Politically informed approaches to gender in fragile and conflict-affected settings

Insights from an expert meeting, 12 September 2019

Clare Castillejo, Pilar Domingo, Rachel George and Shannon O'Connell

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Key messages

- It is important to identify, document and learn from politically informed and adaptive programming on gender in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

- Different analytical and monitoring, learning and evaluation tools are required for politically informed programming on gender. These should be embedded within programme teams and processes, and be genuinely gender-responsive.

- There is a need for more politically smart use of quantitative and qualitative data in order to identify plausible entry points and ways of working on gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. This should include increasing the capacity of programme staff to use data to inform, adapt and correct programmes.

- Staff promoting politically informed work on gender equality are often isolated, with little opportunity to share experiences or learn from others. Platforms should be created to share experience and knowledge, and to bring together donors and implementers involved in this work.

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Acronyms

FCAS   fragile and conflict-affected settings

GADN   Gender and Development Network

MEL   monitoring, evaluation and learning

PEA   political economy analysis

PIA   politically informed approaches

SGBV   sexual and gender-based violence

1   Introduction

Across the development community there is growing recognition of the value of politically informed and adaptive approaches for strengthening work on gender equality, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS).

There is also a nascent but growing body of knowledge on what politically informed work on gender in FCAS looks like, and how it can be done. Research and policy communities involved in thinking and working politically, adaptive management and problem-driven approaches have increasingly engaged with issues of gender, contributing to an emerging body of evidence on politically smart ways of working in these settings. Development actors working on gender and FCAS have also produced important insights as they have experimented with politically informed programming.

The practice of politically informed working is not new – in general, and specifically in relation to gender programming. In many cases, despite politically informed ways of working not being embedded in programme design or reporting and monitoring mechanisms, implementation processes may include such approaches in practice. However, these practices have mostly not been purposefully rewarded, and largely remain undocumented. It is only recently, and in the context of the wider discussion on adaptive and politically informed ways of working, that

development and governance programming in general is being reconsidered from this perspective. This is increasingly also true of gender programming.

Thus, it is unsurprising that the knowledge base remains both limited and disparate, with relatively few documented examples of such programming to draw on, and the experience of those working in these ways frequently not captured or shared.

There has recently been increased momentum towards strengthening this knowledge base in relation to gender programming, with initiatives including the Development Leadership Programme's research on Gender and Politics in Practice (Derbyshire et al., 2018); an OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) guidance note on politically informed approaches to working on gender equality in FCAS (OECD, forthcoming); and a practitioners' guidance note from the Gender and Development Network (GADN) on 'Putting gender into political economy analysis' (Haines and O'Neil, 2018).

This report summarises the discussions at a meeting of a small group of key experts and practitioners to share experiences and knowledge, reflect on what we already know about working politically on gender in FCAS, and identify what further evidence would be useful. It focuses in particular on the priorities for advancing this agenda identified by participants.

2 Ways of working on gender in fragile and conflict-affected settings

2.1 Why politically informed approaches matter for support to gender programming in FCAS

Gender inequalities tend to be deep-rooted, highly political and complex problems, and tightly bound up with a whole variety of interests, attitudes and behaviours. Meanwhile, FCAS are often complex, fluid contexts where access to power and resources is contested, the political stakes are especially high and outcomes are uncertain. Given this causal and contextual complexity, addressing gender equality problems in FCAS requires moving beyond 'traditional' programming approaches to ones that take better account of how gender power is tied up with wider power dynamics in fragile contexts; accepting that solutions to gender equality problems are not obvious or predictable at the outset; and recognising that pathways of change in this area will be neither linear nor predictable.

There is growing recognition both of the value of applying politically informed approaches to gender work *and* of the value of integrating a gender lens in the 'thinking and working politically' agenda (O'Neil, 2016; Moyle, 2015). Advancing gender equality objectives has redistributive effects, which means that the relevant players need to be politically smart in pursuing these, as they are likely to encounter resistance. At the same time, as the 'thinking and working politically' agenda and adaptive approaches to governance and development privilege politically informed ways of working, insights on less visible power dynamics derived

from gender analysis can help to finesse international actors' understanding of the political economy conditions they are working within.

However, despite this recognition, progress in bringing these two agendas together is limited. Hence, there is potential for far deeper and wider engagement between gender equality and politically informed approaches to governance and development work, and a need for a stronger evidence base on how to work across them.

For donors and implementing partners, politically informed approaches to gender in FCAS add value in several ways in advancing gender equality goals and broader peace/stability goals. First, FCAS often experience profound political and socio-economic changes, which may provide strategic entry-points to work politically in pursuit of significant transformations in gender equality and women's empowerment. This may include one-off moments, such as peace agreements or constitutional reform processes. Second, political work on gender can help support sustainable transitions from conflict and fragility, as gender equality struggles in FCAS often make visible the structural inequalities which underlie core drivers of fragility. This can help to advance global normative objectives around inclusion and non-discrimination.

2.2 What we know

Participants discussed what we know about how to work in politically informed ways on gender in FCAS, and identified areas where further evidence needs to be generated through research,

documentation and experience-sharing. They discussed their own experiences of what works in adopting these approaches, many of which mirror the wider evidence base (see Box 1).

2.3 Limited evidence on how to apply these approaches in practice

Participants reported that, within their organisations, there is growing recognition of the value of politically informed and adaptive approaches, and of the broad theory behind them. However, what is missing is detailed knowledge on how to apply these approaches, both in terms of identifying entry-points and in the practices and ways of working that can be adopted throughout the implementation of interventions. This includes evidence about the kind of programmes, partnership models and incentives that facilitate politically informed working, and how to work with context and manage resistance and backlash. Some participants expressed concern that, if the

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Box 1   Evidence from the literature on key elements of politically informed approaches to gender

The existing evidence base offers important insights into how to work in politically informed ways on gender in FCAS, and examples of good and less good practice in this area. However, this evidence base is patchy and needs to be strengthened.

Importantly, we need to distinguish between local processes of change (whereby different actors are engaging in different forms of political contestation) and the role of international actors in supporting these change processes. Our concern is primarily with the latter, and how working through politically informed approaches can be most effective in supporting locally driven agendas addressing gender inequalities and women's empowerment.

There is strong evidence attesting to the need to identify and understand the issues at stake, including by recognising the complex links between gender inequality and fragility, for example how gender discrimination, or opportunities for women's empowerment, relate to fragility factors such as inter-elite contestation over the political settlement (OECD, 2017). Likewise, evidence points to the importance of focusing on locally defined gender equality problems and targeting the underlying drivers of gender inequality, rather than the symptoms (O'Neil, 2016).

There is also increasing knowledge about how to effectively support women's power and agency within fragile contexts, for example through supporting women as active agents within change processes, or strengthening women's individual and collective capacity for voice and influence (O'Neil and Domingo, 2016). Recent years have seen growing criticism of the way in which donors engage with women's organisations, and increasing recognition of the need to adopt funding and partnership models that support women's organisations to advance their own agendas and foster relationship-building among them (Cornwall, 2014; O'Neil and Domingo, 2016).

Studies also demonstrate the importance of working with a wide range of stakeholders and of building strategic coalitions in support of particular gender equality goals (Derbyshire et al., 2018). Critically, this includes engaging with informal institutions, actors and rules, which are often highly powerful in FCAS and have significant influence over gender norms and power relations (Castillejo, 2012).

The evidence base also points to the importance of a multi-dimensional approach that addresses the interconnected constraints to and opportunities for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment across multiple sectors, as well as the need to take account of the ways in which gender identities intersect with other identities and patterns of exclusion (Haines and O'Neil, 2018). Recent evidence also suggests that much longer programme cycles – well beyond the typical 3–4 years – are most useful in supporting shifts in gender norms and power relations (Norad, 2015).

Finally, we also know that there are often siloes between mainstream sector programming and gender-focused programming. While this is the case, gender equality and women's empowerment are likely to remain peripheral to the main focus of programming in conflict settings.

growing popularity of politically informed approaches within the development community is not matched by greater knowledge and evidence, there is a risk that these approaches will be increasingly undertaken in a misinformed or tokenistic way, for example without sufficient political analysis, or with 'tweaking' of programmes being confused with genuine strategy adaptation.

2.4   Unbalanced evidence across sectors and programme types

We know more about working in politically smart ways on gender in some types of programmes than others, resulting in a skewed evidence base. For example, most experiments in this area have been in smaller programmes (with a few notable exceptions) because of the challenges involved in integrating politically informed approaches into larger programmes with heavier structures, larger budgets and less appetite for risk.

Evidence on politically smart working on gender issues also tends to come from a very limited range of sectors, notably governance and gender equality programming. There is very little evidence as to whether these approaches are being used in sectors such as economic recovery, infrastructure or WASH, for example, and little thinking about how politically informed approaches to gender might be applied in these sectors. As such, learning about what working in these ways means for different sectors and types of programmes was identified as a clear knowledge gap.

2.5   Experience of what works reflects the existing knowledge base

Participants identified key lessons from their own experiences of working in politically smart ways on gender equality. These included the importance of an honest assessment of the political arrangement and how this relates to gender power dynamics; being explicit that gender work is political; and going beyond the symptoms of gender inequalities to ensure that programmes focus on the underlying causes of these inequalities, and the ways in which

they interact across different arenas (economy, politics, education, security).

It was also stressed that support for women's collective mobilisation must be central to a political approach to gender, especially in contexts where the space for this is restricted. The starting point must be a recognition that women activists are already working in politically smart ways in these contexts, and development actors should explore how they can best connect to and support this existing work. Participants repeatedly stressed that long-term and flexible funding for women's organisations can help them develop their own political agenda and act in strategic ways. Short-term, project-based funding limits this ability.

Participants identified the value of starting by working on less politically contentious areas in order to create a 'back door' for women's engagement with reform processes; create strategic relationships between women and other important actors; and help change how women's roles and gender equality issues are perceived. The example was given of the DFID-funded Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme, which began with a focus on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) service provision, which appeared non-contentious because of the emphasis on service delivery, but provided an entry-point to transform the way actors such as the police and courts perceive SGBV.

It was suggested that useful ways to trial and learn from politically informed programming on gender can include attaching a politically informed element to a larger programme, or by developing a small targeted programme specifically to do this. Participants also made the point that smaller grants over time can be particularly useful in enabling a programme to be nimble and adaptive, and helping it to manage the changing contexts found in many FCAS.

In terms of timeframes, participants stressed the value of taking a long view, given the complexity of gender equality problems and of fragile settings, and the fact that change in these contexts is inevitably slow and non-linear. However, participants also noted how organisational constraints make it very difficult to adopt such programming timeframes in practice.

3 What we know about organisational opportunities and challenges

Participants discussed how the culture, systems, practices and tools of their own organisations hinder or facilitate politically informed working on gender in FCAS. They agreed that more knowledge is needed about the impact of these factors, both to make organisations better equipped for politically informed working, and to inform discussions about the costs and benefits of using these approaches within different organisations (see Box 2).

3.1 Organisational willingness to take on politically informed working

Participants discussed the factors influencing their organisations' willingness to adopt politically informed approaches to gender work. They agreed that the broader policy environment plays an important role in this. For example, where there is an overarching feminist foreign policy, or where gender equality is central to organisational mandates, this encourages organisations to dedicate resources to gender issues, and to frame these more explicitly as political. It was suggested that donors can play a critical role in encouraging implementing agencies to adopt these approaches, for example by fostering open communication with grantees and explicitly encouraging experimentation, learning from failure and rewarding the reorientation of activities.

It is important that bilateral donors recognise how politically informed approaches can add value to different dimensions of their work on gender and in FCAS – both political engagement through foreign ministries and development cooperation through development agencies. For example, a gendered PEA can both inform development funding choices and programming decisions, as well as providing insights that the donor can bring to political and policy dialogue with national governments, multilateral institutions and other stakeholders.

It was suggested that organisations may be more willing to experiment with politically informed approaches in extremely complex contexts, either because it is easier to admit there is no clear solution in such contexts, or because funding modalities may be more flexible. Likewise, in contexts where donor funding is marginal, it is more logical to use this funding for experimentation rather than expecting it to facilitate major change. Nigeria was noted as an example where both factors – complexity and the marginal role of donor funds – are at play, and where there is interesting experimentation under way with politically informed, adaptive programming. Where decision-making is centralised, and country offices control their own funds, this also increases willingness to trial these ways of working.

It was agreed that more needs to be done to make the case for politically informed approaches with senior managers, including through developing powerful stories of how these programmes have contributed to change. Likewise, participants argued that it is important to anticipate and be prepared to manage resistance within their organisations to adopting these ways of working.

3.2   Rethinking the role of donors and implementing organisations

It is important to underline that both bilateral and multilateral funding is diverse in terms of scale and organisational structures. Funding modalities *within* donors may follow quite different decision-making and sign-off processes. This affects capacity to adapt on the ground and make funding more flexible. Donors themselves are constrained by their own domestic political environment. While the reflections here capture views from the meeting, it is important not to generalise across the roles and capabilities of donors. The capacity of different donors to become more meaningfully adaptive and politically informed in their gender programming requires more in-depth observation.

A major challenge for donors and implementing organisations wanting to work in these ways is the need to reflect on their own role within change processes. Politically informed approaches require an explicit recognition that, as external players, donors and implementing agencies are not the ones driving change, but are helping to facilitate change processes led by local actors to identify and solve their own problems. This can constitute a large shift away from more traditional solution-focused approaches to development programming. Even where programmes do seek to support locally led problem definitions and responses, donors and implementing organisations must still be aware of the more subtle ways in which they shape which gender problems should be prioritised, and how they are addressed. Participants also stressed that a more collaborative approach to problem identification could help overcome the challenge that donors do not always understand enough about a given problem before they put out a bid proposal.

3.3   Skills and capacities

It was agreed that working in politically informed ways requires a quite different set of skills to more traditional programming. Participants stressed that, while gender and relevant sectoral knowledge remain important, skills such as critical thinking, relationship-building, flexibility and the willingness to accept and learn from failure are also crucial. It can be a challenge to foster these skills among frontline programme staff, who are rewarded for delivering activities to schedule and prioritising preset 'results'.

Participants reported that the skills and knowledge needed for this work are not consistently fostered or shared within their organisations. Strengthening internal knowledge management systems was identified as one way to do this, in order to embed learning and ensure that mutual learning about working politically on gender can take place between country offices and HQ, and across staff working in different sectors.

3.4   Tools for analysis and MEL

Many participants noted that existing analytical tools are of limited value in supporting politically informed programming. This is because standard PEA or conflict analysis often overlooks gender, or addresses it in tokenistic ways, and because, even when analyses do include gender, the focus is often on the symptoms and not the root causes of gender inequalities, and fails to capture the bigger picture. Participants argued that, if donors systematically adopt, and demand from their grantees, a stronger, gendered PEA, this will help make this a standard element of all programming. Importantly, a gendered PEA can expose less evident power relations and disruptive elite conduct. It can also help identify risks of unintended consequences of programming, and highlight the danger of backlash. The analytical benefits of a gendered PEA can also help make 'do no harm' measures more effective.

Another gap identified was MEL tools and systems. Participants repeatedly stressed that their organisations' existing MEL approaches and tools are not adequate, and that they need alternative examples of how to monitor progress and report on results which are relevant to these types of programmes. It was suggested that such alternatives could include MEL tools that seek to capture learning about the context, problems and potential pathways of change over the lifetime of a programme, and to capture qualitative factors – such as relationships – that contribute to success. Likewise, it was recognised that MEL systems should feed into programme strategy, rather than just be used for accountability, and that embedded learning and regular feedback can help support course correction during programme implementation. Overall, donors and implementing organisations need to think

more creatively about how to understand and measure success in relation to gender equality problems in complex settings, including in cases of fragility. This includes focusing more on the *process* factors that enable effective support and programming, and critically reviewing theories of change that are based either on pre-set assumptions of how change happens, or inflexible, results-based agendas.

Finally, it was noted that an important organisational constraint is the difficulty of accepting that some projects fail, and being able to walk away from them. Learning from failure should be recognised as a legitimate and important aspect of programming, including to inform significant adaptations and course corrections as relevant.

3.5   Politically informed working is happening in ad hoc ways

An essential point that emerged from the discussions was that, in many organisations, staff are already adopting politically informed approaches within their work on gender in FCAS, but that this is often done in a tacit, ad hoc way, and not explicitly recognised as such. As a result, these experiences are not identified, documented or learned from. Participants agreed that there is a need to document such experiences and make sure that they feed into the larger evidence base.

Given that politically informed work is under way in different guises across many organisations, it was noted that framing these approaches as a 'new' way of working is neither correct nor useful because it risks overlooking existing practice. It also makes taking on politically informed approaches sound daunting and difficult – a whole new way of doing things. It was agreed that a better approach would be to look at current practice and identify where politically informed work is already happening, what can be learned from it, and how it can be strengthened. In examining existing practice, it is important to recognise that politically informed approaches may look very different in different contexts, but that what they are likely to have in common is an (implicit or explicit) understanding of the political economy context and a willingness to respond to shifting contexts and new opportunities.

4   Where we need to know more

Participants reflected on what further knowledge is required to strengthen the ability and willingness of donors and implementing partners to work in politically informed ways on gender in FCAS. It was agreed that it would be particularly useful to have stronger evidence on how to understand gender equality problems and processes of change in FCAS; how to foster cultures, systems, practices and tools that enable politically informed working; and which stakeholders to work with, and how to engage with them.

4.1   Deepening understanding of gender equality problems and change processes

Participants underlined that further knowledge is required regarding how to identify and prioritise gender problems in fragile settings, including how problem definitions can be more locally led and donors or implementing partners can be more reflective about their role in setting the agenda. More evidence is also required about how change happens in gender power relations in such settings, and how to better identify potential pathways of change. Likewise, participants felt that it would be useful to have more evidence on what strategies can support individual attitudinal change, social norm change and institutional change, and how changes at these various levels relate to each other. Donor representatives in particular stressed that it would be useful if the wider gender and development sector could draw on a shared knowledge base in order to speak with a unified voice regarding work on gender in FCAS.

4.2   Identifying organisational culture, systems, practices and tools within donor and implementing organisations

While participants had a lot of ideas – drawn from their own experience – about what factors inhibit or advance politically informed working within their organisations, it was felt that there is little structured knowledge on this. They agreed that it would be useful to sharpen the analytical framing to capture and document how an organisation's ability to work in politically informed ways on gender is shaped by factors such as broad policy frameworks and organisational mandates; organisational attitudes to risk and innovation; and the skills, attitudes and behaviours of managers and staff. Likewise, participants felt that more evidence is required about how grants, contracts and procurement processes can be managed in ways that facilitate politically informed and adaptive working. It was also agreed that more learning is needed regarding how to generate organisational appetite for these ways of working and overcome resistance.

4.3   Which stakeholders to work with and how

It was recognised that working with a broad range of stakeholders is a feature of politically informed programming in any setting, but is particularly important in FCAS, where there may be multiple and competing sources of power operating at different levels, and informal

actors and institutions tend to play an important role. Stakeholders may be particularly hard to access. Given this, there is a need for more knowledge and evidence on which stakeholders to work with and how best to engage with them, including managing the risks involved in working with non-traditional partners.

Participants suggested that it would be useful to document and share examples of where work with women's organisations in FCAS has fostered these organisations' ability to engage with change processes and act in politically smart and strategic ways. While there is growing recognition of the damage that can be done to women's organisations through inappropriate funding and partnership models, there is still limited evidence about what models of partnership are most empowering.

Finally, it was suggested that, while many donors are willing to accept a high level of risk in their work with male-led elite politics in FCAS, they do not have a similar appetite for risk when it comes to working with small, locally based women's organisations. This needs to be challenged given the potential value of such work for conflict prevention and the long-term durability of political settlements. Donors should be encouraged to take risks by working with women's organisations in FCAS that are not their normal partners, and in ways that go beyond traditional partnership models.

5 Conclusion and next steps

It is clear that there is growing appetite within donors and implementing organisations to work in politically informed ways on gender. However, for organisations to be better placed to make the case for taking on these ways of working, they require the necessary evidence that doing so enhances results. They also need to invest in processes and tools, and opportunities for mutual learning.

Recommendation 1: Document and learn from existing and future programmes

There are already programmes working in politically informed ways on gender within many organisations. A priority must be to identify and document lessons from these. Likewise, as new programmes are developed they should be accompanied by action research or other robust forms of learning generation, to ensure that lessons are captured during the life of the programme. It would be particularly useful to develop detailed case studies of specific programmes to analyse the factors that contributed to success, as well as what has worked less well.

Recommendation 2: Develop more appropriate systems and tools

There was a clear recognition that different analytical and MEL systems and tools are required for politically informed programming. These tools need to be owned by programme staff and embedded within programme processes, rather than stand-alone activities done by outsiders. More knowledge is required about which analytical and MEL systems and tools have worked best for politically informed and adaptive programmes,

in order to help programme teams decide which ones might be right for them. It is important to avoid duplication of existing resources; wherever possible, build on existing tools and resources to make these meaningfully gender-responsive.

Recommendation 3: Invest in politically informed production and use of data

It was noted that there is a need for more politically smart use of qualitative and quantitative data. This includes supporting the production of research outputs that are strategically oriented to assist in identifying politically plausible entry points and ways of working that can enhance the likelihood of effective support. Knowledge production should feature as an ongoing and iterative element of MEL. Such investment should also include building capacity among relevant staff within donors and implementing organisations to more effectively use, and respond to, emerging findings to inform course corrections in interventions.

Recommendation 4: Create platforms to share knowledge and experience

Participants reported that staff promoting politically informed work on gender equality are often isolated, with little opportunity to share experiences or learn from the work of others. It was suggested that ongoing mutual learning among donor and implementing partner staff interested in these ways of working could be useful. This could take the form of a loose community of practice, which engages in regular experience sharing and seeks opportunities for collaboration.

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