

Thinking & Working Politically Guidance Paper

Grounding work and practice in political economy



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Introduction

The ASEAN-UK Health Security Partnership (HSP) is a five-year initiative supporting ASEAN's ten Member States (AMS) and Timor-Leste to strengthen health security systems and foster cross-border collaboration. It aims to reduce the impact of public health emergencies by focusing on three core areas: preparedness and response, resilient and equitable health systems, and advancing understanding and action on the health impacts of climate change.

In today's context—marked by climate-driven health risks, persistent inequities, and shifting global priorities in the wake of COVID-19—health security is increasingly shaped by political, economic, and institutional factors. Many ASEAN countries face constrained resources and competing demands, limiting their ability to deliver essential services and coordinate regional responses. Technical solutions alone are insufficient; understanding how power, incentives, and institutions operate is essential for sustainable change.

HSP is designed to be flexible and adaptive in response to the uncertainty and complexity of global and regional geopolitics. It accounts for the competing demands and diverse political systems of AMS, as well as the dynamics of donor engagement with ASEAN. To address this complexity, the HSP integrates a **Thinking and Working Politically (TWP)** approach, informed by **Applied Political Economy Analysis (APEA)**. This approach enables HSP and its partners to better understand the incentives, power dynamics, and institutional landscapes that shape change—both within individual countries and across ASEAN as a regional body. It also helps identify where collaboration is feasible, who needs to be engaged, and how inclusive solutions can be advanced across national and regional levels.

This guidance paper sets out how TWP and APEA are embedded in HSP's core delivery modalities—grantmaking, peer exchange, and technical assistance - and provides a practical framework for applying them in support of health security efforts aligned with the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI).

Why TWP Matters for ASEAN Health Security and Systems Resilience

The HSP approach to TWP is grounded in the understanding that achieving meaningful and sustainable outcomes in health security depends not just on technical inputs but on deep political insight and strong contextual analysis. In practice, this means using APEA to understand how systems really work—who holds power, how decisions are made, and

which formal and informal rules shape outcomes. A TWP approach requires a detailed appreciation of local and regional contexts: from the formal mandates and informal influence patterns across ASEAN institutions, to national political cycles and governance cultures within AMS. By integrating these insights into programme design, HSP and its partners identify not only what needs to change, but how change might actually happen—and what conditions are necessary to make it feasible.

Working politically involves acting on this understanding through flexible, adaptive strategies. HSP supports grantees, and technical partners to navigate complexity, test assumptions, and adjust course based on continuous learning. We encourage intentional practices—such as tracking context, identifying new stakeholders, and testing entry points—to build politically smart interventions. This adaptability is critical in ASEAN, where consensus-based decision-making, non-binding commitments, and shifting leadership structures require nuanced engagement. HSP aligns its support with Health Cluster priorities, while recognising that progress often relies on AMS-led innovation, credible intermediaries, and regionally relevant knowledge. Through TWP and APEA, HSP ensures that all programme elements—grants, peer exchanges, technical assistance—are politically informed, locally grounded, and adaptable to emerging risks and opportunities.

'Work with the grain'. TWP approaches which foreground the potential for national actors to drive change in the rules of the game – the way things are done – increase the likelihood of programme impact. ASEAN operates through consensus, non-interference, and equal respect among AMS. These principles create a strong foundation for cooperation, but they also require careful alignment of regional goals with diverse national realities. AMS have different levels of development, capacities, and priorities—especially in health. For HSP, this means:

- Grants and TA must be adaptable and designed to align with both national and regional objectives.
- There is space to lead and innovate—as long as efforts are shaped to respect ASEAN's principles and complement existing commitments.

National Energy Drives Regional Progress. HSP recognises that national experience is essential to advancing regional health security. Many effective regional policies begin as country-led innovations or pilot projects. Grants and peer exchange awards can help surface and scale these contributions, particularly when they respond to real needs and can generate lessons across contexts.

Partnership and Coordination. The health security space in ASEAN includes many development partners. HSP is committed to working respectfully and in coordination with others while supporting AMS leadership and ASEAN centrality. Technical assistance providers and grantees are encouraged to coordinate with national authorities and ASEAN

institutions where relevant, and to look for ways to connect national actions with broader regional benefits.

HSP is fully aligned with the ASEAN Health Cluster 2, 3 and 4 priorities as well as the UK-ASEAN Plan of Action. Proposals and technical assistance should demonstrate how they contribute to these clusters and support **ASEAN’s vision of a resilient, people-centred, and regionally integrated health system.**

HSP’s Approach to TWP

The ASEAN-UK Health Security Partnership (HSP) recognises that sustainable progress in health security is not driven by technical capacity alone but by the political realities that shape how systems function. The programme’s Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) approach, grounded in applied Political Economy Analysis (PEA), is central to how HSP engages with ASEAN institutions and Member States (AMS). It enables the programme to design and implement support that is politically smart, contextually grounded, and adaptive ensuring that grants, peer learning, and technical assistance (TA) add real value in dynamic and often complex settings.

This approach begins with a commitment to strong political insight, detailed local understanding, and responsiveness to shifting contexts. TWP helps the HSP team, grantees, and partners to identify not only what should be done, but what can be done—when, where, and by whom—within the formal and informal rules of the ASEAN system. The approach is based on six key principles: deep contextual and stakeholder analysis; a focus on the “rules of the game” or the way things are done; identification of politically feasible entry points; flexible implementation and adaptation; promotion of collective action and inclusivity; and continuous learning and reflection.

These principles are applied across the programme’s three delivery mechanisms—grants, peer exchange, and the TA hub—to embed a shared way of working that is politically aware and regionally relevant.

1. Grants mechanism

TWP/APEA informs both the design and assessment of funding applications. HSP invites proposals that reflect political insight, contextual fluency, and clear thinking on how change can happen. Reviewers are encouraged to look for a strong understanding of the problem being addressed, including stakeholder motivations, power dynamics, and institutional capacity. Proposals that articulate multiple pathways or entry points, account for risks and political feasibility, and offer mechanisms for learning and adaptation are prioritised.

For example, a strong grant application to support antimicrobial resistance (AMR) policy development in one AMS would demonstrate the applicant's clear analysis of the country's policy bottlenecks, informal stakeholder networks, and the opportunity to align with an upcoming ASEAN Health Cluster 2 agenda item. The application would illustrate how the engagement strategy would leverage applicant relationships with mid-level technocrats and build on existing regional commitments, increasing traction and uptake.

2. Peer Exchange

Peer exchange activities are designed to strengthen regional collaboration and amplify nationally led innovation drawing on regional and UK experience. Exchanges allow AMS to reflect on common challenges, share practical lessons, learn from the experience of other countries and identify what works in real contexts. These are not technical visits alone but vehicles for fostering trust, promoting collective ownership, and creating policy-relevant knowledge that can inform ASEAN's strategic plans.

3. Technical Assistance (TA) Hub

The TA hub supports AMS and ASEAN institutions with responsive, politically informed assistance. Experts are selected not only for their technical expertise but also for their ability to navigate complex political and bureaucratic environments. TA is co-designed with AMS counterparts to reflect national systems, priorities, and capacity constraints.

For example, a TA deployment to support food safety regulation under Health Cluster 4 might be tailored to the specific decentralised governance structure in an AMS. The TA expert would work with sub-national actors and food safety inspection bodies, co-creating a step-by-step pathway for harmonised provincial practices that meet established ASEAN standards. The expert's national credibility and long-standing relationships would be critical to their ability to broker solutions across multiple agencies and present findings in a way that reinforced national ownership while building momentum toward regional alignment.

These delivery approaches reflect broader strategies derived from the baseline APEA findings and consultation with stakeholders. HSP focuses on promoting coordination and collaboration by leveraging strong leadership, investing in regional knowledge sharing, and strengthening infrastructure for joint action. It recognises the key role of AMS as the primary voices in ASEAN decision-making, with ASEC playing a crucial, though limited, coordinating role. HSP also invests in building sustainable partnerships—using embassies,

national experts, and regional actors to navigate bureaucracies and build relationships that help move technical decisions into action.

By embedding TWP/APEA across its programming, HSP brings multiple benefits to ASEAN stakeholders and the broader health security landscape. For AMS, it offers a more flexible, responsive way to access support that aligns with national systems and priorities and increases the likelihood that grants, and technical assistance result in sustained improvements. For ASEC, it reinforces its convening power without adding to institutional burden, enabling the Secretariat to coordinate effectively and broker regional initiatives with support from AMS. At a regional level, the approach enhances policy coherence, strengthens collective responses to shared threats, and creates mechanisms for translating national innovations into regional action. Globally, it contributes to more equitable and resilient health security systems that are informed by local realities and capable of responding to emerging challenges.

The operationalisation of TWP/APEA within HSP enables the programme to work with not around the complexity of ASEAN. It creates space for more meaningful engagement, more durable partnerships, and more sustainable outcomes across the health security.

Why look at complexity in AMS? One answer is that the structural features of a context shape the way things are done (the rules of the game) and the rules incentivise (positively and negatively) the behaviour of people and organisations in the system such that it generates outcomes (that can be efficient and equitable or inefficient and inequitable).

An example is the ongoing impact of a national corruption scandal related to COVID-19 within Vietnam's Ministry of Health. Vietnam is currently operating as a bottleneck on the effective operationalisation of the three-country ACPHEED. This is partly because the decision makers who backed ACPHEED in Vietnam's health sector were replaced, and Vietnam's new leadership do not want to risk backing something that may link them to the corruption scandal. It is also partly because this would be the first time Vietnam hosts a multinational organisation and there are no established legal frameworks for doing so. Perhaps the legal framework is the more feasible entry point for supporting the effective operationalisation of ACPHEED.

Implications for Practice

1. What This Means for Prospective Grantees

As a prospective grantee, your proposal should demonstrate a clear understanding of the context, institutions, and political dynamics shaping your health security challenge. Strong applications will show how your initiative is feasible within local systems, reflects the interests and capacities of key stakeholders, and can adapt to changing circumstances over time. Specifically, proposals should:

- Describe the **problem and its root causes**, including political, institutional, and social dimensions.
- Identify relevant **stakeholders, power dynamics**, and any formal or informal barriers to change.
- Explain how your organisation is positioned to engage with these dynamics—what relationships, credibility, or leverage you bring.
- Propose a **flexible approach**, with room to iterate, learn, and adjust activities based on real-time feedback or political shifts.

Align your proposal with **ASEAN's strategic frameworks**, such as the **Plan of Action on Health Development** and relevant Health Cluster priorities (e.g. Clusters 2, 3, or 4).

As an implementing partner, your knowledge of how decisions are made, who holds influence, and where barriers lie will help design solutions that are practical, inclusive, and sustainable—not just technically sound.

2. What this means for Reviewers (the TCG, TA Hub Experts)

When reviewing proposals or providing support through the TA hub, assess whether initiatives demonstrate political and contextual awareness, and whether they are designed to respond to local systems, opportunities, and constraints. Key things to look for include:

- **Contextual analysis:** Does the proposal show an understanding of the political, institutional, or social drivers of the problem?
- **Stakeholder mapping:** Have the relevant actors, influencers, or gatekeepers been identified, along with their interests and potential influence?
- **Change strategy:** Is there a realistic theory of how change might occur, and is it based on existing opportunities, leadership, or entry points?
- **Adaptability:** Does the proposal account for uncertainty or complexity, and include a plan to learn, reflect, and adapt over time?

- **Policy alignment:** Does the work support national priorities and contribute to ASEAN regional goals, particularly within relevant Health Clusters?
- **Inclusion and voice:** Does the project consider gender equity, social inclusion, or underserved groups in its approach to systems change?

TWP is not about political risk—it’s about political opportunity. High-quality applications will show a nuanced understanding of where traction exists and how technical work can succeed within real-world systems.

3. For ASEAN and UK stakeholders

The TWP approach strengthens policy coherence, system alignment, and long-term sustainability. By grounding HSP’s delivery mechanisms in political and institutional realities, the programme can help ensure that initiatives:

- Reinforce existing national efforts while contributing to regional integration and shared learning.
- Build on what already works within ASEAN systems, institutions, and norms, rather than duplicating or bypassing them.
- Support flexible and inclusive implementation, allowing different AMS to move at different speeds but remain part of a shared regional direction.
- Enable responsive and targeted assistance, focused on priorities identified through Health Clusters and the UK-ASEAN Plan of Action.

Ultimately, this approach helps create an enabling environment where diplomatic priorities, national needs, and regional goals align, improving the coherence, relevance, and impact of joint ASEAN-UK efforts in health security.

Conclusion

Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) is central to the ASEAN-UK Health Security Partnership’s ambition to deliver meaningful, lasting change in health security across ASEAN. For programme grantees and technical assistance experts, TWP offers a practical lens to navigate the political and institutional realities that shape health systems and regional collaboration. It enables HSP-supported initiatives to go beyond technical fixes—by understanding power dynamics, incentives, and institutional constraints, grantees and TA providers can design and deliver interventions that are not only effective but also politically feasible and locally owned.

By embedding Applied Political Economy Analysis (APEA) into grant making, peer exchange, and technical assistance, HSP ensures that its delivery modalities are responsive to context and grounded in real-world complexity. This approach enhances sustainability, by aligning efforts with national priorities and regional commitments; improves value for money, by targeting resources where change is most likely; and strengthens ASEAN-UK collaboration, by fostering inclusive dialogue and shared problem-solving.

TWP also creates space for long-term learning and innovation. It encourages grantees and TA experts to reflect, adapt, and iterate—building a culture of responsiveness and strategic insight. This adaptive mindset not only improves programme delivery but also contributes to a deeper understanding of what works, for whom, and under what conditions—laying the groundwork for more resilient and equitable health systems across the region.

TWP is an enabler of HSP's goals. It equips all partners whether implementers, advisers, or funders with the tools to think politically, act strategically, and collaborate effectively in pursuit of stronger AMS health security systems and collaboration within ASEAN.