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GUIDANCE NOTE

Institutional and Context Analysis for the Sustainable Development Goals

United Nations Development Programme

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Photo: UNDP

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Acronyms

CDA	Conflict-related and Development Analysis
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DIFD	Department for International Development (United Kingdom)
ICA	Institutional and Context Analysis
MAPS	Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
PEA	Political Economy Analysis
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TWP	Thinking and Working Politically
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNDG	United Nations Development Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN-REDD	United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The implementation of a given policy succeeds when key players have an incentive to make it succeed. When one or more of society's key actors disagree with or are threatened by a certain policy, they have an incentive to make it fail. Understanding how different actors in society – civil servants, farmers, industrialists, incumbents, opposition parties, religious authorities, groups of men or women, and more – have differing incentives to enable or block interventions is key to successful policy implementation. All actors have distinct histories and – crucially – face constraints, such as institutional limits on their power, a weak resource base, or an inability to act collectively. This means that only some have the ability to act on an incentive. Illuminating this mixture of incentives and constraints is the aim of Institutional and Context Analysis (ICA) at the country level.

UNDP first launched Institutional and Context Analysis (ICA) as an approach to support country-level programming in 2012, largely based on methodologies developed by the World Bank and DFID¹. Originally conceived to help UNDP staff take politics into account in their programming work, the main objective of the first analyses done based on the ICA methodology was to help development practitioners deliver on their commitments to national partners and donors to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As such, an ICA was primarily envisioned as an input to understanding how different actors in society, who are subject to an assortment of incentives and constraints, shaped the likelihood of programme success.

Following the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, the United Nations Development Group² (UNDG) has adopted a common approach to supporting the 2030 Agenda dubbed MAPS – *Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support*. While *Mainstreaming* helps landing the SDGs at country level, *Acceleration* helps identify possible bottlenecks in policy implementation and address the complex interrelations underlying sustainable development in order to craft possible solutions to competing priorities by stakeholders; *Policy Support* provides national partners with access to expertise across the UN System's various specialized areas.

¹ Fritz et al. 2009, DFID 2009

² The UNDG unites over 30 UN entities that provide development assistance in more than 150 countries. Members include UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, UNDESA, UNFPA, UNEP, WHO and UN Regional Commissions (<https://undg.org>)

The present Guidance Note has been designed as a tool under *Acceleration* in the context of MAPS and its purpose is to serve as a resource for UN agencies and their national partners to identify elements that may help boost the success of policy implementation or undermine it. It builds on lessons learned from the application of the ICA approach to country programming as well as on international experience with the use of similar analytical frameworks over the past decade.

Thus, the term ‘institutional and context analysis’ has been revised and for the purposes of this Guidance Note, it refers “an analysis that focuses on political and institutional factors in a given country and how these may have a positive or negative impact on the implementation of policies for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.”

The ICA methodology is **not** meant to substitute studies intended to inform country-level programming such as a Country Analysis or a Conflict-related Development Analysis (CDA). Neither is it a traditional political economy analysis tool for development understood as a methodology that looks at issues regarding a country’s political settlement, territorial integrity, monopoly of power, legitimacy, fragility, historical trajectory, illicit flows, the role of foreign investments, ODA, etc. While these dimensions are key to understanding the context in which SDG implementation takes place, they should be covered by programme-level analyses such as the Country Analysis or Conflict-related Development Analysis (CDA). Ideally, these studies will already exist at country level and can inform the ICA, which will have a more limited scope, looking at a particular issue of relevance to one or more SDGs.

How ICA can be useful

The UNCT cannot support the achievement of the SDGs through technical work alone. In order to support policy formulation and implementation, the UNCT must become conversant with the relevant political processes and engage with them through a variety of relevant actors. An ICA can help by identifying who is *actually* in favor of what, who is against, why, and what incentives guide their actions.

In its simplest form, an ICA can be used to investigate why specific laws are not applied or policies not implemented in a given country despite any formal commitments and statements that may exist, and what realistically can be done about it as part of UN support.

An ICA can be useful to support implementation of a particular SDG/SDG accelerator

or a combination of them, by first of all, helping to identify the gaps between formal rules such as laws or regulations (or how things should work in theory) and informal ones (how things really work in practice), and to map those elements influencing the status quo. These could be political factors, cultural practices, or a general bias in the application of legislation favoring or neglecting one geographical region or ethnic group. Based on this information, stakeholder engagement strategies are then designed.

ICA findings can help UNCTs become more strategic in their engagement with other actors and sectors. It does this by providing a framework for understanding the incentives and constraints that frequently influence policy implementation.

Box 1: ICA and similar tools in UNDP and the UN System

A number of UN agencies and Funds have used tools similar to the ICA in the past, with the objective of acquiring programme-relevant intelligence. While the UNDP-FAO-UNEP programme UN-REDD³ has conducted ICAs for climate change mitigation in a wide range of countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, some UN agencies have developed their own tools or commissioned independent political economy analyses.

For example, UNFPA's Environmental Scanning and Planning Branch have long used a tool for monitoring and analysis of political, socio-cultural and economic trends/issues⁴; UNICEF has also made use of political economy analyses to inform country programming⁵; the UN Staff College has conducted courses on 'Context Analysis' for the UNDAF.

The International Food and Agriculture Fund (IFAD)'s sourcebook 'Institutional and Organizational Analysis for Pro-Poor Change' is the most similar to UNDP's ICA approach. It states that "[t]o effect policy changes and arrive at desired outcomes, it is important to understand the institutional and organizational landscape in order to identify 'policy and organizational spaces', devise acceptable and effective ways of proceeding, access local resources, secure allies and ensure local commitment to change. The landscape consists of actors and their interests, networks and relationships, instruments and mechanisms of change and resistance, dominant cultural values, existing incentives and 'dampers' "(IFAD 2008:36).⁶

³ United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries. For more information see www.un-redd.org.

⁴ The UNFPA Environmental Scanning tool is not publicly available. For more information, please contact the UNFPA Scanning and Planning Branch.

⁵ Examples are available at https://www.unicef.org/health/files/Four-country_Summary_PEA_report.pdf

⁶ IFAD (2008). *Institutional and organizational analysis for pro-poor change: meeting IFAD's millennium challenge*. Available at <https://www.ifad.org/documents/10180/7dc9d736-8a15-46a6-8961-da64dd6f94df>

An ICA usually starts with a ‘super question’ to guide the analysis. Examples of questions used in past ICAs include:

- How can resources from extractive industries lead to better Human Development outcomes in Papua New Guinea?
- What are the main corruption risks for carbon finance in Kenya?
- What is hindering implementation of the National Forest Plan in Honduras?
- How does the informal governance system in Yemen work?
- How can UNDP best support the justice sector in Bangladesh?

By revealing the various elements that together provide the answers to the questions, ICAs can help UN agencies unpack the concept of political will and identify courses of action to address bottlenecks for claims holders, or change course, if the vested interests of duty bearers prove too powerful to challenge.

What an ICA cannot do

It is important to stress that ICA is neither a magic bullet that can be used to change complex realities nor a tool to ‘fix’ undesirable circumstances - but it can help manage expectations and promote an informed dialogue with individuals or groups whose support for a given policy is key for its successful implementation. In that sense, an ICA can help UNCTs provide more effective support to national partners in the context of prevailing political dynamics.

Finally, an ICA is not meant to replace the deep local knowledge that those who are working in the country concerned already have - it is only a method to help extract that knowledge so it can support policy implementation and programming in a structured manner.

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