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## **Theories of Change for Promoting Empowerment and Accountability in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings**

Duncan Green

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# Theories of Change for Promoting Empowerment and Accountability in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings

Duncan Green

## Summary

This paper explores the current state of thinking among a range of aid actors (multilaterals, bilateral, applied scholars and international non-governmental organisations) on how to promote empowerment and accountability in fragile, conflict and violence affected settings. It seeks to identify trends, gaps and weaknesses in that thinking, and propose research questions and hypotheses to test.

Three underlying sources of confusion are identified that are hindering progress on both understanding empowerment and accountability (E&A) in fragile, conflict and violence affected settings (FCVAS), and taking helpful action to promote it. They are:

- Theory of endogenous change (e.g. on how empowerment and accountability arise *in situ*) versus the theory of action of an external intervention
- Fragility versus conflict: there is no clear justification for combining these different aspects into a single category
- Empowerment versus accountability: donor analysis and practice has been overwhelmingly weighted towards accountability, exhibiting limited understanding or interest in the nature of power

**Keywords:** fragility, empowerment, accountability, theory of change, theory of action, Myanmar, aid.

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Responsibility for any errors is of course the author's own.

# Acronyms

APARD	African Partnership Aid Rehabilitation and Development
CAR	Central African Republic
CPC	Community Protection Committees
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
E&A	Empowerment and Accountability
FCVAS	Fragile, Conflict and Violence Affected Settings
GPSA	Global Partnership for Social Accountability
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisations
IWA	Integrity Watch Afghanistan
MSTC	Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts
NSAs	Non-State Actors
PSA	Political Settlements Analysis
ToA	Theory of Action
ToC	Theory of Change
WWS	Within and Without the State

# 1 Executive summary

This paper explores the current state of thinking among a range of aid actors (multilaterals, bilateral, applied scholars and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs)) on how to promote empowerment and accountability in fragile, conflict and violence affected settings (E&A in FCVAS). It seeks to identify trends, gaps and weaknesses in that thinking, and propose research questions and hypotheses to test for the Action for Empowerment and Accountability research programme (A4EA).<sup>1</sup>

The paper has been written through a combination of desk review, consultation and a 10-day field trip to Myanmar in September 2016. Initial contacts and discussions with a range of practitioners and scholars led to a first draft, which was then posted on the author's 'From Poverty to Power' blog for comment.<sup>2</sup>

To a striking extent, donor and academic literature on E&A in FCVAS concentrates on theories of (exogenous) action. These are often confusingly termed 'theories of change' and come at the expense of what is arguably a much more important process – the way E&A ebbs and flows endogenously in FCVAS. Clearly distinguishing between theories of change and action and understanding how the system changes on its own are essential first steps in designing useful and relevant aid programmes, but are often skipped in the urge to get onto 'so what do we *do*?'

Considerable research has gone into identifying the factors behind 'turnaround states' that have moved from fragility to something like stable effectiveness, both historically and in more recent times. A recurrent theme in endogenous transitions to accountability in FCVAS is just how long they take – a generation or more - presenting a profound challenge to the short-termism of the aid industry. But beneath such national transitions, FCVAS often exhibit 'pockets of functionality' at various levels (different departments of government, or subnational and city administrations) that provide points of entry for promoting E&A.

The historical record highlights the dynamics of change in FCVAS. This often involves sudden discontinuities (critical junctures) and the negotiation of new political settlements, (although inertia is also a critical factor) driven by a combination of ideas, interests and institutions. Power and political economy analysis are essential prerequisites to working effectively in these settings.

A number of inter-connected features and drivers of change appear more salient in fragile than in non-fragile settings. With a weak or absent national state, non-state actors become more prominent, including faith organisations, diaspora communities and traditional authorities. Formal civil society organisations (CSOs) are often weaker in FCVAS, whereas other less formal civil society activities (funeral and savings groups, cultural associations) persist and can become stepping stones to E&A. Their fluidity and lack of clear organisational structure, however, often prevent them being recognised or supported by external actors.

The increased importance of non-state actors underlines the particular importance of *informal* power in understanding and influencing E&A in FCVAS. Identity (regional, ethnic, religious) also plays a central role, acting as a reservoir of both trust and suspicion.

Violence is a feature of many FCVAS and poses a significant challenge for external actors; endogenous change is likely to be less predictable, more emergent, less 'projectable'.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ids.ac.uk/idsresearch/action-for-empowerment-and-accountability](http://www.ids.ac.uk/idsresearch/action-for-empowerment-and-accountability)

<sup>2</sup> <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/please-comment-on-this-draft-paper-theories-of-change-on-empowerment-and-accountability-in-fragile-states/>

Interventions are potentially 'high risk, high return', with turbulent settings showing less inertia than more stable environments, but with the risks of failure or mistakes being far greater in terms of human suffering. Pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict situations all require both understanding and different kinds of response in terms of E&A.

Traditional aid programmes have struggled to adjust to the unpredictable rhythms and risks of violent conflict. Conflict sensitivity approaches are a critical enabling factor, both reducing the risks and increasing the chances of success. Violent conflicts in places such as Myanmar have become entrenched, leading to a situation of multiple co-existing state and non-state authorities that challenges conventional citizen-state approaches to E&A.

The lack of attention to endogenous change processes matters because such an institutionally self-centred approach has led to a series of weaknesses and oversights in the design of interventions, which a proper theory of change could help correct. Some of the main categories of gaps and missed opportunities include critical junctures, positive deviance (positive outliers thrown up by the system, even without interventions), the importance of non-state actors, the role of power and political economy analyses, and the importance of gender gaps. Gender blindness is particularly unfortunate because, in terms of empowerment, one perhaps unexpected feature of FCVAS is the enhanced role of women in post-conflict settings. Some of these gaps probably arise due to the prevalent processes and political economy of the aid business, with its constraints, structures and silos.

Most of the relevant intellectual activity over the last 20 years has not been directly on E&A in FCVAS. Nor has it explicitly been framed in terms of theories of change or action. Instead, there has been a rich discussion on institutional reform and governance, including on FCVAS. In terms of E&A, since the early 2000s, there has been a considerable investment in analysis and policy advice on accountability, for example in democracy promotion, or open government, but with little examination of the particular process and challenges of FCVAS. However, there has been much less activity on the issue of empowerment.

Donor approaches were initially heavily supply-side: advice and training for governments (both political leaders and officials) on the (often implicit) assumption that the problem was one of capacity, rather than of power and politics. Unsurprisingly, the supply-led approach failed in situations where power and politics were not aligned with the suggestions of donors, triggering a major shift towards demand-led approaches, stimulating citizen demand for services and accountability. Recent attempts to move beyond the supply/demand dichotomy brought different players together in search of locally relevant solutions to 'collective action problems'.

Today, donor thinking on E&A in FCVAS is at something of a crossroads. One current of thinking advocates deeper engagement with context, involving greater analytical skills, and regular analysis of the evolving political, social and economic system; working with non-state actors, sub-national state tiers and informal power; the importance of critical junctures heightening the need for fast feedback and response mechanisms; and changing social norms and working on generation-long shifts requiring new thinking about the tools and methods of engagement of the aid community. But the analysis also engenders a good deal of scepticism and caution about the potential for success, so an alternative opinion argues for pulling back to a limited focus on the 'enabling environment', principally through transparency and access to information. A third option makes the 'both/and' case for an optimal combination of direct intervention and enabling environment approaches.

The following section provides an overview of the definitions of key terms used in this paper. Section 3 considers the importance of examining theories of endogenous change in FCVAS, and Section 4 focuses on informal power and the role of identity in shaping political choice. Section 5 examines the implications of violence and conflict on governance, which often



results in a situation of co-existing state and non-state authorities. Section 6 looks at the gaps and missed opportunities for external actors in not articulating a proper theory of change when focusing on FCVAS, whilst Section 7 moves on to examine why these gaps happen. Section 8 examines how theories of change and action have evolved over time, with Section 9 providing the current state of thinking. Finally the concluding section of the paper sets out some possible hypotheses to test on future directions for promoting E&A in FCVAS.

## 2 E&A in FCVAS: Definitions of key terms

This paper uses the following definitions of key terms:

**Accountability:** A process for holding individual actors or organisations to account for their actions. Accountability requires transparency, answerability, and enforceability between decision makers and citizens (Rocha Menocal and Sharma 2008). Enforceability requires consequences or some form of sanction for acting outside agreed standards.

**Conflict:** Conflict can be defined as ‘A relationship between two or more parties who have, or believe they have, incompatible goals’ (Fisher 2000: 4). This carries the important implication that conflict is relational, is present in every human society, can be constructive if managed well, and is usually necessary for social change. This wider definition can be contrasted with that of violence as the use of actions, attitudes, words, structures etc. to cause harm (Fisher 2000: 4).

**Empowerment:** A process through which individuals or organised groups increase their power and autonomy to achieve certain outcomes they need and desire (Eyben 2011). Empowerment focuses on supporting disadvantaged people to gain power and exert greater influence over those who control access to key resources (DFID 2011). However there are tensions between subjective and objective definitions of empowerment. What is empowering to one person is not necessarily empowering to another. Understanding empowerment therefore needs to include people’s own experiences, rather than focus on a predictable set of outcomes (IDS 2011).

**Fragility:** While there is no internationally-agreed definition of the term ‘fragility’ (Woolcock 2014), most development agencies define it principally as a fundamental failure of the state to perform functions necessary to meet citizens’ basic needs and expectations. Fragile states are commonly described as incapable of assuring basic security, maintaining rule of law and justice, or providing basic services and economic opportunities for their citizens (McCloughlin 2016). However the use of the term ‘fragile states’ is both contested and evolving. Originally seen as an improvement on ‘failed states’, reflecting a more dynamic reality in which states can move between different levels of fragility, the term has subsequently been criticised for failing to recognise that pockets and facets of fragility exist in most (if not all) states, while few states are wholly fragile. Moreover, in many cases, states are not the only institutions responding to citizens’ needs – ethnic armed administrations (Myanmar) or faith organisations (much of Sub Saharan Africa) may also fulfil this role. Increasingly, analysts prefer the term ‘fragile contexts’ or ‘fragile settings’, the term preferred in this paper. The false dichotomy of fragile/non fragile states is one reason why this paper discusses examples from states not normally considered fragile, such as Bangladesh.

The OECD has moved beyond a single categorisation of fragile settings towards a more universal approach for assessing fragility that captures diverse aspects of risk and vulnerability. Its 2015 ‘States of Fragility’ report proposes a working model for analysing all countries’ risks along five clusters of fragility indicators; 1) violence; 2) access to justice for all; 3) effective, accountable and inclusive institutions; 4) economic inclusion and stability;

and 5) capacities to prevent and adapt to social, economic and environmental shocks and disasters (OECD 2015).

The OECD's typology potentially generates five different strands of ToC (sub-theories of change, or change pathways) in every intervention aiming at securing E&A in a fragile setting – which points to the need to be as clear as possible about what the aim of any given intervention is and very selective about pursuing it.

**Social Accountability:** the extent and capability of citizens to hold the state accountable and make it responsive to their needs (Grandvoinnet *et al.* 2015).

McGee and Kroeschell (2012) identified social accountability as just one of eleven forms of accountability, each with different characteristics in terms of who claims it, who gives it, over what, the political space in which it operates (e.g. claimed or invited), the tactics used (mass mobilisation, consensual processes) and why people pursue it.

**Table 2.1: Different types of accountability and their characteristics**

Type of accountability	Who claims?	Who gives?	Over what?	Where? (space)	How? (examples)	For what? Why?
Social	Social actors, e.g. CSOs, social movements	State, aid agencies, private sector	Concerns, identity demands	Claimed, invited	Mass mobilisation, social audits	Apply democratic checks and balances, deepen democracy, empower people, improve service delivery
Citizen-led	Citizens with rights	State, aid agencies, private sector	Rights	Claimed, invited	Citizen report cards	Address deficits in fulfilment of citizen rights
Public	Public institutions, state bodies, social actors, citizens	Public institutions	Standards (laws, policies, regulations)	Invited	Official complaints and petition, procedures, litigation	Enforce obligations of the state
Institutional	Public institutions, state bodies, social actors, citizens	Public institution	Standards (laws, policies, regulations)	Invited	Official complaints and petition, procedures, litigation	Enforce obligation of the state
Horizontal	Public body	Another public body on same level of hierarchy	Standards (laws, policies, regulations)	Closed	Auditing, oversight, reporting	Enforce obligation of the state

(Cont'd).

**Table 2.1 (cont'd).**

Vertical	An actor which is non-state or low/local-level state	A more powerful actor, or one in a position to account to the accountability seeker	Rights, concerns, state obligation	Claimed, invited	Petitioning, public hearing, mobilisation	Enforce obligation of the state
Bureaucratic	Public	Bureaucrats	Obligation of state	Closed, invited	Official procedures, including through litigation	Enforce obligation of the state
Hybrid/ Diagonal	Citizens/ social actors, possibly in alliance with one state oversight body e.g. Supreme Audit Office	State	Entitlements, rights	Claimed, invited	Social actions (collective) designed to activate formal accountability mechanisms	Enforce obligation of the state
Political/ Electoral	Electorate, party members	Party, political leadership, executive	Manifestos, political commitments, party ideology	Intraparty mechanisms, elections (local, national) Closed, invited, claimed	Voting	Ensure due representation of interests
Downwards	Citizens, service users, consumers, aid beneficiaries	State, service provider, aid agency	Service provider, project, programme, rights	Claimed, invited	Feedback and complaints mechanisms	Assure quality and impact of programme on citizens/users
Upwards	Funder, guarantor of rights, oversight actor	Funded actors, Service providers, Local public bodies, NGOs	Resources, performance	Invited, closed, or by written means only	Reporting, impact assessments	Assure responsible use of funds and acceptable performance

Source: McGee and Kroeschell 2012: 11–12

All of these kinds of accountability apply in parallel and overlapping spaces and processes in FCVAS as in non-FCVAS, but many will have particular characteristics in FCVAS that are relevant to the design and effectiveness of any empowerment or accountability intervention.

**Theories of Change:** The definition of Theories of Change (ToC) is more contested: Hivos (2015: 12) defines them as ‘the ideas and hypotheses (‘theories’) people and organisations have about how change happens. These theories can be conscious or unconscious and are based on personal beliefs, assumptions and a necessarily limited, personal perception of reality’. Hivos distinguishes between ToC as a way of thinking (overall approach), a process (doing a ToC analysis/enquiry) and a product (the result of a ToC process).

This paper distinguishes two different aspects of 'theories of change' that are often conflated, especially by aid organisations. First, a ToC sets out an understanding of how endogenous change takes place in any given system; endogenous theories of change could also be termed 'pathways of change', since they may or may not reflect the conscious strategies of identifiable actors. With that distinction, the question for external actors becomes how to strengthen the conditions for certain pathways. Second, a Theory of Action (ToA) sets out the strategy and tactics to be adopted for an intervention by a given organisation, the stakeholders to be involved, and how the exogenous intervention will achieve the outcomes that are expected. In practice, many organisations use the term 'Theory of Change' to describe their Theory of Action. The use of Theories of Action varies widely, from a compass (guide to adaptive interventions), to a fixed roadmap (a plan drawn up in advance and then implemented with little/no iteration or adaptation), to a box-ticking formality that is a condition to obtain funding but thereafter is of little practical use.

The distinction between Theories of Change and Action is not just semantic – this paper argues that conflating the two leads to a systematic under-examination of the nature and dynamics of endogenous change, an exaggeration of the influence of external actors, and significant oversights and lost opportunities.

**Violence:** This concept is framed through Moser's typology of forms of violence (Moser 2001: 36) as:

- Politically motivated violence (such as civil and transnational war, domestic political instability), 'the commission of violent acts motivated by a desire, conscious or unconscious, to obtain or maintain political power'. Politically motivated sexual violence such as mass rape, sterilisation and kidnapping may be instigated by guerrilla conflict, paramilitary conflict or armed conflict between political parties and so on.
- Economically motivated violence that involves the 'commission of violent acts motivated by a desire, conscious or unconscious for economic gain or to obtain or maintain economic power': these would manifest in abductions and rape during economic crimes.
- Social violence which entails violent acts committed by a desire, conscious or unconscious, for social gain or to obtain or maintain social power. This would manifest at the interpersonal level through spouse abuse or sexual harassment by gangs, thugs or various public actors.

While Moser's examples of violence are all gender-based, they can also apply to other expressions of violence, noting that motivations can sometimes be multiple and overlapping. In addition to the physical forms of violence, there is also epistemic violence in the form of the use of language, rhetoric and possibly laws to 'other', malign or denigrate an individual or group, which is highly relevant to the A4EA programme's exploration of norms, perceptions and meanings of violence in relation to collective action.

### 3 Theories of endogenous change in FCVAS

Donor and academic literature on E&A in FCVAS concentrates on the role (positive or negative) of external actors, but the privileging of interventions by aid actors risks obscuring what is arguably a much more important process – the way E&A ebbs and flows endogenously in FCVAS. Understanding how the system changes on its own is an essential first step in designing useful and relevant aid programmes, but it is often skipped in the urge to get onto 'so what do we do?'

One of the striking features of the donor literature and practice on E&A in FCVAS is the absence of history. In Liberia, for example, ‘there is a complete dearth of literature about accountability that focuses on the pre-war period - the war is always used as a key factor in determining post-war governance - it is, but so are many of the dynamics that are part of a much larger history which is almost entirely ignored today’ (Blair Glencorse, pers comm, September 2016).

An exception is provided by World Vision’s ‘Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts (MSTC)’ tool,<sup>3</sup> which equips NGO staff to work with key players to analyse and articulate the actors, symptoms, political economy, trends and triggers of ongoing and sometimes chronic political and economic instability. Amongst the questions asked are: what phases has the context moved through? For example, an MSTC report on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2011 reflected on phases in the country’s history relevant to the current context and events under each of those phases, with emerging themes from the historical analysis (e.g politics, ethnic issues, resources, broader regional tensions, etc) (World Vision, pers comm, September 2016).

Over the longer run, fragility and violent conflict are not a permanent condition, and much research has gone into identifying the factors behind ‘turnaround states’ both historically (Tarrow 1998) and in more recent times (Rosser 2006). A recurrent theme in endogenous transitions to accountability in FCVAS is just how long they take. The World Bank argues that such change takes at least a generation (World Bank 2011). But long-term change on E&A poses particular problems for the traditional business models of aid organisations, with their short project cycles, a point discussed below.

National states may be weak or absent overall, but experience in FCVAS suggests the existence of pockets of functionality at different levels (similarly, nation states may appear coherent, but include substantial subnational regions that exhibit aspects of fragility) (Roll 2014). These pockets of effectiveness are often subnational – effective local states at provincial or local levels. When conflicts wreak havoc or state institutions become seriously incapacitated, human and interpersonal resources and bonds often suffer less damage at the local level than at higher levels. As a result, when the time comes to rebuild, it is often easier to make headway at the grassroots (Manor 2007).

James Putzel and Jonathan di John argue that ‘Analysis and policy discussion around fragile states has concentrated almost entirely on the “central state”, failing to see the particular place of cities in state formation historically and the contemporary importance of growing cities as key sites of state building and state erosion’ (2012: v). In cities, they believe, ‘a diversity of relatively well organised interest groups can challenge reigning political practices’ (Putzel and Di John 2012: vii).

In addition to within sub-national governments, pockets of effectiveness also exist within national states. In the DRC, for example, a context analysis by Oxfam found that the education sector was functional in a way that other line ministries were not (Oxfam 2014a). In 2016, World Vision DRC signed a memorandum of understanding with the DRC Department of Education to support the government in the development of a citizenship and accountability curriculum for primary and secondary school children. The MoU follows several years of working with the government on social accountability activities across a range of areas including education, health, birth registration and the extractive industries. World Vision staff argue that such social accountability programming helps to improve development outcomes through improved service delivery, but also plays an important role in empowering community members. According to World Vision DRC Advocacy manager,

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<sup>3</sup> [www.wvi.org/making-sense-turbulent-contexts](http://www.wvi.org/making-sense-turbulent-contexts)

Vianney Dong, 'People start understanding development in a different way. There is change in the mentality to "I know what I am supposed to do, what I can expect from government and how I should claim my rights", especially in an environment where speaking the truth is very difficult. It's really a significant achievement'.<sup>4</sup>

There are also, of course, individuals and groups of individuals within given ministries and local governance structures who are working to do the right thing, even in the face of institutional incentives that work directly against them. However, if their desires and actions run counter to institutional incentives and social norms, they are always likely to face an uphill struggle.

Re-examining history highlights the dynamics of change. Pointing to the example of Taiwan, Ha-Joon Chang argues that turnarounds can, however, be gradual. Even when government finances are poor, it is possible to create pockets of clean bureaucracy with meritocratic principles and relatively attractive salaries, and later use them as templates to clean up the rest (Chang 2007).

But, particularly in FCVAS, change more often resembles plate tectonics – the steady build-up of social and political pressure, punctuated by sudden earthquakes of instability and violence. FCVAS resemble particularly earthquake-prone regions, often lurching from one critical juncture to another in rapid succession (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Such junctures include economic crises, violent conflicts, natural disasters, political scandals and regular changes of leadership: civil war and genocide led to Rwanda's transformation under Paul Kagame; famine and civil war led to Ethiopia's subsequent stabilisation and economic take off under Prime Minister Meles Zenawi; and economic meltdown triggered Vietnam's Doi Moi reforms.

In terms of empowerment and accountability, critical junctures can unleash a stifling degree of fear and violence, but they can also act as catalytic events, in which new possibilities emerge, and pre-existing grievances or desires are channelled into collective action. It is sometimes during these moments that actors have the opportunity to make 'the impossible' become 'the inevitable', especially if they are well-prepared with ideas and networks (Oxfam 2011). Whether as drivers of change or repression, the importance of critical junctures is systematically underplayed in donors' theories of action (Green 2016).

The pressures that erupt during critical junctures are partly fuelled by long-term structural and demographic shifts, such as the rise of urban elites and new middle classes demanding political change (if only for a fairer share of the spoils) (Putzel and di John 2012).

Political Settlements Analysis (PSA) is one approach used to understand the drivers of change and nature of conflict resolution (Kelsall 2016). At the heart of PSA is the idea that societies cannot develop in the midst of all-out violence or civil war; yet the way different societies solve the problem of violence, the political settlement they craft, creates powerful path-dependencies for the way they do or do not subsequently develop. PSA is about understanding 'the formal and informal processes, agreements, and practices that help consolidate politics, rather than violence, as a means for dealing with disagreements about interests, ideas and the distribution and use of power' (Laws and Leftwich 2014: 1), and that these will play out across two levels, involving both intra-elite and elite-non-elite relations (Laws 2012).

In the mid-2000s, DFID's 'drivers of change' programme<sup>5</sup> made some important progress in understanding endogenous change processes in a range of contexts, but it fell victim to the

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<sup>4</sup> World Vision, pers comm, October 2016

<sup>5</sup> [www.odi.org/publications/5399-drivers-change-dfid-doc](http://www.odi.org/publications/5399-drivers-change-dfid-doc)

demand for 'so what?' – lessons that could be applied rapidly to improve the quality of aid programming. In retrospect the programme's interest in exploring endogenous power, institutions and agency appears ahead of its time, and its fate perhaps symptomatic of the neglect of endogenous change processes.

Kaplan and Freeman (2015) give a sense of the range of different types of political transition out of fragility, contrasting transitions imposed from above (as in Myanmar), engineered from outside (as in Iraq), achieved from below (as in Tunisia), or negotiated (as in Spain). Successful transitions have occurred in post-authoritarian countries (e.g. Brazil, Indonesia and the Baltic states) and post-conflict ones (e.g. El Salvador, Mozambique and Namibia). Yet, there are many more examples cited of disappointing transitions – and even the comparatively successful ones face numerous challenges. They conclude that in such transitions:

Two key lessons stand out. First, the horizontal often matters more than the vertical: that is, the society-society relationship needs as much or more attention than the society-state one. Second, as politics often works in either virtuous or vicious cycles – with inclusive behaviour begetting more inclusive behaviour and vice versa – equity is more important than effectiveness. In other words, various groups within a fragile state, and the general public, will be more likely to forgive inevitable mistakes and delays (within reason) during a transition if they feel they are being treated fairly. (Kaplan and Freeman 2015: 7)

More scholarly attention has been paid to turnarounds in terms of economic growth: what is not clear is the nature and direction of any causal links between the quality and quantity of such growth turnarounds and transitions to new levels of empowerment and accountability. Mushtaq Khan argues that the two are interwoven, with important implications for intervention:

Societies have a distribution of organisational power that is difficult to change in the short run, but which does change over time as a result of economic development (creating new organisations and power structures), and through social and political mobilisations... One way of achieving progress is if successful developmental strategies of these types create a more diversified set of powerful organisations over time, and that is historically an important route towards a more accountable and productive society'. (Khan, pers comm, September 2016, based on Khan 2010)

The focus on change and transition is however, only a partial view. Why change *doesn't* happen is often just as important to understand and address. Inertia and resistance to reform and E&A can arise from a combination of ideas, interests and institutions (Green 2016).

One expression of interest, corruption, plays an important role in many FCVAS. At the E&A/FCVAS interface corruption can provide a self-organising function, albeit negative, introducing values, rules and order into what appears chaotic and dysfunctional, but acting as a block to further progress on E&A.

## 4 Informal power and the role of identity

The literature on fragile settings identifies a number of inter-connected features and drivers of change that appear more salient there than in non-fragile settings. With a weak or absent national state, non-state actors become more prominent, providing justice and security

solutions that are more accessible and more in keeping with prevailing beliefs about justice (Domingo *et al.* 2013). Faith organisations, traditional authorities and tribal structures can provide a hub for change (Christian Aid 2016a; World Vision 2015), as can private sector networks, such as exchange houses in Somalia that enable effective cash transfer programmes. Diaspora populations can also play a role in constructing new kinds of legitimacy and accountability (Oxfam 2014a).

Formal CSOs are often weaker in FCVAS. When there is a culture of fear, insecurity, social exclusion, and asymmetries of power either within a community or between citizens and government officials, citizens often fear involvement in accountability activities (Grandvoinet *et al.* 2015). Poor and dispossessed people often perceive the state as an oppressor and exploiter, rather than a potential source of support. Other forms of organisation often persist, however, such as less formal civil society activities (e.g. funeral and savings groups, cultural associations, see Section 6 for more on non-state actors). These can become stepping stones to E&A, but their fluidity and lack of clear organisational structure often represent a challenge to external actors.

Where there is cooperation brought about by exposure to violence, it is mostly observable *within* groups, rather than *between* groups, leading to forms of parochialism, or identity-based insularity (Bowles and Gintis 2011).

The increased importance of non-state actors underlines the particular significance of *informal* power in many (but not all) FCVAS. Beyond the formal world of rules, contracts, and state decision-making and implementation, power relationships in FCVAS are often characterised by both hidden and invisible power. Hidden power includes behind-the-scenes contacts and informal links based on clan, ethnic or religious links; invisible power stems from norm systems that shape popular beliefs about what is 'normal' or 'natural', leading some groups to exclude themselves (Green 2016).

A learning review of Christian Aid's DFID-funded 'Power to the People' programme extended the analysis of hidden and invisible power to include the 'Importance of understanding citizens' own perceptions of power', citing an example from Kenya where 'women used indigenous understandings of power relations to subtly influence change' on women's rights (Christian Aid 2015: 3). Christian Aid argues that this kind of power analysis should accompany the more conventional donor political economy analyses as 'seamless processes. Both are iterative rather than one off and will continue to shape programme implementation' (Christian Aid 2016b, slide 11).

From the point of view of E&A, norms and invisible power are important everywhere, but particularly in FCVAS. In the absence of strong institutions, identity plays a central role in shaping choices on engagement, acting as a reservoir of both trust and suspicion. Donor 'impartiality' can easily become an excuse to downplay or ignore identity issues.

Identity is durable, both as a motivator and obstacle of E&A. One study of a six country voice and accountability project in Africa (the Mwananchi Programme) concluded 'Citizen voice is rooted in social norms such as 'respect for elders' (Tembo 2012: 12). 'It is in these arenas of power and livelihoods that citizens find room for manoeuvre, through small or large nudges or tensions in their own culture and traditions' (Tembo 2012: 13). Pouligny (2010) concludes that international actors need to gain an understanding of the relationships, structures and belief systems that underpin institutions, and of the multiplicity and diversity of political institutions, cultures, and logics through which state-building processes may be supported.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> GSDRC Summary, [www.gsdr.org/document-library/state-society-relations-and-the-intangible-dimensions-of-state-resilience-and-statebuilding-a-bottom-up-perspective/](http://www.gsdr.org/document-library/state-society-relations-and-the-intangible-dimensions-of-state-resilience-and-statebuilding-a-bottom-up-perspective/)



#### **Box 4.1: Case study: Somaliland v Somalia: an unusual natural experiment**

A comparison between Somaliland v Somalia is both revealing and discomfiting for external actors such as aid agencies, whilst demonstrating the role of identity in power politics. While Somaliland emerged from the shared chaos of the 1990s (and a brutal effort by Somalia to put down its separatist movement) into relative peace and stability (some taxation, rudimentary public services, security, two peaceful presidential transitions through the ballot box, including one to the opposition), Somalia is a quintessential FCVAS.

An analysis by Sarah Phillips (2013) of the reasons underlying this divergence does not make comfortable reading.

Somaliland's government has received virtually no direct financial aid, largely because it is not internationally recognised. The country itself gets some aid via NGOs and the UN, but the government has been generally outside this loop, forced to rely on local sources of funding.

Perhaps of more importance than the financial aspects, this has meant there was no pressure to accept template political institutions from outside. Instead, Somaliland has had time and political space to negotiate its own (e.g. clan-based) political settlements. The process has involved a series of ad hoc, messy, consultative, and local, peace conferences.

The peace process was almost entirely locally funded, due to Somaliland's unrecognised status (so no bilateral aid or loans were available). It has produced a strong sense of local ownership (literally). In the words of one minister, when asked by Phillips about aid 'Aid is not what we desire because [then] they decide for us what we need' (2013: 31).

Power politics has underpinned the transition. Somaliland's second president has offered stability (and tax breaks) to the business elite in exchange for funding demobilisation and the development of state institutions. This has been effective but certainly not inclusive – these elites come mainly from the President's own clan. But according to Phillips, Somalilanders generally still see it as a legitimate process – that's what leaders do.

Source: Phillips (2013)

#### **Box 4.2: Case study: The Mwananchi Programme**

The Mwananchi Programme, backed by DFID's Governance and Transparency Fund, ran for five years (2008-2013) across six very different African countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zambia.

The programme identified national coordinating organisations in each country, who then issued calls for proposals from local civil-society and media organisations to implement projects designed to find innovative ways to increase citizen ability to hold their governments to account (Tembo 2013: 11).

The programme followed a five step theory of action:

'Establish the underlying foundational factors. This includes the history of the formation of the state, the basis of the economy (especially public revenue), the roots of the social, political, cultural and economic structures within which fundamental public decisions are made, and the country's geography and geo-strategic position in relation to other countries. These are the factors that fundamentally shape the social, political and institutional landscape, and therefore also the scope for constructive state-society bargaining, and the institutional arrangements for organising collective action.

Identify the rules of the game (formal and informal narratives). This refers to the formal and informal institutions that shape the incentives and capacity of key actors, the relationships between them, and how processes of political bargaining play out. These are critical in influencing opportunities for different groups, including those representing poor people, to mobilise and engage in collective action that promotes development over the medium term.

(Cont'd.)

Identify game changers or interlocutors of change. This is an emergent category because the actors are identified from the narratives or from the analysis of the rules of the game in the second step. In this case the idea is to identify who the main influencers are in a given context - a politically derived category as opposed to the traditional stakeholder analysis where everyone benefiting or affected by a given intervention or activity is mentioned.

Explore engagement dynamics. These pertain to the behaviour (formal and informal) of various actors around specific governance issues (including policy issues). This too is based on exploration of the narratives or rules of the game but is focused mainly on observable behaviour in action rather than on formal or informal rules.

Establish institutional patterns and decision logics. Then, from these, find entry points or room for manoeuvre, towards the desired changes. In other words, from the analysis of: a) who the main actors are, and b) what their behaviours are; the programme would analytically reach some conclusions around what might be the most useful way to intervene in the context and around the issue, in order to achieve the desired outcomes. (Tembo 2013: 78-79)

The Mwananchi Programme identified three main lessons from its work:

‘Accounting for contextual dynamics is of vital importance. In social-accountability projects, however, there is a need to merge the contextual perspectives of those experiencing the collective action problem and the analysis done by external experts. For those actors in the situation, it is part of the process of finding room for manoeuvre through learning by doing to know and influence their context where possible.

A rear-view mirror shows more clearly what is working than does a prediction from the original log-frame. Collective action situations are complex and dynamic.

For a working theory of change, it is more important to keep examining assumptions than to develop a neat narrative. Often assumptions, as in log-frames, are sidelined and never examined in monitoring and reporting frameworks; yet they can reveal much of the learning as well as the fundamental information for managing risks or other ‘killer assumptions’ on a given pathway of change.’ (Tembo 2013: 83)

Source: Tembo (2013)

## 5 The implications of violence and conflict

The OECD’s disaggregation of five aspects of fragility highlights the arbitrariness of lumping together violence, access to justice, effective and accountable institutions, economic inclusion and stability and resilience to shocks. Ideally, each of the five aspects should be treated separately, in terms of identifying both endogenous change processes and potential external interventions. With respect to E&A, the first category, violence, is perhaps the most neglected, despite its far reaching consequences, not least because in FCVAS violence is likely to be used to resolve the disagreements and disputes which E&A seeks to resolve.

In practice such discussions as exist on E&A in FCVAS focus much more on fragility than on conflict. Violent conflict is frequently conflated with ‘contestation’, and then contestation equated with peaceful protest. This may be because of the unacknowledged preferences of the non-violent aid actors or the sheer difficulty of working in violent contexts, but the effect is to create a divide between those interested in E&A, and those working on conflict, violence and peace-building.

The turbulence of violent conflict settings poses a huge challenge for external actors; endogenous change is likely to be less predictable, is more emergent, and is less 'projectable'. Interventions are potentially 'high risk, high return', with turbulent settings showing less inertia than more stable environments, but with the risks of failure or mistakes being far greater, in terms of human suffering. Pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict situations all require both understanding and different kinds of response in terms of E&A.

## 5.1 Erosion of trust

Issues of trust, risk and fear are prominent in FCVAS. A study of accountability in fragile settings in Nepal, Bangladesh and Mozambique found 'low levels of trust between government and citizens and between different citizen groups, a recent history of citizen disengagement, high levels of tension or conflict between different groups of citizens, low government legitimacy, and weak government capacity to cater to the needs of populations' (McGee and Kroeschell 2012: 35).

One example comes from World Vision in the Central African Republic (CAR). In 2014, World Vision began to work with several hundred children and adolescents (8-18 years) demobilised from armed groups. Most of them displayed signs of distress, nightmares, some social withdrawal, difficulty concentrating and sometimes regression to previous developmental behaviours (e.g. bedwetting or thumb-sucking).

World Vision CAR initially started working with a peace clubs project model designed to help children and adolescents protect themselves and make good decisions for themselves; treat others with respect, tolerance, and peace, and cooperate with others in helping their community become a safer and better place for everyone.

However, very soon World Vision realised that most of these children and adolescents were so broken and lacking in trust vis-à-vis their parents and community that they needed, in addition to safer shelters, access to specialised treatment, income and livelihoods. It therefore had to revise its approach to incorporate trauma healing services for those who required them (about 1 in 10 of the children and adolescents) (World Vision, pers comm, September 2016).

People seeking to hold those in power to account may have well-justified grounds for fear for their personal safety. Trust is eroded, and with it social capital, especially the 'bridging capital' between different social groups divided by class, geography or ethnicity. Even more than in non-FCA settings, empowerment may well need to happen *before* anything approaching accountability-claiming can take place.

## 5.2 Transparency issues

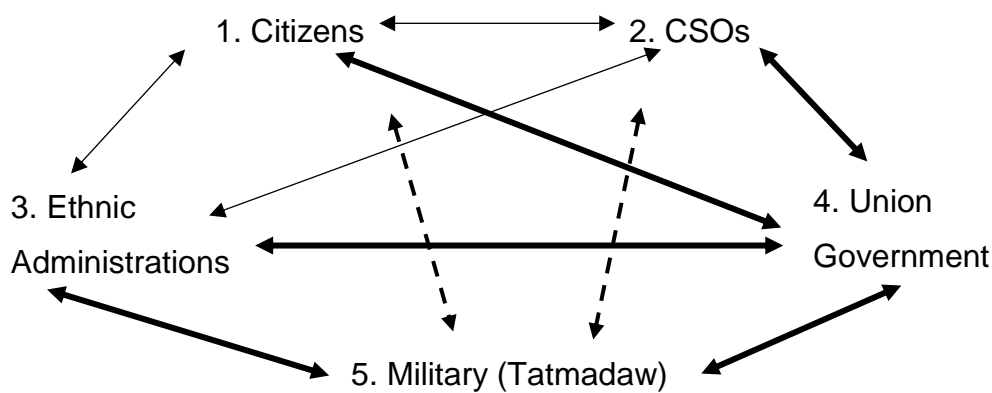
The heightened risk of promoting E&A in violent settings has important implications for external actors. There is an increasing (and welcome) interest in experimentation in non-fragile settings, 'doing development differently', innovating and 'learning by failing', but in violent contexts, people's lives can be at risk if things go wrong (for example if your project benefits one social group at the expense of another). 'Do No Harm', conflict sensitivity and notions of human or community security (Saferworld 2014) become important over-riding considerations.

There is also a potential trade-off between promoting E&A and transparency. In Myanmar, Oxfam has found that strengthening the social contract is often best done through informal mechanisms to build trust. That's when people can get to know each other, but also negotiate and make concessions without losing face.

That trade-off can be seen even in a relatively violence-free region of Myanmar – the Ayeyarwady Delta. After monitoring local authority budgets and then organising public hearings that allowed the population to raise issues with state officials, Oxfam’s CSO partners decided to write two reports – a public one, and a private one for local political leaders, where issues of corruption were identified. Officials were grateful for the tactful approach and took action, with several officials resigning. But it was hardly transparent.<sup>7</sup>

Many violent conflicts have become entrenched, leading to a situation of multiple co-existing state and non-state authorities that challenges conventional approaches to E&A as a relationship between citizen and state. In Myanmar, an ethnic armed administration holds sway over large parts of the Kachin in the north, while both the national (union) government and military are also important and independent power holders. This leads to a more complex set of potential accountability lines, as shown in the diagram.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 5.1: Kachin, Myanmar: lines of accountability**



Source: Author’s own.

Of the ten possible accountability lines, five (thick lines) are already being dealt with through domestic politics, sometimes with the help of the international community:

- 1↔4: elections, democracy strengthening etc.
- 2↔4: traditional social accountability
- 3↔4, 3↔5 and 4↔5: peace process

Two (dotted lines) are very unlikely to happen given the current levels of fear and distrust: citizens or CSOs engaging with the military.

That leaves three (thin lines) that have largely slipped below the radar of donor or NGO attention:

- 1↔2: internal accountability of CSOs (except through partner selection)
- 1↔3: accountability of ethnic administrations
- 2↔3: CSOs acting as independent checks and balances of ethnic administrations

<sup>7</sup> Author field visit, September 2016

<sup>8</sup> Author field visit, September 2016 <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/do-we-need-to-rethink-social-accountability-thoughts-from-myanmar/>

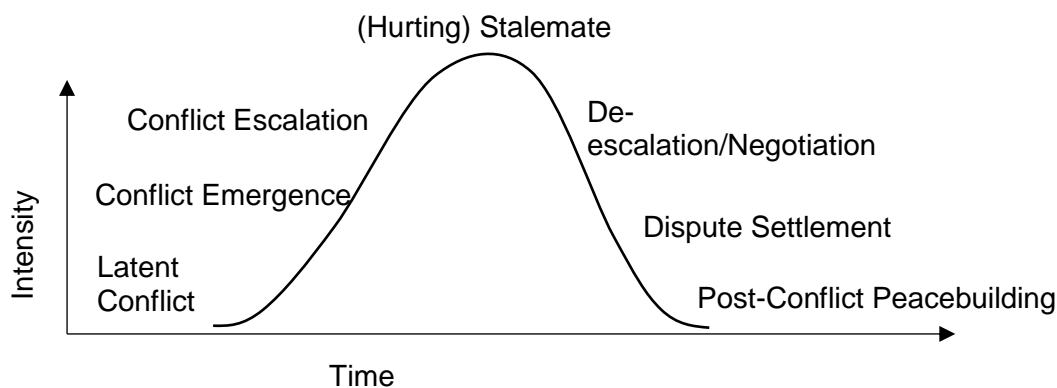
### 5.3 Subnational conflict

In other regions of Asia, as in Myanmar, *subnational* conflict is the most widespread, enduring, and deadly form of violence. On their own, individual subnational conflicts are usually peripheral to national and international concerns. In most cases, they affect only a small minority (6.5 per cent of a national population on average), and typically involve less than 20 per cent of national territory. However, the overall impact of subnational conflict is enormous (Parks *et al.* 2013).

The majority of subnational conflicts in Asia take place in stable, middle-income countries, with relatively strong governments, regular elections, and capable security forces, defying conventional wisdom on the relationship between violent conflict, economic development and institutional capacity (Parks *et al.* 2013).

Even though violent conflicts often become entrenched, they are far from static. Various typologies exist, such as the one shown below (Brahm 2003). Although individual conflicts seldom run smoothly from outbreak to resolution, the typologies help identify the different approaches to E&A and trust-building that are required in different contexts. However, they are no substitute for a careful analysis of the shifting political, social and economic underpinnings of any given conflict.

**Figure 5.2: Typology of violent conflict**



Source: Brahm, E. (2003) [www.beyondintractability.org/essay/conflict-stages](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/conflict-stages). Reproduced with kind permission.

Traditional aid programmes have struggled to adjust to the different rhythms and risks of violent conflict. In Asia, nearly 88 per cent of aid programmes focus on traditional development sectors such as infrastructure, economic development, and service delivery. Even in cases where aid is justified on the basis of contributing towards long-term peace and security, Parks *et al.* (2013) show that most programmes use developmental approaches and that there is very little evidence of positive impact on conflict dynamics.

The same study highlights the gulf that separates aid agencies' theory of action from any coherent theory of endogenous change. In many cases, the country staff of donor agencies and international non-governmental organisations have a sophisticated understanding of the drivers of subnational conflict, but actual programmes and aid practice on the ground have not kept pace with this increased understanding. This gap can be a product of a) sensitivities of the host government, b) conflicting donor government priorities related to aid, trade and security, and c) inflexible staffing rules that make it hard for an aid agency's local and international staff to develop expertise on the conflict and be properly compensated and promoted for this.

The absence of conflict sensitivity in aid programming can have serious consequences. Parks *et al.* (2013: 99) concludes:

There is strong evidence that aid programs are used by local elites to strengthen their support networks. In all three country cases, this study found that community members were unable to correctly identify the actual source of aid funding; instead most attributed projects to local elites, even when they knew that funding came from somewhere else. Local elites can dictate the terms of aid project implementation, especially the selection of beneficiaries, and also take credit for the benefits of projects. This study also found cases where elites have even appropriated aid outputs for themselves.

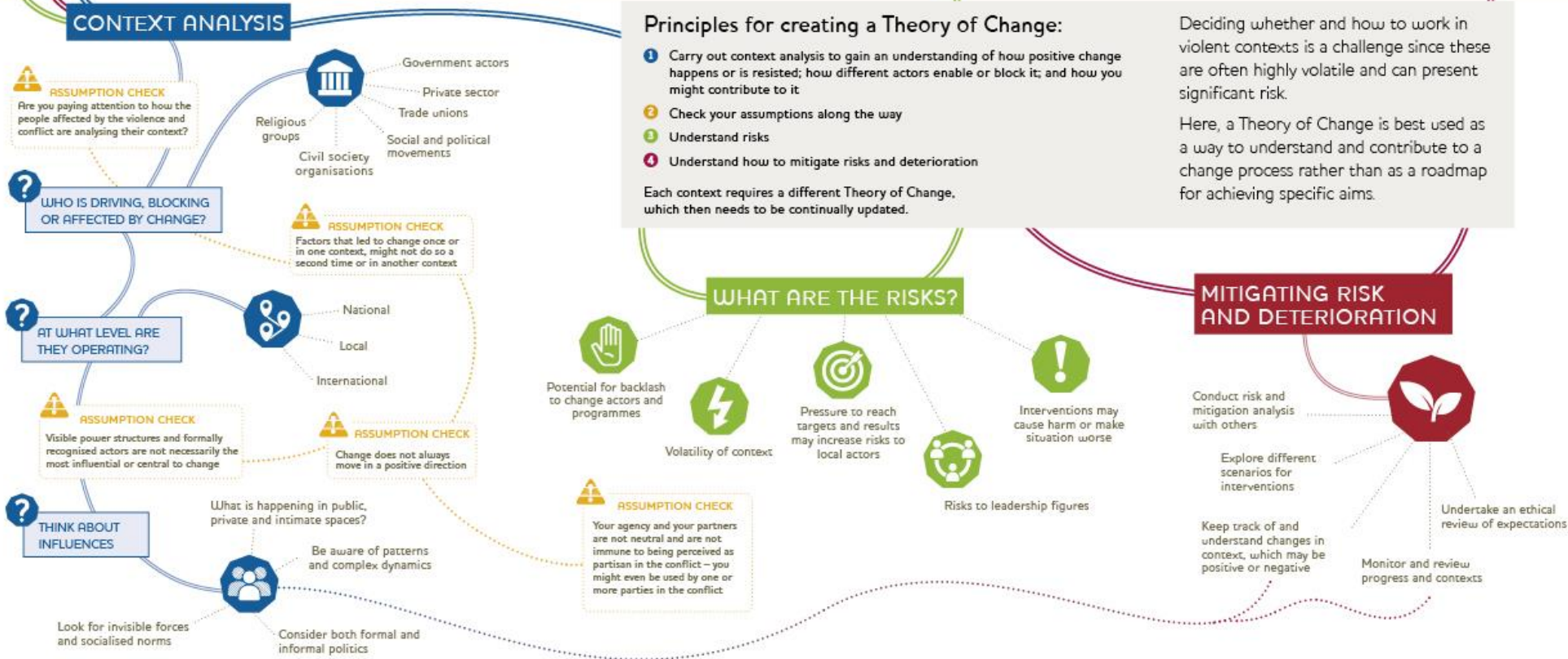
Strengthening local elites can help a transition to peace if it provides a strong motivation for powerful local actors to remain committed to the peace process. However, this can be a major liability in the long term if it reinforces local dynamics that perpetuate conflict. The potential reaction from insurgents is a major factor in aid delivery, acceptance and community engagement.

A 2014 graphic from the Institute of Development Studies captures the focus on risk, complexity and unpredictability and sets out some useful 'Principles for Creating a Theory of change for those working in contexts of violence and conflict'.<sup>9</sup>

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[www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/Working\\_in\\_contexts\\_of\\_Violence\\_and\\_Conflict\\_IDS\\_PVCAproject.jpg](http://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/Working_in_contexts_of_Violence_and_Conflict_IDS_PVCAproject.jpg)



Source: www.ids.ac.uk/pvca

## 6 Consequences of the distinction between theories of change and action: gaps and missed opportunities

This paper argues that, while it is perilous to generalise (especially as the number of examples of better practice is growing, some of them discussed in this paper), aid actors such as multilateral and bilateral lenders and INGOs tend to conflate how endogenous change happens in the social, political and economic system (theory of change) with the process of designing their own interventions (theory of action) (see Section 2). One aid official observes that there is a strong ToC on external intervention, when there is little solid evidence, while on endogenous change, the opposite applies. 'We should be doing more on the endogenous piece', they conclude (author interview, August 2016). This matters because to be effective, actions need to "work with the grain" of the existing system in order to be successful. If the ToA is divorced from the reality of the host system, then it will be much more likely to fail.

Traditionally, external actors have responded to such points by arguing that understanding of the endogenous change process resides with local partners and staff – outsiders can never fully grasp the subtleties of domestic change processes. Investment in supporting country-level learning processes may well be more effective than flying in 'experts' to produce yet another one-off political economy analysis, but some degree of interest in and familiarity with the local context is essential even to select, work with and above all listen to and be guided by local partners.

Such an approach is particularly challenging because while aid projects are often fairly linear in design (do A to achieve B), the political, social and economic context in which endogenous change takes place is much more likely to be a complex system:

Because of the sheer number of relationships and feedback loops among their many elements, [complex systems] cannot be reduced to simple chains of cause and effect. Think of a crowd on a city street, or a flock of starlings wheeling in the sky at dusk. Even with supercomputers, it is impossible to predict the movement of any given person or starling, but there is order; amazingly few collisions occur even on the most crowded streets. In complex systems, change results from the interplay of many diverse and apparently unrelated factors. Those of us engaged in seeking change need to identify which elements are important and understand how they interact. (Green 2016: 10)

Green (2016) unpacks some of the practical implications of systems thinking. Influencing system-wide variables such as norms represents a huge challenge to would-be change agents, whether in terms of measurability and attribution, scale (norms tend to be system-wide attributes that are not easily influenced by tightly focussed interventions), or timescale. Change is likely to be innately unpredictable, requiring change agents to move from attempted prediction to fast feedback and response – the logic underpinning the recent upsurge in interest in adaptive programming methods (Vowles 2013).

Another gulf appears to separate Theories of Action and actual practice. A review of DFID's E&A work in Ghana and Malawi concluded that rather than grapple with the subtleties of a well thought-through ToC approach, 'DFID tends to default to CSO grant-making, which is not always the most strategic option' (ICAI 2013: 1). The weakness of such an approach is that rather than develop a theory of action properly rooted in a country context analysis, aid programmes follow standardised approaches involving a combination of large civil society



grant projects, (scorecards or service delivery), some work on the role of the audit office or parliament (e.g. fiscal accountability or open government), some voter/civic education and democracy promotion and a push on international transparency standards.

Nor is the inertia exclusively on the side of donors. An analysis of over 11,000 applications submitted by civil society groups to the World Bank's Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA) showed that groups put forward just such a standard approach, despite efforts from the funder to convey the message that the programme was looking for more strategic / politically smart options in response to particular contexts (GPSA undated).

The lack of attention to context matters because such an institutionally self-centred approach has led to a series of weaknesses and oversights in the design of interventions, which a proper theory of change could help correct. Some of the main categories of gaps and missed opportunities are listed below.

## 6.1 Critical junctures

Seeing change as a continuous, linear process amenable to the upfront analyses, planning and implementation processes of standard aid procedures ignores the role of discontinuous change as both opportunity and threat. In 'Capitalism and Freedom', Milton Friedman wrote:

Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.  
(Friedman 1962: ix)

Fifty years on, however, the development sector has yet to learn this lesson. Responding to critical junctures as windows of opportunity requires:

- Feedback systems to identify such junctures either in advance when they are predictable (e.g. elections), as scenarios when they are possibilities (e.g. Brexit) or as soon as possible when they are unforeseeable (e.g. the Arab Spring). Natural disasters such as the Nepal earthquake or the Asian tsunami are at the unpredictable end of the scale, while regular events such as droughts or floods are more foreseeable.
- Management processes that allow for rapid decisions in response to such feedback, and the reallocation of staff time and resources in pursuit of windows of opportunity that can often be short lived.
- A network of pre-existing relationships that allows for the rapid construction of change coalitions. Such a network between garment retailers, trade unions and NGOs meant that within weeks of the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh that killed over 1,100 people in April 2013, an international 'Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh' was signed and delivered (Green 2016: 18).

Within the aid sector, the world of humanitarian response is probably closest to this model, because its operational model is built around rapid response to both rapid onset and slow onset shocks. It could be a worthwhile exercise to consider what aspects of humanitarian systems could usefully be adapted to promoting E&A or other change objectives in FCVAS, and the implications for current theories of action.

Examples of how shock-driven approaches could work come from the rapid establishment of citizen helpdesks after the 2015 Nepal Earthquake (Glencorse and Budhathoki 2016) or BBC Media Action's work on governance in Sierra Leone, which argues that 'the Ebola outbreak has increased public demand for accountability and scrutiny over government

spending', even as the initial response 'damaged already low levels of trust in government and services' (BBC Media Action 2015: 1).

Attempts to promote empowerment and accountability in the wake of shocks need to take on board the broader nature of change in complex systems, for example the long term nature of change and the need for broad coalitions. Quick wins will only become sustained progress if they are implemented, which in turn requires them to be embedded in the grain of the society and polity in which they occur (Guerzovich 2012).

## 6.2 Non-State Actors (NSAs)

Beyond the rather sparse mental map of many development interventions (populated by state, civil society and private sector) lie many different kinds of NSAs (both individuals and institutions). These include armed groups, faith organisations, traditional and community leadership structures and many others. Hilker (2012: 137) observes 'Donors often overlook non-state and informal institutions that regulate daily life, and it is critical to find ways to work with them and link them to the state'. An ODI literature review of the links between gender equality, peace-building and state-building concluded:

There is a trend towards engaging with non-state actors... [but] Nevertheless, in practice, programming has remained state-centric, and the international community continues to struggle with how to operationalise this insight. Questions around risk, funding modalities, reporting and accountability remain and need to be addressed practically through guidance to programme implementers.  
(Domingo and Denney 2012: 4)

### Box 6.1: Case study: The Within and Without the State Programme

The Within and Without the State (WWS) is a five-year DFID-funded global initiative (2011-2016), piloting a variety of approaches to working with civil society to promote more accountable governance in conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

WWS works in Afghanistan, the Occupied Palestinian Territories/Israel, South Sudan, DRC, and Yemen (although the Yemen programme had to be suspended in 2015 due to the gravity of the conflict).

In South Sudan, WWS identified six overarching lessons (Chilvers 2015):

1. Work with existing state structures rather than inventing parallel systems.

Two WWS partners set up grassroots community groups which track state budgets for health, education and water from being agreed at national level to the spend in the community itself. CEPO (Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation) and SUTCO (Support the Children Organisation) realised that provision had been made for accountability groups in South Sudan's constitution, but they were not functioning; so they worked to ensure these groups were actually operating effectively rather than starting a parallel system.

2. Build gender equality by demonstrating increased economic productivity at the household level, and involve the whole community including men and religious leaders.

Challenging gender roles and expectations is a long process. One of WWS' partners APARD (African Partnership Aid Rehabilitation and Development) surveyed the amount of work women did compared to men. They sought to demonstrate how households could be better off if women had a greater say in how the money was invested and spent. They used a multi-pronged approach working with key public figures, such as the local bishop, to increase the impact of their message.

(Cont'd.)

3. Support women who are already having a positive impact in their communities.

Susan Nadi Majaro, 38, is Paramount Chief of Wulu County in Lakes State - an exceptional appointment for a woman in South Sudan. She was elected with support from Oxfam's partner APARD in community dialogues and because she was already carrying out invaluable work resolving domestic abuse cases in the community court.

4. In peace mediation work, conduct thorough research into the context, involve all those concerned in the dispute, but limit the number of actual participants.

In Lakes State, cattle raiding is widespread and violent. Two peace and stability dialogues were held between the warring communities. The first involved participants from across the community, including local politicians and leaders, but this was found to be counter-productive. So, after community consultation and power mapping, the second dialogue got the young people carrying out the raids to meet on their own and resolve the situation.

5. Have solid risk management plans and conduct a power analysis, review and update both regularly.

Every three months CEPO conducts a power analysis which they share with other CSOs and NGOs and parliamentarians for comment. They map institutions or individuals who are influential, and identify who is supportive or unsupportive. They use this for particular interventions for example in peacebuilding or women's empowerment. They map allies who can potentially bring others to support the programme and strategies that can influence them.

6. Develop imaginative ways to explain to communities the change you want to see.

SUTCO decided that making a film using local actors would be a good way to highlight the issues a community could face. They recruited actors in an open process and devised scenes where young people turned their lives around from drinking and gambling to working on, and monitoring community development funds. They asked people what the barriers are to the community participating in local government and invited them to come up with possible solutions, and work with them to devise an action plan.

Across the overall WWS programme, Oxfam identified the key lessons on building active citizenship (Chilvers 2014):

- Create unexpected alliances
- Apply complexity theory
- Use the social contract model
- Work with women and young people

Sources: Chilvers (2014; 2015). For WWS see <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-work/governance-citizenship/within-and-without-the-state#88cdd4c6-5b24-499e-ad31-0634ed207cb7>

In Afghanistan, Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA) works through local accountability mechanisms, such as shuras (community gatherings) and community development councils to facilitate elections of volunteer community monitors. These monitors, who are rooted in the communities, are then trained to access project information on reconstruction projects selected by the communities, survey beneficiaries and assess the reality of projects on the ground, thereby contributing to reducing transaction costs and improving delivery of projects with considerable budgets (U4 AntiCorruption Resource Centre 2011).

The ODI review argues that aid agencies need to be clear about their objectives: are NSAs the target of an intervention, an ally, or both? In either case, engaging usefully requires a set of relationships and analytical skills that go beyond those needed to understand the workings of formal state institutions.

INGOs face a comparable challenge, since their default partners of choice – local NGOs or CSOs are often weak or absent in FCVAS. INGOs need to develop their skills in working with traditional leaders and organisations, local private sector associations or faith groups. Even with more recognisable CSOs, imbalances of power, finance and capacity make truly equitable partnerships often a distant dream. Such imbalances are further complicated when working with non-CSOs that often do not share the INGOs' world views or have the administrative capacity and formal registration or longevity normally demanded of partners.

This is particularly true of faith organisations, which are often strong and remarkably resilient in FCVAS, play a vital role in the construction of social norms (as well as service delivery), and have reservoirs of hidden power in terms of the state and other actors. Working with faith-based organisations on E&A in FCVAS is a major blind spot for many aid actors – the words 'faith' or 'religion' are conspicuous by their absence in many of the most influential policy documents. The 352 pages of the World Bank's influential *Opening the Black Box: The Contextual Drivers of Social Accountability* book contains just two references to religion, and three to faith-based groups (Grandvoinet *et al.* 2015).

Faith groups are no freer of corruption or power imbalances than any other institution, and some actively promote attitudes and behaviours contrary to notions of empowerment and accountability, requiring those wishing to work with them to acquire a full and discriminating understanding of their structures and ways of working.

Working with NSAs such as faith groups often requires adapting the traditional tactics and language of aid, identifying common ground even when there are serious differences over attitudes and beliefs. In their ten country family planning programme, Christian Aid, Plan and IHAA found 'A great deal of cross-over between the interests of Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights activists, proponents of healthy birthing and those who focus on socio-economic gains from population control; often these groups were all supportive of increased access to family planning although they may vary widely in religious belief or have widely different political and social agendas - the common point of policy suits all their interests and enables progress.' (Christian Aid 2016a: 3)

### **6.3 Power versus political economy**

Although empowerment and accountability are routinely conjoined, in practice the first term receives much less attention than the second, and the conflation of the two has serious consequences for work in FCVAS. By ignoring or downplaying many aspects of informal power, political economy analyses, the default analytical framework of many donors, further weaken the understanding of empowerment within E&A.

Political economy analysis interprets political actions and strategies through the lens of economic institutions, focusing on key actors, their interests, and what enables or hinders their cooperation. Structures, norms and "rules of the game" are also considered, both formal and informal, but with emphasis on those that are visible or explicit.

In contrast, power analysis comes from critical social theory, anthropology, political sociology and feminist theory, and is used to explain socialised and internalised norms and behaviour and to explore the links between agency and structure. Yet both frameworks share the common objective of unpacking the visible, hidden and invisible dimensions of relationships between key actors involved in producing (or blocking) meaningful development changes. (Acosta and Pettit 2013) A table by Acosta and Pettit (2014) usefully summarises the differences.

**Table 6.1: Three-way comparison of political economy and power analysis**

	<b>Political economy</b>	<b>← →</b>	<b>Power analysis</b>
<b>Main dimensions of power</b>	<b>Visible</b>	<b>Hidden</b>	<b>Invisible</b>
<b>The role of institutions/rules of the game</b>	For the most part, institutions are taken as given or they are hard to change in the short run	Emphasis on informal institutions often resilient to change	Focus on 'structuration' interplay between conscious agency and internalisation of norms
<b>Examples of institutions</b>	Formal government and National Government institutions (mayors, cabinets, NGOs); existing norms and regulations	Informal institutions (traditional governance structures, militias)	Social institutions (gender norms, ethnic identity, etc) and networks (kinship, political solidarity)
<b>The role of individuals</b>	Individual, rational action. Organisational action	Combine individual and collective actions through networks	Focus on individual and collective consciousness (shaped by different factors)
<b>Cooperation and contestation</b>	Collective action is the result of individual motivations	Collective action results from individual motivations and social norms	Collective action results from social and cultural norms
<b>Sanctions and enforcement</b>	Formal (legal) ways to legitimise agreements (contracts) or sanction defections	Informal sanctions outside formal legal norms, such as bribery or coercion	Fear of exclusion or loss of identity, internalised social norms
<b>How they explain change over time (key drivers of change)</b>	Types of actors, preferences and strategies change but institutional change is much slower ('Change from above'?)	Greater trust in agency to change power relations ('Change from below'?)	Changes in critical awareness and sense of empowerment leading to growth in agency ('Change from within'?)
<b>Example: how to ensure effective service delivery from local governments?</b>	What are the legal, political and financial resources allocated to local governments?	Who performs local government functions in practice? Power operates 'behind the scenes'	Who is neglected from local governments or does not benefit from delivery of services, and why?
<b>Sample recommendations emerging from analysis</b>	Influence policymaking through political advocacy and seeking access to formal decision-making	Strengthen and empower organisations, build collective leadership, raise the visibility of issues, mobilise new voices	Raise consciousness to transform the way people perceive themselves and those around them

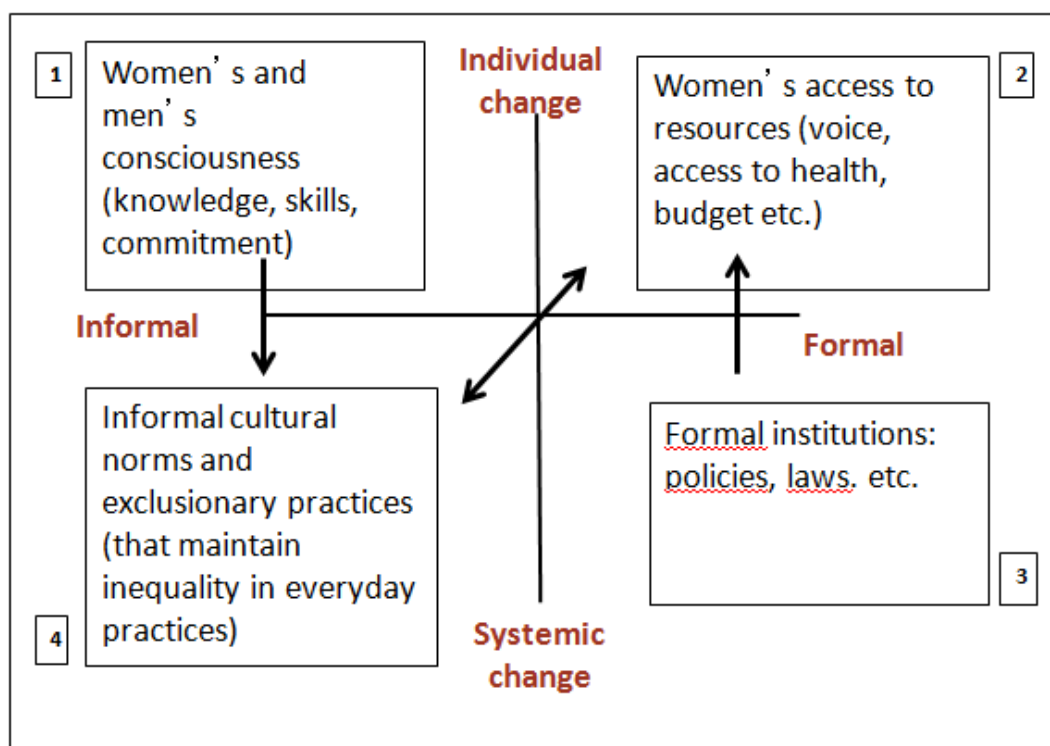
Source: Acosta and Pettit (2014: 14)

## 6.4 Gender gap

The citizenry is not, of course, homogeneous. Experiences of empowerment and disempowerment differ according to social status and group identity, notably along the faultline of gender. This is often acknowledged in passing, but fails to feed through into the subsequent analysis and action. For example, a review of DFID's approach to inclusive political and economic institutions concluded that the political settlements approach, which is the most influential evidence base used by DFID, 'is gender blind' (Piron 2015).

Oxfam uses the Rao-Kelleher framework (see Figure 6.1, based on Rao *et al.* 1999) as a typology for considering the relative importance of formal and informal power and structures in different contexts, and the relationship between them. The conclusion from the literature is that compared to non-fragile settings, the left hand side is particularly important in FCVAS, because empowerment starts in the deeper recesses of informal identity, relationships and institutions, long before it emerges into the formal sphere that often dominates discussions of accountability (Oxfam 2011).

**Figure 6.1: Rao-Kelleher framework**



Source: Based on Rao *et al.* 1999

Gender blindness is particularly unfortunate because in terms of empowerment, one perhaps unexpected feature of critical junctures is the enhanced role of women in post-conflict countries. A study of 17 African countries showed that those emerging from major conflict were quicker to advance women's rights and elect women to political office than less conflict-affected countries (Tripp 2015). However, while participation in formal politics increases, numerous barriers to substantive participation remain, including customary rules, negative cultural attitudes, male- and elite-dominated political parties and structures, lack of financial resources for women, violence and insecurity, the effect of backlash reactions, illiteracy and political inexperience and lack of support for capacity building (Domingo *et al.* 2013).

### **Box 6.2: Case study: Community Protection Committees (CPCs) in the DRC**

In the Eastern Congo (DRC), Oxfam is working through local NGOs to establish and support Community Protection Committees (CPCs) made up of six men and six women elected by their villages in conflict-affected communities. They identify the main threats and actions to mitigate them. When people are forced to flee renewed fighting, these committees are often instrumental in getting people organised in their new refugee camps.

A 'women's forum' is also established to focus on protection issues that particularly affect women. In addition, 'change agents' are elected from further remote villages or locations, in order to expand the geographical impact of the CPC's work.

An external evaluation of Oxfam's DRC programme found that successes cited by committee members were not always recognised or agreed with by other community members; likewise, measuring a concept as complex as 'empowerment' – which includes subjective feelings of self-worth and confidence – is never easy. However, feedback from communities, including statistical data, has identified some tangible positive changes. It also suggests that the broader approach to gender – recognising the impact of conflict on men, and not just in an instrumental way to improve the situation for women – has brought about positive results, strengthening women's feelings of security and empowerment.

The CPC work is an approach, rather than a prescribed programme, so allows communities to adapt to events – it focuses on shifting local dynamics and feeds off that. It builds adaptive capacity, much like climate change adaptation work. By not tying the project to a clear 'sector', the programme was able to be flexible and adapt to fit the context, guided by what people said worked. By cultivating a culture of dialogue as opposed to confrontation, both sides have begun to understand one another, finding ways to generate solutions together. In chaotic and complex environments, working on relationships may be more feasible than trying to target specific outcomes.

Source: Green 2015: 2, 8, 11

## **6.5 Positive deviance**

Thinking in terms of systems and endogenous change highlights the value of approaches that move away from out->in interventions in favour of more rigorous attention to context. One such approach is positive deviance, which capitalises on the fact that for any given problem, someone in the community will usually have already identified a solution. As developed by Monique and Jerry Sternin, the approach consists of first identifying these positive outliers, and then encouraging a process of social learning in which the wider community studies, adapts and adopts the approaches that have led to the deviance. The approach has a track record on everything from child malnutrition in Vietnam to MRSA in US hospitals (Pascale *et al.* 2010).

The Sternins argue that positive deviance comes into its own when other, more conventional interventions have failed, suggesting a clear relevance to E&A in FCVAS, yet as far as the author is aware, no donors have reported supporting or promoting positive deviance approaches in this area. One example comes from Oxfam's work in the Eastern DRC, where a researcher documented examples of better-than-average treatment of civilians by security forces and concluded:

The actual behaviour of the [army] towards civilians differs from place to place, and there are various ways that it could contribute to enhancing civilians' safety. Through local-level initiatives, military units and their immediate civilian environment adjust themselves to work with each other, and may develop mutually beneficial practices that can make a difference for civilians' safety. The challenge is to seize upon existing 'bottom-up' initiatives, value, spread and institutionalise them, and sustain them through high-level policies.

(Oxfam 2012: 37)

The kinds of ‘bottom-up initiatives’ that surfaced in the study included a scheme whereby small traders arranged with the local commander to request that credit they gave to soldiers was directly deducted from the soldiers’ salaries and repaid to the traders. This allowed soldiers to continue to feed their families during crises (for example when wages were not paid) and so reduced the pressure on them to impose ‘taxes’ or steal (Oxfam 2012).

## 7 Are these gaps an accident? Obstacles created by the aid business model

It would be unacceptable in a paper on theories of change to assume that aid actors’ reluctance or inability to give due weight to endogenous change in current approaches is merely due to ignorance or oversight. One way to explore ‘how change doesn’t happen’ – i.e. the obstacles to what seem otherwise sensible policies or behaviours, is to disaggregate ideas, interests and institutions (Green 2016). In this respect, it would seem the case that while ideas (ignorance, lack of historical perspective, shortfalls in research) may be partly to blame, it is hard to see what major interests are served by the status quo.

Instead, this paper argues that the major obstacle is institutional. Exploring theories of endogenous change brings into stark relief some of the limitations created by the business models of a range of aid actors. According to the World Bank’s Shantayanan Devarajan and Stuti Khemani ‘the traditional mode of development assistance—the investment project—was based on overcoming market failures. That mode has not proved to be effective when the problem was government failure’ (Devarajan and Khemani 2016: 19).

Some challenges of the aid business model include:

**Political Economy of Aid:** Aid is a political construct, requiring agreement from donor publics and governments, which in turn generate a number of pressures that can run counter to attempts to ‘do development differently’. Notably, the increasing tendency to tie aid overtly to the national commercial interest of the donor country, pressure to demonstrate tangible results and/or ‘value for money’ for ‘our aid’ and pretensions to ‘zero tolerance’ of corruption can all combine to produce a risk averse, short termist and conservative mindset that is poorly suited to taking risks and ‘working with the grain’ of local political and social contexts.

**Structures and Siloes:** The conventional division of aid activities is into ‘humanitarian’, ‘long term development’ and their smaller relation ‘influencing’. Work in conflict settings traditionally ‘belongs’ to humanitarian staff and agencies who, while arguably more willing to respond to shocks and work in an iterative, adaptive manner, are traditionally less aware of (or even averse to) issues of power, politics, systems thinking and long term change in areas such as norms. Language is also treacherous and silo-specific: accountability in the context of humanitarian aid (e.g. beneficiary feedback mechanisms) and empowerment in the context of survivors of crises are qualitatively different in their meaning and wider impact than general ‘accountability’ or empowerment of non-traumatised non-post-crisis citizens.

**Staffing:** It is hard to maintain a deep political knowledge of non-state actors, who are often very localised, when donor offices are located in capitals with staff changing every few years (Domingo *et al.* 2013). Responses include giving greater priority to recruiting, developing and promoting local staff who both have a deeper understanding of local context, and are less likely to leave after two years. However, in FCVAS, such skills are often in short supply, and the risks inherent in such contexts can make taking on such roles less desirable, especially if staff have family members to consider (Oxfam 2014b).



**Institutional Amnesia:** Staff turnover within FCVAS is one contributor to a wider problem – the lack of institutional memory about any given context, which is also exacerbated by short funding cycles and the move to using a shifting band of management consultants in project implementation. Aid agencies might be able get round these barriers by establishing long-lasting links with ‘knowledge brokers’ with deep knowledge of different contexts (e.g. retired politicians and civil servants, or local universities and think tanks), but there is little evidence of this happening on anything beyond informal conversations.

**Tension with recent trends in aid:** The analysis of how change happens in E&A in FCVAS suggests that donors should support adaptive projects whose outcomes are not entirely foreseeable in advance, and work ‘with the grain’ based on an in-depth understanding of the evolving local context, with an end goal of supporting the emergence of resilient, accountable institutions. There are tensions between this approach, and recent trends such as reduction in headcount or the push to demonstrate immediate and tangible results.

**Timeline:** There is a clear disconnect between humanitarian funding cycles measured in months rather than years, and the idea that transitions to E&A in FCVAS take ‘at least a generation’.

**The structure of funding:** A ‘working with the grain’ approach based on learning by doing (and failing) often requires the placing of multiple ‘small bets’, rather than going straight into developing ‘monolithic’ large scale projects (they can follow once the small bets have been placed, and the results understood). Donors may need to find ways to follow a ‘venture capitalist’ route in some situations, funding a number of small start-ups rather than a single flagship. Programmes like SAVI in Nigeria (see page 40) provide examples of the kind of intermediary project that can achieve this.

But small grants can sometimes kill innovation because there is inadequate staffing, support costs, and, for the staff involved, livelihoods depend on the perceived success of that project, so it hampers honest reflection and the idea that it’s acceptable to fail and reshape. According to Maria Poli of the World Bank’s GPSA:

The experience from 3 plus years is still inconclusive. On the one hand, larger grants enabled lead applicant CSOs to partner with others, in some cases, large civil society groups, particularly groups working at the sub-national level, oftentimes non-traditional actors (thus ensuring they receive adequate funding for their work).

On the other hand, while large grants have given them more stability in terms of long-term planning, it was apparent that only a handful have already integrated adaptive management. So without the incentive to learn by doing and be open to course correct, the long-large grants don’t necessarily work (unless you invest in supporting adaptive management during implementation).

But the issue seems more about the conditions under which these grants are structured more than about the size of grants.

(Maria Poli, pers comm, September 2016)

## 8 How have theories of change and action on E&A in FCVAS changed over time?

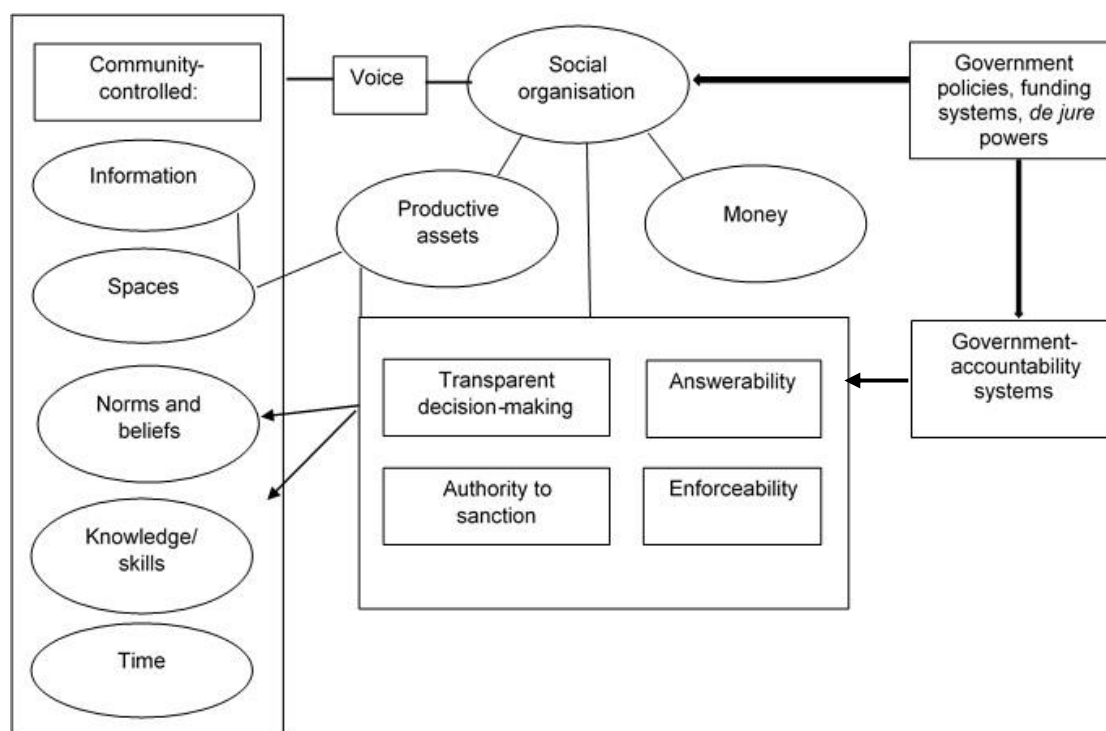
Most of the relevant intellectual activity around theories of change and action over the last 20 years has not been directly on E&A in FCVAS. Nor has it been explicitly framed in terms of theories of change or action. Instead, there has been a rich discussion on institutional reform and governance, which has included looking at fragile, conflict and violence affected settings.

### 8.1 Empowerment

In terms of E&A, since the early 2000s, there has been a considerable investment in analysis and policy advice on accountability, but much less activity on the issue of empowerment. According to at least one critic, this has been partly because the concept of 'empowerment' was tamed and robbed of its meaning once imported into the mainstream development lexicon from the more radical feminist fringes where it originated. And indeed, it is in the area of gender rights and feminism that the most searching thinking on empowerment has continued in recent years (Cornwall 2000).

One exception is a systematic review by Westhorp *et al.* (2014), which explores the relationship between empowerment and accountability in relation to education. Its theory of change is shown below, with empowerment disaggregated into the five categories in the left hand column, feeding into a process of accountability as shown.

**Figure 8.1: Westhorp *et al.* conceptual model: the relationship between empowerment and accountability**



Source: Westhorp *et al.* (2014) © EPPI-Centre.

*Information* refers to all the varieties of information, both from the state and generated locally; in relation to rights, entitlements, budgets, expenditure, student-learning outcomes and so on.

*Spaces* refers to the social spaces in which people come together to identify their concerns, deliberate and develop strategies.

*Norms and beliefs* refers to the cultural perspectives, norms in relation to education, attitudes and aspirations of communities, and understandings of roles and responsibilities for communities and the state that shape the specific demands communities seek to make, community cohesion in relation to those demands, and the propensity of communities to make demands.

*Knowledge and skills* refers to the capacities of local communities, identified primarily in terms of adult literacy, knowledge of the local community, understandings of information, and skills to plan, manage, and advocate on their own behalves

*Time* refers both to available time after survival needs and other social roles are fulfilled to participate in accountability initiatives, and to the passage of time - change does not happen quickly, and years may be required for significant change to be achieved.

(Westthorp *et al.* 2014: 125-6)

Despite this exception, and recognising that there is considerable tacit knowledge among staff, the absence of donor and practitioner literature on empowerment (or indeed power itself) is striking, both in terms of general literature and that in specific connection to FCVAS. Standard political economy analyses cover economic power, formal political power, and an element of 'behind the scenes' hidden power, but largely ignore issues of 'power within' and 'power with' that underpin successful citizen action (Rowlands 1997). These topics have been most developed in gender rights literature, for example in Rao and Kelleher's work (Rao *et al.* 2016), discussed on page 30-1.

## **8.2 Accountability and 'good governance'**

In contrast, there has been a good deal of discussion and insight on accountability, for example in democracy promotion, or open government, but again with little examination of FCVAS. The 38-page strategy document for the international 'Making All Voices Count' transparency and accountability initiative contains no mention of the words 'fragile', 'fragility' or 'conflict' (Brock *et al.* 2014). The lack of overlap between FCVAS and E&A analyses underlines the importance of the A4EA research programme of which this paper is part.

'Good Governance' as a donor theme emerged in the early 1990s, during a period of optimism after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The initial good governance agenda was dominated by generic 'best practice' approaches based on the governance systems of advanced economies. Among donors, the World Bank is the undisputed thought leader in this area, with significant contributions from DFID and others. According to Brian Levy, a key figure in the evolution of World Bank governance approaches:

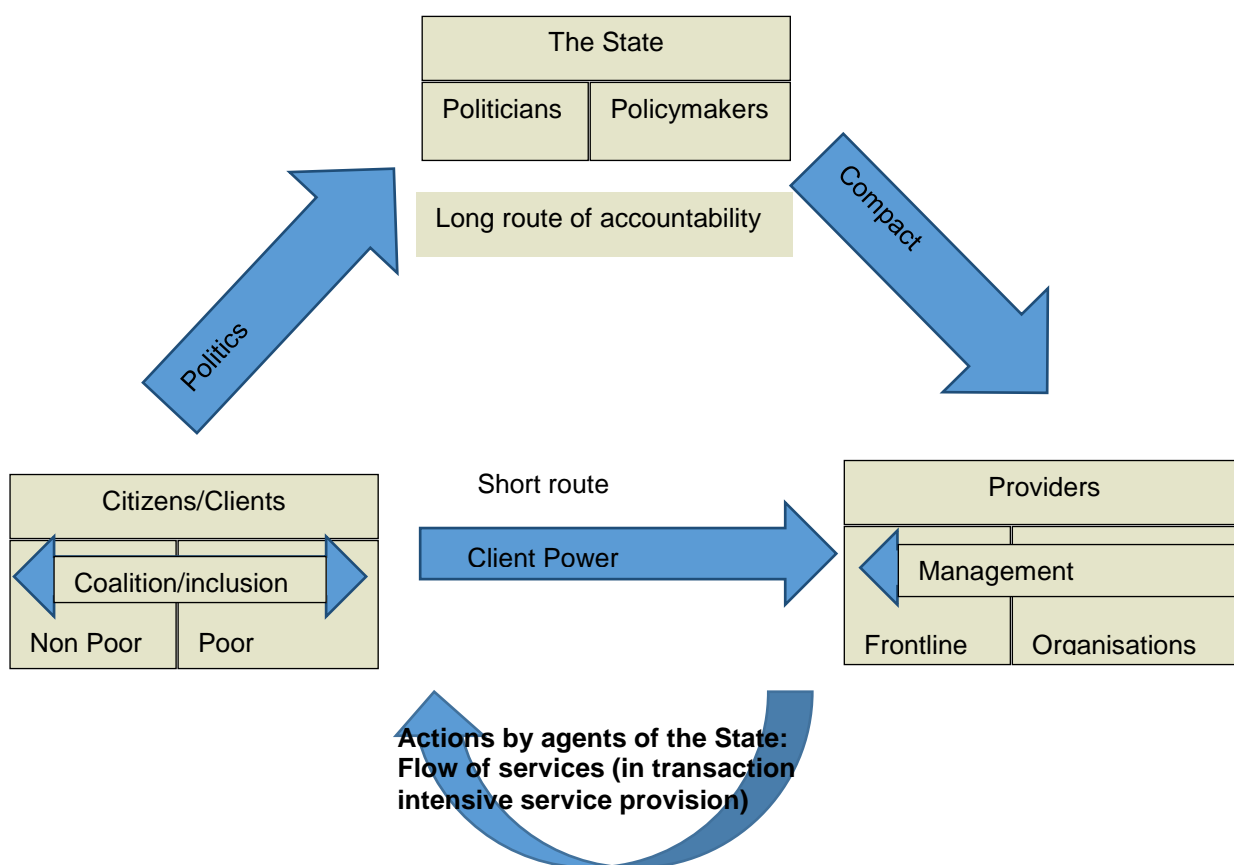
There was something truly extraordinary about coming up with a comprehensive governance reform program for low income countries by describing the characteristics of the world's most affluent and open societies and then reverse engineering them.... A breathtaking combination of naivete and amnesia.

(Levy 2014: 7)

Governance approaches were also heavily supply-led: advice and training for governments (both political leaders and officials) on the (often implicit) assumption that the problem was one of capacity, rather than of power and politics.

Unsurprisingly, the supply-led approach failed in situations where power and politics were not aligned with the suggestions of donors, and the 2004 World Development Report (World Bank 2004) triggered a major shift towards demand-led approaches, particularly among INGOs and some bilateral agencies (e.g. DFID), stimulating citizen demand for services and accountability. The WDR's lasting contribution has been its description of two routes to accountability (see Figure 8.2): the short route (where services are made directly accountable to citizens, for example through citizens' report cards) and the long route (boosting accountability through the formal political system). The result was a large number of short route schemes, and schemes to promote transparency and access to information as a way of stoking demand for better services.

**Figure 8.2: The overall accountability triangle: four relationships of accountability**



Source: Pritchett (2013) [www.slideshare.net/Development\\_Analytics/lant-pritchettankarapresentationdevelopmentanalytics1](http://www.slideshare.net/Development_Analytics/lant-pritchettankarapresentationdevelopmentanalytics1), adapted from World Bank (2003) *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People*, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/5986>. Reproduced with kind permission.

While demand-led approaches were more politically realistic than a largely managerialist supply-led model, they have since been criticised on several counts: they frame users as individuals rather than as collective actors (Grandvoinet *et al.* 2015), and they fail to recognise the very real capacity constraints within state systems that undermine even the best intentions. In East Africa, for example, the innovative NGO Twaweza's rigorous approach to monitoring and evaluation has revealed that major efforts on access to information (for example on quality of education) have failed to produce improvements.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> <http://oxfamblogs.org/wp2p/the-war-for-twawezas-soul-the-hunger-for-clarity-and-certainty-v-the-demands-of-complexity/>

The evidence on impact was both scant and disillusioning. Reviews devoted at least as much time to describing the limitations of the evidence as to synthesising the results (Buffardi *et al.* 2017: 14). In a 2011 review of 80 countries receiving World Bank support for public sector reform, the quality of public administration was higher after reforms in only 13 per cent (and actually fell in a similar number). Matt Andrews, from Harvard University, has criticised the tendency for governments to placate donors through ‘isomorphic mimicry’: governments and organisations pretending to reform by changing what policies or organisations look like rather than what they actually do (Andrews 2013).

A review by Haider (2016: 4) concluded that:

these interventions have often been compartmentalised based on a traditional state-civil society divide. Strategies and policies are needed that focus on the interaction between institutions and citizens at all stages of war-to-peace transition.

The 2011 World Development Report argues that a combination of low trust and low state capacity makes promoting E&A in FCVAS difficult, but possible:

Given the difficulties, how have countries escaped from violence and achieved institutional resilience? These pathways are under-researched, and this report has only some of the answers. The [WDR] framework suggests some fundamental differences between fragile and violent situations and stable developing environments. The first is the need to restore confidence in collective action before embarking on wider institutional transformation. Second is the priority of transforming institutions that provide citizen security, justice, and jobs. Third is the role of regional and international action to reduce external stresses. Fourth is the specialised nature of external support needed.

(World Bank 2011: 103)

**Figure 8.3: WDR framework: repeated cycles of action to bolster institutional resilience**

The WDR framework is presented as an ever-expanding spiral because these processes repeat over time as countries go through multiple transitions. Even as one set of immediate priorities is resolved, other risks and transition moments emerge and require a repeated cycle of action to bolster institutional resiliency. The arrow below the spiral illustrates that external support and incentives can help this nationally led process, and the arrow above illustrates how external stresses can derail it.



World Bank (2011) *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development*. World Bank. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/4389> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO, reproduced with kind permission.

Recent attempts to move beyond the supply/demand dichotomy have focussed on a range of approaches that bring different players together in search of locally relevant solutions to 'collective action problems'. Matt Andrews is piloting an approach known as 'Programme Driven Iterative Adaptation' (Andrews 2013), while at the Overseas Development Institute, David Booth, Susan Unsworth and Diana Cammack have promoted 'politically smart, locally-led' approaches that focus on creating hybrid solutions that marry local traditions with new thinking ('good fit' rather than 'best practice') (Booth and Cammack 2013; Booth and Unsworth 2014). These approaches are echoed in the NGO world in the rising importance of multi-stakeholder initiatives and 'convening and brokering'<sup>11</sup> at both national and subnational level.

While these new approaches appear promising, aspects of them can be criticised on two grounds: firstly, their evidential basis thus far is weak, amounting to little more than a handful of case studies. Secondly, while they tackle the issue of accountability and institution-building, their focus is often drawn towards political settlements and elite bargains. They are sketchy in their understanding of the nature of empowerment, and how it emerges and can be strengthened by external intervention. Piron's 2015 scoping paper on inclusive political and economic institutions concluded that:

A shortcoming of the political settlements approach (as exemplified by Khan 2010 or North *et al.* 2009) is that it tends to over-emphasise the role of elites and take a narrow view of political settlements, as inter-elite bargaining rather than looking at the character of state-society relations and the whole social contract. This literature also gives little room for agency, ideology, political culture and other factors that shape political choice and action, beyond a rational-choice model of interest-based bargains. (Piron 2015: 7)

As discussed in Section 6, these approaches have also been criticised for being almost entirely blind to the gendered dimensions of empowerment and accountability. Moreover, it is not clear how much of this new thinking can be applied in FCVAS, without considerable adaptation.

Discussions linking 'empowerment' and 'accountability' are less well developed, perhaps because the two concepts tend to draw on different disciplines for their language and understanding.

**Box 8.1: Case study: The State Accountability and Voice Initiative, Nigeria The State**

Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) is a DFID-funded empowerment and accountability programme in Nigeria. SAVI puts into practice two emerging schools of thought – systems thinking (Ramalingam 2013) and the 'politically smart, locally led' approach to development (Booth and Unsworth 2014).

Unlike most E&A programmes, SAVI does not call for proposals, and does not provide CSOs with grants or organisational development. Instead, SAVI recruits and invests in training and supporting in-house state teams, made up of staff from diverse backgrounds and indigenous to the state, to facilitate locally driven change. A national team of resident technical advisers (TA), supported by a small team of international TA, provide continuous hands-on mentoring and support to state teams.

SAVI supports what Fox (2015) refers to as both 'voice' (citizen action) and 'teeth' (government capacity to respond to voice). Its theory of change (actually its theory of action), consists of six stages:

(Cont'd).

<sup>11</sup> <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/convening-and-brokering-in-practice-sorting-out-tajikistans-water-problem/>

*Stage 1: Glass half full:* The starting point for the SAVI programme in any state – the inception phase – is for state teams to recognise that they are looking for and dealing with a ‘glass half full’. SAVI state teams analyse the political economy of the state and of specific sub-sectors and issues. They aim to identify issues or processes that have traction both with state governments and with citizens, and build on existing momentum for change both in the state government and in wider society. Potential partners, with demonstrable passion and credibility, are identified through these processes.

*Stage 2: House:* The first stage of support to partners is enabling them to ‘get their own house in order’. This includes consideration of their links and accountability to citizens; their evidence-base; their ability to work in partnership with others; their ability to harness their own networks, knowledge, skills and resources and build these as required; and their ability to understand and work with the politics and power dynamics surrounding their issue of concern.

*Stage 3: Triangle:* The next stage is to break down barriers and build bridges between groups of citizens, their elected state level representatives and the media. Existing partnerships are strengthened, and new partnerships, platforms and broad alliances organically emerge.

*Stage 4: Bridge:* This stage is about facilitating constructive engagement between demand-side partners and the state government. Partners are supported to operate in a politically savvy way. This includes appreciating the complexity of actors and processes involved; understanding the policy, planning and budget processes they are seeking to influence; and identifying entry points. Partners are supported to forge alliances and working relations with key actors within the government; build their case, frame their arguments and marshal their evidence to influence change simultaneously at multiple levels. They plan in incremental stages through learning by doing and reflection, focusing on short-term achievable targets and building the confidence and credibility to take on bigger challenges.

*Stage 5: Wedge:* SAVI encourages partners to adapt new approaches they have found to be effective to their lobbying work on other issues, in other sectors, and in neighbouring states, to tell others and share their story. The effectiveness of SAVI partners in achieving results also attracts the attention of other demand and supply side actors.

*Stage 6: Explosion:* The final stage of the theory of change is to push forward to a ‘critical mass’ of citizens, media companies, State Houses of Assembly and government officials who are actively engaged in participatory, responsive and inclusive governance.

Source: Derbyshire *et al.* 2016: 8 (Crown Copyright)

Fox (2015) distinguishes a number of different frameworks that have been used by the World Bank over the last decade, influencing the wider aid community’s framing of the issues. Two of them were captured in the WDR 2004: the principal-agent (P-A) framework, and the long route versus short route to accountability (World Bank 2004). Imported from orthodox economics, the P-A approach became the conventional wisdom in mainstream development thinking, assuming that citizens are ultimately the principals - regardless of whether or not they actually live under representative forms of government. ‘When applied to governance, the P-A framework implicitly assumes what it needs to demonstrate – that citizens are indeed ultimately in charge - the ‘principals’ (Fox 2015: 11). Moreover, this approach often makes the assumption that citizens have relatively homogenous interests and goals, something that is clearly not the case in many FCVAS (or arguably, anywhere else). Fox also criticises the short-route-long-route framework, partly because in practice, short route accountability requires functioning long route systems.

By the latter part of the first decade of the 2000s, official World Bank documents began to promote a third discursive frame for accountability issues, deploying the market metaphors that contrast “supply” and “demand” for good governance. Fox concedes that:

In contrast to the 2004 WDR, this approach does emphasise the potential contribution of checks and balances-type institutions, which fit under the “supply side” (anti-corruption bureaus, open budgeting, legislative oversight capacity-building, grievance

review mechanisms, etc.). Yet the market metaphor implies that somehow demand will create its own supply, or vice versa. Moreover, the implicit assumption that an invisible hand would bring them together is unrealistic.  
(Fox 2015: 12)

Fox concludes that, 'Each of these four broad conceptual frameworks has their own strengths and limitations, yet they do not direct us to the kind of analytical tools that are needed' (2015: 13). He sets out his own suggestion for such analytical tools – the distinction between tactical and strategic approaches to E&A – in his paper in this series (Fox 2016).

However, the Bank's Maria Poli<sup>12</sup> argues that Fox's stress on supply and demand is misplaced:

'While the market metaphors were indeed used, the approach put forth by the 2007 GAC (Governance and Anticorruption) Strategy – contrary to what Fox implies - actually meant to integrate supply and demand side interventions. This would be done by including PEA (political economy analysis) in operations and assessing how state and non-state actors could be supported –in a complementary manner- to advance governance reforms.

Moreover, the approach also underlined the need to facilitate (broker, support, foster) spaces of interaction between supply and demand, and the understanding of reform coalitions as cutting across the state-civil society divide.

In this sense, the 2007 GAC Strategy for the first time acknowledged that the Bank needed to change the way it approached engagement with NSAs, including through more politically savvy engagement.

Evaluations of the GAC strategy show that the limitations of its implementation weren't so much about the framework in itself but rather determined by organisational design and business model issues.'

(Maria Poli, pers comm, October 2016)

According to Poli, that approach is central to the role of the GPSA (Global Partnership for Social Accountability), which 'emerges in 2012 (after trial, reflection, adaptation) as a stakeholder that aims to help broker relationships between supply, demand, and the World Bank in Operations' (Poli pers comm).

The GPSA set out its 'theory of change' (actually a theory of action) in its 2015 'Results Framework' (GPSA 2015: 3-4):

Through its grant making and its knowledge and learning activities, the GPSA seeks to (1) increase constructive engagement between civil society actors and government decision makers in the executive responsible for improved service delivery; and (2) facilitate collaboration between the social accountability initiatives of civil society actors and state institutions of accountability (sometimes also referred to as "horizontal" or "independent" institutions of accountability) for overseeing actors in the executive responsible for service delivery. These are the two main outcomes of the GPSA's theory of change [...] Rather than focusing solely on bottom-up citizen action, these two outcomes help to "close the loop" between state-society interactions by encouraging government responsiveness to citizens and civil society actors on citizen preferences for public service delivery and citizen demands for better governmental performance.

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<sup>12</sup> Maria Poli, pers comm, October 2016, see also World Bank 2012.



## 9 The current state of thinking on theories of action

The analysis in preceding sections clearly indicates some potential areas of engagement for external actors through their theories of action. The focus on context demands greater analytical skills, and regular analysis of ongoing shifts in the context; working with non-state actors, sub-national state tiers and informal power entails a shift from traditional aid donors' focus on national governments; the importance of critical junctures heightens the need for fast feedback and response mechanisms; and changing social norms and working on generation-long shifts requires new thinking about the tools and methods of engagement of the aid community.

But the analysis also engenders a good deal of scepticism and caution about the potential for success, so while some advocate for more detailed political engagement, others argue for pulling back to a limited focus on the 'enabling environment' for E&A, principally through transparency and access to information. A third option makes the 'both/and' case for an optimal combination of direct intervention and enabling environment approaches.

### 9.1 Explore the assumptions

At a more 'meta' level, the chastening record of failure in governance and empowerment and accountability programmes (Andrews 2013; Levy 2014), and a deeper understanding of issues of power and systems approaches has revived interest in the assumptions that, often implicitly, underpin E&A interventions.

There is a case for using a much more fine-grained analysis and typology of assumptions. This would allow external actors to link their theories of action to an underlying theory(ies) of endogenous change, both as a starting point and as the basis for subsequent evaluation and learning about emerging ToAs.

In her guide to ToCs, Irene Guijt identifies a typology of three kinds of assumptions particularly relevant to ToCs (Hivos 2015: 24):

1. Assumptions about the context and the actors and factors at play
2. Assumptions related to the pathways of change
3. Assumptions related to conditions for and quality of implementation

Making such assumptions explicit and then testing them through debate and action is a central part of the ToC approach. A review by Care International UK of 19 peacebuilding projects in three conflict-affected countries found that the process of articulating and reviewing theories of change adds rigour and transparency, clarifies project logic, highlights assumptions that need to be tested, and helps identify appropriate participants and partners. (Care International UK 2012).

Care's ToC for 'Inclusive Governance in Fragile Settings' sets out 12 underlying assumptions including, for example 'CSOs are instrumental for excluded groups to influence policies on their behalf' and 'Accountability interventions shift power relations in favour of excluded groups' (Care International UK, undated). It should be noted however, that numerous assumptions in turn lie hidden within *these* assumptions, for example that excluded groups are sufficiently homogeneous to be represented by CSOs and have shared and common interests in the first place, or that CSOs are willing and able to represent the interests of excluded groups.

Moreover, although initially at the heart of the logical framework approach, the discussion of assumptions had become increasingly perfunctory prior to the new surge in interest in ToCs. Aid actors are not disinterested ‘philosopher kings’ in such discussions. Assumptions contain worldviews that drive business models and vice-versa. For example, it seems unlikely that aid agencies will arrive at the conclusion that ‘out → in’ interventions are the wrong way to proceed, and instead argue that E&A are more likely to emerge through endogenous change, with outsiders deliberately staying on the sidelines.

## 9.2 Context is all

The focus on the importance and variety of contexts in shaping E&A engagement echoes the themes of ‘Working with the Grain’ (Levy 2014) and the limits on external actors’ ability to effect institutional reform (Andrews 2013). These books, along with a body of work from the ODI (see for example Booth and Cammack 2013) and others, have given rise to a wider rethink of governance programming, reflected in the names of two networks of donors and researchers – Doing Development Differently (DDD)<sup>13</sup> and Thinking and Working Politically (TWP)<sup>1415</sup>.

The DDD and TWP networks agree on the necessity of external actors understanding and involving themselves in the local political and social context, rather than attempting to introduce standard templates or ‘best practice’. That includes detailed political economy analysis, an emphasis on ‘hybrid institutions’ that build on existing traditions, and seeing engagement as an exercise in iterative, adaptive management rather than the execution of a pre-determined plan. A recent DFID/World Bank funded call for 5 year proposals on ‘Global Learning on Adaptive Management’ could be a sign of future directions in this field.<sup>16</sup> A recent example of ‘Working With the Grain’ thinking is the World Bank’s 2015 book on social accountability (SA), which in its chapter on FCAS (fragile and conflict affected settings), concluded:

SA approaches in general, but perhaps even more so in FCASs, need to build on existing structures and local priorities and norms. SA approaches based on organic structures and initiated by local stakeholders themselves tend to be the most successful... [They] need to be adapted and adjusted constantly to the complex and fluid local environment, perhaps more so than in any other context.  
(Grandvoinet *et al.* 2015: 215, 16)

Similarly, McLean-Hilker *et al.* (2010) argue that external actors must gain a detailed and nuanced understanding of local power dynamics and actors, particularly the complex relationships between violent and non-violent actors, and between everyday violence and political violence. Interventions should build on existing sources of resilience, ‘safe spaces’ and structures for change.

When generic ToCs are applied on the ground, a good deal of adaptation is required. In the inception phase of a ten country family planning programme, Christian Aid, Plan and IHAA found that

some programmes and partners struggled to interpret the global theory of change, which focused largely on advocacy and accountability, to their own most obvious problems which were more related to the lack of sensitisation and awareness,

<sup>13</sup> <http://doingdevelopmentdifferently.com/>

<sup>14</sup> [www.dlprog.org/research/thinking-and-working-politically-community-of-practice.php](http://www.dlprog.org/research/thinking-and-working-politically-community-of-practice.php)

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of the different initiatives in the field of adaptive management, see <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/where-have-we-got-to-on-adaptive-learning-thinking-and-working-politically-doing-development-differently-etc-getting-beyond-the-peoples-front-of-judea/w>

<sup>16</sup> <https://supplierportal.dfid.gov.uk/selfservice/pages/public/supplier/publicbulletin/viewPublicNotice.cmd?bm90aWNISWQ9NjY4ODA%3D>

resistance from traditional community leaders but also to the low capacity of government department and service providers.  
(Christian Aid 2016a: 4)

A dichotomy between universal best practice and 'every context is different' is not helpful for practitioners, who need help with finding 'good bets' in terms of approaches and models, that they can then test and adapt to the specific context. Typologies can be helpful in narrowing down the range of options without doing violence to the importance of context.

However, other voices in the World Bank, along with other researchers and practitioners in the two networks, are less sanguine. They see a number of particular difficulties about external actors promoting E&A in FCVAS.

FCVAS are characterised by social fragmentation, low levels of trust, and weak state capacity and/or legitimacy. Civil society may lack leadership and have limited access to information or means of communication. Under these circumstances, mobilising citizens or engaging them in formal accountability mechanisms may be premature: 'the people who benefit are often the most literate, the least geographically isolated, and the most connected to the wealthy and powerful' (Mansuri and Rao 2013: 6); it can exacerbate inequality by being viewed as a challenge to the state (Schouten 2011). Widening the gap between the state and citizens in this way puts the latter at real risk of violence and persecution (Rowland and Smith 2014).

A recent World Bank overview of social accountability (Grandvoinnet *et al.* 2015) argued that all three linking mechanisms between citizen and state – civic mobilisation, the citizen-state interface, and access to information, are harder to achieve in fragile contexts, and expanded on the range of potential risks:

If the process and impact of SA are perceived to be excluding a group, this can create or revive tensions within groups or between certain groups and the state that may have caused the conflict in the first place.

Second, since in many FCASs the state is in the process of consolidating power, there is a risk that an intervention supporting certain actors and institutional reforms may unwittingly favor one group over another. It may also lead to an overly powerful state and close off the space for citizen engagement.

Third, the government may be fearful of opening up the space for negotiation and dialogue.

(Grandvoinnet *et al.* 2015: 201)

### **9.3 Big decisions in current debates**

Caricaturing hugely, current theories of action are evolving in two contrasting directions – do more versus do less.

#### **9.3.1 Do more**

The 'do more' camp is epitomised by the TWP/DDD networks on the governance side, and on empowerment and accountability, by Jonathan Fox's call for aid actors to move from tactical to strategic approaches: tactical interventions are bounded, limited to demand-side interventions and 'Assume that information provision alone will inspire collective action with sufficient power to influence public sector performance' (Fox 2015: 25). In contrast, strategic interventions are coordinated across multiple levels and points of entry, combine actions on

both the supply and demand sides, and are 'iterative, contested and therefore uneven processes' (Fox 2015: 25).

More generally, strategic interventions involve increased attention to the social contract, alliances, 'convening and brokering' and real time feedback and iteration. Care Netherlands found that the same accountability tool (community scorecards - CSC) served different purposes in fragile and non-fragile settings: in fragile contexts in Burundi and South Sudan, the CSC tool was used mainly at the *beginning* of an intervention to build relationships with local authorities and start opening up spaces for dialogue - a challenging endeavour given the repressive context of these countries. In more post-conflict contexts such as Rwanda, Care found that these processes were able to feed into national government planning.<sup>17</sup>

**Capacity building and the social contract:** In many FCVAS, both state and citizens' organisations are weaker than in non-fragile settings. In Northern Mali 'after the 2013 revolt: "Even neighbors no longer trusted people they had known for decades. Communities were shattered" (Van Wicklin 2014)' (Grandvoinet *et al.* 2015: 205). In addition, when social networks exist, they are usually 'bonding' rather than 'bridging' networks and may cause violence in the society (Grandvoinet *et al.* 2015: 205). This may create a false dichotomy between 'bad' bonding capital and 'good' bridging capital - without bonding social capital there is nothing to bridge. But the relative combination and interaction of the two is clearly of great importance in E&A processes FCVAS, not least in terms of their impact on conflict. Such analysis has led to a focus on building the capacity of weak CSOs whether directly (e.g. through training and funding) or more indirect methods such as peer learning and south-south cooperation (U4 AntiCorruption Resource Centre 2011).

The greater risks of demand-side advocacy, and the weakness of the state's ability to respond, have led to a greater focus on building the social contract between states and citizens.

The social contract refers to the (largely informal) agreement of citizens to submit to the authority of government in exchange for protection of their rights and access to services, security and justice. Citizens will refrain from anarchy and respect the law; government will govern according to the law, and promote peace and development. Developing a social contract in a fragile context, as elsewhere, will be the product of ongoing explicit and implicit negotiation between different interest groups and a range of formal and informal power-holders; the resultant 'contract' will not be a static agreement but will be subject to renegotiation and changes in circumstances over time.

(Oxfam 2014b: 5)

In some FCVAS, this approach needs to be adjusted. In Myanmar, for example, the state is not in control or legitimate in many geographical areas, and the remit of the social contract needs to be extended to the relationship between citizens and non-state or quasi-state authorities such as ethnic armed administrations.

A 2011 study of social accountability programmes in East Timor, Afghanistan, and Liberia concluded that donors should 'strengthen the social contract, by understanding power dynamics, and supporting alliances that cut across the public-private divide' (U4 Anti Corruption Resource Centre 2011: 4).

In his accompanying synthesis paper from the A4EA Programme, Jonathan Fox (2016) builds on these insights, arguing that to achieve sustainable institutional change, CSOs and reformers must band together into coalitions that work at the local, subnational, national, and

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<sup>17</sup> Care Netherlands, Pers comm., September 2016

transnational levels. Such “vertically integrated” strategies must be keenly aware of the different levels of power — from the international to the local levels — and leverage these power dynamics to drive change (Guillán *et al.* 2016).

Others go still further, arguing that accountability is best seen as a complex, evolving ecosystem, a characterisation that leads to a focus on bottlenecks and ‘enabling environments’ rather than particular impact chains (Halloran 2015).

**Convening and Brokering:** In situations where trust between communities, sectors, state and citizens is in short supply, external actors can play a valuable role in ‘keeping people in the room’, using their convening power to bring different players together to negotiate and build the social contract. In Timor Leste, since the decades-long independence movement culminated in independence from Indonesia in 2002, Luta Hamutuk (meaning ‘struggle together’) has been engaging authorities in managing the nation’s budget, natural resources and the delivery of infrastructure and services. With over 150 community focal points across the country, Luta Hamutuk conducts community briefings, seminars and training of trainers to share information on the national budget and development project implementation, thereby bridging the state and society. Luta Hamutuk has created a bridge between the capital Dili, rural communities and international networks, including the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, bringing together government, civil society and the private sector at all levels. It is itself part of the INGO-supported international Network for Integrity in Reconstruction (U4 AntiCorruption Resource Centre 2011).

Oxfam’s Tajikistan Water Supply and Sanitation (TajWSS) Programme convenes a bimonthly forum involving 17 government ministries and agencies, the UN family, INGOs, academia, the media, Tajiki CSOs, the private sector, and parliamentarians. The forum has so far triggered the creation of an Inter-Ministerial Co-ordination Council (IMCC), which meets four times a year to discuss policy and to make decisions. It has also led to a new investment law and a co-funding agreement with the government. What is notable in terms of theories of action was that none of the ‘wins’ was foreseeable, and long term (10 year) funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) was essential to allow this emergent theory of change to proceed.<sup>18</sup>

**Cross-Sectoral Alliances:** The weakness of traditional development partners (state, CSOs) makes an even stronger case for building alliances of ‘unusual suspects and awkward allies’ in pursuit of enhanced E&A. In Afghanistan, Oxfam’s Within and Without the State programme (WWS, see Box 6.1, pages 27-8) is running a project that pairs traditional religious leaders with high-profile women, trained in Sharia law. Each pair works together to settle local disputes, challenge harmful traditional practices (such as giving away girls), and to promote women’s rights. The Ulema (traditional religious leaders) are also working with community leaders to gain acceptance of women’s participation in community peace councils. While religious leaders can sometimes act as blockers, this project attempts to build on their sense of responsibility for their communities and enlist them as allies for change (Oxfam 2014b).

**Iteration, multiple parallel experiments and real time evaluation:** Iteration and adaptation are increasingly understood as vital to navigating the complexities of E&A programming, often involving real time evaluation to provide the evidential basis for changes in direction. However, it is much less common to see the more ambitious ‘venture capitalist’ approach of supporting multiple parallel start-ups in the knowledge (and acceptance) that some will fail while others prosper.

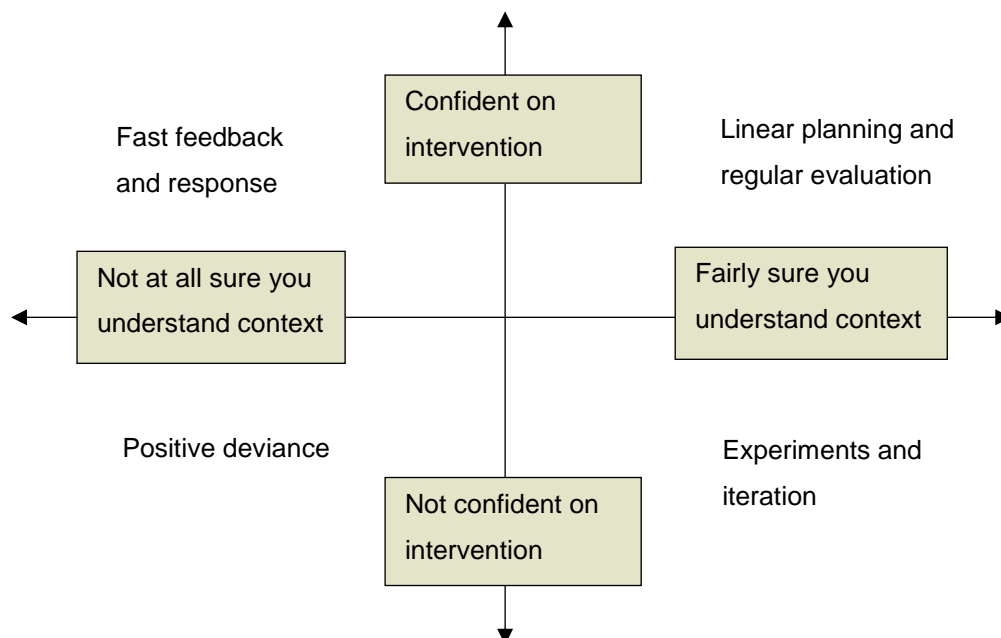
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<sup>18</sup> <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/convening-and-brokering-in-practice-sorting-out-tajikistans-water-problem/>

One exception is Oxfam’s Chukua Hatua project in Tanzania aimed at improving local authorities’ accountability to their citizens, explicitly modelled on evolutionary theory. In the first phase, multiple parallel experiments were initiated in the same region, from ‘farmer animators’ who encouraged peasant communities to engage with village officials, to ‘active musicians’ who visited primary school student councils to spread the word about the benefits of community participation. The project plan stipulated that this experiment in variation would be followed at a predetermined date by selection. Communities, partners, and Oxfam staff met to identify the most successful variants, which were then expanded and adapted. Farmer animators proved the most promising; communities nominated non-farmers as animators, including a father who was trying to convince families to send their daughters to school and a woman who was organising fellow traders at the local market. The first generation of animators was put to work training the new arrivals (Oxfam 2015).

Green (2016: 244) suggests a 2x2 typography that may help identify promising approaches in different contexts. The two axes (see Figure 9.1) correspond to an actor’s degree of confidence in their understanding of the context, and in the efficacy of their intervention.

**Figure 9.1: Approaches to the complexities of E&A programming**



Source: Green (2016), CC BY-NC-ND, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>

If programme staff are operating in a stable or predictable context with a well understood change strategy (upper right quadrant), it may be entirely appropriate to use a traditional linear planning approach, albeit with good mechanisms for feedback and rapid response should their confidence be unwarranted.

If the context is stable, but staff are not sure what kind of change strategy might work (bottom right quadrant), then it may be best to experiment with several different ones, and iterate according to the results.

If they are fairly sure about the strategy but not about the context (upper left quadrant), the emphasis should include setting up fast feedback systems to detect and respond rapidly to sudden changes.

Finally, if they are neither confident of their understanding of the context nor their change strategies (bottom left quadrant), it may be worth adopting a positive deviance approach (looking for positive outliers thrown up by the existing system, rather than focussing on an external intervention). Alternatively, programme staff can look for a simpler, or more tried-and-tested intervention to allow them to move into the top left quadrant, or spend time understanding the context much better, so they can move to the bottom right. FCVAS correspond to the left hand side of the figure, suggesting some of the approaches picked up below as 'hypotheses to test'.

### **9.3.2 Do less**

The 'do less' response comprises two broad currents. The first current is those who conclude that, given the difficulties and risks, donors should first 'restore confidence by mobilising 'inclusive-enough' coalitions of stakeholders and by delivering results' (World Bank 2011: 120). Stirring up the citizenry in such circumstances is counterproductive: 'the conventional idea of supporting a pent-up 'demand for good governance' must be put aside...Citizen pressure will normally lead to more effective clientelism, not better public policies' (Booth 2012: 57).

In this analysis, empowerment is seen as an outcome of stability and economic growth, rather than an immediate need or initial condition. These analyses focus instead on influencing elite bargains and political settlements to improve economic policy and downwards accountability, for example by hiring and working with 'development entrepreneurs', whose focus is on identifying and pursuing reforms that are technically sound and politically possible, using insider lobby techniques rather than either the long or short route to accountability (Faustino and Booth 2014).

The second current within the pessimistic camp focuses on supporting an 'enabling environment' of transparency and access to information, rather than engaging with particular political processes. Devarajan and Khemani (2016) argue that:

There is an inherent hubris in assuming that external actors will have the capacity to identify the appropriate entry points and engineer reforms in the right direction, simultaneously solving both the technical policy problem and that of adapting it to political constraints. Ex ante, there is little reason to believe that the selected entry points are the right ones; they may make the situation worse. The incentives of donor organisations to show results and count reforms as success are further reasons to search for other approaches that do not depend entirely upon external agencies' getting both the economics and the politics right. (Devarajan and Khemani 2016: 6).

They propose instead that donors should focus on building the 'enabling environment' for endogenous change processes, arguing for a focus on providing knowledge to citizens 'to nourish the transparency that is needed for citizens' engagement, to build their capacity to select better leaders who wield power in government, as well as sanction them if they fail to deliver' (Devarajan and Khemani 2016: 2).

In practice, much of this boils down to promoting transparency. In *Opening the Black Box: The Contextual Drivers of Social Accountability*, Grandvoinnet *et al.* argue that:

Accurate and neutral information is essential for rebuilding trust between citizens and the state and is particularly hard to access in FCASs. (Re)building an information ecosystem that emphasizes inclusive information flows (that reach all groups within society) is a pressing agenda that SA [social accountability] interventions may enable. (Grandvoinnet *et al.* 2015: 15)

The authors conclude that a robust theory of action in FCAS should include:

First, support and encourage government to become a trustworthy source of accurate information, able to heed and address the concerns of the public, build public trust, and ensure public support for reconstruction. Doing so is important generally, but insufficient information from government officials can become a serious source of wider grievance. Second, support the institutions of civil society that advocate for an independent media. There are various examples of such institutions in countries around the world, such as press clubs and local chapters of organizations that call for the protection of journalists. Third, strengthen the professionalism of journalists and media organizations and ensure that they are able to report with sensitivity. In FCASs, journalists are often untrained and unskilled. Often, there are no schools of journalism, and the only training that reporters receive is on the job. Sensitivity training is essential in fragile contexts, especially when biased reporting could stem from a lack of understanding or sympathy and an inability to understand events from different perspectives. It is, however, crucial that this kind of support be provided uniformly throughout the country. Finally, identify opportunities to harness information and communication technology and other modern information technologies. (Grandvoinnet *et al.* 2015: 208–9)

While the authors recognise that transparency alone is not enough, their ‘transparency plus’ list still falls well short of a plausible theory of action. Ostrom’s work on the conditions for effective collective action on social dilemmas (Ostrom 2010) suggests that they include:

- available and reliable information about the immediate and longer term costs and benefits of actions;
- the individuals involved see the shared resources as important for their own achievements and have a longer term time horizon for rights of access and use;
- those involved have or are able to gain a reputation for being a trustworthy reciprocator;
- individuals can communicate with at least some of the others involved;
- informal monitoring and sanctioning is feasible and considered appropriate;
- social capital and leadership exist, related to previous successes in solving joint problems;
- rules and sanctions imposed by external authorities are viewed as legitimate and enforced equitably on all.

Moreover, there is often an implicit assumption in the enabling environment approach that it is politically neutral. Access to information, space for civil society and media freedom are just as contested (if not more so) than with more targeted social accountability efforts.

This raises the important question of whether there are minimum conditions for attempts to promote E&A in FCVAS. The authors of *Opening the Black Box* appear to think so, saying:

In some contexts, the minimum requirement to engage in SA may be lacking. If conflict is particularly intense and there is no end in sight, supporting SA is probably premature. The basic structures of local governance, for example, need to be in place for citizens to be able to engage with them. There should be some notion of a social contract or at the least the possibility of negotiating one. Basic infrastructure is also necessary to disseminate information. (Grandvoinnet *et al.* 2015: 212)



A number of scholars have been critical of this kind of reliance on transparency and open data. Fox queries the assumptions underlying this theory of action:

That people who have been denied voice and lack power will perceive vocal participation as having more benefits than costs (if the costs are recognised at all). The second assumption is that even if locally bounded voices do call for accountability, their collective action will have sufficient clout to influence public sector performance - in the absence of external allies with both perceived and actual leverage. (Fox 2015: 352)

A slightly more nuanced approach is emerging from these critiques. According to DFID's Tessa MacArthur<sup>19</sup> 'Currently we are very interested in the role of "infomediaries"<sup>20</sup> – you can't just put information into the public domain and expect results. You need groups located between citizen and state that make data meaningful, e.g. media, investigative journalists, CSOs'.

A good example of infomediary promotion is provided by BBC Media Action's work on 'creating space', which aims to connect communities with national debates, while at the same time encouraging normative shifts and the 'reimagining of social relations... between groups in society and in power, including those between men and women' (BBC Media Action 2016: 6). In Nepal, BBC Media Action supports a debate show, *Sajha Sawal* (Common Questions), which has a female presenter, seeks to ensure there is a female panellist on each show, and has a live audience that is more than 40 per cent female. All programmes encourage reflection on how issues affect men and women differently. Programmes also regularly focus on women's rights issues such as dowry related violence. The programme broadcasts to over 6.3 million Nepalis (BBC Media Action 2016).

## 10 Conclusion and hypotheses to test

This paper identifies three underlying sources of confusion that are hindering progress on both understanding E&A in FCVAS, and taking helpful action to promote it. They are:

- Theory of change versus theory of action
- Fragility versus conflict
- Empowerment versus accountability

In this section these are discussed in turn, along with suggestions for hypotheses that can be tested during the A4EA research programme.

### 10.1 Theory of change v theory of action

Aid actors typically fail to distinguish clearly between a theory of endogenous change, that seeks to understand how FCVAS undergo transitions to higher levels of empowerment and accountability, and their own theories of action. In the hundreds of donor and aid agency documents reviewed for this paper, endogenous change receives remarkably little attention compared to aid agencies own analytical frameworks, programme experiences, and suggestions for best practice for external actors.

The consequences of this are serious. A focus on endogenous change inevitably encourages a systems thinking approach, appreciating the complexity of the plethora of actors and feedback loops present in any society or change process, and contrasting this

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<sup>19</sup> Author interview, August 2016

<sup>20</sup> For more on infomediaries, see [www.gsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/HDR1347.pdf](http://www.gsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/HDR1347.pdf)

with the largely linear nature of project plans and donor interventions (Green 2016). By conflating actual change with their own activities, external actors both exaggerate their own importance, and miss significant endogenous drivers and dynamics of change in the systems they hope to influence. Examples include: the importance of critical junctures, the role of non-state actors, or the use of positive deviance approaches to identify existing positive outliers on any given aspect of E&A. A focus on these dynamics could greatly enrich thinking and practice on E&A by showing in more detail the range of contexts and drivers of change that have led to increased voice for poor communities, even in unpromising settings, with potential lessons for aid providers.

Hypotheses to test:

Theory v practice: The main obstacle to turning evolving theories of action into programme practice is the institutional design of the aid business. There are examples of re-engineering of incentives and processes that can help overcome these barriers.

Lessons of history: More research on the politics and critical junctures that gave rise to 'turnaround states' could contain valuable lessons for current approaches on E&A in FCVAS, as well as demonstrating the ways in which states have moved away from violence and fragility due to their own endogenous processes and resources.

Adaptive management: AM techniques, including fast feedback loops and agile programming, are particularly relevant and useful in FCVAS settings.

Critical junctures: E&A work in FCVAS will be more effective if it gives greater priority to the role of critical junctures (whether predictable or not) as drivers of change. Aid agencies and others need to understand the conditions, and the types of change, for which critical junctures should be prioritised and/or how to combine the critical juncture approach with a more gradual one, as well as improving the ability to detect and respond to such events.

Positive deviance: Including positive deviance as part of due diligence in programme design will lead to a wider range of potentially effective theories of action.

Multiple parallel experiments: In complex FCVAS, aid agencies may obtain better results on E&A by deliberately pursuing an evolutionary cycle of variation/selection/amplification. Variation would involve multiple parallel pilots and experiments; selection, a clearly delineated process for selecting the more/less promising variants; amplification could involve either going to scale, or seeking further variations within the more promising areas identified in earlier rounds.

## **10.2 Low state capacity versus conflict**

There is no clear justification for combining the different aspects of fragility into a single category. Two salient aspects for E&A are state capacity and the use of violence to resolve disagreements and disputes. In reality, many conflicts coexist with high levels of state capacity, while low levels of state capacity (either national or subnational) often do not generate or coexist with high levels of violence.

Conflating the two issues into the one FCVAS category muddles attempts to distinguish between E&A in different settings, and in practice it gives insufficient weight to issues of violence, trust and fear that profoundly change the risks and logic of working on E&A in dangerous places.

Hypotheses to test:

Conflict sensitivity and do no harm: Since change processes in FCVAS are more likely to be unpredictable and violent, with greater risks attached, conflict sensitivity approaches are a critical enabling factor for empowerment and accountability, and will both help reduce the risks associated with E&A programming, and increase the chances of success.

### **10.3 Empowerment versus accountability**

While the academic literature is more evenly balanced in its attention between empowerment and accountability, donor analysis and practice in recent years has been overwhelmingly weighted towards accountability, and exhibits only the most limited understanding or interest in the nature of power and how its different aspects interact and evolve over time. One notable exception has been ongoing work on gender rights and women's empowerment, which has kept the flame of interest alive in the nature of informal power in particular.

Ignoring the nature of power and its flux in different contexts makes it extremely difficult to design effective empowerment strategies. It is particularly damaging in FCVAS because power is more likely to flow through, and be negotiated, in the less visible channels of norms and social relationships or traditional and customary leadership structures, rather than through the formal channels of the state, judiciary and formal politics. Empowerment and accountability efforts that ignore these other forms of power are unlikely to be effective in dealing with issues, for example, of trust-building or gender rights. It may be worth revisiting and updating the literature of earlier decades in this area.

Hypotheses to test:

Non-state actors: Traditional thinking on the role of the state as a duty bearer and source of accountability needs to be extended to NSAs in FCVAS. If different external aid and development agencies can overcome their institutional and ideational obstacles to working with NSAs, their E&A work will have more impact.

Informal Power: Successful E&A interventions in FCVAS should give greater weight to empowerment, especially in informal spheres, and in the early stages of an intervention.

This paper's overall hypothesis is that clarifying and responding to these three conceptions will improve both understanding and practice on E&A in FCVAS, generating a series of research questions and hypotheses to test during the course of the A4EA programme.

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