theory of change, illustrated through results chains, links cause and effect relationships shaping desired outcomes.

- **Problem Analysis:** Situation models provide biodiversity project design teams with a way to organize evidence on threats and drivers to biodiversity loss in a concise, logical fashion. A situation model can highlight areas of uncertainty where a better understanding of the local systems and political context can be addressed through an Applied PEA. The Applied PEA analysis, by refining understanding of the barriers to reform, can lead to considering different development interventions and collaborating with partners not thought of previously. Results from the PEA can then feed back into revisions and refinements of the situation model. (See [How-To Guide 1: Developing Situation Models in USAID Biodiversity Programming](#).)
- **Theory of change:** Situation models lay the foundation for developing a results chain. The results chain illustrates a theory of change as a series of causal relationships going from strategic approaches to the series of results needed to achieve conservation objectives. Developing a results chain provides the design team with opportunities to pinpoint assumptions and identify learning questions. This can help define PEA fieldwork and ensure that PEA inputs feed back into refining and adjusting the theory of change. (See [How-To Guide 2: Using Results Chains to Depict Theories of Change in USAID Biodiversity Programming](#) and [Tips on Power Dynamics and Theories of Change](#)).

Implementation of Adaptive Management: Project reviews or intentional pause and reflect moments during implementation are important CLA tools used to revalidate or critique the project theory of change and assess whether activities are coalescing to achieve the project purpose.

- **Pause and Reflect:** If at any point in the project cycle the results of activities are falling short of expected project outcomes, new information is available, or the local context has changed in ways that affect the project, teams should “pause and reflect” to adjust or modify individual project activities as necessary. A PEA can help to re-examine the expectations about the effectiveness of strategic approaches, results or interventions, both in terms of the political context and the incentives, interests and alliances of key stakeholders. Including implementing partners in this process is often essential.
- **Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning:** USAID’s focus on learning helps to ensure development actors are asking the most important questions and finding answers directly relevant to decision-making. MEL for adaptive programming includes learning about political issues with which projects and activities are grappling. Introducing TWP at the outset of a project and embedding the use of PEAs in MEL planning keeps the learning around political challenges in the foreground. The implementation of a PEA at key junctures helps to identify and strengthen output and outcome indicators and assist in interpreting and responding to

unexpected results. (See [How To Guide 3: Defining Outcomes and Indicators for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning in USAID Biodiversity Programming](#)).

As of 2019, USAID has supported nearly ten PEAs in the biodiversity sector. Three focused on biodiversity and extractives in Africa (Uganda, DRC and Madagascar). These PEAs examined how the impacts of resource extraction activities can affect customary property rights and customary law, intersect with patronage networks and lead to territorial occupation and criminality (USAID, 2016a). In addition to their site-specific findings, these three PEAs yielded [lessons learned on using USAID's applied PEA framework and using PEA for biodiversity conservation planning](#). Other biodiversity PEAs have focused on fisheries management and livelihoods, threats to protected areas, hunting concession allocations and the design of regional policies for combating wildlife trafficking. A concise summary of the characteristics and contributions of each of these biodiversity PEAs appears in Appendix I.

MOVING FORWARD ON THINKING AND WORKING POLITICALLY IN USAID'S BIODIVERSITY PROGRAMMING

TWP and Applied PEA illuminate the drivers and root causes of biodiversity loss and support biodiversity conservation projects throughout the USAID program cycle. Initial field-based evidence indicates that when used at the design stage, PEA work can help catalyze TWP and lay the groundwork for iterative and adaptive programming. The evidence for the impact of PEAs on adaptive management is incomplete and still developing. Additional learning and field experience is needed to strengthen the integration of TWP and PEA into USAID's biodiversity programs. Toward this end, the Forestry and Biodiversity Office is supporting further work on TWP and PEA through the Biodiversity Results and Integrated Development Gains Enhanced (BRIDGE) project. Specifically, BRIDGE will:

- Provide technical assistance to missions to help frame decision-making about PEAs, support the use of existing PEAs, and conduct new PEAs, with a focus on applying the PEA findings at different stages of the program cycle (strategy development, project/activity design and start-up activities, implementation, MEL). This assistance will also focus on how TWP and PEA insights and findings have affected biodiversity programming and results.
- Collaborate with the DRG Center to review, adapt and document DRG best practices for the biodiversity sector such as tools for integrating PEA into the implementation and the development of solicitations that invite context-driven adaptive programming.
- Develop guidance and tools for the biodiversity sector on the use of Applied PEA and TWP throughout the program cycle.
- Develop training and outreach material on the use of PEA to increase TWP in the biodiversity sector.

Appendix I: Summary of Applied PEA Work on Biodiversity Programming

COUNTRY	TECHNICAL FOCAL AREA	PEA FOCUS	PROGRAM CYCLE ENTRY POINT	SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	APPLICATION
Uganda	Forest biodiversity	How and why population movements resulting from oil development are affecting forest biodiversity	Activity design after situation model development	Highlighted need for land literacy to support customary resource managers and engagement with local government officials. Oil development activities increased rent-seeking activities of political elites, who abused property rights to displace customary resource managers and hampered local government biodiversity protection efforts.	PEA findings modified the situation model to account for how population movements were threatening biodiversity prior to theory of change development. The Uganda mission also stated that the learning from the PEA went beyond the biodiversity portfolio and helped clarify linkages among sector goals and development objectives. (USAID, 2016c)
Madagascar	Fisheries and marine biodiversity	Locally managed marine areas (LMMAs) and strengths and weaknesses in managing marine biodiversity	Tested assumptions around the theory of change in a new project appraisal document (PAD)	Identified need for attention to alternative livelihoods and support for LMMAs and nutrition and health linkages in addressing fisheries management.	PEA findings helped refine the PAD's focus to include aspects not previously recognized as critical to success in marine biodiversity and fisheries management. (USAID, 2016d)
DRC	Forest biodiversity and gorilla populations	How incentive structures surrounding artisanal gold mining and related activities contribute to the loss of biodiversity in Kahuzi Biega National Park	Conducted for input to mid-term evaluation	Increased knowledge of the dynamics of gold mining in the park, helped identify openings for more effective biodiversity programming in the region.	Identified how existing USAID programming and coalitions might better support biodiversity work in the region. (USAID, 2016b)
Senegal	Fisheries and marine biodiversity	The persistence of unsustainable fishing practices	Activity design after situation model development	Essential role of female processors; cultural norms as incentives/disincentives for sustainable fishing; the nuanced role of migrant fishers; the need to link sustainable fishing to livelihood alternatives; and the role of fishers and processors as voting constituents.	PEA was an integral part of the design process for a follow-on fisheries activity. Recommendations strengthened aspects of the problem analysis and led to changes in the situation model and strategic approaches used to develop the theory of change.

COUNTRY	TECHNICAL FOCAL AREA	PEA FOCUS	PROGRAM CYCLE ENTRY POINT	SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	APPLICATION
Tanzania	Wildlife management	Regulations and practices for allocating hunting blocks to trophy hunting operators	Implementation of the PROTECT activity	PEA team developed an influence map to identify key actors based on their level of influence and their incentives and disincentives for improving the process.	Informed by a more in-depth follow-on political economy analysis and other circumstances, the mission and PROTECT decided not to directly implement key recommendations on hunting concessions from the PEA fieldwork.
Southern Africa	Combating wildlife trafficking	Key aspects of the political economy around regional collaboration to combat wildlife crime in Southern Africa	Activity design	Helped to identify opportunities for alignment with the Southern African Development Cooperation (SADC) Law Enforcement and Anti-Poaching Strategy 2016-2021.	Conducted through a regional workshop to co-create a new project. Participants identified where PEA fieldwork would be helpful to understand issues such as building trust between actors, incentives for rule of law and community priorities.
Indonesia	Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity conservation (LESTARI)	How and why aspects of the program were not effectively addressing deforestation	Mid-term evaluation	Highlighted the need to change incentives driving key government and private sector actors to behave contrary to project objectives. Deforestation and other unsustainable land use dynamics were due to both inadequate planning and lack of accountability in government and corporate activities.	PEA was used to increase the effectiveness of project strategies, tools and approaches in meeting high-level outcomes. Results helped shift the LESTARI implementation approaches to address the incentives that drive key government and private sector actors.
Ghana	Fisheries sector, with focus on artisanal fisheries	Politically enabling and constraining factors for reforms to stop overfishing and illegal fishing, especially with respect to small pelagics in the artisanal fishing sector	After pause and reflect exercise examining results chains, entering last year of current SFMP fisheries project, reviewing future programmatic options	Lack of transparency and regulatory capture are impeding enforcement against illegal (foreign) industrial and artisanal fishing. Strategic coalitions and greater voice for fisher associations, along with co-management, can help avert a collapse of fisheries.	PEA findings fed into CDCS and Global Food Security Strategy as well as provided the basis for potential integrated programming between Office of Energy and Natural Resource Management and DRG Office in follow-on project activities. Findings were also shared for planning with development partners.

COUNTRY	TECHNICAL FOCAL AREA	PEA FOCUS	PROGRAM CYCLE ENTRY POINT	SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	APPLICATION
Guatemala	Protection of Maya Biosphere Reserve, Sierra de las Minas Reserve, and Costa Sur protected areas	National and local political conditions and engagement with and mobilization of local partners on project activities	Activity design after initial review of baseline findings on status of ecosystems and species	Project activities must work locally and take into account the effects of narco-trafficking, problems of corruption and the institutional weakness of the Guatemalan System of Protected Areas and weak enforcement of environmental crimes.	PEA findings were shared to inform adjustments to results chains as well as engage and sensitize project implementers, CSOs and selected government officials at a workshop prior to the start of project activities.

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