

A five point plan for better political economy analysis

CARE has carried out political economy assessments in 12 countries Peru, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Egypt, Uganda, Malawi, DRC, Ethiopia, Zambia, and India and Mali. Throughout this time we asked field staff what we should do differently. Below are our top four tips for how to take your big concepts (power, ideas, and incentives) down to earth:

1. Pick a clear target

Put forward one clear, and “answerable,” research question with a specific audience you want to influence (e.g. your health team, or a particular external actor), and be sure about what level you want to influence (local, sectorial, national).

Some theorists refer to this as “problem-driven” political economy analysis (Harris and Booth, [2013](#); Fritz, Levy, and Ort, [2014](#)).

2. Adapt your language

One of the worst mistakes you can make is to be too precious about “technical” language. Try to pick as few key concepts as possible, and aim to break down definitions and descriptions as best you can (e.g. what do you mean by “corruption” and *where* does it happen most?).

See Cornwall and Earle on Buzzwords and Fuzzwords ([2010](#)).

3. Use the analysis in regular planning

This sounds like a simple thing to say, but this is the most difficult thing of all to do. Not only do you need to pick an “answerable” question, but you should also make sure organizational decision-makers are on board first. Then, use the design process to build up your potential intervention with a theory of change (ToC) or some other kind of causal chain approach. This can help you to navigate what else you or partners can do to make your tactics into a proper strategy.

See Joshi ([2013](#)) on the “causal chain” and Valters ([2014](#)) on why this is so difficult.

4. Do it more than once

We talk a lot these days about the importance of “context,” but particularly when the aim of the analysis is to influence people and advocate for change, you’ve gotta be aware that context changes *quickly*. This means you ought to refresh your analysis each time something important changes. And this is no mean feat at a BINGO like CARE.

Some theorists refer to this as “iterative adaptation” (see Green, [2015](#) on “supertankers” and Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock [2012](#) on PDIA).

5. Link it to other tools

No one toolkit is a panacea; there are always other tools that do certain things better. PEA is not [PRA](#), nor a [CVCA](#), and however gender-sensitive, it isn’t a [Gender Toolkit](#) either. So, you have to find a way to fill your gaps; and you could do worse than integrating community level power analysis with local, sectorial, or national level PEA.

See Oxfam ([2013](#)) for what I mean by power analysis.

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