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Moderator: Caby Verzosa, the World Bank

Caby: Many development practitioners shy away from the word “politics”. What kind of advice do you have for them?

Sumir: Well, the first thing is trying to convince them that politics is life and whatever you do involves politics. Diplomatically sometimes it’s not very possible for especially outsiders or donors to talk about politics because it’s considered to be interfering in an area that the donor is not supposed to be. You can approach this two ways. One is that you couch it much more diplomatically when you are actually talking with your counterpart. You use much more neutral terms like stakeholders, interest groups, or incentives and dynamics and those sorts of things that make up politics.

Caby: You frame the word “politics” in words that they are comfortable with.

Sumir: Yes exactly. You talk about the things that comprise politics without actually using the word politics. The important thing as the financing agency or whatever role you are playing, it is important to not delude yourself. It is important for the donor to go in knowing that there is a political dimension involved. And what we are trying to find out is what the political dynamics are going to be among stakeholders. And when we talk about politics in this sense, we are not talking about party politics, or government politics or election politics. What we’re talking really about is how the different groups are going to be affected by this intervention one way or another, how they interact with each other.

Caby: Are there risks in doing political analysis?

Sumir: The biggest risk is that it’s done badly, which means that it could either be incomplete, inaccurate or more alarming than it needs to be. Well, I would put it this way, there is more risk in not doing a political analysis, but if you do decide to do a political analysis you need to be able to ensure you got the right person doing it, which is somebody with good local knowledge and no biases of his or her own, but more important than that, having received that political analysis as a task leader or as a country manager, you should be able to see it in perspective, you should be able to know how to react to it and that would basically be my answer to you.

Caby: To summarize, what key ideas would you give our governance reform managers about political analysis?

Sumir: The first thing I would say is that it’s something that needs to be done very, very upstream so that going in you know what your entry points and points of obstruction are likely to be. You should go into any reform program with the intention of creating a demand for reform from below that makes it much more sustainable and much more authentic and in order to do that you once again need to know who your players are, so that would really be my basic advice on any governance-related reform.