



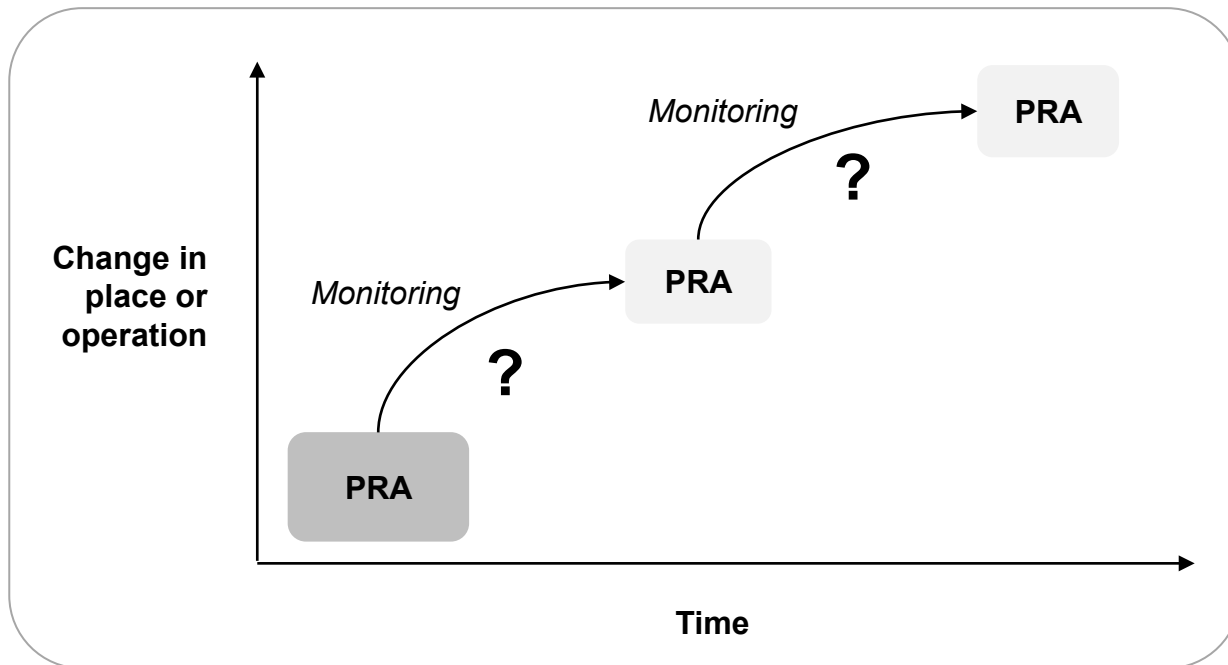
# Country operation review

project rationale and approach

2023

# The usual application of political risk intelligence leaves an insight gap and a missed opportunity for experience-based adaptation

A typical pattern: Intensive political risk assessment (PRA) at entry, monitoring of identified factors in between, and updated PRAs at intervals



PRAs are instructive for longer-term planning, but tend to be macroscopic and “about the country”.

Monitoring is usually an extension of PRA, tracking factors identified therein.

What both fail to account for is the actual experience of the operation, and what we can learn from it for interim adaptation.

## **In our experience, even when PRA is an appropriate exercise, by itself and in its conventional forms, it can be too abstract to provide tangible guidance**

*“The whole thing hit the brief, but what really helped was the last 15 pages of the report and the informal workshop.”*

The last 15 pages and the workshop were based on informal discussions about the organisation within its socio-political milieu – and this was not even part of the actual brief.

*“You certainly did your homework, but frankly between a book and a few transnational agency reports we could have had the same thing – this isn’t really about us, it’s just more data.”*

*“This basically tells us to have plans for a few key contingencies and to keep an eye on other ones, but every day we face significant decisions just about handling immediate relationships.”*

*“It’s great to know about the insurgency and China’s intentions for bilateral relations, but our staff are stressed out, we’re not getting much cooperation, and our security providers seem to have their own agenda – you haven’t shed much light on what really seems to matter.”*

**When an operation or country presence is up and running, country intelligence becomes less important than getting a sense of how the organisation is fitting in**

- Organisation has an ongoing presence or operation in a complex environment**
- Already a reasonable understanding of the country landscape – an extensive research exercise is unnecessary**
- But a focused sense check is always valuable: proactive insight informs proactive fixes and adaptation**

**A concise operational review directly focused on the organisation within its socio-political context**

- Identify potential issues and vulnerabilities, and discuss options to address them**
- And consider opportunities to better align risk and engagement approaches with relevant, ground-level socio-political realities**

# The difference between a focused operational review and more conventional political risk assessment

## Operational review

- Targeted on key assumptions, concerns and uncertainties
- Examines perceptions, experiences, intersubjective insights (human sources on the ground)
- Interactive, flexible
- Actionable – IDs critical issues, vulnerabilities and friction points
- Efficient– not encumbered with extensive desk research and writing

**Tangible operation at stake, accrued local experience and existing relationships**

## Conventional PRA

- Targeted on the country
- Examines trends and macro factors (open sources from a distance)
- Process-driven - set it in motion and let it run
- Much “about the country” data and information – too abstract for nuanced, ground-level decisions
- A months-long data analysis and production process

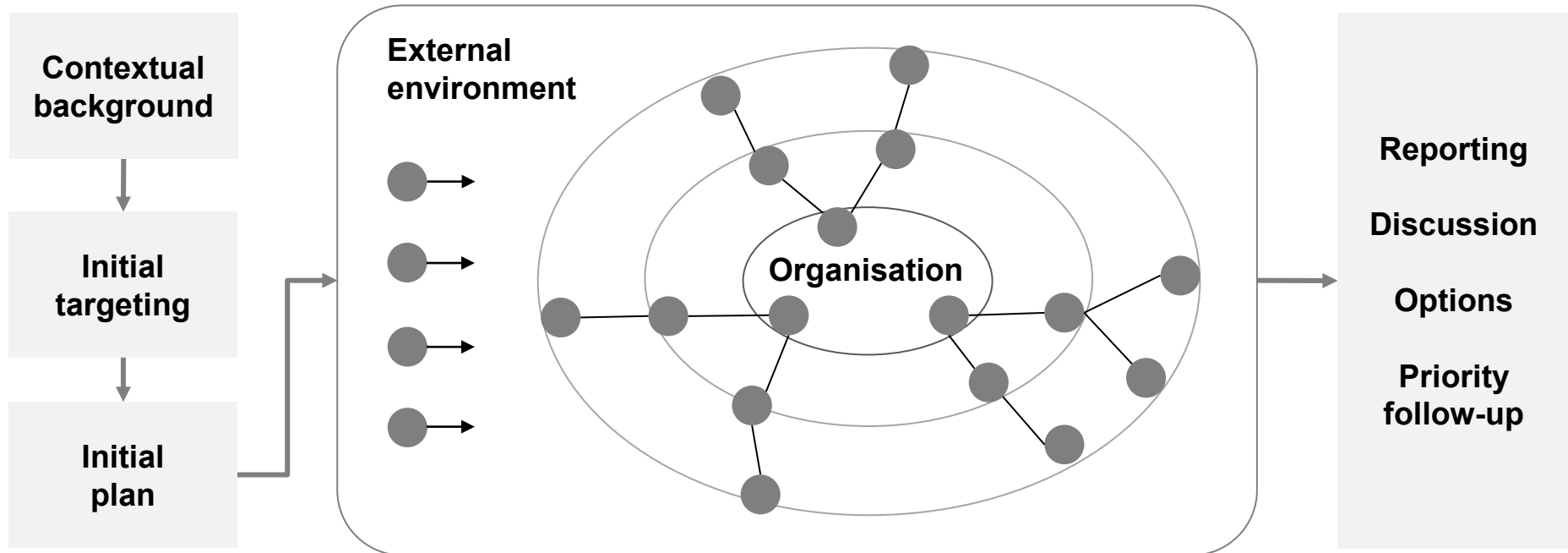
**Go / no-go decisions, initial entry plans, long-term positioning**

**Once in a place for a while, “about the country” insight is obviated by experience.**

**The op review focuses on what we can learn from experience.**

# The general approach – onsite human source discussions are the lynchpin

Discussions – following links from organisation outwards, and seeking external perspectives



**A flexible learning process – issues, frictions and vulnerabilities can be identified during discussions, leading to revisiting discussion subjects or seeking new sources; new sources can also be sought to test / corroborate emerging insights**

**The approach is scalable, from a quick sense check to a holistic “360” diagnostic**

<b>Sense check</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Internal discussions</li><li>- Internal + external workshop</li></ul>
<b>Immediate ecosystem</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Internal discussions</li><li>- Discussions among immediate stakeholders</li></ul>
<b>“360”</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Internal discussions</li><li>- Discussions across and outside of operational ecosystem</li></ul>

**The format and scale depend on degree of concern or uncertainty.**

**The focus depends on indications of the sources of issues or friction.**

## What can be learned from this kind of exercise

### Internal insights

- Staff concerns and experiences that fall outside of normal reporting channels
- Gaps, silos, and complacency in risk management
- HQ-country operation misalignments / expectations gaps
- Expat – local staff relations and sources of friction

### External insights

- Key stakeholder perceptions of the organisation
- Sources of friction with the host milieu
- Informed perceptions of the organisation's awareness and risk management capabilities
- State of relationships critical to socio-political resilience

These could be augmented with a more general PRA for a sense of how the country is evolving.

But the op review on its own captures highly relevant insights and would inevitably discern action items.



## **A small sample of what has actually been learned in previous cases using human source discussions**

### **Internal insights**

- Staff concerns that senior mgt is too acclimatised to personal risk, and expects them to be as cavalier**
- Local staff threatening to disclose company information as promotion bargaining tactic**
- Concern about lack of policy around local staff disappearances / detention**
- Friction between CSR and security, to the point of working at cross-purposes**
- Concern that local partners were unvetted and have ulterior motives**

### **External insights**

- Organisation seen as culturally obtuse because of short expat assignments and “hiding behind walls”**
- Perception that organisation caves into nepotism pressure too quickly and foregoes fair selection processes**
- Perception that organisation fails to really learn how the bureaucracy works, incurring unnecessary permit delays**
- Organisation seen as insensitive to affected host community and vulnerable to local backlash**
- Perception that weak media relations leave organisation’s side of stories untold**

# Human source discussions generate highly relevant insights, but the risks need to be understood and managed

Perceptions and attitudes shape behaviour and hence experience. Discussions are a direct window on how relevant actors see the organisation in its socio-political context. But unlike with open sources and data, discussions are 2-way interaction. Unless carefully managed, they can have unintended consequences. For example...

**Invite criticism**

“What’s wrong?” – “Oh, well, come to think of it...”

**Disclose too much**

“I never even knew that they had an evacuation plan...hmm.”

**Make it look like we have a problem**

“If they’re asking this they must be in trouble.”

**Inadvertently create friction**

“Did he say I never let him see the assessment?”

**Get misinformed or lied to**

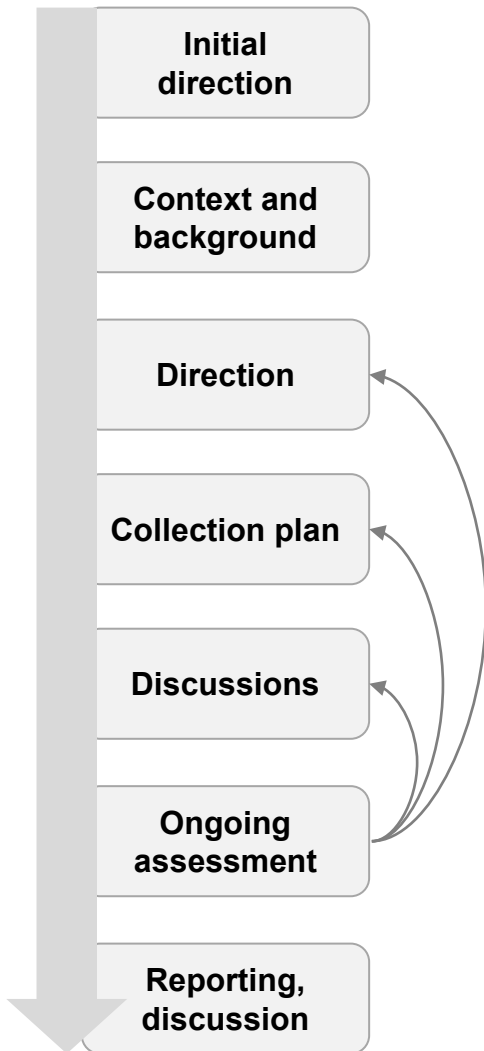
“They need to be friendly with X if they want to succeed here.”

**We’re looking for perspectives and attitudes as much as “the truth”, but even so, human source discussions can be tricky.**

**Sensitivity, corroboration and selective discretion help to manage the risks.**

**In some cases, we might decide that it is simply better not to talk to someone.**

# Process, team and logistics, for illustration assuming not the quick sense check option



## Team

Harmattan Risk consultant

Client organisation counterpart

Local facilitator (& translator if need be)

Client organisation admin / IT / logistics support

The local facilitator is a door opener and networker.

It is a sensitive position and should be selected from among the client organisation's own local staff or trusted networks.

Initial direction is actually set prior to a proposal.

Most context and background can be derived from a desk.

After that, work is onsite, from and in client organisation locations.

# **An operational review based on human sources yields valuable insight, but value rests on critical success factors, for example...**

**Be aware of and manage the risks**

**Risks in discussions are one thing, but another is host government sensitivity to a socio-political intelligence exercise**

**Cross-functional collaboration**

**Whoever commissions the project, they need to accept that the socio-political variable is an organisation-wide concern, and germane to a number of functions**

**A trusted local facilitator**

**This role is critical not only for access but because the facilitator will likely learn much of what the project discerns about the organisation and its socio-political fit**

**Flexibility**

**There will be unknown unknowns, and as work proceeds direction and priorities could shift – this could affect overall timelines**

**What matters will vary by context and requirement.**

**Success factors are assessed early on, and sustaining them is built into the project design.**

**Problems can still arise, but they are minimised by upfront consideration.**

**For more information about operational reviews or to discuss a prospective requirement...**

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