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LESSONS LEARNED USING USAID'S APPLIED POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Political Economy Analysis (PEA) is a field-based methodology that can improve the effectiveness of international development assistance by helping development practitioners to focus on not only how things happen, but also why things happen. Exploring the politics, history, social, and economic dimensions of a given development problem can help unpack the dynamics and incentives that structure actors choices and ultimately determine development success or failure. In many ways a PEA tries to determine the who, the what, and the why that keeps and sustains the status quo and what realistic opportunities are there to change incentives and to effect change.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has developed a framework for conducting PEA field assessments.¹ USAID has applied the framework to assess programming constraints in different regions and sectors, including health in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, governance in Latin America and Africa, and biodiversity conservation in Africa. Recent case studies conducted by USAID in Africa helped assess programming options for biodiversity conservation in the context of extractive activities, the findings of which can be found in a separate report.² At the same time, these recent experiences conducting PEAs also provided practical observations on the process of conducting these assessments in general. This report details these practical insights with steps that can strengthen implementation of PEA field assessments using USAID's Applied PEA framework. Drawing from the implementation of these three case studies and from a workshop on the application of USAID's Applied PEA Framework, which reviewed the various USAID PEA studies to date, this report details key lessons learned for applying the applied PEA framework across sectors, as well as specific recommendations for the biodiversity sector.

2.0 OVERVIEW OF APPLIED PEA

The USAID Applied Political Economy Analysis Framework,³ which is agnostic to the subject matter and country context, can be used for assessments at the country, sector, or problem level.⁴ PEA requires researchers to analyze the politics and power, not

¹ USAID. *Applied Political Economy Analysis (PEA) Field Guide*, 4 February 2016. See <https://www.usaidlearninglab.org/library/applied-political-economy-analysis-field-guide> [Accessed: 15 September 2016]

² USAID, (2016). *Political Economy Analysis for Biodiversity Conservation Planning in the Context of Extractive Industries*, A report prepared under contract for USAID by Integra LLC.

³ USAID Applied PEA Field Guide, op cit.

⁴ USAID's initial PEAs have largely been at the problem level.

simply to understand the relationships but to expose how and why these specifically hinder development goals – and ultimately to identify how the interests of actors and the change processes already in play could be supported. PEA can augment sector-specific analysis with its specific field methodology, which leads development practitioners to delve into a deeper set of political, economic, social or cultural incentives. Additionally, PEA offers development practitioners a way to “think and work politically;” by providing a framework for systematically tracking dynamics that impact specified development challenges, and building in opportunities to reflect on how we, as development practitioners, can support them. Integrating PEA thinking and observations can support cross-sectoral programming by providing more information on how particular political, cultural or governance factors cut across sectors and levels influencing multiple technical areas. There are also different levels of preparation and commitment to a PEA. The analysis of the general problem is intended to be ongoing.

PEA is a process-oriented approach that entails ongoing analysis and updating to continue to inform decision-making. Significant Mission involvement and ownership are necessary to ensure that PEA is not limited solely to a one-off field assessment, but the findings are reviewed and updated as the political economy evolves.

3.0 LESSONS LEARNED

USAID/Washington staff and implementing partners involved in different types of field-level assessments met in July 2016, to identify some of the key lessons learned from the existing set of USAID applied PEA studies. The goal of the meeting was to reflect on how best to strengthen the practical application of PEA through lessons learned in preparing for fieldwork, methodology for conducting applied PEA fieldwork, and synthesizing results into practical and actionable outputs, and effectively engaging Missions. The second half of the day brought together USAID biodiversity conservation practitioners to focus specifically on the ways that PEA can complement other biodiversity tools to strengthen the effectiveness of biodiversity programming.⁵ The lessons below are relevant for all USAID PEAs with additional specific lessons for conducting biodiversity-related PEAs based on recent experiences.

Six key areas highlight important lessons from PEA.

1. Maximizing Mission Ownership and Engagement
2. Initiating PEA Research
3. Defining the Scope
4. Preparing for Fieldwork

⁵ See USAID PEA Lessons Learned Workshop Report for more details.

5. Conducting Fieldwork
6. Analyzing and Synthesizing Findings

3.1 MAXIMIZING MISSION OWNERSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT

Key Lesson: Missions need to drive the PEA process throughout the entire process to help ensure that the results are useful. This requires clear expectations of the substantial commitment required and an understanding of what support the Mission will need. As part of the preliminary PEA processes, Missions should review available data and analysis and to begin to discuss within the Mission what information gaps exist. Missions should reach out to other donors and partners to help inform this preliminary research. Discussions with other donors and implementing partners around a particular sector or question can help Missions to focus on what they most need to know and help avoid scoping questions that implementing partners and donors have already explored. Some Missions are highly engaged with donor and implementing partners in regular consultations, but others might need to establish relations to start the conversation around an applied PEA. Implementing partners can help a Mission identify areas where an applied PEA could be most helpful. Donor partner engagement also can help define the parameters of USAID's manageable interests around a particular topic and understand where USAID's support could add value.

Key Lesson: Conducting trainings in applied PEA can help Missions understand how and when to best utilize this particular analysis. Applied PEA can inform the Mission Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) planning, Project Appraisal Document (PAD) development, or a sector-specific problem analysis or program design process. Building on other kinds of assessments and tools (e.g., systems mapping or a results chain) is an efficient way for Missions to focus on the information that is most urgently needed from an applied PEA.

Ultimately, Missions must drive the applied PEA process and key stakeholders within the Mission must be committed throughout the process. Some Missions may require support from USAID/Washington or outside consultants, particularly Missions or programs find it challenging to find the time and energy needed to focus on a single particular problem among competing demands and with limited resources, including personnel. A short list of criteria could help USAID/Washington in identifying which PEA approaches are most feasible and beneficial based on what resources, including staff time, Missions can commit to an applied PEA process.

Key Lesson: Continuity in Mission engagement is critical for the applied PEA to meet expectations. Particularly in the absence of prior applied PEA experience or technical assistance, Missions may have a variety of expectations around PEA. Maintaining consistent engagement from key personnel in the Mission, to the extent, possible will help scope a practical and feasible research question, set realistic expectations and facilitate the logistics of the field research. In the case of the DRC, changes in Mission personnel engaged in the process and time constraints impacted the effectiveness of the research scoping and fieldwork planning and implementation.

3.2 INITIATING PEA RESEARCH

Political economy analysis is a process – not a specific event. Often, launching efforts to “thinking and working politically” involves preliminary field-based research using USAID’s Applied PEA Framework.

Key Lesson: USAID Applied Political Economy Analysis field assessments require a long lead-time for preparation. Four to six months is an appropriate minimum time to expect to spend in identifying the research topic, completing the desk study, scoping the question, and planning for field level implementation. A number of critical details of the research must be defined prior to determining whether a team is ready to proceed with fieldwork. Notably, a good desk study and narrowing the research scope (as discussed above) are important groundwork before the team arrives in country. Similarly, making logistical and scheduling arrangements in advance will also facilitate efficient use of the time the team spends conducting fieldwork as discussed in greater detail below.

Key Lesson: Priming from USAID personnel with PEA experience secures better Mission engagement in the PEA and more confidence that the process would yield useful results. In-person or virtual engagement by an experienced PEA practitioner or Mission staff participating in PEA training can help Missions to better prepare for a PEA process. In some of the early experiences with PEA, Missions received a lot of exposure to PEA through experts who could work with them to scope the question and understand how the answers would fit into programming. They spent more time focusing on the question and were able to engage more effectively in field level planning and implementation of the applied PEA fieldwork. With good priming of the Mission, PEA teams were able to work remotely with the Mission to scope the question early in the process, thus helping ensure the research would be relevant and the question important to programming needs. This support should be given to every Mission’s first applied PEA process. Considerable lead-time is needed to scope the research question well enough to ensure the research will be useful and productive.

Key Lesson: Applied PEA research should be a flexible process that helps USAID to “think and work politically.” Planning applied PEA research as a process rather than a one-off field assessment is important to maximizing the benefits of applied PEA research and integrating it into broader Mission analyses and programming. Outputs from the applied PEA research should be seen as living documents that the Mission and/or its implementing partners update as the dynamics change.

Integrating PEA into the existing strategic, operational, and monitoring processes (e.g., those around the development and implementation of CDCS, PAD, scopes of work, and program monitoring and planning) can help promote the view of PEA as a tool for on-going monitoring of the programming environment to be revisited and refined.

3.3 DEFINING THE SCOPE

Key lesson learned: Scoping the PEA research question is a critical part of setting up a PEA research design that will be productive and relevant for programming.

The focus of the question needs to reflect the specific programming interests of the Mission, and needs to be broad enough to go beyond assumptions and capture unexpected findings that may reshape assumptions. It is helpful to have good social science research practitioners trained in PEA involved in identifying the question to ensure that the question is well formulated for PEA research. Scoping the question is a process of balancing the desire to understand the dynamics of an issue with an understanding of the manageable interests of the Mission, the context of the project, activity or, County Development Cooperation Strategy, and the capacities of the applied PEA fieldwork team in the time allotted. The Mission's involvement is essential as is that of a PEA expert to ensure the Mission is asking a question that will have a relevant and concrete programmatic output.

Key Lesson: Planning the applied PEA as part of a larger process, whether Mission-wide or within a sector or program, helps sharpen the analysis and clarify demand for the PEA results.

Where Missions have made applied PEA part of an ongoing analytical process, the questions have been much more informed and the research has been able to hone in on an area of interest and relevance to the Mission staff. This scenario not only helps to improve PEA outcomes but also helps to create an environment in which practitioners are encouraged to think and work more strategically within the development context and ideally craft better targeted programming.

Key Lesson: PEAs that feed back into any ongoing analytical process are likely to yield more useful results. Biodiversity PEAs that begin with a situation model to define areas where research is needed are often better able to scope research that informs the model.

In Uganda, the Mission was very supportive of the PEA research and encouraged members of the environment and democracy, human rights, and governance teams to work together on scoping the question. The PEA was timed to follow the Environment Office's work with USAID's Forestry and Biodiversity Office's (FAB's) Measuring Impact projects. FAB and Measuring Impact worked with the Environment Office to develop detailed situation models for the threats and drivers of biodiversity loss. The analytical work completed under the problem analysis helped to define the question the missions wished to answer using applied PEA. Results of Uganda's applied PEA fieldwork then fed back into the situation model leading to modifications that accounted for how processes of population movement were or were not directly threatening biodiversity.

FAB and Measuring Impact, mentioned above, also worked with the Environment and Climate Change Office in USAID/Madagascar to develop a situation model. The Madagascar Mission was highly engaged in the PEA and had a clear understanding of how they wanted to use the PEA research to develop insights into new marine biodiversity programming. Rather than build on the situation model, the Madagascar Mission used their applied PEA fieldwork to test assumptions around the theory of change in a new PAD for fisheries and marine biodiversity. PEA findings helped uncover linkages and factors that changed some of the basic assumptions in the PAD. PEA findings also helped refine the PAD's focus. Both USAID/Madagascar and

USAID/Uganda had strategic visits with experienced PEA practitioners who laid groundwork for the applied PEA process. Support around an applied PEA and complementary analytical tools for defining the problem analysis in biodiversity programming are extremely helpful for scoping relevant and incisive PEA questions.

3.4 PREPARING FOR FIELDWORK

3.4.1 PRE-DEPARTURE PREPARATION

Key Lesson: A checklist or scope of work can help outline the various steps to prepare for fieldwork and set clear expectations. Applied PEA fieldwork requires significant involvement of Mission personnel. If feasible, a checklist or negotiated scope of work can outline the key activities to effectively prepare for fieldwork and specify who will have responsibility for each task. This type of document can help ensure that Missions, USAID/Washington, and consultants (if relevant) all understand their responsibilities. Some of the key Mission responsibilities include: designate key points of contact leading up to the applied PEA fieldwork, flag key background literature and participate in a desk review, elaborate a research plan, help scope the research question and sub-questions, identify key stakeholders, prepare a letter of introduction and potentially set up interviews, and identify logistical issues or operational constraints that may impede a research plan. Mission staff and/or a local logistician are best placed to reach out to stakeholders, arrange interviews, and organize in-country transportation and accommodations.

Team members also need clear ideas of what will be expected of them as team members. A checklist for team members can help explain expectations about taking and sharing notes, including the need to establish a primary interviewer and note taker for every meeting and the frequency and form of sharing notes and analysis and synthesis. Teams should establish a routine and protocol for regularly identifying and documenting key findings. In addition team members should expect to be involved in writing, editing, and commenting on the reporting format requested by the Mission, and reviewing draft findings. Expectations about the time commitment from team members before, during, and after the fieldwork need to be understood. Outlining clear responsibilities and expectations at the outset can help avoid participants being pulled away from the applied PEA activities to respond to competing demands on their time.

To create a common expectation and clarify roles and responsibilities USAID's DRG Center uses a checklist for some of its assessments, and USAID's Conflict Management and Mitigation Office develops a scope of work for each assessment. Both or either of these resources could be added to applied PEA training packets, and discussed in training. The applied PEA checklist or scope of work might help empower applied PEA fieldwork team leaders to get all team members to devote the time and attention needed for applied PEA fieldwork.

Key Lesson: Identify and make arrangements that require advance planning. In particular, the specific locations for field research should typically be identified in advance and relevant logistical arrangements (e.g., in-country transportation and

accommodations) should be booked in advance to the extent possible. The type and number of stakeholders, distance between sites within a field location, and security or political volatility considerations should inform which field locations the research team prioritizes and how much time they spend in each location.

Often locally-based team members, either at the Mission or a local consultant, will need to identify and contact stakeholders in advance of the fieldwork, particularly government and private sector actors. It tends to be difficult to add these interviews at the end of the research. In some instances, the Mission will have existing relationships that facilitate securing interviews. In other instances, local consultants may be able to schedule interviews with fewer bureaucratic hurdles. Arrangements for local transportation (e.g., internal flights) and accommodations may require advance notice as well.

Key Lesson: USAID’s PEA training for team members is very highly recommended. USAID’s training in the Applied PEA Framework provides a common methodological understanding for all participants. Team members who have participated in the training are more likely to have at least a general understanding of the applied PEA process that will help facilitate efficient and effective field-based research. **Key Lesson: Strong PEA team leadership is helpful for protect the space for scoping, preparation, and synthesis of the PEA findings and pushing back on competing demands.** USAID leadership is key here, particularly in “hybrid” teams (a mixture of consultants, implementing partners, and USAID personnel). Conducting regular conference calls is helpful in the advance preparation for the fieldwork. Conference rooms in Missions need to be booked well in advance to ensure participation of Mission team members on both ends of applied PEA fieldwork.

3.4.2 FIELDWORK TIMELINE

USAID’s Applied PEA Framework recommends two weeks of fieldwork to conduct applied PEA fieldwork. Time should be built into both the beginning and the end of the fieldwork for the teams to assemble, meet with Mission staff and finalize field plans before travel to the field begins. Based on our experience with applied PEA research and biodiversity in the context of extractives, two to three days at the beginning of the fieldwork is important to solidify the objective, research methodology, and team dynamics (as discussed in greater detail below). Likewise, two to three days are needed upon return from the field to assess and synthesize results and work with the Mission. Based on our experiences, three weeks for biodiversity PEAs is recommended.⁶

3.4.3 TEAM COMPOSITION

Key Lesson: Team members should commit to involvement in the full research process, from scoping the question to presenting the results, and should

⁶ We found that the logistics of getting to sometimes remote locations and navigate security constraints to meet with resource-dependent communities often reduced the actual time for conducting field research to five or six days out of a two-week trip.

minimize disruptions. Inevitably, planes are delayed or team members may be called away and will still be able to contribute to the research, as happened in some of the applied PEA research discussed, but the resulting changes in team composition can be disruptive, and should be avoided to the extent possible. Building flexibility into the field schedule may help alleviate some of the travel disruptions at a minimum.

Key Lesson: Team composition is a methodological aspect of PEA research. Missions should work with team leaders to consider how age, gender and language might shape the power dynamics of data collection, for example by affecting the willingness of interviewees to speak openly. These types of consideration should be considered on for each interview or focus group. A gender-balanced team is recommended to address the risk of gender bias. Team leaders should seek to balance the technical expertise areas of different team members. For example, applied PEA research on biodiversity conservation will be more productive with a mix of specialists in natural resource and governance areas. Having a team that comes to a research question with different backgrounds, knowledge and ways of looking at questions may be the most important factor in adding to the outcome of applied PEA research. All team members will bring some biases and assumptions that should be identified and communicated to the extent possible. It is helpful to include a good facilitator on the team for the team's analysis and synthesis processes.

Key Lesson: Local experts/research assistants added to teams must be carefully selected. The research hinges on these local consultants. Local consultants do not necessarily need to have expertise or training in applied PEA research, but they do have to understand the objectives of the research and the methods. Setting aside the time to explain USAID's Applied PEA Framework and the goals of the research as well as to give local consultants a chance to understand how and why a question is being scoped is critical. Providing local consultants with some background on PEA helps prepare them for the fieldwork. Where that is done, the local consultants are much more engaged. Moreover, as the local team members are primarily responsible for identifying interviewees and arranging interviews, it is key that they understand the process and the goals of the research. The research teams worked with local consultants who were alumni from the Young African Leaders Initiative, civil society experts, and implementing partners. Each background provides different strengths and weaknesses and can lend itself to playing different roles on the research team.

Key Lesson: Having good logisticians with local connections and adaptability to set up interviews with interviewees identified during the research is critical to the PEA inquiry process. Although many interviews can be scheduled in advance, an ability to prioritize stakeholders and adapt to field conditions is an important skill. Having a schedule with some flexibility is also helpful. Inevitably, new stakeholders are identified as the research progresses. When local consultants understand the research question, they are better able to schedule and prioritize the interviews the team needs. There is also a need to emphasize the importance of very clear communication between the team leader, the logisticians, and the local resources they may use to assist with arranging interviews.

Local experts and research assistants may sometimes play a dual role as logisticians. When they are substantively involved in the research, it is useful to have a separate

logistician who is arranging interviews but is not involved in the interviewing process. This is a methodological point that as a rule makes sense, but in our experience field conditions sometimes require a research assistant in the place of a local expert plus logistician, due to transportation logistics, linguistic conditions, or otherwise.

3.5 CONDUCTING THE FIELDWORK

Key Lesson: When the team assembles in country, the first several days should be spent as a team solidifying the objective, research methodology, and team dynamics. The team should work together to ensure a common understanding of the goals and objectives, finalize and refine the research questions and sub-questions, develop or finalize an interview protocol, discuss key background information, refine the stakeholder list and schedule, think through the practical matter of how to get answers from different types of stakeholders, and make final logistical arrangements.. This is a time to structure the interview process for more conversational or accessible approaches to the research question. It is also the time to review interview techniques (e.g., asking open-ended and non-leading questions), interview protocols, and agree on the division of responsibilities among team members (e.g., identify a lead interviewer and a lead note-taker for each interview).

The field logistics review process provides an opportunity to check the logic of the list of interviewees: and understand who the key stakeholders are, what particular information they can provide, and whether the setting and location for the meeting is appropriate. Reviewing the list in advance allows time to make any necessary changes, additions or subtractions to the list of interviews.

Key Lesson: Tailor the approach to each interview. Ideally, team members will understand the background of each interviewee in advance. This can help identify a particular perspective or area that the team hopes to learn from the stakeholder and may inform which team members are present and who serves as the lead interviewer. For example, a stakeholder may be nervous about speaking about sensitive topics in front of a government official. Similarly, local consultants may have prior relationships with a stakeholder that can either facilitate or decrease the likelihood of frank conversation. Some research approaches may include dividing up group interviews or focus groups (e.g., to have separate discussions with men and women or elders and youth)

Key Lesson: PEA research requires flexibility and adaptability during the interview process. Teams need to coordinate and communicate before, during and after interviews. Interview methods will vary among team members with some preferring to follow the interview questions precisely, while others may prefer a more conversational style. The approaches are equally valid, but teams who acknowledge these differences and communicate about what they want to get out of each interview are less likely to deviate from whatever interview approach has been established by the designated lead interviewer, and are more likely to focus on documenting the interview and identifying areas that need further exploration through clarification questions.

Key Lesson: Effectively plan interviews to “do no harm” and maximize their effectiveness. In setting up interviews, careful consideration should be given to how

and when stakeholders are interviewed. A convenient and safe venue where the interviewee is comfortable and does not feel at risk is ideal for all interviews. In some instances, a group interview may be appropriate, but in others, it may discourage dissenting or minority voices or otherwise create a bias. Group interviews may be appropriate when, for example, several members of a resource management federation wish to meet together to ensure their shared objectives are being explained or when civil society organization leadership wants to have several representatives present to dispel potential rumors about the visiting PEA team's intentions or for them to participate to understand the nature of the questions being asked by PEA research team and ensure the answers are valid and aligned. Sometimes, these group meetings can be tactfully broken into smaller or individual interviews.

Similarly, the affiliation, gender, and age of the team members participating in and conducting the interview should be taken into consideration. In instances where implementing partners or local logisticians arrange interviews, their presence could potentially facilitate a frank interview or could suppress dissenting or critical views. At the same time, it is important for team members to discuss the background of interviewees before each meeting to identify the key objectives of the interview and any particular sensitivities or opportunities to inform the interview approach.

Key Lesson: At some point in the research it is important to take a step back and assess whether the interviews are producing the details needed to answer the research question. Likewise the team needs to assess whether the field questions are robust enough to get the details needed and whether it is important to prioritize some sub-questions over others to fill in information gaps. If it becomes apparent that the sub-questions are not producing answers to the research question or that the original set of questions keeps generating the same information, new questions may need to be asked or new stakeholder groups with different points of view might need to be added. For example, in Madagascar, the fieldwork team realized that it needed interviews with the private sector in order to better understand their views on the aquaculture products they promote, which have important livelihood and resource implications for coastal communities. The field teams were not able to meet with the private sector during the fieldwork, but the Mission followed up after the initial fieldwork and found additional valuable information for the analysis. The methodology allows for the adjustment and review of the interviews through a daily analysis and synthesis process.

3.6 ANALYZING AND SYNTHESIZING FINDINGS

One of the most challenging aspects of applied PEA research is in taking notes in a format that makes the key points and details stand out for easy analysis and synthesis. Salient points will probably emerge, but sometimes it is necessary to comb notes for individual points of view or quotations. This is an area where training can help, especially if combined with a commonly-agreed upon format and code for note taking.

Similarly analysis and synthesis techniques can vary based on how complex the research is, the size of the team and the objective of the research. Often some form of daily analyses of interviews is helpful to highlight key points, identifying divergent information and to identify areas to explore further in future interviews.

Key Lesson: Teams should discuss any coding frameworks that might be helpful and select one to use for the PEA research to help with synthesis. There is a range of approaches for effective note taking and coding that can be discussed among the team members at the start of the fieldwork process. For example, the Madagascar team used a summary format for notes with bulleted points from each interview and the affiliation and identity of each interviewee that made for easy reference during the synthesis process. The team also used a simple coding framework with the four key variables of the USAID Applied PEA Framework: (1) Foundational Factors, (2) Rules of the Game, (3) Here and Now and (4) Dynamics. The team was able to use this coding framework after each meeting to quickly analyze the interview and add details to one or more of the quadrants. This coding framework was particularly helpful in Madagascar because the sub-teams traveled to different parts of the country for the fieldwork and were not able to communicate while in the field. Moreover, the sub-teams’ findings were significantly different in some areas of analysis. Having the variables pre-coded allowed the commonalities and differences to emerge, facilitating analysis and synthesis of the most important findings. Agreeing on methods beforehand makes it possible to do this kind of coding and synthesis more efficiently in the field rather than waiting until the team returns to the capital.

Table 1. Sample Coding Chart

Foundational Factors	Rules of the Games
Here and Now	Dynamics

Key Lesson: PEA analysis and synthesis requires two to three full days even when notes have been well coded. Team members were sometimes overwhelmed by making sense of the information gained through the applied PEA research to apply to programming. A template for summarizing notes for each interview, or for each question, may be time-consuming initially, but it makes the synthesis process less onerous, and makes important information accessible for future reference. The team should work together to identify an important process for analysis and synthesis appropriate for the research question, the team, and the intended output. In instances with relatively straightforward research findings and a small team, relatively unstructured brainstorming may be appropriate. More complex issues and/or larger teams may benefit from a more structured process such as the “headlines” exercise⁷ often utilized in USAID’s conflict assessments. Ideally, the question is scoped in such a way that it can directly inform a situation model, a theory of change, a PAD, or other process, and flag important dynamics to monitor going forward. In addition, having a clearly defined synthesis process can also help clarify how and when the research team will need broader Mission input and engagement. USAID’s PEA trainers should work to identify various approaches to synthesis to help make the process one in which important findings are flagged and related information is categorized and accessible for review and update by the Mission.

⁷ The “headlines” exercise is a pile sorting exercise where individuals initially identify key themes and then the team works together to combine these individual inputs to identify common key themes.

4.0 USING THE APPLIED PEA FRAMEWORK FOR BIODIVERSITY PLANNING

In examining each of these three cases studies, a common thread is that the threats to biodiversity are multi-faceted; they are political, sometimes criminal, and often involve conflict with customary rights to resources. Moreover, these threats not only affect the resources but also shape the behaviors of local resources dependent communities. PEAs help to identify ways to address these threats in ways that specifically follow USAID's Biodiversity Policy⁸ and Biodiversity Code.⁹

USAID's Biodiversity Policy supports programming around sustainable, resilient development with two specific goals: first, to conserve biodiversity in priority places, and second, to integrate biodiversity as an essential component of human development. The objective is to transform the relationship between biodiversity conservation and development to increase and sustain development outcomes.¹⁰ To USAID, these goals are not mutually exclusive and offer ample scope for program integration. USAID's FAB Office actively pursues tools from other sectors that might improve conservation programming. FAB is explicit about applying tools that can specifically strengthen cross-sectoral analysis of biodiversity conservation problems and build new models for this integration. USAID's Applied PEA Framework is one the tools offering the level of rigor needed to support biodiversity program compliance with the Agency's Biodiversity Code.

USAID's Biodiversity Code requires compliance with four criteria. These criteria are: (1) the program must have an explicit biodiversity objective; (2) activities must be identified based on an analysis of drivers and threats to biodiversity, and a corresponding theory of change; (3) Programs must have intent to positively impact biodiversity in biologically significant areas; (4) the program must monitor indicators associated with that theory of change.¹¹ Applied PEA research can both inform and be informed by an analysis of drivers and threats to biodiversity and may link to drivers beyond the direct threats.

A FAB theory of change is a description or graphic representation of the logical causal relationships among a strategic approach and multiple levels of conditions or preliminary results needed to achieve a long-term result. The applied PEA framework can refine a theory of change by testing particular assumptions and examining specific aspects of

⁸ USAID's Biodiversity Policy see <https://www.usaid.gov/biodiversity/policy> [Accessed: 9 September 2016]

⁹ USAID's Biodiversity and Development Handbook 2015 see <https://www.usaid.gov/biodiversity/impact/requirements> [Accessed: 9 September 2016]

¹⁰ Kushnir, H. "Intro to Measuring Impact Process for PEA Workshop" PowerPoint projection presented 7 July 2016 at USAID PEA Lessons Learned Workshop Afternoon Session.

¹¹ To read about the four criteria, see: <https://www.usaid.gov/biodiversity/impact/requirements> [Accessed: 9 September 2016]

causal relationships through a political economic lens. The framework also can help situate conservation efforts and extractives activities within the broad governance characteristics of the state in order to illuminate the opportunities and limitations of potential programming. The substantive technical findings of using USAID's Applied PEA Framework in three case studies examining biodiversity conservation in the context of extractives are discussed, as mentioned above, in detail in a report under separate cover.¹²

Using USAID's Applied PEA Framework to explore biodiversity conservation issues forces a deeper look at the ways that political processes shape resource management decisions. A central tool used in biodiversity planning is the context or problem analysis, an assessment of the major forces (direct threats, constraints, opportunities) that are influencing biodiversity and the causal relationships among those forces. A situation model is a diagram that portrays the results of a context or problem analysis. The diagram graphically situates the problem within a set of causally linked drivers and threats. The context or problem analysis is critical to biodiversity compliance because it defines specific threats to biodiversity loss. The context or problem analysis also forms the basis of a results chain that graphically represents a theory of change

The situation model can also directly support the scoping of the PEA question by narrowing down the threats and drivers shaping current processes. Below are the three biodiversity and extractive PEA research questions for recent case studies.

Box 1. Scoped PEA Research Questions in the Context of Extractives

A PEA research question might look like these examples from recent PEA focused on biodiversity conservation in the context of extractives:

1. The Democratic Republic of the Congo: What are the incentives driving mineral exploitation and related livelihood activities that are leading to biodiversity loss in and around Kahuzi-Biéga National Park?
2. Uganda: How do population movements related to oil development in the Albertine region affect different actors' incentives and interests in protecting biodiversity?
3. Madagascar: What are the incentives and disincentives and drivers supporting community managed marine resources generally and locally managed marine resources specifically?

In all three cases where applied PEA research was conducted on biodiversity and extractives, situation models had been developed. Environment teams can use the situation models and problem analyses to identify areas where applied PEA research can help provide a deeper understanding of political and economic drivers of biodiversity loss. USAID's Applied PEA Framework can specifically address questions around these

¹² USAID, (2016). *Political Economy Analysis for Biodiversity Conservation Planning in the Context of Extractive Industries*, A report prepared under contract for USAID by Integra LLC.

drivers through its field methods, which build knowledge around particular causal linkages that a Mission needs to understand better. In Uganda, USAID built the applied PEA research into the larger process of building their situation model. They planned for the situation model to inform the applied PEA research. Then the Mission used the PEA findings to further refine the situation model. Their analysis work, through the situation model, not only complemented the applied PEA research, but also provided a concrete, specific, and highly relevant output for the applied PEA research.

USAID/Madagascar built the applied PEA research into the process of developing a new project appraisal document on marine biodiversity, a new area for the Madagascar Mission. They built the applied PEA research around the assumptions they needed to test, in order to refine their theory of change and programming around that theory of change. In order to feed the PEA findings into biodiversity tools, the applied PEA research must begin with a clear understanding of where more information is needed in existing biodiversity tools, for example, to clarify particular linkages in a situation models and design a more relevant, ground-truthed project. This kind of PEA output is concrete, distinct and highly relevant to biodiversity programming.

5.0 GOING FORWARD

The applied PEA process can help Missions to consider the bigger picture, particularly as part of a larger planning process. Applied PEA research can help Missions to think more deeply about programming and help identify opportunities for a course correction. Several suggestions, outlined below, could further improve USAID's use of applied PEA research.

1. **Create PEA Trainings Part I and II.** Currently, the high demand for the PEA course limits the numbers of staff able to participate in PEA training. Moreover, participants have suggested that the current PEA training spends too much time on the background of PEA and why it is useful and not enough time on training participants in skills needed to apply the methodology. It could be useful to make a distinction between an introductory PEA course, providing the background on PEA, and a second PEA course that goes into the methodological details and application of the framework. Creating an online, interactive course for teaching an Introduction to USAID's Applied PEA Framework could complement or replace an in-person introductory course and help disseminate the awareness of the applied PEA research process and expose more of USAID's staff to the method. An online course would also make the Introductory training more accessible across the Agency from Foreign Service Nationals to Mission management. This introductory course could be pre-requisite for the Part II Methods course.
2. **PEA Training Part II: Methods.** A second, in-person PEA training course could focus on methods including: defining and scoping research questions; interviewing, note-taking, coding and synthesis techniques; team composition considerations; social science research basics; and understanding the range of outputs for PEA findings, including but not limited to short reports, situation models, system maps, and PowerPoint presentations. The PEA training might

- develop some insights or options for synthesis techniques, including useful formats, and let team members determine what format will work best for them.
3. **Communications and Messaging.** Since PEA is applicable across sectors and often produce cross-cutting findings, USAID should actively pursue venues to communicate the findings of different PEAs across bureaus/divisions. In addition, information sheets could highlight how applied PEA research can help analyze and identify solutions for particular challenges in a given sector. Blurbs could be circulated through appropriate and relevant USAID-specific knowledge management systems.
 4. **PEA Methodological Notes Series.** A regular series of PEA methodological notes might show how a good research question can lead to interesting insights. Likewise disseminating brief summaries of PEA research on USAID websites as a flash “PEA thought of the day” might help reach a broader audience across the Agency. USAID’s recent report synthesizing the technical findings of using PEA for biodiversity in the context of extractive industries is one that should be promoted for biodiversity, governance and economic growth practitioners, as well as more broadly.
 5. **Checklists, Coding and Synthesis Frameworks and other tools.** USAID PEA specialists could develop some tools to help Missions prepare for applied PEA research and help USAID/Washington staff identify where additional support may be needed to facilitate an effective applied PEA research process is off to a good start. First, PEA Checklists and/or template scope of work could include time commitments and logistical needs as well as where the applied PEA research will fit into existing analytical processes and what kind of outputs will be produced, i.e. adjustments to a situation model, theory of change, PAD, CDCS, etc. Second, PEA experts should work to develop coding and synthesis frameworks that can help PEA teams feed research results into useful formats for synthesis of results and for monitoring and follow-up work.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

USAID’s Applied PEA Framework provides biodiversity programming with an additional and complementary set of tools to those currently in use for tackling what some resource management scientists have, for decades, called a wicked problem.¹³ Wicked problems are complex, multi-scale, persistent or reoccurring, socially contentious, and linked with broader political and economic policy issues that make them challenging to solve.¹⁴ Biodiversity loss is a classic example because practitioners cannot solve only one part of the problem, for example through local level management capacity, and get the desired

¹³ Rittel, H.W. and Webber, M.M., 1973. Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences* 4:155-169.

¹⁴ Sharman, M. and Mlambo, M., “Wicked: The Problem of Biodiversity Loss.” GAIA 21/4 (2012) 274-77.

results because of factors outside of the control of local managers like criminality, power imbalances and weak enforcement linked to patronage networks. PEA requires researchers to analyze the politics and power, not simply to understand the relationships but to expose how and why these specifically hinder conservation goals in order to identify what leverage points might change incentives or disincentives to result in a better conservation impact. Applied PEA research can help provide insights into local level solutions as well as national level policies. PEA insights, however, are only a starting point. Missions need to take the insights and define how best to seize, integrate, and sustain opportunities for change that are allied with USAID's interests.

Applied PEA research enables the integration of diverse views of different stakeholders at multiple levels coupled with different forms of knowledge needed to understand how to tackle development problems. PEA requires researchers to understand the broader systems and relationships between powerful actors and development outcomes (e.g., conservation goals) and to expose how and why these actors and systems specifically hinder development goals in order to identify what change processes could be supported by targeted programming to support changes in behavior. Lessons for the use of USAID'S Applied PEA Framework to biodiversity in the context of extractives highlight the importance of multidisciplinary approaches that include programming that extends beyond traditional environmental approaches.

High quality applied PEA research will be paired to conducting other types of analysis such as: conflict, environmental, gender, economic growth, and democracy, human rights and governance assessments. Missions that can insert applied PEA research into other development planning or analyses processes will yield better more focused results. Whether PEA is conducted by employing outside consultants or solely with USAID personnel, and whether the research is developed with a detailed desk review or more extensive field-based research, the important thing is to ensure that the analysis is not a one-off exercise but becomes integral to the decision making across the Mission's portfolio and is frequently reviewed and updated.

Lessons learned in conducting applied PEA research must acknowledge that while PEA can be a useful assessment tool, ideally it should be integrated into the workflow. To make PEA part of the broader program planning and implementation processes means focusing on issues of local importance as perceived by local actors and searching for local capacity. It also means shifting the power balance in the relationship between donors and partners, recognizing the need to influence but not push reforms. For this to happen, more time and effort needs to be invested in building relationships with a broad range of stakeholders. This is crucial to understanding their interests and incentives and spotting opportunities to build on common interests and for

Applied PEA research makes connections between national level policies and local level realities, breaking down “wicked” problems into parts and determining possible approaches that can trigger new ways of addressing seemingly intractable problems.

creating trust. Practitioners can build relationships directly and indirectly by facilitating the creation of coalitions of different interest groups.

Using applied PEA research to become more politically informed implies changing the way things are done in small ways. In the CDCS process, it might mean looking deeply at findings revealed by political economy analysis—an unstable political settlement, dependence on extractives as a source of formal or illegal revenue, or historical grievances—and acknowledging that while there may be little that USAID can do directly to address the findings, these issues will shape the political context within which USAID must work. This political context may harbor systemic constraints that affect the ability of tackling a host of secondary issues and problems.

Being politically informed through applied PEA research may highlight political development issues often considered outside of a particular technical backstop. This can encourage cross-sectoral thinking about linkages between broad based economic growth opportunities and demobilization, or how global financial regulations intersect with incentives for wildlife trafficking to affect biodiversity conservation.¹⁵ Even when a sector is constrained by legislative earmarks, better understanding of what is politically feasible should shape choices at the level of individual programs about the content and ambition of desired reform.¹⁶

Finally, incorporating PEA learning into monitoring, evaluation, indicator development, impact analysis, and collaborative learning can help keep a focus on context-specific constraints. Using the applied PEA approach across scales and sectors will help the development practitioner to more readily identify key actors and their incentives, relationships and their capacity for collective action. This in turn can help prevent errors of omission in program design.

¹⁵ Grindle, M. (2007). Good enough governance revisited. *Development Policy Review*, Vol. 25(5), pp. 553-574.

¹⁶ Faustino, J. and Booth, D. (2014). Development entrepreneurship: How donors and leaders can foster institutional change,” *Working Politically in Practice Series*, Case Study No. 2 Asia Foundation and ODI, London.

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