# Tips on Power Dynamics and Theories of Change

These tips are part of a series of tips and resources to support context-driven adaptation in programming. For other resources, see the Context-Driven Adaptation Collection at https://usaidlearninglab.org/context-driven-adaptation-overview (internal staff version at https://programnet.usaid.gov/collection/context-driven-adaptation) or the Google Doc versions here.

These tips relate to the theory of change (TOC) that animates your programming - a description of how the Mission perceives the system it wants to change, and how and why the Project Purpose is expected to be achieved in the project context. For a more robust discussion of a TOC, see the Discussion Note on Logic Models.
For our purposes, it is most important to note that the TOC must address certain assumptions about the context, describe expected pathways for change to occur which relate to plans for the Mission to undertake certain activities, and review how both the context and the change processes will be monitored. These tips do not address monitoring (which is covered elsewhere) but describe how to insert political economy[1] into assumptions and pathways for change.

Power dynamics in context/assumptions
1) Articulate the "rules of the game" around how processes relevant to the project happen in the context - how supplies get allocated, how teachers get assigned and schools run, how mayors keep their popularity up, etc. For an example, listen (8:34-9:20) to USAID/Kosovo talk about how mapping incentives in systems helped their TOCs get beyond "good and bad" individuals to structural issues in fighting corruption and promoting rule of law.
2) Identify your assumptions around who will support or resist change and which of these will matter. A simple power mapping that traces importance in the context and interest in the reform can provide a sense of assumptions over who matters, such as this example dividing into quadrants of bystanders, spoilers, allies, and recruitables:

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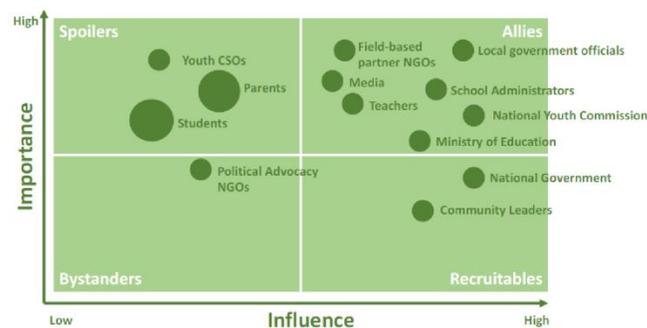
[1] Political economy refers to the distribution of power, incentives, and ideas that inform processes of contestation and bargaining in a society. See https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/applied-political-economy-analysis-field-guide.

3) Describe how you understand the core political settlement[2] among elites in the state and why it matters to your problem. For example, [research](#) on social protection in Africa has found that the political settlements play a strong role in explaining which countries expand social protection and what they cover.

Power dynamics in change pathways
4) Identify audiences that approaches should appeal to. Whether through their engagement in joint action, changes in individual behavior, or otherwise, all change pathways imply that someone (beyond USAID and its implementers) will start to do something different. Be explicit about which audiences you have in mind - not just "citizens" or "women" but with greater specificity - and why your theory holds that they will change their behavior.
5) Define credibility or salience of issues and formation of coalitions or alliances as intermediate outcomes. Many pathways to change require not just individual action, but collective action, which in turn means that there are key "tipping points" where an idea is powerful and pressing enough, or a coalition is diverse enough and includes enough key actors, that collective action is possible - whether it be an improved farming technique spreading or a change in a policy being made. If your TOC includes collective action as part of how activities will achieve the project purpose, be sure to define the credibility of key frames or ideas, or the formation of robust alliances or coalitions, as intermediate outcomes within the TOC. [Listen](#) (4:39-6:43) to how they approached relationships in a TOC in USAID/Serbia on private sector development for a great example.
6) Anticipate how key gatekeepers will be recruited and/or opponents outmaneuvered, or define investments to allow this to happen and reasons that they should succeed. A TOC that expects only its implementers and allies to act is not realistic. Embed in the TOC expectations, and relevant actions, to deal with other actors who might be swayed to support (or prevented from blocking) the changes pursued.
7) Show momentum growing through building on early successes that enable local winners to champion change. A TOC that shows how momentum is built on credibility, trust, and proven effectiveness offers much more opportunity to address how initial successes will be scaled up and spread. There's a great example on the facing page of a TOC for planning reform in municipal governments, showing how a simplistic TOC is expanded into a more nuanced

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[2] Political settlements constitute a common understanding or agreement, usually among elites, on how power and resources are to be distributed and how state–society relations are to be articulated. They involve managing the uneasy relationships between elite interests and the broader array of interests and needs in society, through ongoing processes of conflict, negotiation and compromise. More information on their use in analyzing a situation can be found [here](#).

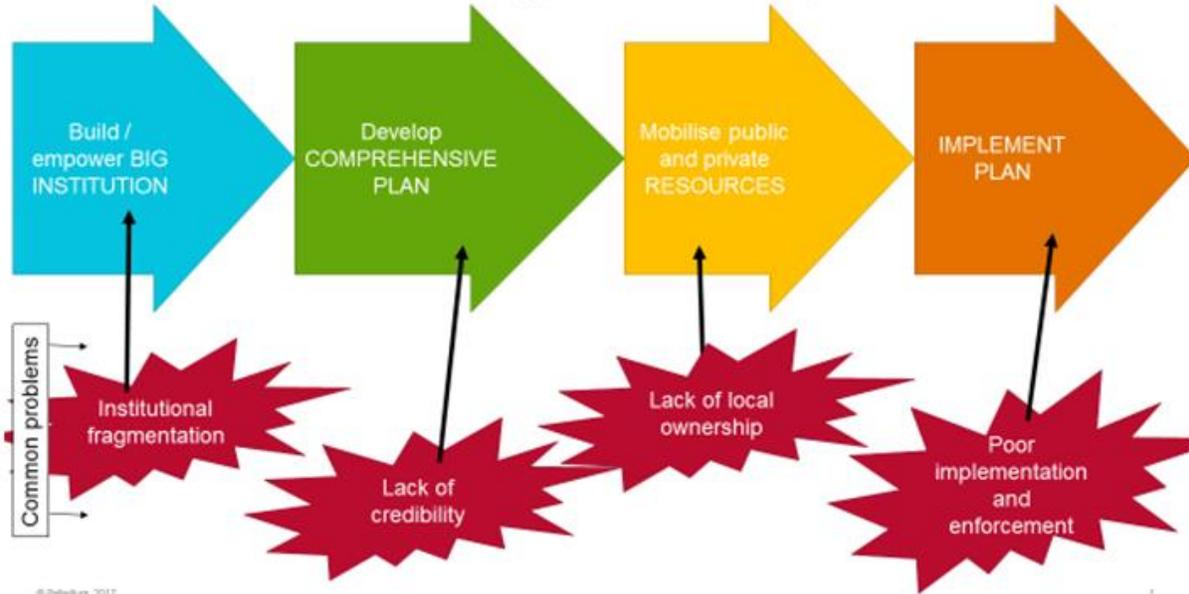one. Detailing expectations around this makes course correction during implementation much easier.

8) Define discovery as an intended part of how programs should logically operate. Not everything about a TOC can or should be known at the outset. Rather than write down the single likeliest approach, defining discovery of the right methods (as described in this [Discussion Note](#)), or a process of making a series of small bets and building off of the most effective (also known as "[development entrepreneurship](#)") as a part of the TOC makes programming both more flexible and more intentional.
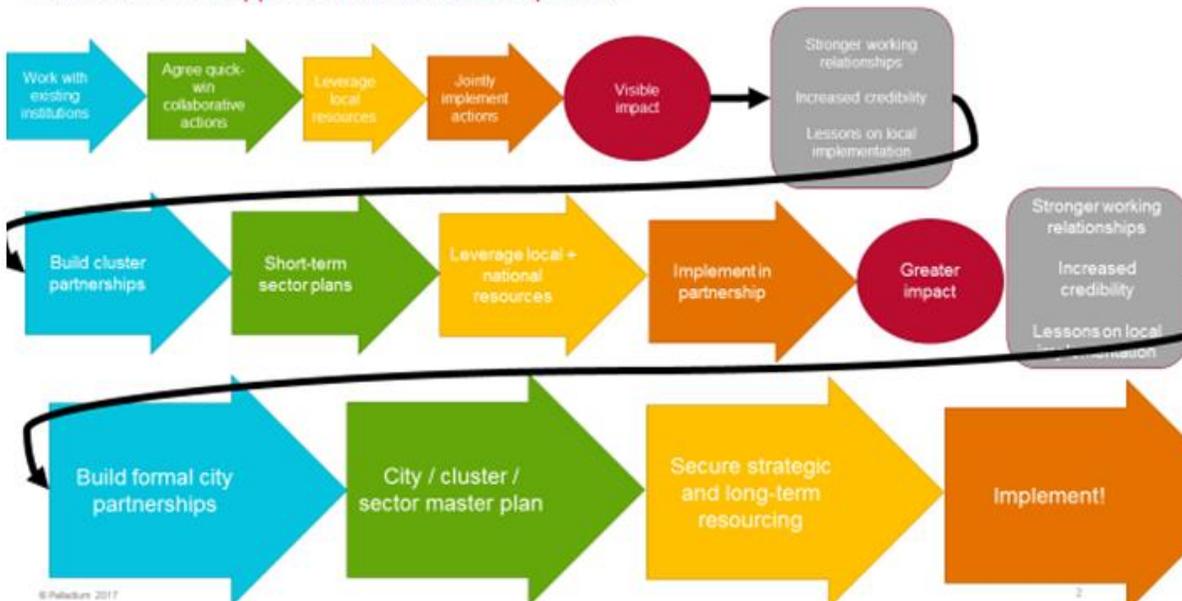
Updating understandings of power dynamics

9) It is vital to devote time during implementing refreshing assumptions and reflecting on how power is influencing change. This necessitates gathering some data both within activities and of wider context, and critically, shifting TOCs in response to findings. Here's an excellent [example](#) of discovering new assumptions, revising the TOC, and shifting emphasis from Uganda.

Ditching the Master Plan: Comparing two Theories of Change[3]