

## **IMPROVING DEVELOPMENT AID DESIGN AND EVALUATION: PLAN FOR SAILBOATS, NOT TRAINS**

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The development field increasingly looks to sophisticated metrics to measure impact. Simultaneously, practitioners are recognizing that most development programs must engage with politics and policy. Unfortunately, the measurement techniques gaining popularity are those least able to determine how to implement political reforms. Effective reform efforts require planning for and measuring change that is nonlinear and nonincremental. Complexity, or systems, theory offers insights for improving program design and evaluation.

### **The Nature of Political Reforms**

- In more political development programs, opponents may contest both ends and means. Programs that get adopted are rarely technical best practices, but rather those that amass the most political support.
- The presence of opposition actors means that reforms are frequently followed by counterreforms. Change swings back and forth. Measuring success at only one point in time means little for whether a reform will be sustained.
- Political variables are interdependent, but popular measurement tools such as regressions and randomized controlled trials assume variables can be separated. These techniques can determine which interventions are most effective—but not how to get those programs implemented.
- Designing programs that alter the underlying rules of political and social systems is the key to successful reform.

### **Recommendations for Designing and Measuring Reform Efforts**

**Design programs and funding to anticipate counterreforms and multiple battles.** Opposition learns, too: techniques that worked at one point may fail at another.

**Engage local partners who can amass broad coalitions.** Avoid making groups overly beholden to donor agendas that can cost them local support. Measure programs based on whether they have created long-term, broad coalitions and/or elite influencers with real political power who are growing stronger.

**Ensure flexibility for programs and budgeting, and expect changes.** Test hypotheses throughout a program's life cycle. Design contracts to enable closing projects and moving funds among projects so that acting on what works does not carry a stigma or lead to perverse incentives.

**Prepare for windows of opportunity before they open.** Invest in coalitions, policy development, and social networks ahead of time.

**Determine whether programs have shaped the rules of the system to make change easier.**

Programs that enable organizing, increase transparency and public voice in policy, reduce violence against reform advocates, and increase avenues to power are types of systemic changes that allow reform.

**Measure reform based on the space of the possible.** Look at all the potential options in a policy space, including possible counterreforms, not just the currently ascendant policy.

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