



ALIGN

Advancing Land-based Investment Governance

 COLUMBIA CLIMATE SCHOOL
COLUMBIA CENTER ON
SUSTAINABLE INVESTMENT



Working in Politically Savvy Ways to Improve Land-Based Investment Governance

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Introduction	3
1. The importance of working in politically savvy ways	4
2. How political economy realities can shape LBI governance outcomes	4
3. Preliminary steps for crafting politically smart LBI reform efforts: Defining parameters, assessing the political landscape, and planning for change	6
3.1 Defining problems and goals.....	6
3.2 Assessing the political landscape.....	7
3.3 Charting a course: theories of change and action	8
3.4 Adopting adaptive and learning-centric ways of working	8
4. Politically savvy approaches and strategies.....	9
4.1 Navigating the status quo.....	9
4.2 Changing the balance of power and interest to improve prospects of impact.....	11
4.3 Attempting to circumvent sources of political obstacles.....	17
5. Conclusion	19
Annex.....	20

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ALIGN: Advancing Land-based Investment Governance

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Introduction

The bulk of this working paper was produced in advance of an interactive workshop among ALIGN peer-to-peer network members.¹ The paper draws on a variety of sources: the author's prior research on the "Politics of Extractive Industries,"² the collective work of the core ALIGN consortium organizations,³ and the experiences and reflections of some of ALIGN's country-level technical support partners. It provided a starting point for discussions at the "Politically Savvy Approaches to Improving Land-Based Investment Governance" workshop on October 7, 2024 and is now being shared publicly in hopes of its use to others.⁴ The paper also includes insights gained during the workshop and explores:

- (1) the importance of focusing on the political aspects of governance reforms, alongside a more traditional focus on technical reforms, in order to improve prospects of achieving desired impacts;
- (2) some of the types of political dynamics that can impede or drive impact; and
- (3) reflections on how these dynamics might be addressed.

In the context of the ALIGN project, land-based investment (LBI) governance refers to the laws, policies, institutions, and practices that regulate investments in land and natural resources that entail a significant land footprint (including those in agriculture, renewable energy, forestry, extractive, and related industries).

¹ For more on the ALIGN project and its objectives, see: "Advancing Land-Based Investment Governance (ALIGN)," Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment (CCSI), International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and Namati, <https://ccsi.columbia.edu/content/advancing-land-based-investment-governance-align>.

² For more on the project on the Politics of Extractive Industries and its outputs, see <https://ccsi.columbia.edu/content/politics-extractive-industries>.

³ The ALIGN work referenced includes strategies, reflections, and insights shared by those directly working to deliver ALIGN technical support as well as the experiences shared by project partners with whom they collaborated.

⁴ Please note that this is not an original research paper but a synthesis of key insights from existing research and ALIGN project perspectives meant to serve as a resource for those working on LBI governance reforms.

1. The importance of working in politically savvy ways

Traditionally, efforts to support better **LBI** governance in pursuit of sustainable development outcomes, like the majority of undertakings in the broader development field, have tended to be largely technocratic. Examples include support focused on identifying technical notions of “good practice” (examples on licensing, impact assessments in a narrow sense, or taxation systems were raised by meeting participants) and ensuring adequate capacity to implement these. However, even when key actors in a given policy or legal realm know what to do, how to do it, and are equipped with adequate resources, the intended impacts of these good practices are often derailed by political realities. As a participant in the workshop noted, “Technocrats may be powerful but politicians often have at least as much influence over outcomes.”

Political realities that can undermine reform efforts	
Uptake gaps	Ideas for good practice that fail to translate into law or policy (e.g., recommendations or guidance for good practice on assessment, licensing, or other LBI processes that “sit on the shelf” and are not adopted).
Implementation gaps	Laws and policies that are not effectively implemented (e.g., laws or policies on community consent that are not implemented or are partially implemented in ways that distort intended outcomes).
Impact gaps	Laws or policies that are implemented in a way that dilutes their effects (e.g., environmental impact assessment (EIA) processes that function largely as box-ticking exercises rather than effective mechanisms for anticipating and addressing social and environmental risks). ⁵

The political contexts within which LBI governance plays out are often at the heart of these gaps which impede significant practical progress on crucial issues from being made. They are also central to successful governance reforms. It is often political economy (**PE**) considerations—who has power over what and whom, who has an interest in advancing or opposing particular changes, and key characteristics of a given political system—that determine what outcomes and impacts are feasible, where openings and obstacles lie, and which notions of “good practice” in LBI governance are most likely to translate into actual practice. Therefore, any attempts to improve LBI governance must deliberately account for such factors.

2. How political economy realities can shape LBI governance outcomes

When governance reforms have the backing of powerful actors with a strong interest in seeing them succeed, the prospects of progress are improved. However, when national leaders, heads of powerful ministries, or their political and private sector allies have interests or priorities that do not align with the goals of specific governance reforms, they can impede progress and impact in various ways. Some of the **major political challenges** raised within ALIGN include **meddling**, **pressure**, or **obstruction by**:

⁵ For more on the ways in which the impact of EIA processes can be undermined, see the tables in: Hobbs, J. and Juffe-Bignoli, D., *Impact Assessment for Corridors: From Infrastructure to Development Corridors* (eds.). Cambridge: The Development Corridors Partnership, 2022), <https://developmentcorridors.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Chapter-03-1.pdf>; Leila Kazemi, Perrine Toledano, and Tehtena Mebratu-Tsegaye, *Tackling the EIA Impact Gap: Addressing Political Economy Realities to Bring Actual Practice Closer to Best Practice* (New York: CCSI, February 2022), <https://ccsi.columbia.edu/sites/ccsi.columbia.edu/files/content/docs/Tackling-the-EIA-Impact-Gap-Addressing-Political-Economy-Realities-to-Bring-Actual-Practice-Closer-to-Best-Practice.pdf>.

- **high-level government officials who see LBI governance reforms as working against their personal or political interests** and who undermine progress through cronyism, corruption, and clientelism;
- **officials at all levels and across agencies who prioritize corporate or investor interests** over those of citizens or communities in the design and execution of governance activities (i.e., various levels of state capture);
- **subnational or traditional authorities who can use their positions of power to benefit** from current dysfunctional systems of LBI—these authorities might also be subject to influence by national figures, putting them in service of the priorities of those figures and their interests rather than those of communities and the broader population;⁶ and

In addition, global forces can contribute to influencing the fate of LBI. For instance, powerful private sector actors who see their interests impeded by strong LBI governance can pressure government officials to weaken protective regulations in favor of expedited investment processes. The global pursuit of energy transitions to mitigate climate change – and more recently, the growing energy demands of digitization and defense – can at times create *de facto* pressure for rapid mining and renewables project approvals, unintentionally undercutting the implementation of LBI regulatory standards and processes along the way.⁷

These actors can undermine attempts to reform LBI governance by simply withholding support for potential policy or legislative changes, thereby effectively halting progress on uptake by making it more difficult or even impossible to get policies approved or legislation passed. They can also apply pressure on officials driving or implementing reforms by withholding funding or support for their agencies and threatening professional or personal consequences to disincentivize action on reform agendas, potentially undermining uptake and implementation. If, for instance, such figures prioritize investment promotion above all else, they may use their influence to undermine the efficacy of good governance measures such as EIA processes.⁸ Even when implementation is undermined, it can confer unmerited reputational benefits on those involved—they get credit for making commitments to reforms and in some cases taking cursory actions to put these in practice without having to take steps to meaningfully do so (and potentially actively undercutting such steps).

Similarly, powerful actors hoping to perpetuate investment governance arrangements that enable them to benefit from corruption and capture dynamics can use their

⁶ For more on the ways in which home governments can put pressure on host government officials to prioritize investor interests, see: Lorenzo Cotula with Thierry Berger, *Legal empowerment in agribusiness investments: harnessing political economy analysis* (London: LEGEND, 2017), 13-14, <https://landportal.info/library/resources/legal-empowerment-agribusiness-investments-harnessing-political-economy-analysis>.

⁷ On impacts of mining of transition minerals on indigenous and other land-connected peoples, see: Owen, J.R., Kemp, D., Lechner, A.M. et al., “Energy transition minerals and their intersection with land-connected peoples,” *Nat Sustain* 6. (2023): 203–211, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-022-00994-6>; and for more on the idea of “sacrifice zones,” see: examples of such discussions regarding [Madagascar](#), [Myanmar](#), [Chile](#), and [more broadly](#).

⁸ In the meeting it was noted that even when formal participatory mechanisms exist, citizens and their interests can be effectively sidelined. This can be done, for instance, by communicating assessments in languages and with technical detail inaccessible to communities and/or providing short timeframes to review these often very long, dense documents. Consultation processes can in other ways be designed to force a project ahead with the appearance of having undertaken meaningful consultation and then ignoring commitments to compensation or grievance mechanisms once projects are approved. For more on the politics of EIA, see ALIGN’s primer on the subject: Lorenzo Cotula, *Climate change in impact assessments: towards an integrated approach* (London: ALIGN, October 2023), <https://www.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/2023-10/21636iied.pdf>, and CCSI’s research in the context of extractive industries: “The Politics of Environmental Impact Assessments,” CCSI, <https://ccsi.columbia.edu/content/politics-environmental-impact-assessments>.

influence to undermine efforts to foster transparency and accountability. This may include: avoiding commitments or crafting them in ways that overly circumscribe their coverage; weakening implementation; compromising the timing and quality of disclosures; undercutting oversight institutions; or thwarting public accountability pathways.⁹ Powerful actors might also put pressure on bureaucrats charged with implementing participatory decision-making processes to produce watered-down consultations that do not give participants a meaningful voice in shaping outcomes. They can also use direct sidelining and formal or informal restrictions on civic space to actively exclude and effectively neutralize the voice of potential opponents among civil society, local communities, or the broader population.¹⁰

This section has provided a very small set of illustrations of the ways in which political economy realities can shape the fate of LBI governance reforms. They underscore the importance of crafting reform efforts that are technically sound and adequately capacitated but also *politically feasible*. The remainder of this document will explore potential ways to pursue this.

3. Preliminary steps for crafting politically smart LBI reform efforts: Defining parameters, assessing the political landscape, and planning for change

This section gives an overview of the preliminary steps that should be taken to determine political feasibility and inform specific politically savvy strategies and approaches: **(A) Defining problems and goals; (B) Assessing the political landscape; (C) Charting a course: theories of change and action; and (D) Adopting adaptive and learning-centric ways of working.**

3.1 Defining problems and goals

Before considering politically savvy strategies and approaches for working on LBI governance, it is important for those undertaking this work to define their targets by narrowing in on specific LBI governance challenges to be addressed and specifying desired outcomes. The first involves considering specific problems to be tackled based on a variety of factors. These might include the urgency or need for action, magnitude of potential impact, feasibility of making progress, and level of priority given to the issue by key stakeholders. For each problem, then, local actors must decide what changes in outcomes they are hoping to see. For instance, if the problem is that existing community consultation processes do not allow stakeholders to meaningfully shape whether and how LBI will proceed, then desired outcomes might be processes in which communities' voices actually affect at least some key decisions related to LBI. While these matters might seem straightforward, explicitly naming these problems and desired outcomes rather than taking them for granted can be instrumental in setting appropriate targets and direction for reform agendas.

⁹ The dynamics of the politics of efforts to foster more transparency and accountability in governance are illustrated in more detail in CCSI's analysis of these issues in the context of extractive industries, see various pieces here: "The Politics of Transparency and Accountability," CCSI, <https://ccsi.columbia.edu/content/politics-transparency-and-accountability>.

¹⁰ For more on the politics of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) processes, see: Tehtena Mebratu-Tsegaye, Leila Kazemi, *Free, prior and informed consent: Addressing political realities to improve impact* (CCSI, October 2020), <https://ccsi.columbia.edu/work/projects/the-politics-of-free-prior-and-informed-consent>.

3.2 Assessing the political landscape

Political economy analysis (**PEA**) is a way to try to identify some of the key political factors that might be perpetuating a given problem or impeding progress on addressing it. PEA can also illuminate potential opportunities for driving progress forward. While there are numerous different ways to undertake PEA,¹¹ at a basic level, analyses of the political landscape will tend to focus on understanding:¹²

- **Who would need to do what** in order to bring about progress toward the desired outcomes or ultimate goals (e.g., reducing corruption in LBI decision-making processes or improving environmental management of large-scale LBIs)? What is the likelihood of this occurring?
- Who are the **key players** with regard to a given issue (e.g., specific government officials within relevant ministries, regulators, investors, project partners, influential individuals)? Beyond these actors, are there others who might have a strong interest in this specific issue (e.g., land owners, land users, and others within an affected community)?
- Who has **power** (formal authority, informal influence, or both) over the fate of a particular area of policy or practice? Among the key stakeholders, who has power over whom?
- What are the **priorities and interests** of the key players? Are they benefitting from the problematic governance status quo that might be affected by the adoption and implementation of the good governance policy or practice being pursued?
- How do these priorities and interests **align with a given good practice/policy or change agenda**? (In other words, who might ‘win’ or ‘lose’ as the result of success in achieving your objectives?) Based on these (mis)alignments, who are **potential allies and opponents** to the goals being pursued?
- Are there specific **contextual or systemic factors** that influence the outcomes you care about (including political, cultural, social, or historical considerations)?
- Where powerful actors do not perceive that it is in their interest to support an aspect of LBI governance reform, what are the prospects of change in the desired direction? **Who would have to do what for this change of perception to occur**? How and why might they want to do this?

The answers to such questions can help provide a **context-specific roadmap** to both identify potential obstacles in the political landscape and strategize possible ways of addressing them. By understanding who might be political opponents or allies and where there might be political obstacles or opportunities, those seeking to advance LBI governance reforms can more deliberately address these and pursue pathways to change that are more likely to be impactful. Because political contexts are dynamic,

¹¹ For resources for carrying out PEA, see: David Hudson, Heather Marquette, Sam Waldo, *Everyday Political Analysis* (Developmental Leadership Program, January 2016), <https://res.cloudinary.com/dlprog/image/upload/ZwPASQapyoiZRnsWMkze6kMpomP1T6WrFsxGupO8.pdf>; “Political Economy Analysis Toolkit,” WaterAid, last modified November 8, 2017, <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/political-economy-analysis-toolkit>; Verena Fritz, Brian Levy, and Rachel Ort, eds., *Problem-Driven Political Economy Analysis: The World Bank’s Experience* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2014), <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/147811468171250430/problem-driven-political-economy-analysis-the-world-banks-experience>.

¹² The questions from this section are drawn directly from CCSI’s 2021 primer, see: Leila Kazemi, *Getting from Ideas to Reality: Building Political Support to Translate Good Ideas into Actual Practice* (CCSI, September 2021), <https://ccsi.columbia.edu/sites/ccsi.columbia.edu/files/content/docs/CCSI%20ALIGN%20primer%20getting%20from%20ideas%20to%20reality.pdf>.

such PEAs need to be updated regularly and when major changes occur.

3.3 Charting a course: theories of change and action

Once LBI governance problems and desired outcomes have been defined and the ways in which PE realities might affect attempts to get to the desired outcomes are better understood, these insights can then be applied to thinking through a **theory of change**.¹³ Simply put, this involves thinking through and spelling out the rationale of different strategies and approaches to trying to achieve desired changes. It is important that anticipated change processes account not only for uptake of reforms but also for their implementation, monitoring, and enforcement. Identifying change pathways also involves being explicit about **assumptions** regarding the conditions under which these pathways will work as intended (e.g., assuming that a particular party, specific minister, or traditional leader stays in power, that key actors read and act on a policy brief or International Financial Institution (IFI) requirement, that local communities are mobilized to demand the changes in question, or that prices for certain types of land parcels stay within a certain band).

Theories of action,¹⁴ in turn, apply the same lens to thinking through how the activities of any particular actor—e.g., a government reformer producing a policy brief, a civil society organization (CSO) undertaking advocacy, or a development organization providing conditional financing—are intended to contribute to the broader change pathway being pursued. Theories of action reflect considerations like resources and comparative advantages that a particular actor brings to the table with regard to the problems and desired outcomes at hand.

Thinking through theories of change and theories of action provides crucial opportunities to clarify why and how specific LBI governance reforms might be pursued, and to rigorously scrutinize and assess the viability of different change pathways. Without such steps, many actors risk expending resources on fruitless solution-driven work (i.e., the pursuit of certain notions of “good practice” regardless of viability or relevance to achieving a certain outcome).

3.4 Adopting adaptive and learning-centric ways of working

Because governance changes are embedded in dynamic, complex, and unpredictable systems,¹⁵ it is unreasonable to expect that initial theories of change and action will necessarily play out as intended in practice—that action X, targeting actor Y will necessarily contribute to LBI governance outcome Z. With many other factors conditioning such outcomes, there is always the possibility of unexpected diversions from the desired change pathway or unintended consequences. Strategies and

¹³ There are many resources to support the development of theories of change, including the reasonably straightforward Theory of Change Workbook produced by USAID’s Learning Lab, see: “Theory of Change Workbook,” USAID, <https://socialimpact.com/introducing-the-toc-workbook/>.

¹⁴ For more on the difference between theories of change and theories of action, see: Annemarie Reerink, Rebecca Devitt, and Didar Ali Didar, “Theory of Change and Theory of Action: What’s the Difference and Why Does It Matter?” *Governance and Development Soapbox* (blog), July 19, 2019, <https://abt.gov/governance.com/2019/07/19/theory-of-change-and-theory-of-action-whats-the-difference-and-why-does-it-matter/>.

¹⁵ For more tools and resources for understanding complex systems and pursuing change within these, see: Woodhill, J. and Millican, J., “Systems Thinking and Practice: A Guide to Concepts, Principles and Tools for FCDO and Partners,” *The Institute of Development Studies*, (February, 2023), <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12413/17862>; and “Reos Partners – Your Partners in Systems Change,” Reos Partners, <https://reospartners.com/>.

approaches need to be able to evolve in response in order to maximize the prospects of impact. Therefore, those working on trying to bring about LBI governance changes could benefit from adopting **nimble, flexible, adaptive, and opportunistic ways of working, tracking, and responding to learning from practice and changes in context** as they go. Rather than locking into one change pathway, they would pursue various pathways and monitor how their theories of change and action unfold, analyze their performance on an ongoing basis, and make adjustments as needed. If something is not working as intended, or some aspect of the assumed conditions changes or proves unrealistic, strategies and approaches could be adapted to try to improve the chances of making progress toward the desired outcomes.

4. Politically savvy approaches and strategies

When it comes to politically savvy strategies and approaches to supporting changes in LBI governance, hopes of contributing to meaningful progress often rest on the ability to address political obstacles and, where possible, take advantage of political opportunities. This working paper lays out three general approaches and within them explores a handful of illustrative examples based on insights from the ALIGN project and related CCSI research (summarized in the Annex at the end of this document).¹⁶ These examples are meant to serve not as a roadmap or a set of mutually exclusive possibilities, but as a sampling of options intended to provide inspiration for different ways of strategically confronting political obstacles and capitalizing on political opportunities.

4.1 Navigating the status quo

One general approach or orientation to addressing political obstacles and capitalizing on opportunities involves **accepting the contours of the political context as they are for the foreseeable future and trying to strategically maximize progress within these constraints and opportunities**. Under this approach—sometimes referred to as “working with the grain”¹⁷—priority is placed on feasibility and actionability, tailoring goals, approaches, and strategies to the realities of political circumstances. In many contexts, this may involve focusing on smaller, incremental changes to build momentum rather than immediately seeking major transformations which may be much less likely to succeed. Pursuit of LBI governance reforms within this orientation tends to focus on trying to be opportunistic and capitalizing on openings for incremental progress wherever possible. There are various ways to try to do this, which can include:

- A. *Strategic issue framing to meet the powerful at their interests*. One way to try to make the most of existing power and interest dynamics is to actively target reforms at issues that align with the interests of powerful actors (or at least are not opposed to them). This strategy involves understanding what the priorities of key actors are, determining where these interests might intersect with specific

¹⁶ For more on CCSI’s research on politically savvy ways of working, see: Leila Kazemi, *Getting from Ideas to Reality: Building Political Support to Translate Good Ideas into Actual Practice* (CCSI, September 2021), <https://ccsi.columbia.edu/sites/ccsi.columbia.edu/files/content/docs/CCSI%20ALIGN%20primer%20getting%20from%20ideas%20to%20reality.pdf>. CCSI, *The Politics of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent*; CCSI, *Unlocking the Power of Reformers to Achieve Better Progress on Extractives Governance* (January 2022), <https://ccsi.columbia.edu/sites/ccsi.columbia.edu/files/content/Think%20Piece%20-%20Unlocking%20the%20Power%20of%20Reformers%20to%20Achieve%20Better%20Progress%20on%20Extractives%20Governance.pdf>.

¹⁷ See Brian Levy’s seminal discussion of this concept and its practical implications here: Brian Levy, “A ‘With the Grain’ Interpretation of Community-Driven Development,” *Working with the Grain* (blog), June 11, 2018, <https://workingwiththegrain.com/2018/06/11/a-with-the-grain-interpretation-of-community-driven-development/>.

aspects of the LBI governance reform agenda being pursued, and then framing issues in ways that focus on this intersection. Such framing might involve making the case for how specific LBI governance reforms might benefit them and serve their interests or highlight the downsides or costs of particular areas of weak governance that it would be in their interest to avoid. In addition to trying to focus on areas that align with the interests of powerful actors, another way to try to use strategic issue framing is to deliberately avoid powerful opposition by designing reform agendas to actively sidestep areas of high interest to powerful actors. In either case, the point is to be strategically mindful of the interests of key powerful actors and to potentially pursue a more collaborative rather than adversarial relationship with these actors when this is both feasible and the risk of co-optation is low.

- B. Making tolerable concessions.* Where there is opposition, proponents of governance reforms can consider whether there are concessions that can be made to powerful opponents (e.g., allowing them to retain some influence or benefits post-reform) to neutralize the prospects of them acting as spoilers while still making progress on key aspects of the reform agenda being pursued. This requires asking whether there are possibilities for engagement of potential opponents to allow them to articulate their priorities and help identify where they are willing to budge in order to find the most feasible openings for action. A key risk to avoid is such concessions undermining or constraining progress too much.
- C. Simplifying implementation.* It is often at the implementation stage that resistance to governance change can manifest itself, as evidenced by growing recognition of “implementation gaps.”¹⁸ Therefore, any steps that can be taken to make implementation as straightforward as possible—e.g., through adequate planning and resourcing or minimizing the need for extensive new institutions or new teams of experts—may help reduce opportunities for excuses and blockages to arise during this stage.
- D. Capitalizing on windows of opportunity.*¹⁹ Because the PE context is dynamic, situations that might appear to be stuck or inauspicious to LBI reforms at one point can evolve as certain obstacles might be reduced. There is also the possibility of windows of opportunity arising from, for example:
- **Campaigns and elections** – They may introduce uncertainty and “short-termism” that can disrupt momentum around reforms and undermine their long-term implementation if power changes hands. However, they can also be moments of opportunity if those running for office across various parties or affiliations can be pressured or persuaded (through advocacy, popular mobilization, or other means) to make commitments to act on specific issues in specific ways if elected. This can potentially lay the groundwork for future policy or legislation regardless of who is elected and also be a chance to raise public

¹⁸ For more on implementation gaps, see: Center for International Private Enterprise, *Improving Public Governance: Closing the Implementation Gap between Law and Practice* (Washington, DC: CIPE, October 23, 2012), <https://www.cipe.org/resources/improving-public-governance-closing-implementation-gap-law-practice/>;

Michael Howlett, M. Ramesh, and Anka Kekez, “Policy Failure and the Policy-Implementation Gap: Can Policy Support Programs Help?” *Policy Design and Practice* 1, no. 1 (2018): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2018.1540378>; and Natural Resource Governance Institute, “Politics Are Holding Back Implementation of Extractive Sector Transparency Rules,” *Natural Resource Governance Institute*, March 6, 2018, <https://resourcegovernance.org/articles/politics-are-holding-back-implementation-extractive-sector-transparency-rules>.

¹⁹ For more on anticipating and acting on windows of opportunity, discussed specifically with regard to anti-corruption but holding more broadly applicable insights, see: Florencia Guertzovich, María Soledad Gattoni, and Dave Algos, *Seeing New Opportunities: How Global Actors Can Better Support Anticorruption Reformers* (Open Society Foundations, November 2020), <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/seeing-new-opportunities-how-global-actors-can-better-support-anticorruption-reformers>.

awareness of specific LBI governance issues and influence their votes.

- **Key moments in policy/legislation development** – The ability to act quickly when the decision is made to develop major new LBI policies or legislation, or significantly revise existing ones, potentially provides an opportunity to shape outcomes for those with standing knowledge of the issues at hand. They can work to shape these processes, their outcomes, or both, through various strategies including direct involvement in policy-making groups, advocacy, and provision of inputs to key actors. In addition to the formulation or development of the policy or legislation in question, it is important that there be follow-up to ensure adoption or passage as well as implementation in order for this moment of opportunity to translate into impact.
- **Corruption scandals, environmental disasters, or other scenarios spotlighting risks of bad LBI governance** – While no one wants such events to occur, when they do, there may be an opportunity to try to use resulting attention and scrutiny to make significant advances on reforms.

Being able to recognize and nimbly and strategically act on such moments of opportunity could enable significant strides that might not otherwise be available.

E. Focusing on “reformers.” Even in the most challenging settings, the landscape of power and interests is not monolithic, and there may well be figures who are sympathetic to governance reforms. Supporting the most powerful of such “reformers,” particularly in government, with technical inputs and political support to maximize their impact may be another way to try to make the best of the status quo. The leverage of such actors can potentially be increased through, for instance, engagement and technical support to help identify actionable problems, viable change pathways, and strategic allies, as well as, to take informed action on these.²⁰

4.2 Changing the balance of power and interest to improve prospects of impact

Rather than bending goals to meet status quo political circumstances (as in the “navigate” approach above), strategies in this approach work to bend political circumstances to better align with the pursuit of LBI governance reform goals by shifting power and interest dynamics.

A. Changing the interests of powerful actors. Such strategies focus on trying to change the incentive calculus of powerful actors to either decrease their interests in opposing LBI governance reforms or increase their support for these. Examples of ways to try to shift incentives or disincentives to be more conducive to the pursuit of desired LBI outcomes include:

- **Naming and shaming** opponents of reform or beneficiaries of current “bad practice” by civil society, media, government oversight actors, or others to try

²⁰ For more supporting reformers in government, see: “Empowering and Incentivizing Reformers”, CCSI, <https://ccsi.columbia.edu/content/empowering-and-incentivizing-reformers>.

to leverage negative attention as a disincentive;

- **Naming and “faming”** proponents of reform in hopes of using positive attention to create incentives for government officials who contribute to good LBI governance;²¹
- **Mobilizing and sustaining pressure against opponents or in favor of supporters** of LBI governance changes from below (e.g., via communities, unions, indigenous populations, and broader social groups) from the inception of policy or legislative reforms through to their implementation and ongoing monitoring and enforcement to create incentives for action or disincentives for inaction;
- **Leveraging the power of global actors to shift incentives** e.g., through IFI loan conditions, requirements, or implementation support to incentivize the LBI governance reforms being sought, along with monitoring and enforcing these to be effective;
- **Using strategic issue framing to create disincentives** for those opposing reform by redefining their stance as somehow negative (e.g., when EIAs or other forms of regulation and oversight are described as “anti-development” or “anti-investment,” reframing them as “pro-responsible/sustainable development or investment” or “pro-[country X] investment” versus “pro-company investment”). Such “positive purpose” framing of a strategic reform could serve to disincentivize officials from opposing them; and
- **Targeting conflicts of interest** by designing policy-making and implementation roles in ways that deliberately integrate steps to identify conflicts of interest and minimize the authority of those who may have an interest in opposing LBI reforms for personal gains, for example, preventing government officials charged with investment promotion and EIA consultants hired by investors from assuming key regulatory or implementation roles.

B. Changing the balance of power across stakeholders through strategic coalitions.

One of the most fundamental challenges undermining LBI governance reforms tends to be the power imbalance between proponents and opponents of reform. For real and durable progress toward changes in the governance of LBI to be made, at least some very powerful actors who are in a position to shape the outcomes around a particular issue must be supportive of these changes and the ultimate goals being sought. Often this is not the case.

In many instances there are powerful actors—including national leaders, officials in powerful ministries (such as finance, investment, commerce, mining, or energy), and major investors—who are unsupportive of, or directly opposed to, LBI governance reforms for various reasons. For some, it is a matter of simple indifference. For others, there is more active opposition rooted in fears around the potential impacts of such changes on investment promotion or around the potential loss of personal, professional, or political benefits that they are deriving from the problematic status quo (e.g., from opportunities for corruption, from lax application of regulations, or from opaque and inconsistent investment approval processes).

²¹ The term “naming and faming” is used, and may have been coined, by Accountability Lab to describe their *Integrity Icon* work which provides a valuable example of how such strategies might be operationalized, see: “Integrity Icon – Celebrating, Encouraging and Connecting Civil Servants,” Integrity Icon, <https://integrityicon.org/>.

On the other side of the equation, there are proponents of LBI governance reforms—e.g., civil society, communities, reformers within governments, and others who seek to enhance social and environmental protections, improve development outcomes for communities, or otherwise serve the interests of diffuse broader populations—who tend to be in a weaker position to bring about key changes. They are often not in senior positions of formal authority and they tend to have less influence over those who are in such positions than more powerful government or private sector actors. Therefore, another way to try to improve prospects of successful reforms in this area is to **bolster the relative power of proponents through support for strategic coalitions**.

The **rationale for strategic coalitions** is that they offer the possibility of amplifying power behind reform efforts by deliberately bringing together a constellation of actors to leverage their respective areas of expertise, authority, resources, and networks to drive the desired change processes. By building strength in numbers to combat inertia or opposition from powerful actors, the likelihood of progress toward desired outcomes can be increased. From ALIGN case studies, we find that such coalitions can:

- **Amplify the pressure on those making key decisions**, e.g., by:
 - demonstrating further-reaching support for proposed changes beyond any single government supporter or affected community; or
 - demonstrating potential political costs for those failing to respond to this pressure.
- **Improve the information available to and knowledge of those involved**, e.g., about:
 - the technical area in question, boosting the ability of those leading the drive for change to make their case and advocate for specific policies, among other things, in appropriate and credible ways;
 - who the key players are and what they care about, in order to strategize most effective pathway to action;
 - potential obstacles and opportunities, and opponents and allies; or
 - examples of success in enacting analogous changes in other relevant spheres.
- **Strategize and tailor focus to improve prospects for progress**, e.g., by:
 - collectively crafting recommendations in light of their understandings of key actors within government (including their own agency when it comes to government reformers) and their respective preferences, priorities, and apprehensions; or
 - learning and getting inspiration from experiences of global coalition allies with experience working on similar LBI governance issues in other country contexts and sharing the various strategies and approaches that they have used.
- **Improve the credibility of, and increase sympathy for, their cause**, e.g., by:
 - connecting relevant actors (e.g., officials across government agencies), thereby making it harder for opponents to:
 - ignore the recommendations being made by coalition members and the different stakeholders they might represent;

- target or sideline particular reformers for retribution (as responsibility will be more diffused); or
- discredit reform proponents by blaming or scapegoating them for process failures (by insulating them somewhat);
- bringing together actors from different stakeholder groups—including civil society, private sector, and government—around LBI reforms of common interest to broaden the reach and range of support behind changes being proposed.

In order for actors to work together, formally or informally, there must be a common purpose that binds them and animates coalition members to take concerted actions to advance that purpose. Therefore, **coalition formation or mobilization** relies on identifying or cultivating areas of shared interest across actors who may have very different reasons for wanting to support a particular LBI governance change.

Bringing together a range of actors with a shared interest in a particular area of LBI governance reform, the **configuration of strategic coalitions** might be thought of in three categories (which can be deployed in tandem or separately):

- **Horizontal coalitions** that connect up combinations of actors across different government agencies or across civil society and social movements within a particular setting;
- **Vertical coalitions** that build connections among different types of actors, such as government officials, civil society, relevant technical experts, private sector, local government officials, social leaders, cultural figures and groups, religious or spiritual leaders, traditional leaders, media, and academia; and
- **Transnational coalitions** that connect national and subnational actors with global actors (e.g., counterparts from other governments or CSOs, companies, IFI, donors, trade associations, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and investor groups) who might be in a position to leverage financial resources, advice, analyses, advocacy, international media attention, credibility, and other assets in support of the national or subnational coalition's agenda.

Participants in strategic coalitions will vary depending on the issue and the interests that are mobilized. Different members of coalitions can play specific roles in driving ahead the reform process and will likely require different approaches to engage them to act. Some examples of possible coalition members and illustrative points on why they matter and how they might be engaged include:

- Individual **reformers and champions for change within government**
 - *Why they matter* – Ultimately, changes in governance will tend to require action by governments. This sort of action often benefits from sympathetic and committed reform-minded individuals or agencies using their knowledge, networks, and influence within government to coordinate and drive action.
 - *How to engage* – These individuals typically self-select by making their intentions known, but at times there are more subtle signals, such as participation in relevant workshops, meetings, or involvement with reform-minded actors beyond government.
- Other **powerful or high-level government officials**

- *Why they matter* – Buy-in or support from reasonably high-level government officials greatly improves prospects for impact on LBI governance. The interests and priorities of specific individuals serving in key roles (e.g., the president and heads of relevant and powerful ministries and government agencies) and how well they do or do not align with a given reform agenda can heavily influence outcomes.
- *How to engage*²² – Understanding the primary interests and motivations of key actors related to a particular issue (from PEA) provides a valuable starting point. Where they exist, personal relationships can also be valuable for trying to move these actors as can leveraging past productive engagements with government if these exist or considering intermediaries with such track records if they do not. Offering these key actors something they need (e.g., technical expertise, greater buy-in from key constituents, credibility with important global actors, or implementation support) can also improve prospects of their supporting the coalition’s agenda.
- **Allies across different government agencies**
 - *Why they matter* – Allies in different government agencies can bring more political clout, knowledge, relationships, and expertise to the table. They can also help insulate specific individuals from punishment or retaliation for their support for reforms.
 - *How to engage* – Again, such allies might be sought out through persuasion on the basis of areas of shared interests across agencies or mandates that could be served by specific LBI governance changes.
- **Parliamentarians**
 - *Why they matter* – Legislation cannot be advanced, passed, and implemented without buy-in from at least some key members of parliament (**MPs**) to lead on marshaling support and driving the process forward.
 - *How to engage* – Because these actors may not be deep technical experts on the subject of legislation, one way to gain their favor may be by sharing technical expertise and providing related inputs (such as policy briefs and presentations to specific committees at key moments) to support the development, deliberation, and implementation planning related to specific pieces of legislation. Persuasion via bilateral meetings or advocacy targeting individual MPs can also be helpful.
- **Communities, other social movements, broader population**
 - *Why they matter* – These actors can bring pressure from below to demand reforms of government officials at various levels, parliamentarians, investors, companies, traditional leaders, and others. This strategy can potentially legitimize actions taken in response and raise the costs of not responding to or opposing these demands.
 - *How to engage* – In some cases it is simply a matter of responding to the needs of already-mobilized actors and providing them with support to better coordinate and more effectively undertake their efforts to

²² For a recent set of reflections on the issue of how to try to move key government officials toward reform agenda, see: Ivy Ong, “On Working Politically, Listening, and Learning Out Loud,” *Medium* (blog), January 15, 2024, https://medium.com/@ivyong_ph/on-working-politically-listening-and-learning-out-loud-bf0d8acca2a4.

advance LBI reforms (e.g., through participation in consultation processes, advocacy around policy debates, or use of relevant electoral opportunities). In other cases, it may be necessary to inform and educate specific strategic actors in accessible ways to gain their support.

- **Traditional, cultural, religious, or organized labor leaders**

- *Why they matter* – In cases where such figures are key in shaping decisions or actions around land use, or play an important role in mobilizing broader populations, their *de facto* power makes them valuable potential allies.
- *How to engage* - Again, as coalitions are built on shared interests, the idea is to find ways to frame reforms or offerings to at least partially align with some aspect of their respective interests.

- **Media actors**

- *Why they matter* - Media figures can play an important role in raising the profile of issues, advancing particular narrative framings of potential costs and benefits of different LBI governance scenarios, and simply disseminating real-time information in relevant languages to a range of actors via, e.g., radio and television content, online platforms, op-eds, and interviews.
- *How to engage* - While some media actors might be captured by special interests favoring the status quo, and therefore unsympathetic, engaging those who are more open might take place by providing content and stories (e.g., via op-eds and interviews) or providing trainings on relevant LBI issues so they can cover these more effectively themselves.

- **Private sector actors**

- *Why they matter* - Some private sector actors can be influential in pressing officials for governance reforms and helping make an economic or commercial case for their potential value (which can at times be different from, or presented differently from, the cases made by civil society or communities, and increases the possibility that something will resonate with key powerful actors).
- *How to engage* - Again, these actors are only likely to join a coalition working on a specific LBI governance reform if the issue somehow directly impacts their profitability or long-term commercial survival, so identifying such issues would help direct how to engage with such actors.

- **Global actors**

- *Why they matter* – Global actors (e.g., IFI staff, INGOs, global media) can bring financial, reputational, and other points of leverage to pressure or incentivize companies, investors, and governments to undertake LBI governance reforms (e.g., through IFI loan conditions, INGO advocacy, or international media coverage). Global actors can also responsively provide various resources and capacity support for national and subnational coalitions driving LBI governance reform processes, ideally through coordinated efforts (e.g., among all the global development actors working on LBI governance in a given country or region).

- *How to engage* – Finding openings to engage with global allies may involve working through existing networks of contacts to establish relationships with local staff of these actors and potentially offering local technical expertise, knowledge of key players, relationships, and the ability to monitor government commitments as inducements.

4.3 Attempting to circumvent sources of political obstacles

A third general orientation involves trying to develop alternative pathways to achieving the desired ends by actively seeking to circumvent or work around political obstacles or opponents of reform. Such strategies attempt to find alternative pathways for delivering particular outcomes by relocating authority or responsibilities for a specific goal to alternative actors. Examples of potential strategies for seeking to circumvent political roadblocks and relocate authority or responsibility, drawn from broader research, include:

- **Relocating authority within government to neutralize conflicts of interest** – Potentially pushing for the creation of a new, ideally independent, government body to oversee a specific policy or practice and cultivating the new body to be a “pocket of effectiveness.”²³
- **Moving responsibility to different levels of government to avoid obstructors** – Moving reform efforts from the national to subnational levels if the latter would improve prospects of uptake and implementation by removing activities from the attention of national figures who might be tempted to obstruct progress.
- **Expanding governance authority beyond governments alone** – Reimagining government-centric groups and activities as multi-stakeholder groups and activities, where authority for key decisions would involve a range of actors and interests, including those from civil society (diversifying supply side of governance in contrast to strategic coalitions working on the demand side).
- **Considering options beyond governments altogether** – Considering whether companies and investors can play a direct role in advancing a particular LBI governance goal (e.g., mining companies might help implement enhanced consultation and consent processes or share infrastructure with local communities for social license purposes) and looking for ways to engage them, including through guidance on good practice in a given setting.

Feedback on how global actors can better enable politically savvy approaches

Finally, because powerful global actors (including various categories of donors, financial institutions, INGOs, implementation partners, investors, etc.), particularly those working on sustainable development agendas, can help shape the incentive and resource contexts in which efforts to reform LBI take place, we wanted to understand how they might play a more constructive role. In response to the question of what global actors might do to better support more politically savvy work on LBI governance, participants

²³ See: Sam Hickey et al., “The politics of governing oil effectively: A comparative study of two new oil-rich states in Africa,” (ESID Working Paper No. 54, Manchester, UK: Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre (ESID), October 2015), <https://www.effective-states.org/working-paper-54/>.

in the ALIGN workshop and other consortium partners suggested:

- Appreciating that politically savvy interventions require significant time and resources in pursuit of meaningful change and these realities need to be accommodated by donors in particular.
- Recognizing that there can be a mismatch between global standards and local realities, and therefore local actors should be given a greater role in developing standards and more agency in applying them.
- Leveraging the World Bank and other IFIs to potentially help shift relevant incentives by putting pressure on, or providing inducement for, governments to undertake and then actually implement various LBI commitments.
- Providing civil society with tools or guidance on a wide range of LBI issues, tailored to specific contexts.
- Creating consultation or dialogue opportunities to elevate the voices and interests of citizens and communities, particularly vis-à-vis key government and private sector actors.
- Developing resources for communities and civil society to use in engaging companies, including support in identifying which actors within companies to target.

Conclusion

Political realities profoundly shape the trajectories of efforts to improve governance and development outcomes. Yet, these issues have often received far less attention than technical guidance on best practice, informational inputs, and technocratic capacity. While effectively addressing political obstacles and opportunities will rarely be straightforward or simple, it is nonetheless crucial for those trying to help change the way LBI is governed in practice. This working paper has provided some high-level insights on how one might begin to start thinking through working in more politically savvy ways, insights on which we intend to build with ALIGN consortium members and project partners moving forward.

Annex

This table toolkit summarizes three general approaches to working in politically savvy ways to advance responsible land-based investment (LBI) governance. Illustrative strategies within each approach are offered based on prior research by the author and from inputs across the ALIGN project's members and partners. These approaches and strategies are elaborated upon in ALIGN's primer [Getting from Ideas to Reality: Building Political Support to Translate Good Ideas into Actual Practice](#) and in various [CCSI resources on the Politics of Extractives Industries](#). An earlier version of this table features in Namati's March 2025 publication [How National Legislation Can Advance Carbon Justice: A Policy Toolkit](#).

Strategy	Rationale	Operationalizing
Navigate: Making the best of the <i>status quo</i> - Aligning goals and strategies with political realities		
<i>1a. Strategic issue framing</i>	Frame issues and specific LBI governance reforms in ways that maximize support and minimize opposition from key actors may improve likelihood of progress.	Understand key actors' priorities and frame or focus on issues in ways that align with their interests or deliberately avoid scenarios where opposition is likely.
<i>1b. Tolerable concessions</i>	Select concessions might neutralize opposition and allow for some progress.	Understand interests of those blocking progress and considering whether there are concessions to be made that do not compromise core aspects of the reform agenda.
<i>1c. Simplify implementation</i>	The easier implementation is, the more likely it is to happen, and the fewer opportunities for delay or obstruction.	Include implementation planning and resourcing in reform efforts, with an emphasis on simplification.
<i>1d. Capitalize on windows of opportunity</i>	Certain moments can create auspicious opportunities to advance reforms due to increased attention/ scrutiny or the creation of openings to influence LBI that do not normally exist.	Look out for and take strategic action in response to openings such as: campaigns and elections; key moments in development of LBI policies or legislation; and scandals, disasters, and other events demonstrating risks of poor LBI governance.
<i>1e. Collaborate with reformers</i>	The landscape of power will not be monolithic, so look for the most powerful actors who are sympathetic to reform and try to maximize their impact.	Engage sympathetic actors in government through collaboration on identifying actionable problems, viable change pathways, and technical inputs to support their actions.
Change: Trying to shift the <i>status quo</i> - Aligning political realities with goals and strategies		

<p><i>2a. Shift the interests and incentives of key actors</i></p>	<p>Actively seek strategies to change the incentives or disincentives and interests of key actors to better align with the pursuit of desired LBI governance outcomes (increase support/ decrease opposition).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name and shame those undermining LBI reform. • “Fame” (draw positive attention) to those supporting LBI reform. • Mobilize pressure from “below” to demand change (communities, unions, indigenous populations, broader social groups). • Mobilize pressure and support from “above” (global actors like international financial institutions, credit rating agencies, etc.) to both incentivize and enable change. • Reframe issues to disincentivize opposition. • Focus on avoiding conflicts of interest.
<p><i>2b. Shift the balance of power through strategic coalitions</i></p>	<p>Build strength in numbers—ideally involving at least one reasonably powerful government actor—to try to overcome opposition or inertia impeding LBI governance reform by amplifying pressure on key decision-makers, improving resources of those involved, expanding networks, improving credibility of reform proponents, and/or insulating individual actors from dismissal, pushback, retaliation, or other pressures that might dampen their resolve or ability to advance reform processes.</p>	<p><u>Types of coalitions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horizontal: connecting actors across government or across social groups. • Vertical: connecting a range of different types of actors. • Transnational: connecting national or subnational coalitions with global allies. <p><u>Form coalitions:</u> Identify/cultivate and focus on areas of shared interest across actors.</p> <p><u>Potential participants:</u> Reform champions in government, allies across government agencies, parliamentarians, communities, social movements, traditional/cultural/religious figures, media, organized labor, domestic private sector, global actors (international non-governmental organizations, media, international financial institutions, investors, etc.).</p>
<p>Circumvent: Working around political obstacles</p>		
<p><i>3a. Relocate authority within government</i></p>	<p>Authority often lies with those who have a conflict of interest/obstruct change, so it may be useful to try to move to more independent or pro-reform actors.</p>	<p>Explore possibilities for creating new bodies to oversee specific policies or practices and cultivate their independence/autonomy.</p>

<i>3b. Move to different levels of government</i>	Removing reform activities from the attention of national figures can reduce prospects of interference by vested interests.	Move reform efforts from national to subnational/local levels.
<i>3c. Think beyond governments alone</i>	Involvement of stakeholders in key decision-making, implementation and oversight/monitoring roles may contribute to greater support and efficacy.	Explore possibilities of creating multi-stakeholder bodies or groups to oversee and advance reforms.
<i>3d. Think beyond governments altogether</i>	If there are powerful, nonstate actors in a position to help deliver the desired LBI governance outcomes, and that have the desire to do so, they might provide another pathway for improving prospects for progress.	Look for major private sector actors who might be motivated by social license or other concerns to address specific LBI governance demands, e.g., around community beneficitation, consultation or complaint mechanisms.