DLP
DEVELOPMENTAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Developmental Leadership:

What it is, why it matters, and how it can be supported

February 2018

How do we explain how, when and why change does, or doesn't, happen? This brief argues that developmental leadership is key. It draws on 10 years of research by the Developmental Leadership Program, which is discussed in more detail in *Inside the Black Box of Political Will.*

Developmental leadership is the strategic, collective and political process of building political will to make good change happen. It relies on three elements.

- First, on motivated and strategic individuals with the incentives, values, interests and opportunity to push for change.
- Second, these motivated people must overcome barriers to cooperation and form coalitions with sufficient power, legitimacy and influence.
- Third, coalitions' power and effectiveness partly hinges on their ability to contest and de-legitimise one set of ideas and legitimise an alternative set.

Through this process of contestation, leaders and coalitions challenge, subvert and reformulate society's rules in ways that are perceived as locally legitimate and sustainable. The process of developmental leadership can be carefully supported from outside if agencies think and work politically in facilitating effective coalitions and navigating the politics of legitimacy.

How does change happen?

Development is challenged by what can seem intractable problems – whether it's economic stagnation, patrimonial governance, or fixed and exclusionary power relations. The formal and informal rules of society that lock in these problems are notoriously 'sticky'; they resist change.

In August 2015, in Tonga, less than six months after announcing the intention to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Prime Minister Pōhiva informed parliament that cabinet would not. This was after four petitions amounting to 15,000 signatures (of a population of 107,122) were presented to the palace office and women marched in the streets against the ratification. The formal and informal rules of society – the parliamentary process, and the role of the king in it, class hierarchies, the nobility and land rights, Tongan values about family and gender, and the strength of religious identity and authority – all came together to stop change in this instance.

At the same time, change *does* happen, often with dramatic, unexpected effects – whether it's progress on climate change regulation, the introduction of term limits, extension of voting rights, changing attitudes towards smoking in public or greater rights with regard to disabilities, gender and sexuality.

Consider, in contrast to Tonga, the success of the Egyptian CEDAW coalition that urged the government to improve its women's rights record. The coalition worked quietly and cautiously to ensure that CEDAW wasn't seen as competing with Islam. It prepared shadow reports for the international CEDAW committees, to bring gender injustices to light and hold the government to account.

Institutions don't set up institutions, people do. Institutions are not 'empty boxes' that... determine outcomes independently of human interaction.

So how do we explain how, when and why change does, or doesn't, happen?

In our view, appeals to structural shifts or a 'critical juncture' – such as a conflict, disaster, economic crisis, major demographic change, or shifting values or beliefs in society – are insufficient. Each of these structural explanations is compelling in its own right, but missing one vital ingredient: people.

Addressing the puzzle of how change happens demands a fundamental shift away from focusing exclusively on institutions – or rules of the game – because institutions don't set up institutions, people do.

Institutions are not 'empty boxes' that float freely above societies and determine outcomes independently of human interaction. Rather, they are created, sustained, used and transformed through the purposive action of motivated agents.

Whether these people are opportunists, subversives, or outright insurrectionaries, institutions rise and fall on the actions of individuals working to defend or oppose them.

Yet the idea that people can change institutions raises several questions. What motivates people to change institutions? And how do they actually do it?

The shorthand answer has tended to be 'political will' – that change relies on the willingness of key decision-makers, whether politicians or traditional leaders, to expend valuable political or reputational capital to push for a reform. At the same time, reform failure, stagnating institutions, social exclusion and poor services are widely explained as arising from lack of political will.

Where does political will come from?

Political will may be a temptingly simple and intuitive explanation for why reforms succeed or fail, but it is a turn of phrase masquerading as an explanation. As Duncan Green put it, these two words 'fill a vacuum where political analysis should be'. While popular, the idea of political will tells us nothing about how change actually happens.

More importantly, it can be misleading, for two reasons.

Political will is a collective effort. The default position has been to focus narrowly on political will in terms of individual motivation and intent. But no individual leader can bring about change by themselves. Reform is rarely the product of politicians or other leaders acting alone, but instead relies on strategic alliances, policy networks, and advocacy.

There's no point having political will if you don't have the collective capacity to implement it. While on rare occasions individuals may be sufficiently powerful to act alone, it is more likely that change will require collective, collaborative effort. Casting political will as individual intent obscures this reality.

Political will is a political process. Political will is not a psychological phenomenon, but a political one. It does not magically appear.

It is curated and embedded through the political process of contestation whereby citizens and other stakeholders seek to hold their representatives to account. In the same way, leaders are never entirely free from rules that constrain or restrain them.

In the real world, change hinges on the complex relationships *between* individuals and the norms and rules they inhabit – their institutional context.

People are embedded *in* institutions; they can individually or collectively work within the existing institutional frameworks, to disrupt, evade or re-write them, but they are also constrained and empowered by them.

Political will, then, hides deeper questions: Where does political will come from? How does it work? And crucially, can it be built?

Over the past 10 years, DLP research has found that political will emerges through the collective and political process of developmental leadership.

What is developmental leadership?

Developmental leadership is the strategic, collective and political process of building political will to make good change happen.

Development and change happen for many reasons: luck, accident, chance, or structural transformation (demographic change, geopolitical shifts).

But developmental leadership involves more deliberate action. It is a *strategic* process of agency. It is the mobilisation of people and resources in pursuit of shared goals.

Developmental leadership is the strategic, collective and political process of building political will to make positive change happen.

Often, but not always, this involves the formation of coalitions of leaders, elites and organisations with diverse interests, or even competing ideas on how to operate. Together, these individuals contest and change institutions and push for reform.

Of course, leadership is not inherently positive, inclusive or developmental. Motivated leaders are not always benign, and effective coalitions are not always seeking progressive change.

Developmental leadership, on the other hand, implies defending or progressively transforming institutions to subvert, modify or forge new ones to achieve developmental goods. This could be to enable poverty reduction, realise rights and freedoms, gender equality, redistribute wealth, or facilitate inclusive growth or social development.

Developmental leadership can be transformational, as documented by David Sebudubudu and Patrick Molutsi in their DLP paper on Botswana. In this case, a 'grand coalition' worked towards a common development agenda which helped the country transform from one of the poorest in the world to middle income status.

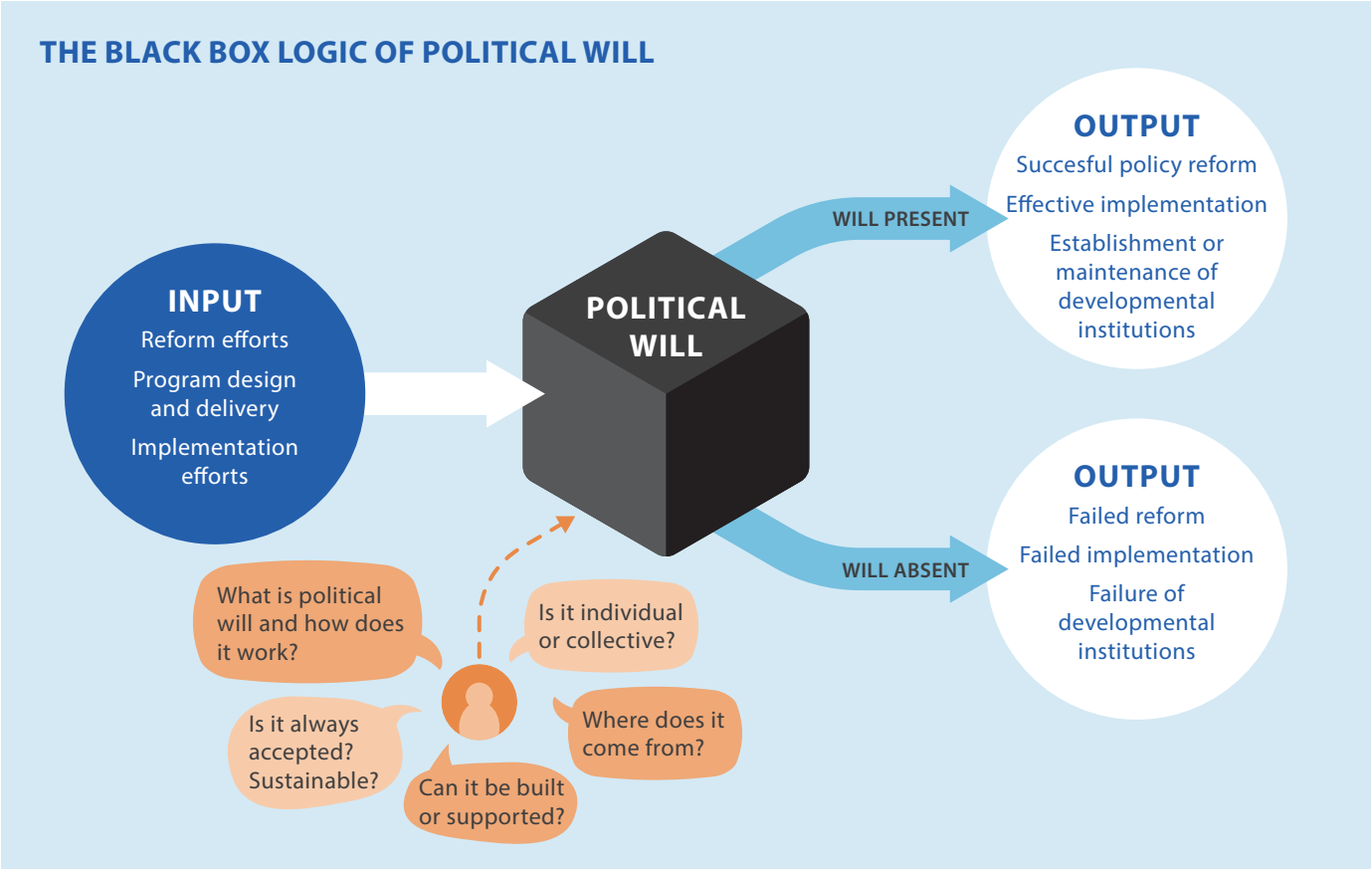
They did this by grafting modern judicial and administrative systems to the locally-legitimate, traditional pre-colonial and colonial Tswana institutions of chieftaincy and of the *Kgotla* (traditional assembly place and court).

This case and others illustrate two key characteristics of developmental leadership – it is collective and at its heart involves a contest over power and ideas.

Developmental leadership is a collective, political process of contestation

As Gillian Fletcher, Tait Brimacombe and Chris Roche detail in their DLP paper *Power, Politics and Coalitions in the Pacific*, developmental leadership happens in the backstreets, meeting halls and homes of Suva, where a social movement of organisers and activists successfully blocked the proposed removal of protection, on the grounds of sexual orientation, from the Fijian Constitution.

Or in Jordan, where a coalition helped introduce new legislation protecting women from domestic violence, as



documented by Mariz Tadros in her DLP paper *Working Politically Behind Red Lines*.

Or, as analysed in Sarah Phillips' paper *Political Settlements and State Formation*, it can work through the clan structures and secondary schools of Somaliland, where peace was secured and has been maintained against the odds.

Everywhere it happens, developmental leadership is a collective process, involving interaction and negotiation between multiple leaders and their followers, often across a range of sectors.

Yet, as Heather Lyne de Ver explains in *Leadership, Politics and Development*, leadership research has too often focused on individuals, perpetuating a 'great man' or 'heroic' perspective of leadership. Of course, leadership *can* involve traditional 'Big Men' leaders who drive change. An example is Joe Sungi, a politician in Papua New Guinea, who used his district funds to build all-weather roads to help farmers, teachers, and nurses, as described by Oxfam's Duncan Green in his jointly funded book *How Change Happens.*

But even 'big P' politics demands collective effort. As Niheer Dasandi and David Hudson unpack in *The Political Road to Digital Revolution*, the successful passing of telecoms reform in Myanmar involved not only the president, but ministers, cronies, civil servants, donors, consultants, private investors, lawyers, as well as open public consultation.

Developmental leadership is a contest over power and ideas. It is the fundamental process of contesting, negotiating and cooperating over values and ideas that shape the distribution of resources in society.

A broader view of politics

Many people, not unreasonably, understand politics as being about government: parliament, elections and bureaucracies. DLP has found Adrian Leftwich's broader view of politics useful. He defined politics as 'all the activities of conflict (peaceful or not), negotiation and co-operation over the use and distribution of resources, wherever they may be found, within or beyond formal institutions, on a global level or within a family, involving two or more people.' DLP therefore views politics as a process that can happen anywhere.

Likewise, meeting energy targets in China required the collaboration of state bureaucrats and big business, as demonstrated by Tom Harrison and Genia Kostka in their 2012 DLP paper *Manoeuvres for a Low Carbon State*.

Developmental leadership is a contest over power and ideas

Developmental leadership involves groups of individuals contesting, negotiating and cooperating over the core values and ideas that shape the distribution of power and resources in society. Ideas are not an academic luxury or affectation. They are powerful in the systematic ebb and flow of winning hearts and minds.

Politics is, ultimately, a battle of ideas. Successfully contesting the ideas that underpin institutions is central to explaining how change happens. Leaders and coalitions have to manufacture and mobilise support for certain ideas to justify the basis of their power. They have to demonstrate their ideas align with what people think is right for society.

Equally, developmental change often requires transforming power relations. It is only through power that individuals, organisations, and coalitions can shape the world. Power is positive and productive, not just negative and controlling. For example, in *How Change Happens*, Duncan Green describes how Community Discussion Classes (CDCs) in Nepal galvanised women to impose 500 Rupee fines on men who beat their wives. This collective action is an act of power just as much as the original violence.

The political process of developmental leadership

The process of contesting ideas and transforming power relations – the heart of developmental leadership – is neither neat, nor linear. It is more typically messy, often protracted, and frequently beset by missteps and reversals. It can be incremental and slow moving, unfolding over time, or more dramatically catalysed by crises or unexpected shocks that mobilise people. People's power and capacity to act is always conditioned by the social context and political system. But regardless of context, developmental leadership invariably relies on three core elements:

- First, on motivated and strategic individuals with the incentives, values, interests and opportunity to push for change.
- Second, these motivated people must overcome barriers to cooperation and form coalitions with sufficient power, legitimacy and influence.
- Third, coalitions' power and effectiveness partly hinges on their ability to challenge one set of ideas and legitimise an alternative set.

Motivated agents

Motivated agents are in many ways the primary ingredient in developmental leadership. Development cannot happen without individuals willing to mobilise and drive change. DLP research reveals the importance of education in the emergence of leaders with shared values, key skills and political networks.

For example, elites that helped bring about change in Mauritius, Ghana, and Somaliland, who were well-educated and had often gone to the same schools or universities, often viewed their experience of higher education as formative to their future role in pushing for developmental change.

But to exercise the agency required to change institutions – whether it's pushing through legal reforms at the macro level, or agitating for women's rights at the local level – motivation alone is not enough.

Even the most willing agents need a combination of power and opportunity to realise their goals, as well as the skill to do it. They must be capable of deliberating and working strategically.

For example, as Ceridwen Spark, Jack Corbett, and John Cox demonstrate in their DLP paper *Being the First: Women Leaders in the Pacific Islands,* President Hilda Heine of the Marshall Islands, Hon. Fiame Naomi Mata'afa of Samoa and Dame Carol Kidu of Papua New Guinea all used their family and political networks, alongside their education and expertise and international networks, to effectively navigate male-dominated political environments in politically-savvy ways.

Effective coalitions

Individual leaders matter, but they are not islands. They rely on power and resources – people, ideas, followers. They need to win legitimacy, work within systems of rules, values, ideas and norms, and mobilise others to implement change.

Challenging institutions usually requires individuals and organisations to forge formal or informal coalitions, vertical or horizontal, of a diverse range of leaders and elites.

The effectiveness of coalitions hinges on the kinds of political strategies and tactics they use, their perceived local legitimacy, the quiet political work they do behind the scenes, and ultimately their pragmatism.

Shared ideas, values and trust-building are often critical for enabling diverse sets of actors to overcome collective action problems and work together to form coalitions.

As Deborah Brautigam and Tania Diolle show in their DLP paper on Mauritius, trust between the public and private sectors can be built through leaders using symbolic, public gestures that signal commitment.

But practicalities also matter. In this case, the business class organised itself into a unified, cross-ethic constituency with a single voice, facilitating government-business interaction.

Coalitions can be equally successful without necessarily having the same values or interests, if they share the same substantive goals.

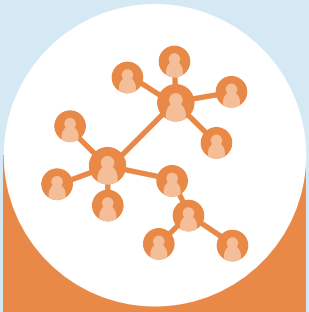
As John Sidel shows in his account of how President Aquino passed the 2012 'Sin Tax' reform through the Philippine Congress – and the role of British American Tobacco in this – 'reforms are not made by reformists alone'. Coalitions can be made up of people committed to reforms and those who are more opportunistic and non-reformist.

THE THREE LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENTAL LEADERSHIP

INDIVIDUAL

Developmental leadership relies on **motivated individuals** with the values, interests and opportunity to influence change.

COLLECTIVE



Motivated people overcome barriers to cooperation and form **coalitions** with power, legitimacy and influence.

SOCIETAL

Coalitions' power and effectiveness partly hinges on their ability to **contest** and de-legitimise one set of ideas **and legitimise** an alternative set.

Politics of legitimation

Coalitions' power and effectiveness partly hinges on their ability to contest and de-legitimise the ideas that underpin fixed or 'sticky' institutions, and legitimise an alternative set. If they can do that, they can reformulate institutions in ways that are perceived as locally legitimate, anchor them in local norms, and therefore make change more sustainable.

One of DLP's core concerns is with understanding *how* this process of changing ideas, which is so key to legitimising institutions, actually happens. The research particularly points to the important role of narratives and framing – that is, how change is communicated to the people who need to be convinced it's fair and right for society.

Reforms often come up against intractable, hidden, and usually deeply embedded ideas – whether patriarchal values, gender norms and hierarchies, or cultural beliefs. Fixed ideas can be a significant impediment to change. For example, as Claire Mcloughlin details in her DLP paper on Sri Lanka, the long-standing, entrenched idea of free education as an intrinsic birth right cannot be contravened by any government or regime without facing the risk of violent dissent, closing down space for discussion of privatisation. In this way, ideas can shape what is politically feasible.

Reform narratives are a key mechanism for acknowledging and potentially nudging ideas. They present a story arc that describes a problem, a diagnosis, and reason to support change.

In some cases, narratives resonate and gain traction precisely because they carefully navigate politically sensitive issues. For example, DLP's Gender and Politics in Practice research found that effective gender programming sometimes has to avoid using the language of gender entirely. Getting the framing right requires understanding what is and isn't legitimate to say, and what will convince key stakeholders to back a change. Crucially, effective framings will look different across different political contexts.

Supporting developmental leadership

So what does this all mean for engaging with the political process of developmental leadership? Several implications flow from the findings – on how to support individual leaders, build effective coalitions, and navigate legitimacy politics. Collectively, these add up to a bigger picture on how donors can approach politics, power and ideas in aid programming. Institutions do change, whether rapidly or incrementally, through a political process of contestation.

TOPU-SAHA

Aid actors can strategically support this process if they think and work politically. This sometimes means letting the process run its course, and not jumping to answers.

Supporting leadership

Support the development of leadership values and motivation through quality education at all levels. Here's why. First, a high-quality curriculum and extra-curricular activities can support the emergence of developmental values and skills for transformational leadership.

Second, the networks produced during education may be key to forming future political connections.

Third, access to higher education can create a strata of 'sub-elites' who can hold more established elites to account. An active citizenry is a key factor in shaping leaders' decisions to work towards development.

Facilitating effective coalitions

Create space for coalitions to form and to work their politics. Collective action requires negotiation, contestation and compromise. Even networks with high levels of trust need 'safe spaces' where these processes can occur.

Donor agencies can provide funding for retreats and workshops, or support individuals to travel, provide technical advice, or offer assistance for brokering or facilitation. They can also act as a 'critical friend' by constructively challenging thinking.

Aid actors can strategically support this process if they think and work politically. This sometimes means letting the process run its course, and not jumping to answers.

Work behind the scenes and explore the roles of other actors. Donors can work behind the scenes, informally, to build relationships, obtain information and help get reforms on the agenda. This requires astute political judgement, good local 'intelligence' and a judicious assessment of the risks involved. It also means identifying other actors that may be better placed to undertake this advocacy.

Navigating legitimacy politics

Support local actors, but don't undermine their legitimacy. Local coalitions can be seen as 'creatures' of outsiders if they have strong links with donors or international agencies. If the reforms they promote are viewed as alien, or not aligned with local values, this can be used politically to undermine their legitimacy. This has implications for considering whether programs are best supported directly or indirectly (through local NGOs), as well as how they are branded and promoted.

Identify opportunities for contesting norms, but beware. If interventions or policies do not align with legitimate norms and ideas, they will almost certainly fail. There can be unintended consequences of programming based on universal norms (e.g. 'equity') without properly understanding how this will be perceived in local contexts.

This has two implications. First, ensure that ideas, ideologies and beliefs are factored into political analysis and do more research on local perceptions of fairness. Second, local actors may be better positioned to shape how reforms are framed and narrated in ways that are considered legitimate and therefore likely to win support from key groups.

What it all adds up to: thinking and working politically

Politics is not the obstacle, it is the way. There is a tendency to see politics as something that 'gets in the way' of development, whether through rent-seeking, special interests or corruption. But politics is the process that builds locally legitimate institutions. More successful ways of engaging with this political process create space and strengthen the political environment, rather than pick winners.

Development actors can think and work politically. DLP's research consistently underlines the centrality of politics. Development outcomes cannot be achieved by technical solutions alone.

This means that actors – politicians, bureaucrats, civil society, donors and so on – need to be able to better understand the local context ('thinking politically') in order to support the processes that enable local actors to bring about sustainable developmental change ('working politically').

This includes supporting, brokering, facilitating and aiding the emergence and practices of reform leaderships, organisations, networks and coalitions. These ways of working should be integrated across all sectors, not just governance.

Do ongoing, internal political analysis. Political economy analysis (PEA) has been a welcome development in aid practice, but there are at least two problems with it.

First, it is dominated by institutionalist economics and neglects how ideas and power shape development.

Second, its applicability is limited when these studies are commissioned periodically, undertaken by international consultants, and quickly become out of date. '*Everyday Political Analysis*' offers a complementary and more continuous way of incorporating politics into everyday decision-making.

Explicitly address ethical dilemmas. Donors often face ethical dilemmas when working in contexts where local norms do not align with international standards, rights or freedoms. In such cases, choosing whether to 'work with the grain' can be tricky. While thinking and working politically means grappling with these dilemmas, there is little guidance available on how to do that.

Politics is not the obstacle, it is the way... politics is the process that builds locally legitimate institutions.

DLP has developed a framework – *The Donor's Dilemma* – which walks decision-makers through ethical challenges and justifications for action, and the short and long term implications of different ways of working.

Be creative with monitoring and evaluation. Traditional, results-based management approaches are ill-suited for designing, monitoring or evaluating programs which seek to support complex, unpredictable and non-linear change processes.

Programs working in politically informed, gender aware and flexible ways need inventive monitoring and learning processes that can cope with these challenges. In addition to more formal and experimental methods, other approaches show promise, such as process tracing or action research.

In any case, the social learning, feedback and reflection processes that programs or organisations develop, and the culture of curiosity they inculcate, is as important as the choice of monitoring or evaluation method.

This brief provides a summary of *Inside the Black Box of Political Will*, which is a synthesis report of the past 10 years of DLP's research.

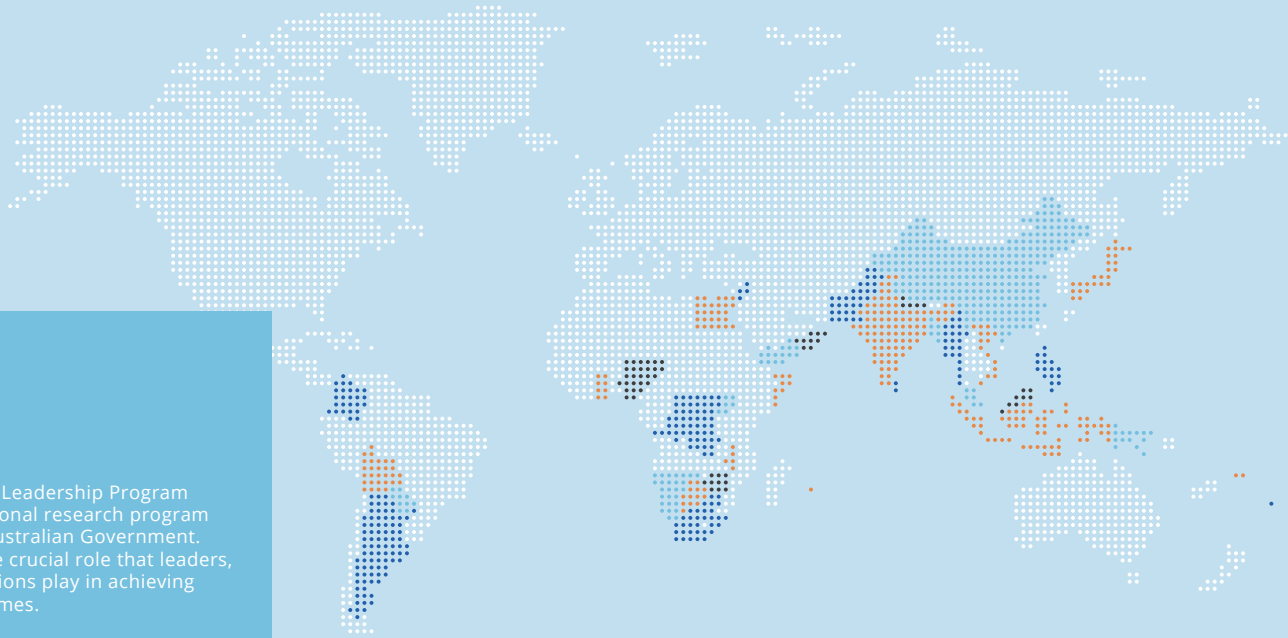
DLP was founded in 2007 by the late Dr Adrian Leftwich and by Steve Hogg, senior governance specialist at the Australian aid program.

Their aim was to produce a body of research to address an important knowledge gap about the role of leaders and coalitions in the politics of development, as well as to help inform Australia's aid investments. Since the sad loss of Adrian in April 2013, DLP has continued to build on this legacy.

DLP research is funded by the Australian Government through a strategic partnership with the Development Policy Division of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

EXPLORE MORE DLP FINDINGS AND RESOURCES

DLP's research has examined how leadership, power and political processes have driven change in diverse sectors in 44 countries. Explore more than 100 briefs, summaries, guidance notes and research papers, plus commentary from researchers, at **dlprog.org/publications.php**



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The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) is an international research program supported by the Australian Government. DLP investigates the crucial role that leaders, networks and coalitions play in achieving development outcomes.

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