

POLICY BRIEF



IMAGE: Global Partnership Education - Guy Nzazi

Generating political will: A means to building stronger institutions

Political will is often seen as a critical factor in reform processes. Typical approaches usually acknowledge the fact that, if the most senior decision makers in each context support an idea, then change will follow. However, Accelere!2's (A!2) experience shows that, whilst generating political will does require senior support, the means to do this must appreciate the complexity of context, layers of interests and the dynamics of power, which can be especially important in fragile states. Furthermore, through its own experience, A!2 believes that when applied using key principles, political will can be generated and will then enhance the role actors play in change and thereby create strong systems.

This Information Brief shares A!2's insights in developing political will for often controversial and contested reform topics and seeks to draw out wider lessons that may be of value to actors seeking to apply advocacy approaches and build support for change.

What is political will?

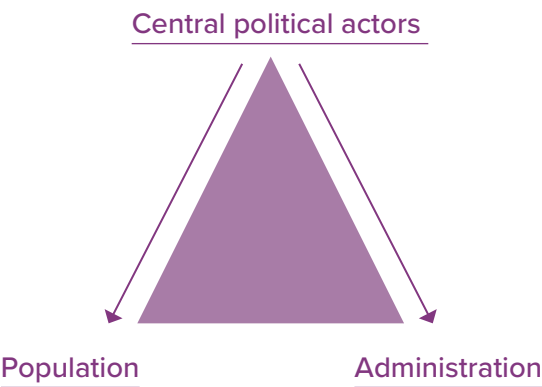
A commonly held image of political will is that it relies on a limited number of people at the top of a structure, and often the one most senior person. However, a growing body of evidence, and A!2's own experience, shows political will is a more complicated reality which goes beyond willingness to act of one person or the most senior interest group. The Greek term 'polis', from which the word political is derived, refers to city states in which the affairs of cities are complex and managed by a large range of stakeholders with different visions, interests, and values.

Political will is therefore by essence political but it also strategic and collective. It is the outcome of an ongoing process of contesting, negotiating, and cooperating in which stakeholders' objectives, interests and values are constantly interacting and confronting each other. This puts leadership and the decisions of the most senior leaders at the centre of a collective and dynamic process. Therefore, the willingness and ability of stakeholders to play a part and assume a legitimate role in accountability and responsibility is a key lever in generating political will, which in turn can strengthen systems.

"Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions,"

President Barack Obama,
speech to Ghanaian Parliament, 2009

How political will is often seen



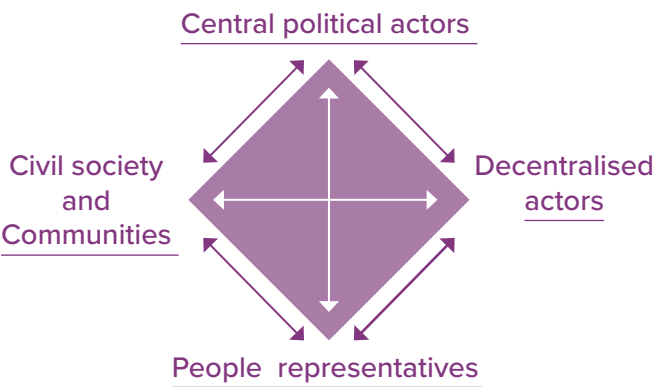
Barriers to Political Will

In recent years, AI2 has found that there are often clear barriers to the creation of political will and that it is important to fully assess a situation to understand what might stand in the way of change. These barriers can include:

- Lack of technical skills to support political authorities in being proactive and engaging others
- Lack of awareness/information or sense of legitimacy on the part of some stakeholders within the system preventing them from playing their role in change processes
- Lack of understanding from politicians or other stakeholders of what is at stake and the need for change
- Politicians not seeing their interests being served by the proposed reform
- Key stakeholders at different levels being against the proposed reform.



How political will works



Lessons from the field

School fees in Equateur

School fees have been a politically sensitive topic in DRC, with little appetite from actors to engage openly in addressing endemic corruption in the education sector that paying for schooling involves. As a result, AI2 worked carefully to build consensus at the central and provincial levels on the need to address school fees.

After close engagement with a range of stakeholders, AI2 succeeded in getting a national School Fees Taskforce set up supported by provincial Working Groups to focus on school financing. This development created space for more open discussion, with representatives from civil society and other education sector stakeholders, around how school fees are set, leading to more participative decision making.

Due to the lack of transparency and participation previously in this area, there was little coordinated pressure from demand-side actors to hold system actors to account for their actions and decisions. AI2 invested time and effort in building the capacity of demand-side actors, such as Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and the media, to improve transparency and accountability around school fees. This work on the demand side improved information to communities and parents about their rights, and helped pressure state actors to act, to the point that on some occasions provincial actors were able to push back requests from the central level.

A key factor in moving the school fees issue forward was generation of evidence to show what was happening on the ground. A key part of AI2’s legacy has been the evidence it has generated on school fees that has been used to support advocacy efforts and highlight what was happening, forcing actors to position themselves in the debate. In Equateur province, AI2 organised several roundtables and community discussions around school fees, and how they disproportionately affect girls, and other minorities in the province, especially

pygmies. These discussions motivated provincial actors, parliamentarians, and the education administration to work together on a provincial decree suppressing school fees for girls and pygmies in the province.

Free Education

In 2019, the newly elected President announced the free school fees policy, Gratuité, and the context changed considerably. A!2 had to adapt how it engaged on this topic, focusing on how best to support provincial and national actors to implement Gratuité, monitor it and ensure its sustainability, while also continuing to focus on the demand side to ensure that the promises from the state are upheld.

The President's decision did not immediately create the political will to support Gratuité. It was a decision from above, with many education actors strongly against it. A!2 tried to change the perception that Gratuité would only bring negative effects, such as overcrowded classrooms, by conducting surveys on the impact of Gratuité.

A!2 also worked with Faith Based Organisations and parliamentarians to build strong support for Gratuité's long term planning and sustainability, by working on a Gratuité Law. Of course, a law in itself may not be sufficient to support Gratuité in the long term, but it is a step that underpins change. As well as framing the debate around Gratuité to counter negative perceptions, and generating evidence, A!2 found on this issue that political will is also about creating the 'small steps' required to move an issue forward. It also found that 'political will' alone is not enough to create change – in this case because changes need technical preparation and also enforcement.

Reform and rationalisation of the BG system.

The reform of the education management offices (Bureaux Gestionnaire) system was identified as a priority in the DRC's Sectoral Strategy 2015-2025. The MEPST considered it necessary to place particular emphasis on efficient management of the education system with a view to improving its quality and service delivery. Rationalising Bureaux Gestionnaires (BG) would include reducing the number of open positions and making savings - something that is very unpopular as DRC's government is the first employer.

A!2 worked on building the political will for the measure by testing solutions and approaches with a selection of BGs in a pilot project. This involved assessing how they were supposed to function by working on job

descriptions/specifications, and learning to work more efficiently, through improved norms and standards, learning to self-assess their own performance (BGCOF) and giving them tools to be better prepared through coaching and training. This exercise created a sense of responsibility and more willingness to work to the highest standard. A!2 capitalised on this experience in the provincial BG working group and fostered discussions about how to bring more efficiency to the system.

Working groups in A!2's six provinces over time were involved in preparing a list of BGs that should be closed or merged as they were not providing any added value. The working groups also proposed updated organograms with reduced staff, as they had been able to identify through the pilot how many staff were required to do the work.

At central level, A!2 made education actors aware of the provincial level propositions and leveraged support from the FBOs (Catholics and Protestants) to bring the taskforce on board. A!2 built on this broader based support by providing information on how inefficient the BG system was to central level deputies. A!2 finally managed to get enough traction at central level, and the taskforce has now expanded to include FBO representatives and additional departments such as HRD who were more open to reform and worked on a full reform proposal, with radical reduction of organograms and clear norms and standards for a BG creation.

Issues to address when creating political will

In summary, A!2 has learned that those who wish to create reform need to understand what 'political will' concretely means in a specific context at a given time (How does it work? Where does it come from? Can it be built or supported?). At this point, the issue to be addressed needs to be unpacked in order to identify the entry points, levers and gaps which can serve to influence the dynamics and power relations:

Which actors are currently influencing the issue? Who are the actors affected by the issue? What are their roles? What should their roles be? Are they all playing their part? Why not?

What are the other stakeholders' interests?

Is change being accepted? By whom? What are the barriers or enablers of change? Which actors do not accept change? Why?

What can convince stakeholders to shift their position?

What is needed?

- In-depth knowledge of the local context (history, culture, socioeconomic environment)
- Mapping of stakeholders with their inner motivation and interests
- Understand the coalitions in place and dynamics of power (Political Economy Analysis)
- Identifying the ideas which are circulating and develop knowledges product and support dissemination to back up new ideas and change perceptions.

Key Principles

Based on its experience of creating and shaping the conditions in which political will is built, AI2 has identified the following lessons or principles that support a more inclusive, evidence-based process that, when applied, can support sustainable change:

- 1 Perceptions matter.** Stakeholders' understanding of the situation impacts on their perception of what matters. It requires time and energy to build understanding, but it is possible to influence their positioning. (e.g., Loi Gratuite, stakeholders pushing back on Kinshasa requests on applying school fees)
- 2 Political will is a process.** Level and form of political will is not given for good. The good news is that 'political will' can be built up. It is twofold, both technical and political. It depends on the resources and the approach, with the investment of time being a key resource consideration.
- 3 Political will is about increasing the circle of influence** and integrating new stakeholders in key debates and the structures that support them through empowerment and building capacity, especially among civil society actors.
- 4 Political will is transactional** in the sense that it is the result of the interactions among actors. Therefore, when a process deliberately empowers actors it can change the dynamics. Political will is then generated as a result of interactions between different actors. Therefore, the transaction provides the space for change.
- 5 When political will is transactional it can become transformational.** The process of creating political will can become deeply engrained with all the dynamics work. It is therefore less about one senior influence and is more sustainable. Not relying on one person or group of people, means the process is less at risk. It broadens the basis from which change can emerge.
- 6 Evidence is important.** Politicians dislike a lack of content. Whenever there is a vacuum, politicians tend to fill the space with what they consider being in their interests. But if interested stakeholders provide content and evidence that appeals to the issue, they can change attitudes. Doing so requires presence and energy and a focus on how evidence can be leveraged to mitigate barriers.
- 7 Narratives and framing are important.** The way issues are presented, and the reasons for change can shift perspectives. This battle of ideas is essential for forging locally legitimate – normatively acceptable – institutions and reforms.

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