

Supporting resilient political institutions: a politically agile approach

This paper considers the practical issues that arise in implementing a politically informed approach to development in fragile states and describes some of the tools used from the point of view of a practitioner. Global Partners Governance (GPG) works in the field of governance assistance to support political institutions, including parliaments, local governments and political parties. GPG works often in fragile states, mainly in the Middle East and North Africa, for example in Iraq, Sudan and Libya.

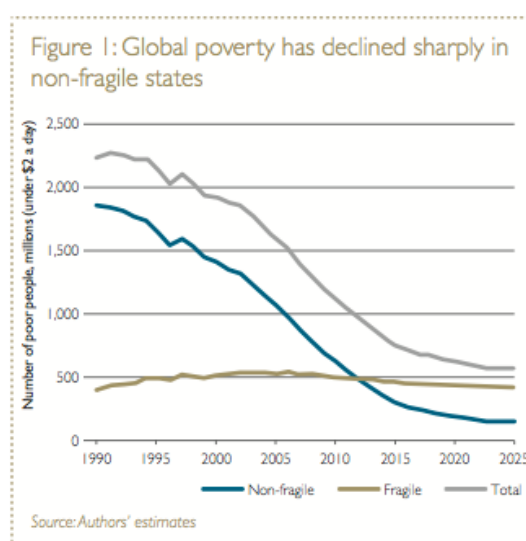
The idea that for aid to be more effective, it needs to be more flexible, and more politically aware has become familiar to all those working in development in recent years. There has been a flurry of publications and initiatives designed to spread the word that, to implement this in practice, delivery needs to be two things:

1. *Politically Smart* – engaging with local incentives, not just formal structures, but how small p and large p politics really work
2. *Adaptive* – not following a rigid pre-planned approach, set at the beginning of a 5-year programme, but responding to changes in context so that the project can remain relevant.

The current consensus, then, is that these things are desirable, but that is easy to say in theory. The real question is, how to do it in practice? This is the first issue covered by this paper.

The second element of the paper begins with the understanding that flexibility and political awareness is nowhere more important than in fragile states. This is for 3 reasons.

Firstly, (as the graph below shows) it is estimated that there are now more poor people living in fragile states than non-fragile states. If the development focus remains on delivering aid to the poorest people in the world, then fragile states are likely to be the biggest recipients of aid in future, because they are where the poor are going to be located.



Source: Horizon 2025, ODI (Kharas and Rogerson, 2012)

Secondly, fragile states are the place where an adaptive and flexible approach is most needed, because the environment is subject to change very quickly.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly for the future of our work, they are for the same reason the hardest place to demonstrate any kind of impact, because of the same rapid changes that happen in fragile states. The challenges of measuring impact are therefore massive, but if we do not find a way to address them, the future of governance assistance as a stand alone discipline is under threat.

GPG has developed its own approach to implementing an adaptive approach, called *Politically Agile Programming*, and we are constantly trying to develop new ways to measure results, with our current focus on resilient institutions. Publications on our website (www.gpgovernance.net) explain this approach in greater detail, but this paper briefly covers GPG's two key aims in developing this approach:

- (1) Operationalising a politically smart and adaptive approach
- (2) Meeting the challenges of measuring impact, and the concept of resilient institutions as one way of approaching these challenges.

Question 1: How can we operationalise an adaptive and politically smart approach?

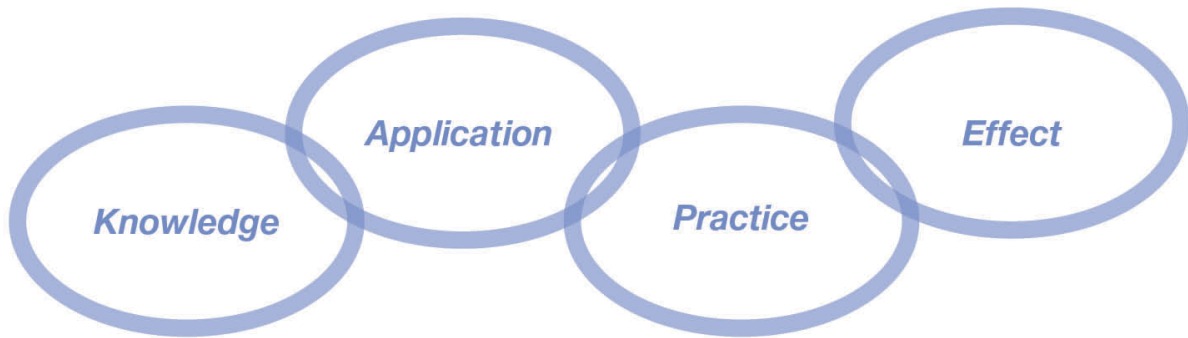
GPG has designed our own approach to implementation, which we call *politically agile programming*. The basis of this approach is to combine political understanding with agility and adaptability.

Since GPG is usually working with an organisation or institution of some kind (whether a parliament or a Ministry or a sub-national organisation), this approach has taken some inspiration and insights from what is already known about changing institutions through the field of change management. It has been recognised for some time in that field that efforts to achieve change are doomed to fail if they are only about altering the visible structures of a company. They need to address underlying behaviour patterns and cultures of people in that organisation. This is where the notion of 'sticky change' has come from.

For example, John Kotter, one of the leading authors on change management says, "change sticks only when it becomes 'the way we do things around here', when it seeps into the very bloodstream of the work unit or corporate body. Until new behaviours are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are always subject to degradation as soon as the pressures associated with a change effort are removed."¹

In order to ensure our Politically Agile Approach runs through all our projects, we have devised our own tool for project planning and delivery which we call KAPE (see diagram below). KAPE is an acronym which stands for Knowledge, Application, Practice, Effect and is represented as a chain.

¹ John P. Kotter, Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail, *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1995.



The KAPE® Chain

Starting from the first link in the chain, **Knowledge**, at this point in the project we are concerned with generating new knowledge about three things.

1. Our Knowledge of the context.
2. Plugging gaps in Knowledge of our partners through things like training, capacity development or specialist technical advice of some sort.
3. Most importantly, Knowledge of what the problem is. This must be shared knowledge between GPG and people we are working with.

The second link is **Application**. This is the phase at which that new knowledge is applied in practice to try to address whatever problem is facing our partners. This could be in the form of a new technique or approach. The aim at this stage is to just use that approach once, to demonstrate that it works and to learn lessons from how it can be applied in the particular context we are working with.

We move then to **Practice**. Assuming the new technique has been successful, at least to an extent, this step involves trying to replicate that one application multiple times, until it becomes 'the new normal' – standard practice for the institution, it "gets into the bloodstream" (as Kotter says of change management).

Finally, we hope to see an **Effect** from this new practice, in terms of what might be called an outcome or an impact.

To illustrate the process with one example, following the chain through, GPG often works with parliamentary committees. Committees are often a promising entry point for work with a parliament, because they allow the project to address multiple different organisational issues simultaneously, including:

- the relationship between MPs and staff,
- the relationship between different political parties
- the way in which the parliament interacts with the public
- the way in which the parliament holds government accountable for its actions.

The first stage of a KAPE project might be to work with the committee to generate, in the case of a completely new parliament, knowledge about what a committee is, what it does, what the role of the Chair is, how it can gather reliable information about its subject area, etc.

The application step would be moving from that theory to practice. A key role of a committee in most parliaments is to test whether government policies are doing what they are supposed to. To do that, they need to speak to people to gather evidence. So GPG might guide a committee through a public consultation process, how to make recommendations to government, how to follow them up.

In practice, we would hope to see that process replicated in the first instance by the committee we are working with, but ultimately, by other committees in the parliament until the process of public consultation becomes standard practice.

Finally, we hopefully achieve the ultimate desired effect, which is better representation of citizens' concerns and improved accountability.

The reason that KAPE is represented as a chain is that it provides instant feedback for our project managers to warn them if progress is not being made. So, for example, if GPG has delivered basic training in part 1 (knowledge), but none of it is being applied in practice, then there is a problem and we need to adapt our approach. Or if one committee has been effective, but nobody else within parliament has picked up on it, we have a problem between application and practice. This is what allows our project managers to be agile, to shift our approach and try something different.

Question 2: How can we prove it works?

To an extent, this same KAPE chain can be used to measure progress. If the links are being made, then project progress is good, if they are not, then something is wrong. However, KAPE mainly evolved as an internal tool for project managers. It is fundamentally tied to project activities and GPG would like to complement it with a more external tool for measuring results.

As mentioned above, GPG has taken some inspiration from the field of change management. Research suggests that nearly 70% of change management programmes fail and only 25% are successful for the long term.² This paper has already alluded to the reasons for this – the familiar iceberg metaphor (illustrated below). People tend to focus fixing the visible structures when it is actually the less visible underlying behaviour and cultures that will determine organisational direction.

² Towers Watson 2013 Change and Communication ROI Survey:
<http://www.towerswatson.com/en/Press/2013/08/Only-One-Quarter-of-Employers-Are-Sustaining-Gains-From-Change-Management>



But the same argument can also be made for accountability mechanisms. A donor seeking to evaluate a project will find it temptingly easier to look at visible structures to assess progress, when actually it is the underlying culture that really determines sustainability. How much easier is it to say – do you have the rules in place, the people, the process? How much harder is it to assess, do people really play by those rules, are those processes operated in an inclusive way?

Assuming for the sake of argument that we have a good project which is making headway on a behavioural front, how then do we prove that it's good? Interestingly, the same question is being asked in change management.

**Harvard
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CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Data Can Do for Change Management What It Did for Marketing

by Michael L. Tushman, Anna Kahn, Mary Elizabeth Porray, and Andy Binns

JULY 31, 2017

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The article above from last month's Harvard Business Review highlights the same issue of 'provability' with change management:

"Just as the discipline of marketing has transformed from soft to hard science in the past 20 years, so too will the practice of change...When change management does work, it is due to the work of skilled, experienced professionals who know how to weave together a set of practices to help a business reach its change goals. The issue is that they operate as artisans, not scientists. Change practitioners struggle to reach the levels of proof that are standard in other professions."³

We live in an increasingly data driven world, in all sectors of industry, and all parts of our lives. Much as we would perhaps like to suggest that the work we do is all too complicated and subjective to assess, or that we should simply be trusted to deliver, or that events are too complicated to account for, this argument is not going to remain persuasive (as far as it ever was) for much longer.

So there is a need to develop more sensitive, agile and politically informed measures of impact. One response the Change Managers have come up with is the Capability Maturity Model (CMM – see below).



Source: <http://www.sei.cmu.edu/cmmi/>

The idea of this model, instead of trying to predict what the institution will do in what are almost always unpredictable circumstances, is to instead assess how it reacts to events, whatever they may be. Ultimately the model assesses whether the institution is **resilient** to whatever life throws at it. There is a range from level 1: 'reactive' – i.e. just dealing with

³ Michael L Tushman, Anna Kahn, Mary Elizabeth Porray and Andy Binns, Data Can Do For Change Management What it Did for Marketing, *Harvard Business Review*, July 2017.

whatever crisis arrives every day – through levels 2 and 3, where some people are managing some things, towards more centralised systems, and ultimately level 5 where the institution is itself an agile organisation, ready to adapt to difficult circumstances.

The CMM model could be applied to GPG's experience in working with institutions experiencing crisis. Most often, those organisations are entirely reactive – they may have heroic individuals in them who are working hard to deal with an endless stream of emergencies, but they are essentially reactive, and hence not very resilient, apt to be disrupted by any new crisis, which in fragile states is fairly likely to come along. In the next stage of our work, GPG will be testing this model as a way to evaluate our progress with partner institutions – trying to map their processes onto this scale and determine a realistic target level for them to aim at.

The future?

As we all know, there is not an endless stream of money for governance assistance work and there are always other things which could be funded. A big problem for the governance field in particular, is that those other fields are easier to measure. Health and Education projects can provide relatively easily digestible data about the impact they are having, at the moment governance cannot. There is significant public scepticism about the value of aid in the current climate of austerity. Unless the governance field can prove its worth, there is a significant risk that it will not exist as a distinct field in 10 years' time. Governance work may continue, but it is more likely to be at the service of those policy areas like health and education where impact can be more clearly demonstrated. Potentially, the only reason for interacting with political institutions would be to secure a specific pre-determined policy change – a law passing or a programme funding. Is that really building institutions, or is that just changing whom they serve?