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Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik

German Development Institute

Discussion Paper 28/2021

Institutional Change through Development Assistance

The Comparative Advantages of Political and Adaptive Approaches

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Bonn 2021

Discussion Paper / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik
ISSN (Print) 1860-0441
ISSN (Online) 2512-8698

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

ISBN 978-3-96021-171-6 (printed edition)

DOI:10.23661/dp28.2021

Printed on eco-friendly, certified paper

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Abstract

Development assistance often fails to achieve institutional change because of a limited consideration of the political nature of these reforms and the local context. In response, political and adaptive development assistance (PADA) approaches, such as "Thinking and Working Politically" (TWP) and "Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation" (PDIA), have been developed in recent years. Politicians, practitioners and researchers increasingly want to know if these approaches are more effective than mainstream approaches to development assistance. To answer this question, this paper develops a framework by asking three more specific questions about the "which", the "where" and the "what". First, for which types of *development problems* is political and adaptive development assistance likely to work better than mainstream approaches? Second, where or in which *contexts* might this be the case? And third, what *contributions* can be expected from these approaches including, but going beyond, effectiveness? Available evidence is used to answer these questions. This paper finds that political and adaptive approaches have comparative advantages over mainstream approaches when either the problem is complex, the context is hard to predict, or the solution is contentious. The overall conclusion is that development policy needs a broader variety of approaches from which to choose based on which fits the problem and the context best.

Acknowledgements

I thank Heiner Janus, Niels Keijzer, Julia Leininger and Christian von Haldenwang for their helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper.

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Abbreviations

AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (Germany's state-owned development organisation)
DDD	Doing Development Differently
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (UK)
PADA	political and adaptive development assistance
PDIA	Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation
PEA	political economy analysis
PFM	public financial management
TAF	The Asia Foundation
TWP	Thinking and Working Politically

1 Introduction

Sustainable institutional change is hard to achieve. And despite billions of dollars spent on governance and public sector reform since the mid-1990s, development assistance has not been particularly good at it (Andrews, 2013). Developing countries now often have world-class laws and institutions on paper, but many do not work as intended. As a result of what Pritchett, Woolcock, and Andrews (2013) have called "isomorphic mimicry", development assistance-sponsored institutional reforms tend to foster the replication of international best practice forms without their functions. While implementation shortcomings in partner countries are frequently blamed for these outcomes, they are also the result of the way development assistance works, especially the management strategies used to achieve results and the indicators used to measure them (Andrews, 2013; Buntaine, Parks, & Buch, 2017; Pritchett et al., 2013).

Development scholars have explored these problems in recent years and have argued for a move away from "international best practice" towards "best local fit" in development assistance (Andrews, 2013; Booth & Cammack, 2013). To achieve that, a better understanding of the political nature of institutional change and the local context is necessary. While these claims are not new and have been accepted by several development agencies in the abstract, their translation into development practice has been limited. A recent evaluation of the governance advisory services of Germany's state-owned development organisation GIZ illustrates this. The report (in German) notes that despite the high context-sensitivity of governance projects, a continuous and systematic examination of context factors – including political will and the ability to enforce policies – only occurred in isolated instances, neither in the strategic project planning phase nor during project implementation (GIZ, 2020, p. 5, 41, 53).[1] This is not only significant because Germany is the second-biggest bilateral donor in the field of government and civil society behind the United States[2], but also because their gap between theory and practice in considering the political dimension and local context in development assistance is not unique.

Another example comes from one the longest and most expensive attempts at institutional transformation. The Afghanistan war and reconstruction efforts between 2001 and 2021 went beyond development assistance but included it to a significant extent. A report by the United States Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) in August 2021 concluded on politics and power that "early on the United States seems to have misunderstood the dynamics of political power in Afghanistan" (SIGAR, 2021, p. 72). On local context, the report criticised that "the U.S. government did not understand the Afghan context and therefore failed to tailor its efforts accordingly. … Lack of knowledge at the local level meant projects intended to mitigate conflict often exacerbated it, and even inadvertently funded insurgents" (p. X-XI).

In response to flaws such as these, scholars and practitioners have developed new approaches to development assistance in recent years that this paper refers to as political

1 The report elaborates that the consequences of this lack of examining context factors are, among others, that risks and potentials for, as well as obstacles to, achieving effectiveness and impact are not systematically identified (GIZ, 2020, p. 5, 54).

2 Data on aid by sector and donor are available on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) statistics website.

and adaptive approaches or political and adaptive development assistance (PADA). The most prominent ones are "Thinking and Working Politically" (TWP) (TWP Community of Practice, n.d.) and "Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation" (PDIA) (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2013, 2017). Proponents of these approaches, which some have prematurely dubbed a "second orthodoxy" (Teskey, 2017), have convinced major donors to experiment with them or incorporate key principles into some of their projects. After some years of working with them, policy-makers, donors and researchers are increasingly curious if these approaches make development assistance more effective compared with mainstream approaches as has been claimed (TWP Community of Practice, n.d.). While review studies have presented some initial empirical support for that, overall, the available findings do "not yet constitute a 'strong enough' evidence base that proves that TWP has significantly improved aid effectiveness" (Dasandi, Laws, Marquette, & Robinson, 2019; see also McCulloch & Piron, 2019).

This paper argues that political and adaptive approaches should not generally be expected to improve aid effectiveness. If asked in these broad terms, the question is misleading because specific conditions and contexts matter. Instead, in order to learn more about the conditions under which these approaches can be effective, three specific questions should be asked about the "which", the "where", and the "what". First, for which types of *development problems* is political and development assistance likely to work better than mainstream approaches? Second, where or in which *contexts* might this be the case? And third, what main *contributions* can be expected from these approaches including, but going beyond, effectiveness? While these questions have been raised within the PADA community, they have not yet been answered systematically and certainly remain implicit for those who are new to these debates. In a recent overview for a special issue on TWP, the authors specifically identified "an urgent need for research that could help to identify the kinds of problems and the sorts of contexts where a TWP approach is more or less effective" (McCulloch & Piron, 2019, p. O13).

Each of these three questions will be answered in two steps. The first step is a theoretical discussion of the potential comparative advantages of political and adaptive approaches over mainstream approaches with regard to development problems, contexts and contributions. In a second step, relevant evidence on development management in general, and on TWP and PDIA in particular, will be used to analyse if it supports, contradicts or qualifies the theoretical claims. The resulting framework may be used by future researchers to study the potential impact of PADA as well as by policy-makers who consider adopting these approaches. Overall, the paper contributes to research on institutional change and on the role of development assistance for institutional change.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, it discusses how the most prominent political and adaptive approaches (TWP and PDIA) differ from each other as well as from mainstream approaches to development assistance. Based on these differences and a wide range of studies of development projects and approaches, Sections 3, 4 and 5 discuss for which types of development problems and in which kinds of contexts PADA is likely to have comparative advantages and what its main contributions may be. Section 3 looks at the "problem type" which comprises different combinations of problem complexity and the potential contentiousness of a problem and its solution. The paper finds that PADA is better suited for more complex rather than less complex problems but that the distinction between the two can be blurry. It also argues that PADA seems to be more appropriate when a

problem and its solution are potentially contentious. Section 4 focuses on "context" and especially on "context predictability". It argues that development assistance itself should be considered a factor that influences and potentially lowers context predictability. PADA is likely to perform better than mainstream approaches in contexts with lower predictability. While on aggregate, PADA seems to have advantages for many development problem types and in most country contexts, mainstream approaches have comparative advantages when problem complexity is low and context predictability is high. Section 5 then discusses the contributions that PADA is most likely to make and focuses on short-term outcome effectiveness, long-term institutional impact, and harm. The last section draws conclusions for future research and discusses policy implications, especially the need for a broader variety of approaches from which to select based on which fits the problem and context best.

2 How different is political and adaptive development assistance?

PADA refers to fairly similar sets of ideas and principles of how development assistance should work that networks of researchers and practitioners have developed in recent years. Three clusters can be identified that emerged in the 2010s with significant exchange and often personal overlap among them. These clusters are the "Doing Development Differently" (DDD) community, the TWP community of practice and the PDIA team. After a brief look at how they emerged, the differences and similarities between the two most prominent approaches (TWP and PDIA) are discussed and then compared with mainstream approaches to development assistance.

2.1 Historical emergence

In the early 2000s, the "drivers of change" analysis developed at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) was the first of a number of tools to identify power constellations and the potential drivers of developmental institutional reform (Dahl-Østergaard, Unsworth, Robinson, & Jensen, 2005). At the same time, the then Department for International Development (DFID)[3] funded several long-term research projects on the local realities of governance, public authority, and the politics of social change and development, which, in turn, influenced DFID's work on governance and politics in development.[4]

At about the same time, Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock thought about how to address the problem that donor-funded institutional reform projects in developing countries often failed and instead led to isomorphic mimicry (Andrews, 2013; Pritchett et

3 In September 2020, DFID became part of the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

4 Some of the most important ones were the Centre for the Future State (CFS; 2000-2010) at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), the Africa Power and Politics Programme (APPP; 2007-2012) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), and the Effective States and Inclusive Development Programme (ESID; 2011-2019) at the University of Manchester's Global Development Institute (GDI). The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP; 2008-2018) at the University of Birmingham, funded by Australian Aid, was also influential.

al., 2013) rather than helping these governments overcome the "capability traps" they were stuck in (Andrews et al., 2013; Pritchett, Woolcock, & Andrews, 2010). As an alternative to the dominating solution-led international best practice reform projects that changed the outward forms but not the actual functions of institutions, they developed an approach for developing more realistic and functional solutions, called it "problem-driven iterative adaptation" (PDIA) (Andrews et al., 2013, 2017), and established the Building State Capability (BSC) programme at Harvard University's Center for International Development to teach and promote it.

At that time, the Politics and Governance Team at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), worked on integrating politics more firmly into development thinking and practice (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). In 2014, representatives of this ODI team and the PDIA team met at Harvard and produced the *Doing Development Differently Manifesto* (DDD Manifesto, n.d.). In it, they combined their priorities and called for development assistance to be reinvented by focusing on problem solving, local ownership, brokering coalitions for change, blending design and implementation, managing risk through small bets, and delivering results that empower, are sustainable and build trust (DDD Manifesto, n.d.). DDD community members, which included several practitioners, met frequently and documented development interventions that were guided by the principles laid out in the manifesto.

TWP has been most widely used and institutionalised within DFID. The TWP community of practice had been set up primarily by UK senior development officials and scholars in 2013 to promote thinking and working politically in development and, by doing so, improving development effectiveness (TWP Community of Practice, n.d.). Because the group did not have a public profile until then and the DDD community seemed to be more vibrant at this time, several members of the group switched to the DDD community. When the TWP community of practice secured funding in 2016 and established a secretariat in the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) at the University of Birmingham, however, this changed. Since then, DDD's principles and many of its members have moved to the TWP community. Partly based on the insights generated by the DFID-funded, long-term research projects, DFID senior officials developed a commitment to take politics and local context more seriously in development assistance (Piron, Baker, Savage, & Wiseman, 2016) and to generally experiment more with new approaches. This commitment has guided their approach to governance programming (Piron et al., 2016) but has also been extended to other sectors beyond the governance silo (DFID, 2019). Outside of DFID, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and The Asia Foundation (TAF) have applied and experimented with TWP principles in some of their projects, have funded research and have developed new tools.

2.2 TWP and PDIA

2.2.1 Thinking and Working Politically

After several years of research on the role of politics for development, several scholars and practitioners pushed for a move from primarily *thinking* politically to also *working* politically in development assistance with a focus on improving development effectiveness

and adapting development programming to achieve this (Rocha Menocal, 2014; TWP Community of Practice, n.d.).[5] Their rationale for thinking and working politically is that developmental change is about power and its redistribution, which makes it inherently political.

Based on this understanding of the nature of development, TWP has three core principles (TWP Community of Practice, n.d.).

- *Political analysis, insight and understanding:* Sectors should be analysed with a focus on power dynamics, interests – including multiple and potentially contradictory interests – incentives and institutions in the country context. Instead of adopting idealised models of change, contextual realities and the distribution of power should be the starting points.

- *Appreciation of, and response to, context:* Agencies should focus on problems identified by local actors, work with and through those local actors who have power or can act as powerbrokers, understand local networks of stakeholders and facilitate coalitions of different interests rather than relying on one particular partner organisation.

- *Flexibility and adaptability in programme design and implementation:* Agencies should be guided by programme goals without being prescriptive in how to achieve them. Rigid project frameworks should be avoided and instead, approaches should be adapted based on new opportunities. This requires donors to continuously assess the local context as well as which interventions are working and which are not and to generally be iterative and flexible in their day-to-day operations. Design and implementation should be merged with a focus on small bets and experimental steps while monitoring results, thereby combining implementation, monitoring and evaluation into a concurrent process. In all this, the donor agency's own political economy – what is negotiable and what is not – must be taken into account.

While much material is available on the TWP community's website, it does not provide a single agreed framework or a set of formal tools beyond these core principles. This offers a great deal of flexibility but also means that TWP projects can look very differently on the ground. While the TWP community has convinced donor agencies to integrate their principles into selected projects and to adapt mainstream modes of development programming and management for this purpose, this has not been standardised.

2.2.2 Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation

The PDIA approach is based on the assumption that local agents in developing countries, such as public officials, should develop domestic solutions for their problems and improve their capabilities in the process.[6] While scholars have focused on the iterative adaptation

5 The community organises training and events and provides tools and resources on its website: www.twpcommunity.org.

6 More information on PDIA is available on the Building State Capability (BSC) programme website https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/.

part of PDIA,[7] its problem-driven nature is at least as important in contrast to the often solution-led approach of mainstream development assistance (Green, 2018).

Directed at people planning to use the approach, it is described in the PDIA toolkit as

> a step-by-step approach which helps you break down your problems into root causes, identify entry points, search for possible solutions, take action, reflect upon what you have learned, adapt and then act again. It is a dynamic process with tight feedback loops that allow you to build you own solution to your problem that fits your local context. PDIA is a learning by doing approach. (Samji, Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2018, p. 6)

PDIA rests on four principles (Andrews et al., 2017, p. 135 and Chapters 7-10; Samji et al., 2018, p. 6):

- *Local solutions for local problems*: Rather than starting with predetermined solutions, the focus of the process should be on specific local problems as perceived and prioritised by local actors, usually public officials. This first step involves a process the authors call "problem construction" (Andrews et al., 2017, pp. 142-150) which is based on facilitated deliberations in a group of stakeholders who agree on concrete problems that matter to them and that they want to solve. The next step is the deconstruction of the problems into their root causes. International advisers may act as experts in the early phase but then focus on their role as facilitators of the process.

- *Pushing problem-driven positive deviance*: An authorising environment within or across organisations should be created that enables and encourages experimentation. Several small and rapid interventions are carried out by public officials to address specific aspects of the larger problems. Because the first experimental interventions only take a few weeks, local agents have a steep learning curve, both when these interventions succeed and when they fail. Some quick, early successes or "positive deviance" appease reform opponents and motivate those involved.

- *Try, learn, iterate, adapt*: Experimental iteration, learning through feedback, and rapid adaptation continue until a workable solution has been identified.

- *Scale through diffusion*: Broad sets of agents should be engaged so that reforms are not only relevant and legitimate at all levels but will also be politically supported and widely implemented. Based on these principles, the PDIA process has six steps (Samji et al., 2018, p. 7): analyse problems, identify action steps, take action, check in, sustain authority and legitimacy, and learn, adapt and iterate. From there, the cycle starts again with the identification of new action steps. Scaling through diffusion is an additional step when a workable solution has been found. Beyond the book and the "do-it-yourself" toolkit, there are online training programmes, working papers, videos, and a podcast series to teach this approach.

7 For a good overview of adaptive approaches for development programmes, see Pett (2020).

2.2.3 Differences between TWP and PDIA

Despite the differences between TWP and PDIA, this paper argues that their similarities justify referring to both as "political and adaptive development assistance". Their differences are discussed first before looking at their similarities and comparing them with mainstream approaches.

Six main differences between TWP and PDIA are worth noting (Table 1). The first is the *self-understanding and role* of those working with the approaches. Because TWP is implemented in development programmes, it is typically their staff – development practitioners – who do most of the work, usually in local country offices. PDIA team members, on the other hand, act as consultants who fly in for short periods of time to facilitate the local PDIA process.

Table 1: Differences between TWP and PDIA

	Thinking and Working Politically (TWP)	**Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA)**
Self-understanding and role of experts	Development practitioners	Consultants and facilitators
Formalisation of the process	Low	High
Theory of change	Building or supporting coalitions and networks for reform	Guiding local actors through the process for developing local solutions and capability
Role of politics	Explicit political economy and power analysis Working "politically smart"	"Authorising environment" if relevant for problem solving Leaving political work to local actors
Resources employed, types of interventions and scope of project	Local teams with offices and aid budgets permanently based in the country Scope: medium to large	Small team visiting repeatedly for short periods of time Scope: small to medium
Key partners	Government and non-governmental partners	Governments (local to national)

Source: Author

The second major difference is the *formalisation of the process*. The PDIA toolkit breaks down the clearly defined steps to follow for conducting the process including the methods and tools to be used. While this may look like a linear process, its iterative nature and the flexibility are built into these steps and the process as a whole. TWP, on the other hand, is based on three broad core principles and leaves the implementation to the project teams.

Both approaches also differ regarding their *theories of change*. TWP is based on the assumption that reforms can be achieved by building or supporting coalitions and networks. In PDIA, local actors are guided through the process to develop their own local solutions. However, regardless of these direct results, the "indirect or second-order influences" (Andrews, 2018a, p. 4) through local PDIA-participants who continue to use these approaches and tools in their work may even be more important. In comparison, TWP is more proactive on the ground while PDIA facilitates a local process and relies on the participants' and authorisers' buy-in.

On the *role of politics*, the difference between the two approaches is most obvious and is even reflected in their terminology. While TWP explicitly focuses on understanding the local political economy context, PDIA is more narrowly interested in the relevant "authorising environment". Explicit political analyses and engagement are not part of the process and are left to the local agents because the international experts see themselves as mere facilitators. In the deliberative sessions, however, politics is at least implicitly part of the discussion, for example, in discussions about the political feasibility of certain interventions. Beyond that, it is expected that the PDIA process empowers and inspires local agents to advocate for change at least in their immediate authorising environment (Andrews, 2018a, p. 5).

The differences identified so far have implications for the *personnel and financial resources* employed, the *types of intervention* and the *scope of the projects*. In line with mainstream development assistance, TWP projects continuously have local teams and offices in the countries they work in and usually spend millions of dollars over three to five years. Correspondingly, the scope of these projects is medium to broad, often covering entire sectors or even countries. PDIA is much less resource intensive, partly because the process itself usually is only one element of a larger programme. External PDIA teams are small and visit the country repeatedly for short periods of time. Therefore, and because they focus on solving a certain set of problems in a rather short period of time, their scope is narrower in comparison.

Finally, the approaches differ in terms of their *key partners*. While TWP is potentially very flexible and can adapt the partners it works with to the context and to local changes, PDIA could also work with a wide range of clients but has so far focused on governments.

The picture that emerges is one of two rather different approaches. But as the next section will show, these approaches share four fundamental features that are highly consequential for the way development assistance works, especially in comparison with mainstream approaches. They can, therefore, be referred to as political and adaptive approaches.

2.3 PADA and mainstream development assistance

To anyone familiar with how multilateral and bilateral development assistance works, it is obvious that implementing political and adaptive approaches such as TWP and PDIA on a larger scale would require a very different set-up than the current one. While the details of the frameworks and procedures that individual development organisations employ differ, the general set-up is similar and will be referred to as "mainstream development assistance" in this paper.[8] Some of the key features include that the solutions to be implemented and the results to be achieved are defined before the project begins or early on in the project; that local context and actors may influence the details but not the general direction of the project once it has started; that there is generally limited flexibility to change goals and indicators during implementation; and that the preparation, implementation and evaluation

8 However, despite these broad similarities, development organisations differ in their prioritised style of development management, either top-down management and control or granting local agents substantial discretion for decision-making, which Dan Honig calls "navigation by judgement". For his ranking of donor agencies based on their "propensity to navigate by judgement", see Honig (2018, pp. 202-203).

phases are clearly distinguished from one another in a linear sequence. There are also limits to the extent to which these projects can accommodate politics with their planning and implementation logic. Politics is, therefore, often regarded as something to avoid rather than to engage.

How does PADA differ from that? Contrasting political and adaptive approaches with mainstream approaches to development assistance in a stylised way, as papers on TWP have recently done (see the tables in Teskey, 2017; USAID, 2018; Williams, Owen, Duncan, Kingsmill, & Paterson, 2019, p. O38), is useful for didactical purposes. However, although these tables may capture the essence, they miss important aspects of the reality of project implementation. Development practitioners have long realised how important local politics and context are and routinely make small and not so small adjustments by relying on local actors and by working politically even within existing frameworks. Actual project work on the ground tends to be more pragmatic than the rigid reporting formats allow to convey. In terms of the distinctions between mainstream and political and adaptive development assistance, project reality often is an "as well as" rather than an "either-or". Likewise, the conceptual differences between both models should not be regarded as mutually exclusive. Notwithstanding these observations, the existing development assistance set-up favours and incentivises a specific mindset, imposes strict limitations and encourages certain behaviours while suppressing others.

With these caveats in mind, how do mainstream approaches and PADA differ? This subsection draws on the four most important similarities between TWP and PDIA and then looks at how, together as PADA, they differ from mainstream development assistance on each of these elements (see Table 2). The first feature that TWP and PDIA share and in which they differ from mainstream approaches is *the primacy of local context and local actors*. Instead of international best practice, local realities and priorities should guide problem definition and solution development. By either making local agents drive their own problem-solving process (PDIA) or convening and supporting reform-minded groups and individuals (TWP), PADA tries to institutionalise "driver ownership" (McCulloch & Piron, 2019, p. O8), which is the commitment to a reform agenda and its pursual irrespective of donor support. Driver ownership is crucial for reforms to be meaningful and sustainable but is difficult to generate by external actors. Weaker forms of ownership, such as "agreement ownership" and "management ownership", are much easier to establish but do not provide the same degree of reform commitment, if any at all.[9]

The second similarity of TWP and PDIA is that both are *taking politics seriously*. While the ways in which they do so differ, both approaches analyse and actively support collective action for institutional change. In terms of political analyses, most donor agencies produce political economy analyses (PEA) of the countries they work in every few years. TWP instead works with other kinds of PEA like the "everyday PEA" (Hudson, Marquette, & Waldock, 2016) which are locally produced, frequently updated and focus specifically on the dynamics, actors and regions or sectors relevant for the project. When it comes to working politically, development projects typically lack a political mandate and either have to do it informally or

9 "Agreement ownership" is ownership introduced through a formal agreement, for example, between a donor agency and a government. "Management ownership" is the professional ownership that a programme or unit managing a project has for it (McCulloch & Piron, 2019, p. O7-O9).

feed their concerns into bilateral aid negotiations. PADA projects, on the other hand, and especially TWP, have an explicit mandate to work on topics and in ways that are highly political and reporting formats to headquarters have been adapted to enable and encourage reporting this.

Table 2: A comparison of key elements of mainstream approaches with political and adaptive approaches to development assistance

	Mainstream development assistance	**Political and adaptive development assistance (PADA)**
Orientation	International best practice and normative solutions Country ownership through formal "agreement ownership"	Primacy of local context and local actors (local best fit) Aiming at "driver ownership"
Politics	Internal, general political economy analysis Ignore or avoid politics, taking it as a given	Taking politics seriously (analysis and engagement, e.g., through brokering and facilitating developmental coalitions and processes)
Approach	Solution-driven nature with general problem analysis	Problem-driven nature
Procedures	Pre-planned linear project logic (logframe: planning, implementation, evaluation)	Flexible, adaptive process with iterative experimentation and constant learning in between (searchframe)

Source: Author

The third common feature of the two approaches is their *problem-driven nature*. It is not assumed that problems and the reasons for their existence are known in advance and that, therefore, the solutions to these problems are self-evident or covered by international base practice. Defining or constructing the problem is seen as an inherent and critical part of the project itself and not as an exploratory phase prior to the actual project. In line with the first similarity, the primacy of local context and actors, this problem analysis is carried out in close collaboration with and, in PDIA, by local actors themselves. Through this approach, PADA encourages a broad local driver ownership for the problem and for discovering hidden potential to solve it from within the system. Problem construction, solution finding, and implementation are, therefore, intertwined unlike in mainstream projects where these are distinct phases.

Finally, because the local context, politics, and the relevant problems may change, the fourth similarity of TWP and PDIA is their *focus on constant learning and adaptation*, which is considered a key element of iterative experimentation. Less successful interventions can be stopped early, and more successful ones can be scaled up, while learning from both outcomes takes place along the way. In practice, analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation are integrated into one iterative process for large parts of the project. Mainstream development assistance instruments and procedures do not allow for this kind of flexibility and tend to suppress rather than encourage learning as soon as the findings lead too far away from the predefined objectives and solutions.

Even within the current structures of development assistance, practitioners sometimes find enough space to do some of the things discussed here. But they will neither be able to do all of them, nor to do them systematically, and they will surely not exchange open and critical

reports with headquarters about them. The experiences that TWP and PDIA pioneers made when they tried to convince donor agencies to adopt their unconventional approaches nicely illustrate how incongruous the current development assistance structures and political and adaptive approaches are. Even in the best-case scenario of a committed and risk-taking donor, they first "took shape '*despite*' DFID systems and processes" (Wild, Booth, & Valters, 2017, p. 7), and it took years of sustained advocacy and piloting before they were applied more systematically (Piron et al., 2016; Wild et al., 2017). To set up the PDIA-based component of a larger World Bank project in Mozambique, several standards and procedures had to be adapted and "multiple mid-level and high-level meetings were required to ensure full understanding of the approach and to bring the project to a decision point" (Andrews, 2018b, p. 5). This process took two years, but the general scepticism only began to abate when the approach produced results.[10]

So, if adopting political and adaptive approaches more systematically would require changing some of development assistance's structures, rules and procedures, evidence showing that they produce results – and ideally better results than mainstream approaches – would be useful. Rather than asking whether PADA improves aid effectiveness more generally, this paper proceeds to answer three more specific questions: For which problems might PADA work better? Where or in which contexts might this be the case? And what could its main contributions be?

3 For which problems does PADA work better?

Political and adaptive approaches are likely to work better for some development problems than others. This section looks at different "problems types" that vary by complexity and contentiousness. After theoretical considerations about the types of problems for which PADA might have comparative advantages over mainstream approaches, evidence is presented to support or challenge these claims.

Development problems have different degrees of complexity. A general distinction can be made between low-complexity and high-complexity development problems. Problems that can be resolved through infrastructure, like roads, or through standardised interventions, like vaccination programmes, are relatively low in complexity. Problems where the distribution of responsibilities or the ways in which things are done have to be changed are more complex, such as the reform of public financial management. Whether or not a problem is actually complex and can be sustainably resolved by straightforward solutions, however, is highly context dependent and needs to be investigated rather than assumed. When building a new road requires the eviction and compensation of communities and trust in the government is low, for example, this is a fairly complex project. More generally, infrastructure projects may be accompanied by some kind of institutional reform process to be sustainable. And some problems that look like straightforward infrastructure problems at

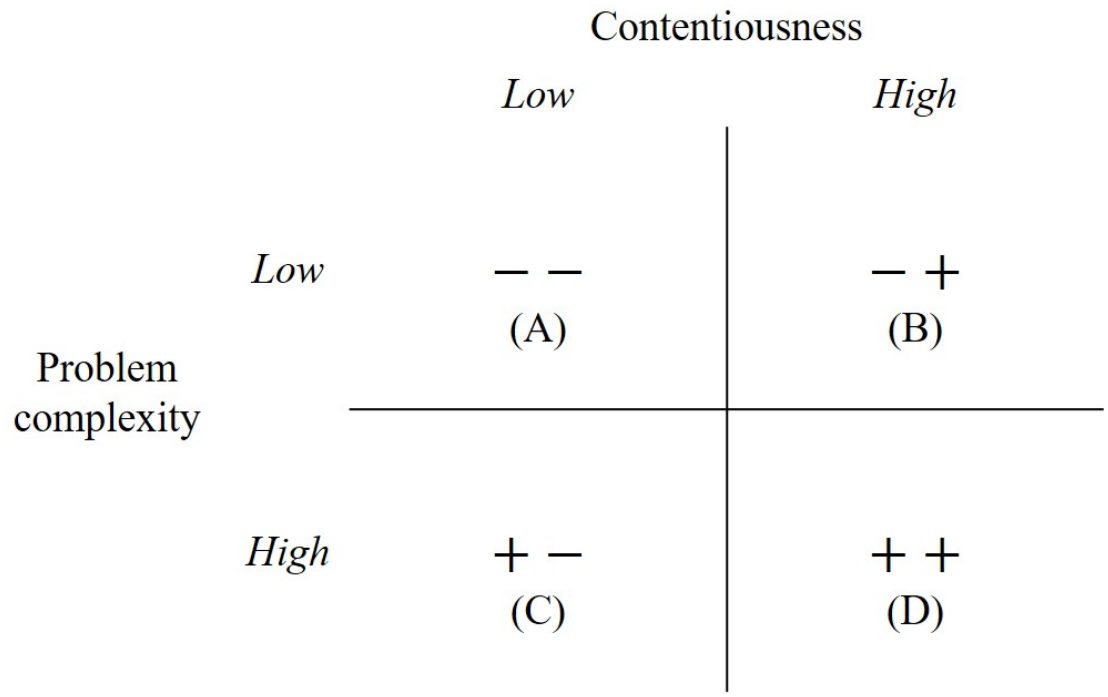
10 More insights into the early challenges that pioneers of political and adaptive approaches faced and into how they got around them are available on, among others, TWP and "developmental entrepreneurship" in the Philippines funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through The Asia Foundation (Booth, 2014; Faustino & Booth, 2014), DDD at the World Bank Nigeria Country Office (Bain, Booth, & Wild, 2016) and TWP at DFID Nigeria (Williams et al., 2019; Williams & Owen, 2020).

first, may turn out to be different and more complex problems, for example, when budget allocations for roads or schools in remote areas do not arrive.

The second dimension is "contentiousness". Some problems and their solutions are potentially more contentious than others. Again, whether they are or could become contentious is highly context dependent as the salience of political or religious factors, to mention just two possible aspects, varies. Contentiousness can be primarily political, for example, before elections, or societal when non-government actors mobilise around certain issues.

Figure 1 combines problem complexity and contentiousness to create four problem types. A plus sign signifies that PADA is likely to perform better under a particular condition and a minus sign indicates that mainstream approaches may have comparative advantages.

Figure 1: Problem types and the comparative advantages of PADA



Source: Author

When both the complexity and contentiousness of a problem are low (Category A), mainstream approaches to development assistance have comparative advantages because they are more effective under these circumstances. For low-complexity problems that are potentially contentious (Category B), however, PADA provides a better framework for navigating political and social conflicts.

For more complex development problems (Categories C and D), PADA has comparative advantages over mainstream approaches because it allows for a better understanding of the complexities of the problems and enables adaptations to these conditions while searching for potential solutions in a problem-driven iterative process. These advantages are particularly strong when the problems are both complex and potentially contentious (Category D). And because most development problems are at least somewhat complex, most cases will probably be in this lower row (Categories C and D).

Based on Figure 1, PADA can be expected to perform better than mainstream development assistance for problems that are either complex or potentially contentious or both. Mainstream approaches, on the other hand, should be better suited for non-contentious, low-complexity problems.

There is some general and some more specific evidence to support these claims. One of the most fundamental insights of organisational sociology is that complex bureaucratic tasks and interactions require a certain degree of discretion to produce results (Lipsky, 1980, p.16). Studies have shown that this is also true in particularly challenging bureaucratic environments, like in Nigeria (Rasul & Rogger, 2018). Because political and adaptive approaches provide local development agents with much more discretion than mainstream approaches, these findings provide some general support for the claim that they have comparative advantages when development problems are complex.

But there is more specific evidence as well. In his book on development management strategies, Dan Honig (2018) uses his comprehensive "Project Performance Database"[11] (pp. 58-60) and case studies to explore the conditions under which top-down management and control by quantitative output indicators works best and when "navigation by judgement", a different management strategy that gives local development agents substantial discretion, produces better results.[12] He finds that more complex projects that do not lend themselves to management by quantitative targets and, therefore, have what he calls a "low project verifiability"[13] (p. 8) achieve better results with the navigation by judgement management approach (p. 103). On the other hand, he also shows that a mainstream top-down development management approach works better for less complex problems with a high project verifiability, such as HIV/AIDS drug delivery (p. 134). While PADA goes beyond navigation by judgement, Honig's findings provide additional support for the claim that PADA is more appropriate for more complex development problems.

Finally, there is supportive evidence from case studies of TWP and PDIA projects. Many of these studies are based on the observations and reflections of some of the key actors involved. More systematic evidence is scarce, but some counterfactual analyses exist. For TWP and for what has been called "development entrepreneurship" (Faustino & Booth, 2014), David Booth (2014) compared a financially modest but complex TWP-inspired land rights policy reform project in the Philippines funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through The Asia Foundation (TAF) with that of a preceding multi-million-dollar, multi-year project with similar goals funded by the World Bank, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and the Philippine

11 The Project Performance Database contains data on more than 14,000 projects in 178 countries and includes a measure of overall project success. It is publicly available on Dan Honig's website (https://danhonig.info).

12 Honig defines organisational navigation by judgement as "an organizational management strategy in which the organization gives agents an extremely large degree of discretion, extending to policy decisions and strategic revision of organizational interventions." (Honig, 2018, p. 16).

13 According to Honig, "Project verifiability is about the tightness of the link between the best possible quantifiable output and project goals" (p. 8). He provides the examples of road construction and HIV/AIDS drug delivery as high verifiability projects and health systems strengthening and agricultural extension as low verifiability projects where quantifiable outputs cannot easily measure progress towards the project goals (pp. 8-9).

government. While this comprehensive pre-planned international best-practice-based project failed to reach its goals, the TAF project resulted in a new law that led to a tenfold increase of residential land titles granted in the subsequent year alone (Booth, 2014, pp. 7-8). In his study, Booth specifies how project success was linked to the key principles of TWP and development entrepreneurship (see also Sidel & Faustino, 2019).

For PDIA, Matt Andrews describes how the approach contributed to reforms in Mozambique's public financial management (PFM) that improved service delivery and government capability as part of a larger World Bank project (Andrews, 2018b, pp. 6-8). A counterfactual analysis is possible because a group of donors implemented a mainstream PFM reform project in the country at the same time with a focus on new formal PFM mechanisms and information technology systems (Andrews, 2018b, p. 9). This project did not resolve compliance gaps generated by earlier reforms, which eventually contributed to a corruption crisis in 2016 (Andrews, McNaught, & Samji, 2018) and was overall less effective (Andrews, 2018b, p. 9). Andrews analyses how PDIA's key principles of problem-driven local adaptation and iterative experimentation by Mozambique's public officials eventually led to this outcome. PFM clearly is one of the more complex development challenges and there is now substantial literature showing that mainstream pre-planned solution- and international best-practice-based approaches often fail to achieve functional improvements (Andrews, 2013; Bridges & Woolcock, 2017; Independent Evaluation Group, 2008). Political and adaptive approaches seem to have been more successful at that (Andrews, 2018b; Peterson, 2011) but more systematic and comparative long-term research is necessary to confirm that.

The evidence presented provides initial support for the claim that PADA has comparative advantages over mainstream development assistance for complex and potentially contentious development problems and that mainstream approaches fare better with less complex projects.

4 In which contexts does PADA work better?

Whether political and adaptive approaches to development assistance work better than mainstream approaches also depends on the context. PADA is likely to have comparative advantages in some contexts and disadvantages in others. This section looks at the dimension of "context predictability". While "context" is usually understood as "country context", it should be adapted to the kind of context that is most relevant for the intervention of interest, such as a sector or a subnational unit. After theoretical considerations about the kinds of contexts in which PADA might have comparative advantages, evidence is presented to support or challenge these claims.

A context is less predictable when formal rules and institutions are weak compared with informal ones, when domestic politics is highly complex and dominated by personal networks, and when it is fragile overall. Over time, less predictable contexts are also more likely to experience sudden changes in which the status quo may deteriorate while windows of opportunity for reform may also open up. The (un)predictability of a given context is usually understood as an endogenous factor. Especially for more aid dependent countries, however, this is questionable. Development organisations influence politics and policy by the sheer size of their budgets, by the credibility of their experts, and by the international

legitimacy they bestow on governments. Multiple studies have shown that aid fragmentation is not only detrimental to development outcomes but can also weaken government capability and thereby lower context predictability. Rather than regarding themselves as external to a given context, development organisations should seriously reflect on their individual and collective impact on the context's predictability or unpredictability.

A less predictable context is likely to require deeper political analysis and a stronger local adaptation and problem-orientation compared with a context that is more predictable. Since these are the features that distinguish PADA from mainstream approaches to development assistance, PADA is likely to have comparative advantages in less predictable contexts, including conflict-affected settings. Mainstream approaches may perform better than political and adaptive ones when context predictability is high.

Available evidence to support this claim is both general and more PADA-specific. In his book on foreign aid management, Honig also considers the factor of "environmental predictability" and defines it in a way that is fairly similar to "context predictability".[14] He concludes from both his quantitative and qualitative analyses that a navigation by judgement management strategy mediates the impact of lower environmental predictability "with high Navigation by Judgement-prone IDO [International Development Organisations] performance declining less [compared with low Navigation by Judgement-prone IDO] as environmental predictability rises" (Honig, 2018, p. 133). In other words, projects or organisations that grant their local agents more discretion perform better than top-down managed projects when environmental predictability is low. Because the discretion of local development agents to "navigate by judgement" is a key aspect of political and adaptive approaches to development assistance, Honig's finding provides strong empirical support for the comparative advantage of PADA in low-predictability contexts.

The counterfactual analyses of TWP and PDIA projects presented in the previous section also provide empirical support for the comparative advantages of PADA in less predictable contexts. Booth's study of the land rights policy reform project in the Philippines (2014), for example, shows that apart from the complexity of the problem, the familiarity of local development agents with and often their embeddedness in informal networks was crucial for identifying the people to engage, for framing their messages in ways that would resonate with them, and for timing their interventions appropriately. Given the low predictability of the context, however, many of these targeted initiatives turned out to be dead ends and new strategies and repeated attempts were required. In anticipation of this, the local team even split into two sub-teams in the first year of the project and employed distinct approaches to the common problem (Booth, 2014, p. 12). Eventually, one of them was successful.

14 Honig defines "environmental predictability" as capturing "the extent to which the project environment is one in which there are 'unknown unknowns', where even the best contingency planning is likely to be incomplete" and argues that it is "linked with legibility, the extent to which those outside a context can make sense of what is going on and respond accordingly" (Honig, 2018, p. 9). He operationalises the concept as differential state fragility and uses the Polity IV State Fragility Index to measure it (Honig, 2018, p. 64). His concept is not used here for two reasons. First, rather than on state fragility, the focus should be on more subtle but systemic features that make politics and policy implementation less predictable, such as patronage networks and informal practices. Second, by "environment" Honig refers to developing country environments (Honig, 2018, p. 9). While intuitive and easy to operationalise, different sectors or regions within a given country often vary substantially in terms of how predictable they are. The concept of "context predictability" invites such reflections.

Additional supporting evidence comes from the study of DFID-funded TWP projects in two particularly unpredictable contexts. The first project aimed at introducing PFM systems and processes in the highly conflict-affected Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) (Pijuan, 2019).[15] A chronic low-level conflict, an unelected government and major restrictions for the movement of people and goods made for an extremely challenging and unpredictable context. Within one year of the start of the project, it had already seen three different Ministers of Finance. A dual track approach was therefore developed with the first component focusing on political analysis and longer-term PFM improvements and the second one on health service delivery in response to emerging local priorities. Because external health referral costs were escalating and constituted a political challenge, the project supported the development of new referral guidelines, which improved the efficiency of referrals and thereby "provided breathing space and legitimacy to continue to support longer-term core PFM reforms" (Pijuan, 2019, p. O58).

The second project operated in an extractive sector, which, despite existing formal rules, remained largely unpredictable: Nigeria's oil sector. The Facility for Oil Sector Transparency and Reform (FOSTER) consisted of a team of all-Nigerian sector experts, it took a low-profile approach to minimise risk, and it could draw on an unearmarked fund to flexibly finance several initiatives (Lucia, Buckley, Marquette, & McCulloch, 2019). Some of these interventions were successful, like the support to domestic non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for recovering USD 540 million in unremitted oil and gas revenues. Others failed, like the attempt to set up a social media oil spill map based on information provided by affected communities. Support for a comprehensive and more developmental framework for the country's petroleum industry, the Petroleum Industry Bill (PIB), resulted in a broad consultation process, a public information campaign, and a detailed draft bill that the President declined to sign at first but eventually signed into law in August 2021 after the project had ended.

The highly unpredictable contexts in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in Nigeria's oil sector set a limit to what these projects could achieve. But the studies claim that the TWP approach enabled them to still accomplish a lot – although in ways and on objectives they had not previously anticipated and for which they sometimes had to improvise in response to context-specific challenges and opportunities.

Andrews' counterfactual perspective on the PDIA process for PFM reform in Mozambique (2018b) also confirms the claim that PADA has comparative advantages in less predictable contexts. By focusing on formal systems and technological solutions, the mainstream, solution-driven reform project did not learn about the practical problems on the ground and the informal strategies developed to deal with them. It, therefore, did not close the actual compliance gaps nor strengthen the system's resilience against corruption. PDIA's explicitly problem-driven nature, on the other hand, served as a focal point for common learning and for the iterative development of feasible domestic solutions. These solutions were effective because they worked *with* the context's specific challenges and unpredictability rather than ignoring them. One way to address context unpredictability within PDIA is to engage the authorising environment to provide just enough authorisation and predictability for the process and the iterative experimentation to proceed. And because in PDIA it is the public

15 On the use of adaptive approaches in fragile settings more generally, see Christie & Greene (2019).

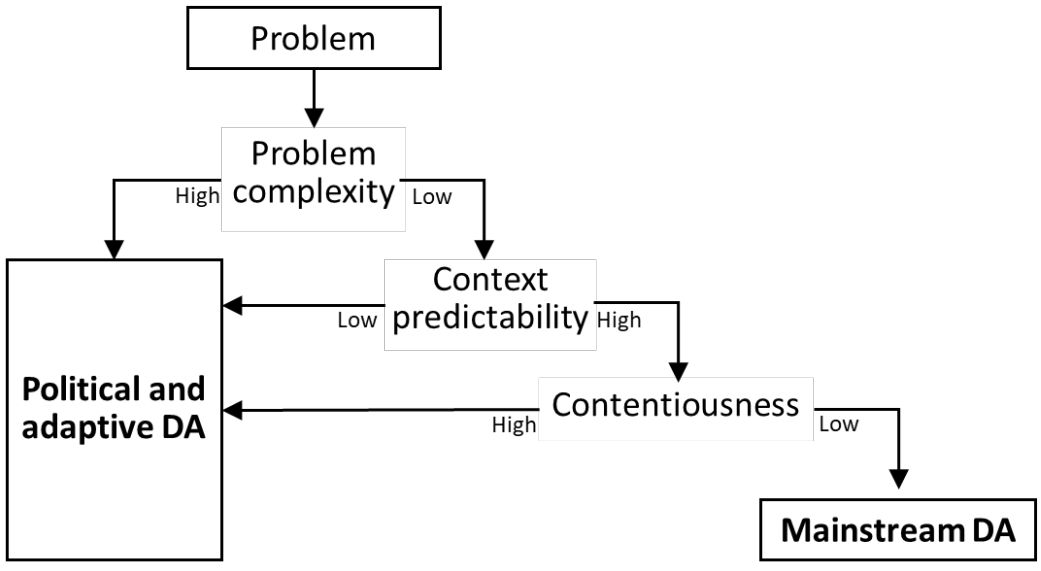
officials who are in charge of the process, they have the necessary soft information about informal networks and actual decision-making power to develop workable solutions and strategies to effectively lobby for authorisation. A particularly interesting difference between the solutions that PADA and mainstream approaches come up with in PFM reforms concerns the role of technology. While mainstream PFM reform projects typically include comprehensive international state-of-the-art software solutions for PFM (see, for example, Bridges & Woolcock, 2017), political and adaptive approaches tend to repurpose existing systems or employ basic software that is broadly accessible even when electricity and the internet are not constantly available (Andrews, 2018b; Peterson, 2011). In many developing countries the latter solutions are more sustainable because they fit the local context better.

While none of these projects were successful across the board, all of them introduced practical solutions to relevant problems, often in institutionalised ways that increased the chances for these solutions to be sustainable. Especially given the counterfactual evidence, it is difficult to imagine how mainstream projects with much less space for political engagement and flexible adaptation to local problems and priorities could do the same. This supports the claim that PADA has comparative advantages over mainstream development assistance in less predictable contexts.

The three dimensions of problem complexity, contentiousness and context predictability can now be combined to summarise under which conditions PADA is likely to have comparative advantages over mainstream development assistance. Figure 2 summarises the theoretical argument and can be used to design future research on the effects of political and adaptive approaches. At the same time, it may serve as a decision tree for policy-makers.

A developing country context is generally assumed, which means that, overall, formal rules and institutions are expected to be less well established and effective than they are in an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country context. The dimensions are arranged in order of their importance in such a context.

Figure 2: Under which conditions does PADA have comparative advantages? Summary of the argument and decision tree



Source: Author

Figure 2 shows that PADA is more appropriate for more complex development problems irrespective of the extent of context predictability by developing country standards and by contentiousness. When the complexity of the problem is low, but context predictability is low as well, political and adaptive approaches are also better suited to addressing the problem. And when problem complexity is low and context predictability is high, whether PADA is the better choice depends on how potentially contentious the problem and the solutions are. When they are highly contentious, PADA remains the better option, but when they are not, a mainstream approach has comparative advantages. This result that mainstream development assistance is only superior when a development problem is not complex, when the context is relatively predictable and when problems and solutions are not contentious is in line with Honig's findings. In addition to his quantitative analysis, he compared case studies that varied in terms of his key criteria "project verifiability" and "environmental predictability". He concluded that a "highly verifiable intervention in a predictable environment is the only case study pair in which Navigation by Judgement seems to have been a weakness rather than a strength" (Honig, 2018, p. 134).[16] Given that most development problems are complex and that contexts with a high degree of predictability are scarce in the developing world, the conclusion is that political and adaptive approaches have comparative advantages over mainstream approaches for the majority of development projects.

5 What are PADA's main contributions?

Knowing for which problems and in which contexts political and adaptive approaches are likely to have comparative advantages over mainstream approaches is important. But an equally fundamental question is which kinds of contributions these approaches can be expected to make under these conditions. This section focuses on three potential contributions that PADA can make: improving short-term effectiveness, improving long-term effectiveness and reducing harm.

So far, studies of TWP have referred to the claim that the approach can improve the effectiveness of development projects (Dasandi et al., 2019; McCulloch & Piron, 2019, p. O13; see also TWP Community of Practice, n.d.). However, to be able to decide whether PADA really is more effective than mainstream approaches, we need to know what "effectiveness" refers to. One of the most important distinctions is between short-term and long-term effectiveness (McCulloch & Piron, 2019, p. O10). In this paper, short-term effectiveness refers to outcomes that contribute to the solution of a problem and have immediate developmental benefits. Certain laws, like the land rights law in the Philippines, creative administrative approaches, or campaigns for the recovery of unremitted funds are examples of this. Long-term effectiveness, on the other hand, means that a project has contributed to reducing rather than deepening the institutional capability trap. Realistically, that means that it has introduced or supported an institutional process that has taken on a self-sustained dynamic towards reducing the capability trap. Or, from a broader systems

16 Honig refers to two projects on the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV in South Africa. In direct comparison with each other, the top-down management and control approach used by USAID was much more successful than the navigation-by-judgement management strategy employed in DFID's project (2018, pp. 112-122).

perspective, "that institutional relationships have begun to shift in ways that make breakthroughs [in their relationships] more feasible in the future" (Booth & Unsworth, 2014, p. 7). To be clear, PADA is not a silver bullet and the more complex a problem is and the more unpredictable a context, the more difficult it is to achieve both short-term and long-term effectiveness. But based on the argument made and the evidence presented so far, PADA is more likely to be effective under these conditions compared with mainstream approaches.

Short-term effectiveness

Because political and adaptive approaches are still relatively new, available studies focus on their short-term effectiveness. However, the evidence they can draw on is limited. Some case study findings, and especially the stronger counterfactual evidence discussed earlier, suggest that when these approaches fit the problems and contexts, they can indeed produce better results than mainstream approaches. Because both TWP and PDIA grant local development agents substantial discretion to navigate by judgement, strong additional support for the claim is provided by Honig's (2018) finding that projects that use this strategy are more likely to be successful when project verifiability and environmental predictability are low. Beyond that, however, more systematic research, including direct comparisons of mainstream and political and adaptive approaches is necessary to build a strong evidence base for comparing their respective advantages under different conditions. A key problem for both research and policy is that these approaches differ from each other in ways that are so fundamental that different metrics have to be used to measure their performance. And some of the metrics and methods more suitable for PADA are yet to be developed.

Long-term effectiveness

How is PADA likely to fare on long-term effectiveness and institutional impact? As a study of World Bank projects (Andrews, 2018c) and the evaluation of GIZ's governance work stream (GIZ, 2020) show, the lack of impact is a weak spot of institutional reform projects. While making this kind of impact is a lot harder than achieving short-term outcomes, that makes it even more important that donors are clear about what kinds of impact they want to achieve and how they think they can do so. Unlike mainstream approaches, political and adaptive approaches not only enable but explicitly encourage projects to adapt project objectives, theories of change, strategies and even interventions throughout the project in response to changes in the context and in response to lessons learnt from iterative experimentation. This does not guarantee that they will eventually have a bigger impact, but it enables projects to develop more realistic context-specific expectations, to better navigate risks, to explore opportunities when they arise, and perhaps even to help create novel opportunities themselves.

A better understanding of the context's political dynamics and the close collaboration with local agents are two of PADA's comparative advantages that enable long-term effectiveness and impact. In the case of PDIA, external agents regard themselves merely as facilitators of a process owned and driven by local actors. If successful, these interventions strengthen institutional capability both in the short run and especially in the long run by motivating and empowering them. But because long-term evaluations with a focus on institutional impact are

rare, apart from being methodologically challenging, these potential comparative advantages may not be empirically tested any time soon.

Direct and indirect harm

With regard to harm, this paper distinguishes direct harm – or harm that causes immediate damage – and indirect harm, which decreases institutional capability over time and, thereby, deepens the capability trap. Somewhat surprisingly, the most comprehensive study of TWP in development assistance to date concludes that "the primary function of TWP may not in fact be aid effectiveness per se, but rather avoiding the well recorded pitfalls and negative unintended consequences of 'politically blind' aid" (Dasandi et al., 2019, p. 163).[17] This is an important point because development projects that do not achieve their goals are not "only" ineffective – these interventions in polities and bureaucracies with millions of dollars over many years can be incredibly harmful. Especially in contexts where institutions are weak, direct harm caused by development projects and donors may include the diversion of critical government resources away from more important issues by excessive and uncoordinated reporting and accounting requirements, for example. Insisting on procedures that are not in line with or even contradict local processes are another case in point. Unfortunately, even though these problems are well known, and attempts have been made to address them, recent years have seen little progress with donor harmonisation and seriously taking the "absorptive capacity" of partner countries into account.

For institutional reform, however, the indirect harm caused by mainstream development assistance may be even more damaging. By arriving with pre-planned projects and solutions, development agencies actively disempower the very agents that are in charge of development. This is done by prioritising international best practice solutions over home-grown solutions that local agents could have developed, or by primarily talking to senior politicians and bureaucrats and seeing mid- and lower-level officials as mere implementing partners. Given the overall power inequality between development partners, this approach can effectively undermine a government's capability to feel in charge and actually be in charge of and analyse their development problems and, perhaps with international support on their own terms, develop their own solutions. This is especially the case when development projects are not few and far between but have become a local constant, often without taking the lessons learnt (or not learnt) by earlier projects and other donors into account. It is not surprising that these constellations frequently produce reform fatigue, frustration and cynicism on the part of local public officials rather than actual reforms.

The potential of political and adaptive approaches to do less direct harm and especially less indirect harm to institutional capability may well be, therefore, at least as important a contribution as improving short-term and long-term effectiveness. But while it is common to evaluate whether development projects were effective or not, the same care is not usually taken in investigating the damage they have done or have avoided. In addition to that, it is necessary to more systematically and more forcefully apply the "do no harm" principle that

17 In their long-term assessment of the differences that TWP made to DFID-funded work in Nigeria, Williams and Owen make a similar observation: "Yet the real gains of TWP may be to a significant extent invisible, in terms of bad work avoided and wastage prevented" (2020, p. 14).

has been common in humanitarian assistance for decades now (Anderson, 1999) to development assistance in general and to institutional reform projects in particular.

In conclusion, under certain conditions, political and adaptive approaches to development assistance are likely to have comparative advantages over mainstream approaches in terms of short-term outcome effectiveness, long-term institutional impact and avoiding direct and indirect harm. And while it is understandable that current TWP studies try to build the case for PADA on the (short-term outcome) effectiveness claim, the ways in which political and adaptive approaches differ from mainstream approaches is so fundamental, that other contributions they are likely to make should be more strongly emphasised and further explored. This incomplete yet broader set of contributions may even attract development agencies, practitioners and developing country governments who are unfamiliar with PADA but for whom long-term institutional impact and harm reduction are priorities.

6 Conclusions

Political and adaptive approaches in development assistance are still relatively new. This paper has suggested that rather than expecting them to improve aid effectiveness in general, three questions should be asked to specify for which problems and in which contexts they may have comparative advantages over mainstream approaches, and what their main contributions may be under these conditions. Based on theoretical discussions and a review of available evidence, the conclusion is that political and adaptive approaches seem to have comparative advantages over mainstream approaches when either the problem is complex, the context is difficult to predict or the problem and its solution are contentious. Under these conditions, PADA is likely to improve short-term outcome effectiveness and long-term institutional impact. It may also reduce direct and indirect harm, which weakens institutional capability and, thereby, makes developmental institutional change less likely.

While the evidence base is still too thin to conclusively confirm that the expectations and hopes invested in PADA are justified, the general and specific evidence assembled for this paper suggests that this is the case under the conditions and with the qualifications brought forward. This paper responds to the call for a more systematic, evidence-based discussion of the potential contributions of PADA and has developed a framework of specific theoretical claims with supporting evidence on which future researchers can build. It agrees with Dasandi et al. (2019) and McCulloch and Piron (2019) that more systematic and more rigorous empirical studies that investigate if and under which conditions PADA works better than mainstream approaches are necessary. More policy-based research is also required for developing new development programming tools and methods. Problem-driven adaptive and politically informed approaches require novel metrics and reporting formats. If learning and long-term institutional impact should be more central in institutional reform projects, these aspects must be accounted for and, eventually, evaluated. While there are no common

standards yet, several new tools and innovative procedures have been developed and tested in recent years.[18]

If the conclusions suggested in this paper are correct, the implications for evidence-based development policy would be huge. Because development projects beyond governance and public sector reform try to achieve institutional change of some kind, and because problem complexity is usually high and context predictability low, a large share of bilateral and multilateral development assistance would be affected. Political and adaptive approaches would have to be greatly expanded while mainstream approaches would become the exception rather than the rule for institutional reform projects. While this may well be the case, however, this paper's overall conclusion is a more general one. The range of topics that development assistance deals with has steadily widened in recent decades and has become almost all-encompassing. In light of that, it is remarkable how little development programming and management have changed. While there have been modifications, the general model and procedures have changed so little that in many countries a project manager from the 1980s would not have a major problem understanding and implementing a project conceived in 2020. Development assistance itself is in need of institutional reform. Mainstream models and procedures must be questioned because they have changed very little over long periods of time and because it is highly unlikely that the same programming approach works for every single one of the challenges that development assistance concerns itself with. Development policy needs a broader variety of clearly differentiated approaches and the evidence base and analytical capability to select those that best fit the respective problem and context for every case.[19] While this paper has focused on political and adaptive approaches that may work better for institutional reform projects under certain conditions, other problems and contexts may require approaches with different qualities and comparative advantages.

Whether international development assistance is open to such fundamental change is not clear (Yanguas, 2018; 2021). Two trends are currently contradicting each other. At the level of development organisations, it appears that the need for greater political sensitivity, context-based problem-orientation, and procedural flexibility is increasingly being recognised, even outside the PADA community. The evaluation report of GIZ's governance advisory services cited earlier, for example, makes several recommendations along these lines.[20] And an earlier book on GIZ experiences with "smart implementation in governance programs" (Kirsch, Siehl, & Stockmayer, 2017) confirms that much of this is already being practiced in the field within the limits of the existing development system. But as long as these practices and approaches are not formally approved, they and the lessons learnt from them have to remain informal and detached from official reporting and programming.

18 There are too many to mention all of them. A small selection includes: "everyday political analysis" instead of the more traditional political economy analysis (Hudson, Marquette, & Waldock, 2016), the "searchframe" as an alternative to the logframe (Andrews et al., 2017, Chapter 8), "contribution analysis" for adaptive management (Apgar, Hernandez, & Ton, 2020), learning-centred approaches (Valters, Cummings, & Nixon, 2016), "strategy testing" as a monitoring approach for flexible projects (Ladner, 2015), and monitoring and evaluation for adaptive development programming (Roche & Kelly, 2018).

19 In his book, Honig also argues that "tailoring management to suit the task" (2018, p. 105) has to be improved and that development organisations have to be made "fit for purpose" (p. 152).

20 However, it is quite peculiar that neither TWP nor PDIA are mentioned in the report and that the respective literature is completely absent (Kirsch, Siehl, & Stockmayer, 2017).

Because of these pragmatic practices within development organisations and their increasing realisation that the formalisation of these practices is possible with the political and adaptive approaches discussed, a shift towards more PADA at the level of development organisations seems conceivable. On the other hand, however, there are broader political developments that work against these trends. These include growing donor nationalism; the subordination of aid under foreign policy, like in Australia and the UK; and the increasing tendency of donors to unilaterally determine the topics they are prepared to support. Together with an overly rigid interpretation of results-based approaches,[21] these political trends could potentially undermine or even terminate the growing awareness that PADA may be a useful addition to mainstream approaches to development assistance if the political dimension of development and the importance of context are taken seriously.

21 For results- versus adaptation-based ideas and approaches in development assistance, see Janus (2020).

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