

ARTICLE

Practising politics: Technical project templates and political practice in a DFID country office

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ABSTRACT

Development agencies including the UK Department for International Development (DFID) increasingly agree that if aid is to be effective, it should be politically smart and locally led. However, both the critical and the reformist literature have argued that development agencies persist with technical, template-driven programming: political analysis and practice have not been widely institutionalized. This study aims to identify why development representations are persistently technical in their form, and what blockages have existed for developing locally grounded and politically aware programmes. The article presents an ethnography of the process of developing the core elements of the governance portfolio in an (anonymized) DFID country office. Focusing on a key design workshop, the study is situated within a wider organizational ethnography. The persistently technical justifications for programmes are a result of the bureaucratic form itself, its accountability and approval processes. Political analyses represent countries in such a way that officials can prioritize selection from a repertoire of technical models. However, scepticism about the tractability of governance problems to such analyses and programming has led to an emerging understanding of politics that creates space within the bureaucratic form for politically aware practice. Politically aware programming should emphasize

good operational practice over explicit analysis and should continue to emphasize technical models like the adaptive management models which create room for such practice.

KEYWORDS

adaptive management, bilateral aid, bureaucracy, ethnography, international development, political economy analysis

1 | INTRODUCTION

For years there have been calls for development agencies to move away from the application of template-driven aid models and towards the adoption of contextualized and politically aware development programming. Carothers and de Gramont (2013, pp. 10–11) emphasize the importance of “politically smart aid” as a political method where analyses of political relations and power dynamics inform the design and implementation of programmes. Yet as Carothers and de Gramont go on to observe (2013) and Yanguas and Hulme have affirmed (2015), the adoption of political analysis that has been the main analytical tool to this end never quite took formal root. The development sector's project documents remained resolutely “technical” in nature: that is, based on template theories of change that do not take into account the political dynamics through which change might happen. Calls for political approaches increasingly betrayed a certain weariness: they ask why the self-evidently useful has not happened and have shifted their attention to the possible “barriers” to such analysis (Booth, 2012; Hout, 2012; Unsworth, 2009; Yanguas & Hulme, 2015). The recent shift to adaptive management approaches politics not representationally but through the incremental, exploratory and iterative practices of “adaptive management” (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Laws & Marquette, 2018). This leaves the technical nature of the project documents intact: the attention shifts to political practice within the programmes. This article addresses the blockages to political representation, and how the practices of adaptive management allow political programming while avoiding these blockages.

The article is based on an “aidnography” of a Department of International Development (DFID) country office, the article focuses on the composition of the core narrative of the office's governance portfolio and in particular on a two-day workshop. The article argues that the persistently technical nature of development project documents derives from the working of the bureaucratic form itself. DFID is a decentralized and classically Weberian rational-legal bureaucracy. Approval and professional accountability processes justify projects based on established, replicable rules and precedents. These are semi-codified into a repertoire of governance project blueprints, templates or “travelling models”, to use the term from Behrends, Park, and Rottenburg (2014). The debates analysed in this study show how, in order to justify aid spending, officials select from the repertoire of models according to the particularities of the case. Following Murray Li (2007), selecting the models is a matter of representing the country and problematizing its governance in such a way that solutions are apparent (Ferguson, 1994 [1990]). This form of political analysis casts the country's power relations as a certain kind of object, which allows officials to justify certain governance models. Observing the bureaucratic limits to the adoption of political analysis, this article considers an alternative framing of politics as a practice. Reframed thus, politically informed development entails a fundamentally different view of the nature of the country, its politics and how change happens (Eyben, 2010). This standpoint is sceptical about the tractability of political behaviours to the traditional programming models and to the political-economic approaches that act as their corollary. It presumes these behaviours cannot be

identified through a priori political analysis, but require iterative engagement through political practices of relationship building. In the office, they are anchored in the increasingly prevalent technical “adaptive management” models.¹

The article closes by addressing policy considerations. The former emphasis on institutionalizing political analysis seldom helped aid to become more locally grounded because political analyses mostly worked to justify established forms of intervention. Standardization is crucial to bureaucracies which demand recognized, evidence-based interventions that provide intelligible accounts within the hierarchy and scrutiny mechanisms (Wynne, 1988). It is the bureaucratic form itself that causes the persistently technical nature of the documents and the circumscribed influence of political analyses. Representations of the political economy of a country will inevitably be interpreted and framed to legitimize certain generic technical models, for all the specificities of the local context they may include. Given the ways of working implied by the bureaucratic form and its emphasis on replicable and reliable models, a productive approach to pursuing locally led aid may be to refocus attention on the practices rather than the representation of politics: that is, on the practices of building and negotiating relationships and networks. The article shows how this idea of practice was raised within the design discussions through reference to adaptive management technical models – which have become increasingly prevalent in development discourses (Honig & Gulrajani, 2018; Laws & Marquette, 2018). These models create space for iterative and unplanned political practice and offer a way to unpick the dilemma posed by the bureaucratic form.

The article lays out this argument as follows: after this introduction, the second section reviews the literature on “rendering technical” development contexts and discusses the nature of the ethnographic material on which the argument is based. The third section elaborates the argument presented by the article, particularly with reference to the literature calling for and identifying barriers to political analysis in development. The fourth section presents brief policy-oriented conclusions.

2 | TECHNICAL AID AND POLITICS: INSTRUMENTAL AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

For some time, writers with reformist goals have been calling for political economy analyses to influence programming decisions (DFID, 2005; Hyden, 2008; Leftwich, 2007; Unsworth, 2009). This kind of “politically smart aid” urges both contextualization and explicit recognition of power through analyses of the political and institutional dynamics underpinning the behaviours of a governance system (Booth, 2011a; Carothers & de Gramont, 2013; Fisher & Marquette, 2014; Hout, 2012; Hudson & Leftwich, 2014). These are founded on ex ante analytical tools and are still to be embedded in the institutional fabric of key donor organizations (Carothers & de Gramont, 2013; Yanguas & Hulme, 2015). Yet until the recent growth of adaptive management techniques, this agenda made little progress. Such was the gap between rhetoric and institutional action that reform-minded observers turned to the “obstacles” or “barriers” to research uptake and to the use of political economy analyses in the day-to-day of development work (Booth, 2012; Duncan & Williams, 2012; Hudson & Marquette, 2015; Unsworth, 2009; Yanguas & Hulme, 2015). Blame was laid at different aspects

¹These new technical models are based on short iterated processes of design, experimentation and adaptation (encapsulated in Andrews (2013), at least one copy of which was physically present in the conference room). A growing epistemic community has increasing formed around certain initiatives, including “Doing Development Differently”, (Doing Development Differently, 2014) and “Thinking and Working Politically” (Laws & Marquette, 2018). They share many features of other approaches (to pick some: Chambers, Pacey, & Thrupp, 1989; Earl, Carden, & Smutylo, 2001; Eyben, 2006a; Honadle & Rosengard, 1983; Horton & Mackay, 2003; Korten, 1980).

of the political economy of the donors themselves (Hout, 2012): their management processes and incentives (Hout, 2012; Unsworth, 2015), their incentives to spend funds, and their lack of flexibility (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Carothers & de Gramont, 2013; Hout, 2012). These aspects form part of the institutional audit and management culture of the bureaucracy. The literature identifies a further set of limitations established by the mental models of officials, rooted in officials' preconfigured conceptions of the functioning of their developing country counterpart-governments and limited by expectations that governance improvements would reproduce their own norms and institutions (IDS, 2010; Unsworth, 2009, p. 889).

The critical literature told a similar story, albeit from a different standpoint. For this literature, the depoliticization of the context is crucial to the development enterprise itself: that is, development representations identify a specific problem and propose a solution, usually based on pre-established models, with suitable legitimizing evidence and track record (Apthorpe, 1986; Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994 [1990]; Murray Li, 2007; Porter, 1995). The identification of problems is intrinsically linked to the validation of specific solutions. These take the form of "travelling models," whose validity is supported as far as possible by evidence, lay down certain protocols for action which will be applied in different contexts (Behrends et al., 2014, p. 1). For post-development writers such as Escobar, the process of "rendering technical" is part of a covert geopolitical strategy adopted by the elites of the World Bank and the US development apparatus in particular to mask the exercise of power through "Development" (Escobar, 1995; Goldman, 2005; Mitchell, 2002).

Others, however, reject the assumption that covert geopolitical goals characterize all aid spending. They seek to escape the relentless "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Yarrow, 2011, p. 6) that characterized the earlier "post-development" movement. Murray Li argues that the rush to identify hidden motives for development serves to obscure rather than elucidate (for her the will to improve is genuinely meant, its intentions "benevolent, even utopian" (Murray Li, 2007, p. 5), even if the effects are not. She argues that translating the political context into a technical approach—"rendering technical"—is necessary for agencies to legitimize their interventions (Murray Li, 2011, p. 60). The ethnographic turn this argument typifies grounds the analysis of development in an analysis of practice (see contributions to Lewis & Mosse, 2006b; Mosse, 2011d; Yarrow & Venkatesan, 2012), drawing extensively on insights from Science and Technology Studies.² Increasingly, documents (Hull, 2012) and policies (Shore, Wright, & Però, 2011) are being taken seriously, not so much as texts but as ethnographic objects and as mediators of meaning, susceptible to different interpretations and embedded in practice. With bureaucracies, there is always a "huge contradiction between the neat and tidy public image, and the messier reality" (Wynne, 1988, p. 150). A project necessarily stands for multiple possible meanings and interpretations—to use Bruno Latour's term, an "actant" (Latour, 1996). That shift from policy to implementation is intrinsic to the operation of expertise. To explore this, the growing "aid-nography" tradition often takes a particular project and "studies through" from the project document to the implementation (Wedel, 2004; Wright & Reinhold, 2011).

However, there are considerable practical challenges in this form of research. Bureaucrats will often "refuse to be objectified" in the terms necessary for an ethnography (Mosse, 2011a, p. 20). Neither the critical literature nor the reformist literature draws on direct evidence of practice to resolve these diverging explanations. Such analyses that exist are typically of professionals reflecting on their experiences as participants within the development sphere, "hovering on the threshold" (Eyben, 2009). In particular, there remains a gap in the analysis of document production practice (although there are rare examples to the contrary, see Goldman (2005) for a polemic; Green (2011); Mosse

²Notably the work of Bruno Latour in understanding the knowledge practices of experts and professionals (Latour, 1987, 1996).

(2005)). The lack of backstage access to such practices has forced authors to deconstruct documents rather than analyse how they were composed. Consequently, the works that reveal the disjunctures between the documented intention and the realities of development practice (Lewis & Mosse, 2006a; Mosse, 2005; Murray Li, 2007; Quarles van Ufford, 1988; Rossi, 2004; Rottenburg, 2009) are often asymmetrical, since they cannot explore the practices of producing the documents in detail. For example, Murray Li's fine-grained analysis of an Asian Development Bank (ADB) project in Indonesia ends at the project documents (Murray Li, 2007), as do other ethnographic analyses (Ferguson, 1994 [1990]; Mitchell, 2002).³ Why has the will to improve consistently retained its exclusively technical character? Indeed, in Murray Li's case, the ADB actively ignored their careful research into the local area and politics, preferring a technical solution (Murray Li, 2007, pp. 125–126). They funded this work; the knowledge might have been useful, consonant with a genuine “will to improve.” The twin practices of problematizing and proposing solutions could have incorporated the knowledge they had generated into the context. Why would the political analysis not be used, if the will to improve is genuine? What are the blockages?

The article provides a response to these questions. It shows how the adaptive management mechanisms have offered a technical route out of the obstacles posed by the bureaucratic institutions. The analysis draws on two months of fieldwork in an anonymized DFID office, collected as a doctoral researcher and as an observer. It focuses on a specific workshop which formed the starting point for the design of the governance portfolio. As such, it offered an unusual opportunity to analyse the composition of the justifications underpinning a range of programmes within the governance portfolio. The country in question was characterized by weak governance arrangements, predatory elites and an ongoing history of conflict. These were the early conceptual shoots underpinning the composition and justification of a full package of projects, and marked some of the rawest discussions as different theories and narratives of change were tested. The article supplements observation of the workshop with extended discussions and interviews with the officials involved in the workshop and in surrounding discussions. Eschewing the option of “studying a programme through,” it instead focuses on the limited arena of negotiation of the core elements of the governance portfolio.

The case has been selected specifically to reveal the role of politics within these practices of composition: a two-day workshop within a DFID country office, whose purpose was specifically to formulate the portfolio of projects for the governance team.⁴ Political arguments will be revealed here if anywhere: as Yanguas and Hulme (2015) observe, it is within the governance cadre⁵ above all others that political analyses are prioritized and DFID is one of the “most likely cases” for donor adoption of political analysis. Governance as a domain of interventions is concerned centrally with the proper functioning of the state and its relations to society. In this case, the DFID governance officials and office leadership were strong and personally committed proponents of the importance of thinking and working politically. The discussions here were framed and driven by members of the governance profession, and therefore started from a similar set of incentives and understanding of change. As I shall show, within that framing, there were different incentives and priorities that had to be balanced: the appetite for risk and the extent to which politically oriented work was

³Indeed, for all the methodological critique of the post-development movement, Escobar's own emphasis was on the categories working at the heart of a bureaucracy (Escobar, 1995).

⁴It is based on written notes taken during the two-day session and written up immediately thereafter as well as notes of other discussions with the governance team.

⁵Within DFID, the governance cadre was composed of professional specialists in this kind of programming—that is, matters of “how a country manages its affairs, including how power and resources are acquired, managed and distributed” (DFID, 2016).

appropriate, over more traditional forms of technical assistance. At the same time, I show how the portfolio had to address countervailing bureaucratic norms, calling for reliable, familiar and predictable modalities, less risky or politically contingent reforms, or ones which are more measurable and reproducible. These I suggest are a matter of the bureaucratic form, which prefers replicable technical expertise rather than the specificities of context and which seeks reproducible and recognizable travelling models.

Methodologically, the work presented both opportunities and challenges. As a researcher I was engaged by the participants, who presented their own theorizations of what was happening, second-guessed my analyses, and gave their own accounts of the events. The analysis here is therefore replete with what Holmes and Marcus describe as para-ethnographic material (Holmes & Marcus, 2005). In this, the participants' reflections on their working practices are also supplemented by my own experience as a political economy consultant, on occasion for DFID country offices. However, the ability to access the field then shifted considerable pressure onto "exit" from the field – that is, on the ability to withdraw and generate space for analysis without negotiation with participants in the research. Within bureaucracies, project documents are socially produced through careful negotiation. An aidnography, which second-guesses but is subject to none of this negotiation, is necessarily "anti-social" (Mosse, 2006). It undercuts the negotiation by which a document has been produced. Yet the authority of anthropological studies traditionally rests on the possibility of creating distance between the researcher and the immersion of their field experience. For expert ethnography, exit from the field can therefore be deeply problematic. The reactions of research participants cannot easily be removed from the writing process (Eyben, 2009; Mosse, 2006, 2011b). I agreed with participants to a third-party review of any disputes concerning the possible harm of any material being placed in the public domain, including this article, while I retained full control of the material. This review would entail a second authoritative reading on the ethical balance, while I retained academic control of the material.⁶ No review was necessary in this case.

3 | COMPOSING A GOVERNANCE PORTFOLIO

The workshop which forms the focus of this study was planned by the Head of Governance, Paul (all names have been anonymized). Paul had been in his post for six months, and the workshop was an important early step in the design process for the Governance portfolio, a key aspect of his role. The workshop was intended to define the core concepts underpinning the package of projects that would form the portfolio, and the basic justification for these decisions. These would then be worked up by the Governance advisers into "business cases" (the documents justifying projects), articulating a full justification for the funds. It transpired that Paul had gone into the workshop with a fairly clear idea of what he wanted from the portfolio: his goal was to get office buy-in and to develop an overarching narrative for the package of projects he had already envisaged. He had to get support from the Head of Office, George, and from the Service Provision team, led by Sam, whose own governance team might be expected to support his health and education work. To this end, he had earmarked two days, requested several colleagues to facilitate discussions or present, and had invited two experienced and respected DFID Governance Advisers (Dan and Martin) from outside the office to help keep the discussions on track.

⁶David Mosse resolved significant conflict around his draft through a mediation process, throughout which he retained control of the material and of the argument (discussed by the mediator and author in, respectively, Eyben, 2009; Mosse, 2006).

The analysis of the event is broken into three broad stages: first, the process of taking stock of the repertoire of governance interventions and project models which could be drawn upon; second, the application of the repertoire through the process of selection from within these models; and third, the composition of an overarching portfolio narrative from within that selection. These were interlinked and proceeded broadly sequentially, although I have taken some liberty in harmonizing the order, at the risk of making the transitions seem too smooth (in fact, discussion tracked back and forward, particularly between taking stock and making the selection).

3.1 | Taking stock: Travelling models and the governance repertoire

The workshop opened at 9:00 a.m. on a Wednesday morning. The tables in the big conference room had been folded away and set aside, and the chairs had been pulled into a giant horseshoe. People had filtered down and were taking their seats. Despite a warning from Camille (a governance adviser and confidant of Paul) which was intended to manage my expectations, I felt and shared a buzz of anticipation within the room. It was an opportunity for officials to spend time engaging with an intellectual problem outside of the day-to-day of operational project work, the meetings and the emails and the drafting or responding to documents.

To get the discussion going, Paul had scheduled the morning and early afternoon with a series of presentations for discussion. An opening presentation from the Head of Office sketched the boundaries of the problems, institutional partners and possible solutions. He exhorted officials to think broadly and flexibly about how projects could bring together different ingredients, moving beyond traditional governance project models' focus on capacity-support to government agencies or civil society. Paul had set up a short, sharp series of four presentations, each of which was to identify an example of working politically and flexibly. The first, presented by Martin, showcased successful examples of flexible projects from DFID's global governance programming, based on an iterative practice-oriented development (Andrews, 2013; Booth & Chambers, 2014; Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Wild, Booth, Cummings, Foresti, & Wales, 2015); the second presented a flexible, multi-level and multi-pronged project targeting a range of specific obstacles to economic growth, from the private sector development team; the third discussed not a type of project but ways to act politically (this "odd one out" I return to below); and the fourth identified ways of bridging accountability and empowerment programming. Paul had, in addition, already circulated four briefing papers which identified different kinds of break-down in the relations between state and society and in possible "pathways" by which these problems may be solved.⁷ Two of these he presented in more detail, both forming the core of models he hoped to incorporate as part of the portfolio.

The morning's presentations suggested a two-fold approach to politically informal programming. The first was how political relations were analysed and described. Although many of the presentations and subsequent discussions emphasized the importance of politics, very few of the discussions referred to details of the political environment or context specifically. The briefing papers were supported by depictions of the state and its relations with society which explicitly addressed power but were abstracted from the context: each could be applicable to the governance portfolio in any country characterized by neo-patrimonial politics, predatory elites and weak state institutions.⁸ Power relations were described in explicit but generic categories. The second conception of politics was less

⁷They were titled: "Collective action by supporting coalitions"; "Promoting positive competition to strengthen delivery and accountability"; "Putting empowerment and accountability in the heart of the portfolio"; "Unlocking reforms."

⁸These have been systematized and developed through various research programmes, including the Africa Power and Politics Programme and the Crisis States Research Centre.

explicit; it emerged most clearly in the “odd-one-out” presentation. Felipe, a governance adviser, had been brought in to discuss “the need to engage politically: what does it really mean in [country]?” He was considered to be a particularly strong example of political work within the office, since he spent considerable time out of the office and had close relations with his host government counterparts. Paul had selected him to give one of the few presentations because he personally valued this approach and knowledge of their hosts’ bureaucratic and political culture. Felipe talked about the importance of the relations to partners and the need for constant, daily engagement. He talked about the importance of personal connections and the need for close personal management, the presence and political awareness needed to manage a governance programme. In doing so, he asked “how many of you have gone out for a beer with your counterparts?” Framed thus, “politics” becomes not so much a matter of analysis but a matter of practice and of relations. It refocuses attention on building relationships and on the political act of mobilizing meaning within a particular arena (see Eyben, 2006a, 2006b).

As an object, a country's political relations takes on dual aspects. Each crystallizes different understandings of the nature of politics and how change happens. Each materializes in different aspects of officials’ work to (a) justify and document proposed projects and (b) to manage these projects’ implementation. In the former justificatory work, political analysis legitimizes certain project models; but in the implementation of programmes, politics concerns a set of practices which are profoundly personal and relational. The discussion following Felipe's presentation warmly and unanimously endorsed the value of his position and approach—my other experiences in the office confirmed that it was a crucial tenet in many of the officials’ approach to their work, albeit one that was not easy to achieve. The adaptive management project models already introduced by Dan were designed to make space for the second, practice-oriented way of understanding politics: they were designed specifically as a model which would create the space for more flexible operational work. Paul had spent considerable effort, indeed, the majority of these sessions, convincing the office that these models were viable: that is, this form of iterated and flexible projects had been successful in the past and were considered legitimate within the broader DFID hierarchy. Legitimacy within DFID was crucial for projects which must be approved by the Minister or senior leadership. Paul had established that the governance portfolio would have to include these project models: the challenge was to design and justify what form these would take, and how they would integrate with more traditional institutional-support and capacity-building projects.

3.2 | Selecting from the repertoire: Politics deferred

Embedded in the presentations of the morning, Paul had asked Sam (the Head of Service Provision, an expert facilitator and a key ally for Paul) to lead a session to get the creative cogs turning. In introducing the session, she invited the officials to formulate a design statement on a long strip of paper—a strapline summarizing the purpose of the governance portfolio. I was urged by Martin, one of the two external Governance Advisers, to contribute—“who knows, yours might be the one that we choose.” After a moment's thought, I duly wrote a statement. The participants got up and started to order the strips, grouping them and discussing their merits, with the locally hired officials mostly retreating to the back of the group. The statements were ordered according to the level of ambition they showed; some talked about instruments and modes of change, others about outcomes. I watched as my own was buried without mention in one of the groupings. It became clear, as the ordering process continued, that the specific political context was not discussed. Dan (the second of the two governance advisers from outside) asked “but what is unique to this country?” It was a question that I found expressed my own frustration at this lack of contextual detail. No answer was given. Most of the straplines were abstract, resting on abstract analytical categories about a predatory state, patrimonialism

and weak institutions, and the discussion followed suit. As I reflected on the session afterwards, however, it struck me that the feeling of frustration that my strapline was ignored was inconsistent with the parallel feeling that my contribution merited greater attention. It too was based on an abstract statement, one based on my own profound lack of knowledge of the context but a familiarity with political economy analyses and categories.

In the end, the session did not turn up an elegant or convincing anchoring idea from which to develop the rest of the programme. This lack of a design statement was to characterize the discussion of the afternoon. Paul opened the discussion for general discussion and across three or so hours, the remaining participants—around a dozen, although throughout the afternoon people kept dropping in and out—discussed what the statement might be which would tie the governance portfolio together. A succession of ways to generate social change were tested and discarded: to raise a new generation through tertiary education or tap into the diaspora; to use aid conditionality or diplomacy to leverage change; to adopt the briefing papers' theories of change oriented at overcoming the disconnection between state and society. All had antecedents in development thinking, were tested and reviewed, but none had sufficient traction to be retained.

As the discussion continued, the room divided between those who suggested that the programme needed to start by organizing around the “how” or the approach—the project model or “solution” to be adopted—and those who advocated starting on the problem, with the model implied. Sam, Camille, and others suggested that the starting-point should be one of problem or issue identification, and from that solutions would flow (the usual expert response faced with a lack of knowledge, see Rottenburg, 2009). For Sam, organizing the problems was the core. She drew a diagram, whose concentric rings offered the perfect pictorial representation of this process: a grounding strapline to be entered in the centre, the problems in the next ring, approaches in the next and specific actions in the farthest ring. Paul fell into the other camp. He advocated for a flexible approach that would explore how best to support processes of change, rooted in the approaches he had identified in the briefing papers and in practice, rather than analytical approaches.

What was at stake between the two positions was precisely the nature of politics and the extent to which political analysis could be expected to provide the rubric by which projects were selected. The difference reflects the similar divide I identify in the role of political analysis above and in Felipe's presentation; it treats politics as a matter of practice rather than representation and analysis. Paul was worried about how little they knew about the context: “we just don't know how change happens here ... how the hell does change happen in this place?” As Sam talked through her concentric rings, Paul jumped out of his chair and declared his dislike of the concentric rings, saying “I am nervous, it's closing me in, it's too pretty.” Yet while the lack of knowledge was a problem, it could not be solved by conventional knowledge-collection and analysis. At one point, Dan queried the term “citizen” and the framing of people's relationship with the state as demand and supply: are they not also church-goers, family members, football supporters? Paul countered by asking whether it mattered whether they knew “the anthropological details” or precisely what they would do at this stage.

The differences between Paul and Sam pertained at once to their perspectives on the tractability of the political context, to the relationships of which the political context is composed, and to the extent to which they are susceptible to analysis and theoretical abstraction. For Paul, the proposed careful progression was simply too structured: from the identification and ranking of problems centred round a core rubric, to the isolation of solutions of general approaches, to specific actions. Not only was the scope for useful analysis of the political dynamics limited, but the ability to articulate in advance a programme of action was also circumscribed.

Two reasons exist for the inability to come to a decision. In the first place, no single external referent within the political context could be adduced to prefer one programme or model or the other.

Political analysis of the context would be mobilized to justify certain templates and project models, which had traction within DFID and would be recognized as a suitable approach with adequate precedents: both depiction of politics and the categories were generic and technical in nature and limited the scope of discussions and the ways in which politics could validly be described. The nature of the country's governance, captured in low governance indicator indices, meant that much of the governance repertoire could be justifiable. The participants had been unable to produce a rubric sufficient to justify preferring one over another on the basis of their knowledge of the external context. Secondly, there was no agreement that more or better research would lead to a better solution. It emerged that there was no shared position within the office, but rather two distinct ones: in the first place, the traditional governance models prompted more structured or better analysis as the way forward; the other suggested political relations were not amenable to useful political analysis, and that iterative exploratory work was essential to facilitate change. Paul wanted to develop a portfolio which relied on the iterative and experiential approach to understanding and changing political behaviours, rather than on a detailed plan developed through prior analysis. The lack of a clear external referent within the context, combined with the lack of agreement on any given referent's utility, was the source of the lack of progress. The conversation continued to circle without resolution, and as the day dragged past 4:00 p.m. and towards 5:00 p.m., the room had become a disordered mess, and the participants were increasingly tired and frustrated.

3.3 | Selection and composition

Early the next morning, the core governance team congregated in the conference room, seemingly refreshed and full of energy once again. They were surrounded by an array of A4 sheets, spread on the floor, each expressing ideas captured during the previous day's discussion. It transpired that Paul had decided to commit to the package of projects that he had in mind from the beginning, notably including the new models expressed in his briefing notes. He had revoked the office-wide nature of the discussion, rejected the notion of generating a problem tree, and instead decided to focus on drawing up the necessary representations—a diagram, specified programmes and a narrative.

His selection balanced four traditional projects which were ongoing or up for renewal (capacity-building and project supporting Public Financial Management; and similarly supporting forthcoming elections; a military reform project; a project based on support to women's groups) with two newer models, whose precise dynamics were to be decided but which would centre on “unblocking reform” and “building coalitions.” The seventh project comprised support to the governance of reforms in the health and education sector, at the interface between Sam and Paul's portfolios. Viewed as a portfolio, these drew on the “semi-codified” repertoire of possible projects comprising governance professional expertise—“semi-codified,” because as the new models show, it was constantly changing with the shift in policy discussions. These proposed projects offered a balance between traditional models of governance reform and the newer ideas expressed in the briefing papers; between governance as an end in itself and governance as a means to support better service delivery; between state and society, or governance “demand” and “supply;” between those with corporate results, and those hoping to achieve deeper behavioural change; between direct application of capacity-building support, and approaches that incorporated more complex understandings of behavioural change; those that identified specific governance problems, and those that worked with provision of services. The balance was composed in order to meet the bureaucratic interests and expectations of the centre and the policy state of the art within the governance cadre. In short, the rubric for prioritization and selection was to be found within the repertoire of governance models and the desire for a balanced distribution within

that repertoire, rather than in the specifics of the context. It was to be found in the internal categories of professional expertise, rather than in the specificities of the external context.

The challenge that morning was therefore compositional rather than selective: it was to capture these seven ideas into a communicable and convincing narrative for an overarching portfolio, in just three or four headings forming an aesthetically elegant typology—which is to say, a typology that seemed balanced. It had to be palatable within the office, to George and within the DFID hierarchy, as well as having internal logical coherence and linkages to the other projects, notably the service-delivery sectors. The ingredients were there, but the selection rationale had to be articulated. In the hours that followed, Paul, Camille, Dan and Martin batted ideas back and forth. Occasionally, one of them might drop out of the discussion—Paul, for example, might take a seat off to the side and draw out some ideas. Then he would come back, take a fresh piece of paper on the flipchart, draw a breath, and pitch. The pitch would list four headings, such as:

Facility to support sector work

Coalitions work

Underpinning work

Core programmes

It would then elaborate the merits of the definitions, how they interact, how they fitted with each other and with the other programmes, and so on. Martin might say, “I don't see the difference between one and three,” and a further round of clarification and discussion would unfold. It would then be challenged—“we can't communicate it”—and another proposal would be offered. As I watched, I struggled to prevent myself becoming intellectually involved myself, thinking about possible ways to resolve what they were trying to do.

As the morning drew on, they arrived at a set of projects and an overarching narrative which could arrange the group of projects Paul had in mind. A series of diagrams was proposed to capture pictorially the approach that was favoured. Paul drew a spiral outwards from a single point, indicating the process of developing in an environment since “we don't know how change happens;” later, someone suggested that the spiral have gaps, as an opportunity to reflect and explore options; others returned to the concentric rings. Over lunchtime, they were working furiously on laptops, pulling together the diagram and the narrative they had prepared. They presented this once more to the office directly after lunch, where they received—after some questions and probing—an initial approval from George and the rest of the team.

4 | ANALYSIS

4.1 | Rendering technical: Internal and external justifications for technical models

Paul's goal in convening the workshop was to compose and gain office backing for the governance portfolio that he and his team would design and deliver over the following two years. In practice, this meant reviewing and selecting a set of projects from the repertoire of governance models and producing the narrative and diagrammatic representations which could justify that selection and the decisions of location and focus it entailed. The high-level characterization of the political context was sufficient to legitimize the applicability of the models but was not sufficient to provide any concrete justification for one model or the other. Such were the governance failings in Ruritania that most of the models from the governance repertoire would have been justified. The problems identified—the support to sector service delivery or the responses to public financial management weaknesses, for

example—were clearly established by virtue of the country's poor placement in governance indices, its recognizable weak systems, predatory governance and history of conflict. Specific political details were unnecessary. In the final narrative that the team arrived at, the justification concerned defining a balanced representation of projects across the categories *within* the governance repertoire. No further contextualization to the local political environment was made during the workshop which meant that prioritizing technical models was very difficult. No strapline, grounded in the political environment, was identified which could form the foundation of a prioritization.

In classical Weberian theory, bureaucracies demand the exercise of legal rationality and due process. In the case of DFID, this takes the form of established models grounded in the problems identified through political analysis. Writing in a technology-oriented bureaucracy, Wynne suggests that “demands for public justification of technologies creates pressure to standardize design and operating rules, so as to present a clear, intelligible account to third parties” (Wynne, 1988, p. 156). Technical models are examples of programmes with established legitimacy within DFID, of which officials could be relatively assured of approval from within the hierarchy—“travelling models” (Behrends et al., 2014) or “immutable mobiles” (Latour, 1987, p. 227). The workshop was a matter of applying the established repertoire of governance models to these *internal* bureaucratic considerations—the need for replicable models with a track-record of success. Paul and his supporters sought to draw on the repertoire with respect to internal considerations arising from the available budget, legacy projects, the internal appetite for differing forms of project, corporate targets and understandings of change: it was the balance of models, new and old, service sector-linked and governance linked, focused on “demand” and on “supply” that drove the decisions. The “application” is not therefore mechanistic in nature, but requires considerable craftsmanship in balancing replicable models to respond to abstract problems, rather than politically grounded responses tailored to Ruritania's unique power dynamics.

The very persistence of the technical nature of project documents suggests that something beyond the individual office culture of DFID is causing this. I suggest that the persistence of the technical nature of development may be ascribed to the bureaucratic form itself—that is, it is a function of DFID's need to present justifiable programmes that have precedents and are well-evidenced.

It may perhaps be argued that this group of officials was characterized by a lack of political imagination and another group could problematize with greater creativity or arrive at more innovative solutions. Yet it is not the case that the officials were uninterested in the political context. On the contrary, the governance advisers and officials present stressed the importance of politics in their work throughout the discussions, and indeed throughout my time in the office. My observation was that the officials were sincerely committed to political engagement. As Murray Li observes, the will to improve is genuinely meant (Murray Li, 2007)—it was simply that the political engagement at the point of preparing the project documents was limited primarily to the mobilization of high-level political characterizations of the context to justify certain models. If there was a lack of development imagination, it was a failing that I shared, and it was rooted in the ways of thinking about governance which are structured by the categories, the models and the forms of political analysis.

The political analysis legitimizes the application of project templates which have traction within the bureaucracy. The country is framed as a familiar kind of object. The recruitment of political or contextual detail would typically not disturb the core logics of the project templates or models, or the categories of political relations on which they rest. Detailed knowledge of the politics might actively undermine the legitimacy of the models within the bureaucratic hierarchy by producing unwanted and complicating information. Indeed, political detail is not *necessary*. In the absence of any defining feature or arresting strapline which supports a particular selection and prioritization—as in this case—it is still possible to legitimize a governance portfolio with reference to an abstract depiction of

the context and the aesthetics of internal balance within the repertoire. The country's problems were apparent and validated through the research available.

4.2 | Rendering operational: Making space for political practice

The traditional view of political economy analyses is that the behaviours, relationships and interactions that make up “political life” can be observed and understood in a useful manner, through political economic analysis (Yanguas & Hulme, 2015). Yet, throughout, Paul articulated his position that better representations of the political context had limited utility in prioritizing programmes or understanding the manner in which change happens or making most programme design decisions. He rejected the possibility of developing a problem tree or other form of structured analysis, or collecting more data. Instead, political awareness was characterized as a set of practices: a way of interacting with and managing counterparts and partners which takes into account sensitivity to environment and the relations with people—to give one telling framing, it involved getting out of the office, and having a beer with their counterparts. It involves the fabric of practices and compromises that characterize the application of any body of protocols or rules. It was characterized in Felipe's presentation which concerned the way of forming relations with partners and counterparts.

Undertaken thus, being “politically smart” was a matter of exploring through the practices of negotiating meaning and creating relationships with other project actors rather than through analysing and representing their motivations. It lay in making operational the technical representations justifying the applicability of a particular technical model. Politics was therefore deferred, not abandoned; it concerned rendering operational the technical document, rather than making a technical document acknowledge politics. From one view, it is the familiar bureaucratic process of contextualizing to the local conditions during a projects' implementation (Latour, 1996; Lewis & Mosse, 2006a; Shore & Wright, 2011; Wynne, 1988). However, this process of contextualization proceeds from certain principles, in particular the acceptance of the network of relations in a complex social environment (Eyben, 2010, 2006b). It concerns the very nature of political relations and behaviours and processes of change. It proceeds from different assumptions about their tractability to useful analysis, and the position that these relationships, and the potential for change, cannot be comprehended through research and must instead be affected through iterative action and learning.

Set out thus, the attraction of the increasingly popular “adaptive management” models (Andrews, 2013; Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Laws & Marquette, 2018; Honig & Gulrajani, 2018) comes into focus (although see Yanguas & Bukenya, 2015). Much of Paul's efforts in the presentations described as taking stock at the beginning of the workshop were targeted at establishing the legitimacy of these models within the office and thus ensuring their inclusion in the mix. The technical models which Paul advocates, and which are grounded in adaptive programming, precisely accommodate the movement between the justification of projects within the bureaucracy and the operational practice ‘in the field’ of building relationships and negotiating meaning within the intervention. The point is not to say that they will be effective in addressing governance programming (Yanguas & Bukenya, 2015), but to observe the nature of the fit they allow within the bureaucracy. Their design intentionally creates space for officials to work politically, but in a model that can be accepted within the bureaucracy; while they are generally applicable, they are also designed to incorporate the movement between justification on a generic basis and local contextualization. They permit iterated rounds of development and exploration through practice, while reconciling the need for that space for flexibility and the practices of politics with the need for recognized and legitimate models. They offer a way in which politics and adaptability to context may overcome the limitations of the persistently technical character of development representations. As such, their adoption as policy by the governance cadre is shaped

by their positioning within the bureaucracy, and their need to generate reproducible and recognizable models—in a manner reminiscent of David Mosse's writing of social anthropologists in the World Bank (Mosse, 2011c).

5 | CONCLUSION

DFID is a bureaucracy, and therefore favours the application of consistent rules and precedents—the technical models arranged within the repertoire of governance as a category of programming. Countries are represented in ways which legitimize the application of these problems and solutions. The foregoing analysis suggests that political economy analyses contribute to that process or are treated as irrelevant or marginal. Consequently, I suggest that the emphasis on the institutionalization of political analysis as a precursor to design should not be seen as a key route for development agencies to become more politically aware and engaged (Carothers & de Gramont, 2013; Unsworth, 2009, 2015; Yanguas & Hulme, 2015)—its function is often to justify certain technical models. That is not to say that such analysis should be stopped, but to recognize that this kind of analysis will always be subject to the exigencies of the bureaucracy and to the limits of the available repertoire of established models. It will have a function in justifying particular models and directing plausible starting points for programming, but its natural limits should be acknowledged. However, the foregoing analysis also highlighted another route to politically aware programming. The participants themselves focused on the importance of practice rather than through representations and analysis of the political environment. This approach focuses on the ongoing work of forging relationships with programme stakeholders and of negotiating the details and meaning of programme interventions within the arena of a specific programme (Eyben, 2006b). It refocuses on the capabilities and the professional skills necessary to do this. In this perspective, the value of iterative and flexible programming is to create an arena with enough space to negotiate and build relationships.

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