



– CASE STUDY –



Case study: State Partnership for Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability

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Study of the SPARC approach to governance reform

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Key messages

- Nigeria's federal structure directs about half of national public resources to state and local levels, where governance patterns and quality are variable.
- Part of one of DFID's largest governance portfolios, the SPARC programme aims to work adaptively at the state level to support policy and strategy, public financial management, and public service management.
- Support to public sector reform in developing countries is more effective if it takes a flexible, politically informed and locally-led approach, and SPARC's experience illustrates some challenges and opportunities of operationalising such an approach.
- The programme has innovative features to identify reform priorities with partners and enable flexible allocation of resources, while also revealing potential tensions between donor and local priorities, flexibility and the technical demands of core governance reforms, and specific problem-driven interventions and joining up smaller initiatives.
- SPARC provides lessons for future governance programming, particularly the importance of making assumptions and trade-offs explicit.

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Abbreviations

AGI	Africa Governance Initiative	ODI	Overseas Development Institute
AIA	Agreed Implementation Approach	PATHS	Partnership for Transforming Health Systems
BSI	Budget Strengthening Initiative	PAVS	Partnership for Voice and Accountability in States
CAP	Country Assistance Plan	PEA	Political Economy Analysis
CGS	Conditional Grants Scheme	PEFA	Public Expenditure and Finance Accountability
CSO	Civil Society Organisation	PFM	Public Financial Management
DFID	Department for International Development	PMU	Programme Management Unit
ESSPIN	Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria	PS&ME	Policy and Strategy Development, Monitoring and Evaluation
ExCo	Executive Council	PSM	Public Service Management
FEPAR	Federal Public Administration Reform Programme	PSR	Public Sector Reform
GEMS	Growth, Employment in States	SAVI	State Accountability and Voice Initiative
GoSL	Government of Sierra Leone	SEAT	State Evaluation and Assessment Tool
GSDRC	Governance and Social Development Resource Centre	SEEDS	State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy
IEG	Independent Evaluation Group	SLGP	State and Local Government Programme
IMEP	Independent Monitoring and Evaluation Project for the SLPs	SLP	State-Level Programme
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation	SPARC	State Partnership, Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability Programme
MATT	Managing at the Top	SPM	State Programme Manager
MDA	Ministries, Departments and Agencies	SPRM	State Peer Review Mechanism
MDG	Millennium Development Goal	TA	Technical Assistance
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding	UK	United Kingdom
MTSS	Medium-Term Sector Strategy	UN	United Nations
NEEDS	National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy	UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
NGF	Nigeria Governors Forum		

Executive summary

There is growing consensus that, to be effective, public sector reform (PSR) programmes, and indeed development interventions generally, need to move away from an international ‘best practice’ model towards one more attuned to ‘best fit’. This shift has major implications for PSR assistance, including the need for detailed political analysis in its design, implementation and monitoring; the adoption of problem-driven approaches; drawing on local knowledge; and allowing for flexibility and experimentation throughout.

Nigeria is one of the UK Department for International Development’s (DFID’s) largest governance portfolios, and the State Partnership, Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability (SPARC) programme is one of its central components. This study assesses how the SPARC programme functions in light of recent shifts in PSR thinking and practice, and considers lessons for future governance reform programmes.

Recent literature on supporting PSR in developing countries emphasises the importance of more localised and flexible methods of supporting institutional change. This report reviews 10 factors emerging from recent literature and practice to guide an analysis of SPARC’s design and implementation. These can be grouped under four principles:

Thinking and working politically: do, and use, political economy analysis (PEA), engage a broad range of stakeholders and seize windows of opportunity;

Locally led and problem-driven: identify local problems and enable locally driven solutions;

Be flexible and responsive: be experimental and adaptive, focus on pockets of effectiveness, allow sequencing of support to be flexible and use South–South skill-sharing and networking;

Use integrated approaches.

SPARC is one of a suite of complementary DFID State-Level Programmes (SLP) introduced in 2008, which are expected to increase impact by collaborating and complementing each other. SPARC was initially introduced into five states (Lagos, Enugu, Jigawa, Kaduna and Kano) and extended into five more in 2012 (Anambra, Katsina, Niger, Yobe and Zamfara). SPARC aims to support solutions to technical challenges identified in state government systems and processes, and thereby enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of state-level governments’ use of public resources. To do so, it takes a holistic approach by supporting reform across three interlocking workstreams; policy and strategy, public finance and civil service management. However, the programme also

recognises that these technical inputs must be facilitated by a process of political engagement. Key elements of the SPARC approach include:

- Being structured around state-level teams;
- Using PEA to identify governance problems and political constraints;
- Addressing these by providing technical support flexibly across three distinct work streams;
- Attempting to coordinate vertical (sectoral) and horizontal (cross-government) reform dimensions, in part through partnership with other programmes;
- Adopting distinctive sequencing and engagement strategies according to state characteristics.

SPARC’s political engagement strategy reflects its interpretation of thinking and working politically. SPARC’s political engagement tends mostly towards understanding the political economy context in order to assess the constraints and opportunities for reform and shift resources accordingly. SPARC could also use its political knowledge and engagement to pay more attention to problem-solving and experimenting with new interventions. For example, SPARC’s PEA could be more problem-focused so that political knowledge can be applied to specific issues as they arise. SPARC staff could use their political skills to focus on generating support for reforms through coalition-building.

In the SPARC design, local ownership is sought in three principle ways: the identification of problems to be resolved; training of state government partners in technical skills; and enabling inter-state knowledge-sharing. However, there can be a tension between the emphasis on locally determined and owned problems and reversion to a fairly limited set of technical interventions, particularly as the issues relate to centre of government processes such as public financial management (PFM) functions or multi-year planning with relatively standardised assessment tools. Since SPARC is a technical assistance (TA)-led effort, some assistance can prove complex for existing state government capacity. Recognising this tension, SPARC has tried to embed reform activities in governments’ own structures, and increasingly offers a range of context-specific tools that state government can adapt.

SPARC has worked flexibly and been responsive to context through its capacity to shift resources between different work streams through the ‘three-legged stool’. This approach can be seen as an attempt to combine politically

smart and locally led initiatives with awareness of the holistic nature of some governance challenges. SPARC has also shown flexibility in working with a broad range of state partners depending on both the context and the work stream. Learning iteratively has been promoted through the Knowledge Management work stream, which facilitates knowledge-sharing between state teams and between state governments. However, examples of working experimentally are less visible in SPARC's design and documentation.

The objective of the SLP suite and of the individual SLPs are the same: to ensure 'Nigeria's resources are used efficiently and effectively to achieve the MDGs'. However, beyond the initial conception of the suite, each programme is designed and managed separately, and no common accountability or strategic suite management structure has been created. SPARC has been inhibited in its ability to deliver outcomes at the service level. To preserve political traction, the suite's design separates SPARC's supply-side approach from voice and accountability efforts under the SAVI programme. Though these programmes do coordinate, there are challenges in using the suite to take coalition-based approaches to reform.

SPARC evolved out of several years of state-level programming in Nigeria and combines lessons of earlier issue-based approaches with a desire for more integrated, holistic and strategic PSR initiatives. One way to interpret SPARC – and therefore better understand its strengths and

weaknesses – is as an attempt to navigate these multiple intentions. SPARC suggests navigating four interconnected tensions may be a challenge for the design of PSR: that between a strategic and comprehensive approach and politically salient locally driven problem-solving; that between flexibility and adaptability and the need to measure progress against a set of results; that between improvement of centre of government functions and sectoral approaches driven by service delivery; and that within a programme able to work across the country while addressing the varied political environments of Nigerian states.

SPARC, and by extension the SLP, addresses these tensions through a combination of three design features that is unusual in the universe of PSR programmes: an emphasis on contextualisation; the three-legged stool; and the SLP suite. Experimentation with these features has shown some positive results, but adaptations could help manage these tensions further. These include expanding the brokering and facilitation functions of the assistance provided and exploring possibilities for more explicit experimentation – for example by implementing different approaches and sequences to shifting resources when confronted by similar barriers. Furthermore, while it is outside the remit of SPARC itself to reframe the SLP suite, sectoral programmes could further integrate governance issues and the suite could be adjusted more explicitly on a state-by-state basis.

1 Introduction

Since the early 2000s, there has been growing consensus that, to be effective, public sector reform (PSR) programmes, and indeed development interventions generally, need to move away from an international ‘best practice’ model towards one more attuned to ‘best fit’. Programmes need to be informed by a much better understanding of the complex socioeconomic and political realities of the countries in which they are taking place (Blum et al., 2012; Lewis, 2011; Unsworth, 2002; World Bank, 2012). They need to be based on the context and process of planned reforms and focus on public service outcomes over concentrating on the outward form of the institutions that deliver them (Andrews 2013, 2014; Bovaird and Löffler, 2003; Fukuyama, 2013).

PSR is a political, as well as a technical, challenge, which needs to be addressed through an iterative process involving local stakeholders in problem and solution identification (Booth and Unsworth, 2014; World Bank, 2012). In short, new approaches to PSR suggest a flexible, locally driven approach that delivers development results even if the form of governance does not meet the standards the good governance agenda prescribes. This shift has major implications for PSR assistance programmes, including the need for detailed political analysis in their design, implementation and monitoring, the adoption of problem-driven approaches, drawing on local knowledge and allowing for flexibility and experimentation throughout.

The UK Department for International Development (DFID) Nigeria programme has one of DFID’s largest governance portfolios and is currently preparing a new operational plan for the country programme (2015-2018). The State Partnership, Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability (SPARC) programme is a core element of DFID Nigeria’s current governance portfolio. SPARC has four outputs, intended to improve:

- State government policy and strategy development, monitoring and evaluation (PS&ME);
- State public financial management (PFM);
- State public service management (PSM);
- Federal support to state governance.

Nigeria is a very difficult reform environment, and upcoming presidential and gubernatorial elections in 2015 are likely to complicate the reform process. Many of DFID Nigeria’s key public sector management programmes are due to end in 2015 or 2016 and, in anticipation of these opportunities, DFID Nigeria has been taking stock of its PSR programmes to date.¹ As part of this process, it is critically evaluating the long-term effectiveness of its governance programming, with particular reference to recent thinking on PSR (Andrews 2013; Barnett, 2014; Rao 2013a, 2013b, 2014; World Bank 2012). SPARC is preparing a series of case studies to inform a programme evaluation as well as broader reflection on governance programming in Nigeria. In this context, the SPARC Programme Management Unit (PMU) was keen to take a comprehensive look at the model/approach SPARC has taken to governance reform.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has been tasked to develop an analysis of SPARC design and implementation in light of recent shifts in PSR thinking and practice. This report is the result of that engagement. SPARC is based on an anticipated complementarity between 1) the suite of sectoral and governance interventions at the state level; and 2) the use of a flexible ‘three-legged’ stool approach that incorporates three distinct work streams.² The PMU is interested in examining the benefits that interaction between these components has yielded, especially the relationship between SPARC and the State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) and within SPARC’s ‘three-legged stool’ model. The other objectives of the study include: identifying key lessons from recent literature on PSR; understanding the design process of SPARC and its implications for PSR; identifying other PSR initiatives with similar characteristics and features contributing to effectiveness; and drawing conclusions for SPARC and other programmes.

The remainder of Section 1 introduces SPARC in its context and describes the conduct of the study. The following sections outline the key elements of emergent PSR thinking and practice, assess SPARC’s design and implementation in that light and conclude with some implications for SPARC and future governance programming.

1 SPARC, the State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) and the Federal Public Administration Reform Programme (FEPAR).

2 SPARC’s ‘three legged stool’ includes three main dimensions of public sector reform: 1) policy and strategy development, 2) PFM and 3) civil service reform.

1.1 The SPARC approach

SPARC is one of DFID Nigeria's State Level Programme (SLP) suite of interventions introduced in 2008 (see Box 1). It grew out of a predecessor DFID programme, the State and Local Government Programme (SLGP) 2001-2008. SPARC was initially introduced into SLGP's five target states (Lagos, Enugu, Jigawa, Kaduna and Kano), and was extended into five more in 2012 (Anambra, Katsina, Niger, Yobe and Zamfara). In the same period, programme funding increased from £45.9 million to £60.4 million and the programme's completion date was extended from June 2014 to June 2015. It has since been extended to April 2016 with funding of £65.1 million.

1.1.1 SPARC orientation to technical assistance

The SPARC approach is based on a theory of change developed during the programme's inception phase and that has undergone significant modifications since the programme's expansion from five to ten states in 2012 and in response to the independent mid-term and annual reviews (SPARC, 2009a; 2013a; 2014a). The central proposition is that 'if state governments apply quality technical advice it will lead to better and sustained policies and strategies for development, management of public finances and staff, and better basic services can be delivered to improve citizens' lives' (SPARC, 2014a).

In this sense, SPARC aims to support solutions to technical challenges identified in state government systems and processes, and thereby enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of state-level governments' use of public resources. However, the current theory of change recognises and emphasises that the key to success lies not only in the provision of technical assistance (TA), but also in the adoption and application of these technical inputs by state governments, which must be facilitated by a process of political engagement: 'while SPARC activities can transfer technical capacity, only the knowledgeable engagement of decision makers (including elected representatives, senior public servants, and others) can bring about institutional change' (SPARC, 2012b).

A second key feature of the theory of change is that it has a holistic outlook on governance reform, suggesting governance failures have roots in several interrelated aspects of the public sector. The programme approaches this challenge by providing TA and associated training to selected state governments across three interlocking work streams:³

- Policy strategy, development and monitoring and evaluation (PS&ME) processes;
- Public financial management (PFM); and
- Public service management (PSM).

Box 1: SLPs and SPARC

The DFID-funded SLPs were designed as complementary governance programmes to have a collective impact on state governments' use of resources and ability to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The focus of the suite was initially on five states: Enugu, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano and Lagos.

The SLPs were expected to increase individual programme impact by collaborating and complementing each other. There are five SLPs:

- The State Partnership for Accountability, responsiveness and Capability Programme (SPARC), dealing with public management and finance;
- The State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) dealing with civil society development and representative institutions;
- The Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria (ESSPIN);
- The Partnership for Transforming Health Systems (PATHS2);
- Growth and Employment in States (GEMS), dealing with private sector development.

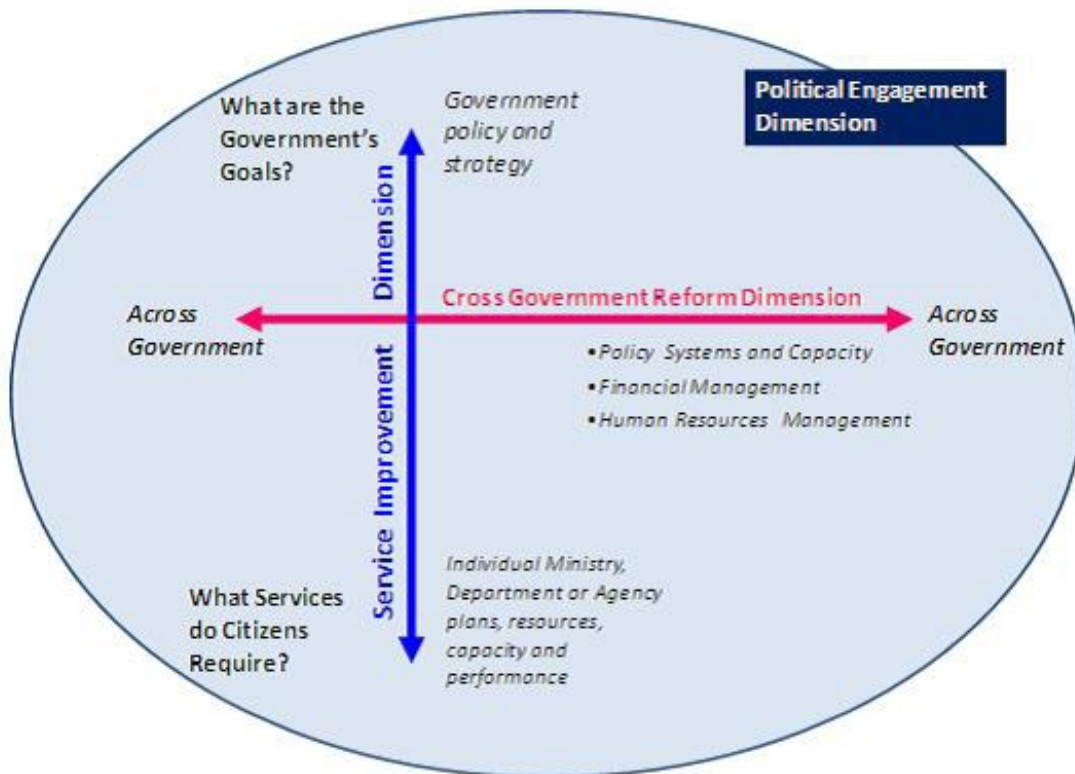
SPARC was intended in part as an umbrella governance initiative across the SLPs; as such, it was expected to provide technical guidance on governance reform to the sector programmes (ESSPIN, PATHS2 and GEMS) and work in close collaboration with SAVI, a civil society monitoring and advocacy programme.

Source: Author interviews and project documents

The SPARC theory of change also distinguishes between *vertical* and *horizontal* dimensions of TA (SPARC 2009a, 2013a). The vertical dimension concerns a 'sectoral' or 'service delivery-led' perspective, characterised by the development of policies and strategies and the positioning of resources to deliver improved services. The horizontal dimension concerns cross-government reforms, such as the introduction of improved policies, regulations and systems (see Figure 1) – sometimes known as 'centre of government' reforms. SPARC's approach implies integrating the abovementioned work streams at state level to achieve progress in both dimensions, and involves working with central ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs). This holistic approach is dependent on a high degree of coordination and interaction both among its own work streams and among the SLP suite. As summarised in the theory of change, 'SPARC is unlikely to achieve success in service delivery without improvements in the main sectors

³ The programme also includes monitoring and evaluation and knowledge management components.

Figure 1: Three reform dimensions



Source: SPARC (2012b).

supported by other DFID programmes, and demand side pressure for change stimulated by SAVI. Similarly, sustainable improvement to service delivery in health and education, or successful implementation of policies to facilitate economic growth, is dependent on reforms in the central ministries and agencies supported by SPARC’ (SPARC, 2014a). While it is not the remit of this paper to assess the SLP suite as a whole, it is important to note the challenge of coordinating a set of programmes that are separately contracted, implemented by different service providers and overseen by separate DFID teams in difficult governance environments.

SPARC seeks to agree work plans with state partners, recognising that both improvements in technical competence and also action taken by the state government to improve institutional performance are necessary to achieve progress towards the programmes objectives (Figure 2). In order to operationalise this, SPARC regularly (in quarterly progress reports) monitors conditions specified as decision points and triggers. The programme also undertakes joint annual reviews with state partners of the various types of partnership agreements, described next (SPARC, 2014b).

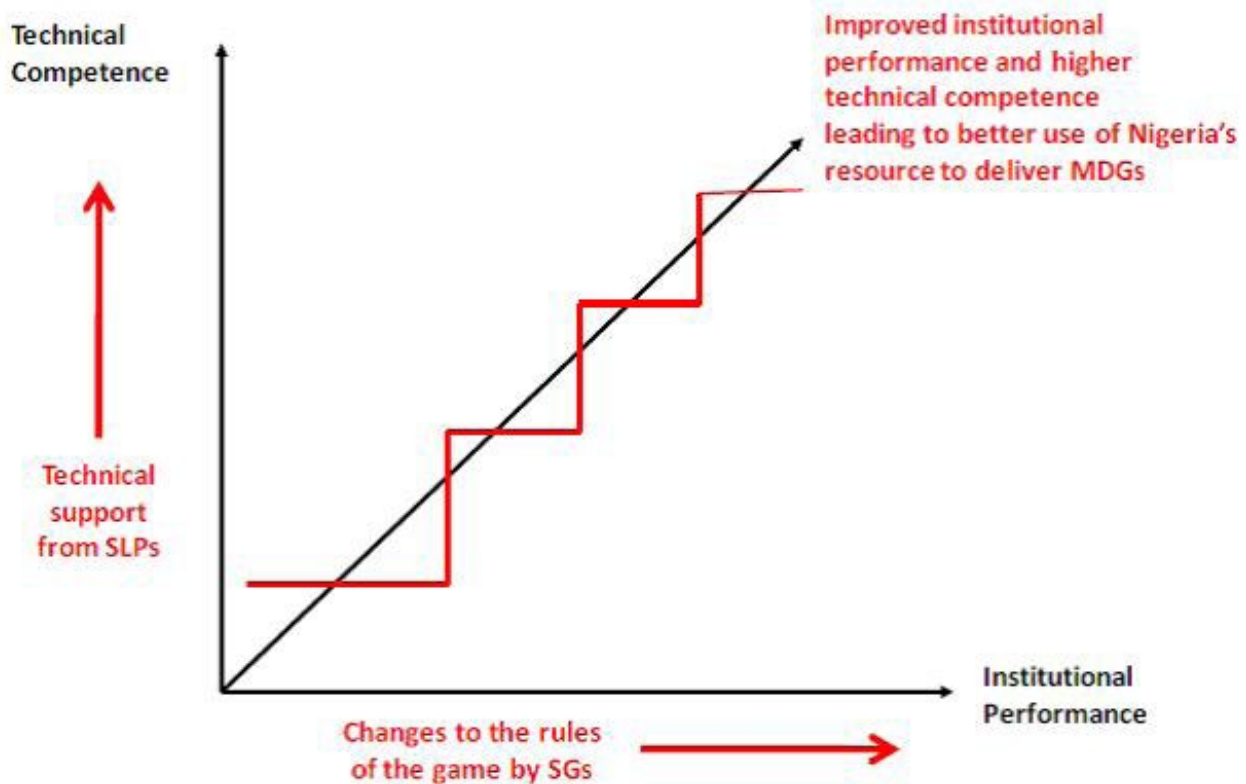
1.1.2 State strategies and agreements

SPARC’s programme of TA and political engagement is developed following an assessment of both the technical

and the political constraints to improved performance and differs in each of the 10 states. Technical performance is measured through the use of participatory self-assessment approaches using the Public Expenditure and Finance Accountability (PEFA) framework for PFM, and a State Evaluation and Assessment Tool (SEAT) developed by SPARC to apply to the other work stream areas. Political challenges are assessed through a consideration of the state’s political economy and of the state’s political commitment to reform.

In three of SPARC’s original five states (Kano, Jigawa and Kaduna), PEFA assessments had been undertaken under its predecessor programme, SLGP; these were used to advise continuing PFM engagement plans with SPARC. In Enugu and Lagos, PEFA assessments were undertaken during 2009. In collaboration with state government, these assessments were used to develop state change programmes and plans for each of the three work streams. This process of self-assessment was important for encouraging government ownership of reforms to be supported by SPARC (SPARC, 2011b). The change programmes formed the basis for agreement between the state governments and SPARC, and, once they were completed, two-year SPARC work programmes (2009-2011) were agreed. In 2011, the guidelines for SEAT were revised; reviews of SEAT were carried out in the five original states as

Figure 2: Sequence in the SPARC theory of change



Source: SPARC (2013a).

well as in the five new states in 2012. New or repeat PEFAs were carried out in all states.

When SPARC was expanded from five to ten states, it modified its approach to how it forged high-level agreement with state governments. Previously, the programme agreed change plans with senior civil servants, but, given that power in Nigerian states is centralised in the office of the governor, it was felt that agreeing reform goals at a higher level could lead to a higher realism of those goals (SPARC, 2013a). Since expanding, SPARC has sought to establish agreements with governors, and therefore a variety of formats are now used to clarify the relationship between SPARC and its partner state governments (see Box 2). In the original five states there are two different bases for the relationship: in Kaduna, Kano and Enugu the change programmes still shape the basis of the relationship, whereas in Lagos and Jigawa the relationship is based on the state's own development plans. In the five new states, SPARC has entered into Agreed Implementation Approaches (AIAs), which the state governor signs. The AIAs replace the comprehensive reform plans and are based on the characteristics of support each state require and the type of approach considered most appropriate to addressing the particular causes of poor performance in each state.

In 2012, as SPARC expanded from five to ten states, the programme's engagement strategy evolved in a second

significant way. SPARC adopted a three-part classification approach for state conditions – A, B or C – and specified different approaches to states depending on the character of the political commitment present in them (see Box 2). Adopting more state-specific approaches to technical and political engagement was designed to make a difference to what the programme actually does at the activity level in order to achieve the outputs in the log frame.

1.1.3 Political engagement routes

Political constraints – and patronage politics in particular – are identified in the theory of change as a primary reason why state leaders do not ensure government improvements that would seem sensible from the perspective of technical good practice: 'Weaknesses encompass low capacity, poor skills, and more importantly low willingness to reform, but there are islands of improvement which demonstrate change is possible' (SPARC, 2014a). Assessing, and potentially influencing, political willingness to engage in reform is therefore a central element of the programme's theory of change.

The programme uses a variety of tools and practices for political engagement, including undertaking state-level political economy analyses (PEAs) to better understand the political context and measuring political commitment to assess the obstacles as well as the opportunities for

Box 2: State categories

Approach A – ‘going with the grain’ – considered most appropriate for those states that already have a track record of committing to and delivering governance reform, and simply require specific TA with parts of their own governance reform plans (such as Lagos and Jigawa).

Approach B – ‘consolidated approach’ – the original SPARC ‘stepped’ model, considered most useful for those states where there is already some governance reform experience and understanding of the need for systematic cross-government governance reform (such as Kaduna, Kano and Enugu).

Approach C – ‘building foundations’ – considered most useful for those states where, although there may be limited experience of undertaking governance reform, there are some instances of reform initiatives and opportunities on which to build.

Each state was initially allocated an approach based on three core factors, with political economy analysis (PEA) of each state tailoring the detail of the approach to specific state circumstances:

Length of time that SPARC has been engaged;
Strength and consistency of progress towards reform objectives;

Generally perceived level of political commitment to change.

Source: SPARC (2012b).

change. SPARC’s theory of change envisages three routes to political engagement: direct engagement with state government at a high political level; support to selected federal agencies (such as the Conditional Grants Scheme (CGS) in the MDGs Office and the Nigeria Governors’ Forum (NGF)); and routing influence through state–society relations and legislative oversight via collaboration with SAVI (see Figure 3).

SPARC is not designed to support civil society voice directly, but rather to collaborate closely with the SLP partner programme, SAVI, and also with selected sector programmes that can work with non-government actors, such as GEMS. SAVI was initially designed to be part of SPARC, but it was separated into a distinct programme because it was decided that SPARC’s opportunities to build a constructive relationship with state governments could be jeopardised if it was also working to support civil society voice. This is based on an in-depth understanding of how professional civil society has developed in Nigeria (both before and during the democratic transition); the perception the state has of civil society organisations (CSOs) and how this has created tensions in state–civil society relations; and the experience of some other programmes (Booth and Chambers, 2014). The SPARC (2009a) overarching concept note explains how SPARC and SAVI should collaborate, with SPARC working to ensure better delivery of information and understanding of

government systems among the state assemblies, and SAVI facilitating the development of accountability links between the people and their representatives in the assemblies.

1.1.4 Summary

This brief review shows SPARC represents a holistic approach to governance improvement – in fact doubly so as it seeks to incorporate efforts across *both* three key functions of policy, public finance and civil service management *and* the two dimensions of centre of government reform and sectoral improvements. Perhaps inevitably, as a result of such wide-ranging ambitions, the programme’s theory of change is also dependent on smooth functioning with other members of the SLP suite. While framing its efforts broadly, the programme was also set up to try to produce and apply contextualised and locally owned reform plans that can reflect the diversity in both technical capacity and political conditions found across Nigeria’s diverse states. The possibility to supply TA across the three ‘legs of the stool’ in different levels or sequences both is recognition of the interdependencies between these three key governance functions but also can be read as an attempt to marry this holism with contextual specificity and political groundedness. The partnerships across the suite intend to enhance the horizontal dimension of reform that SPARC pursues with sectoral content.

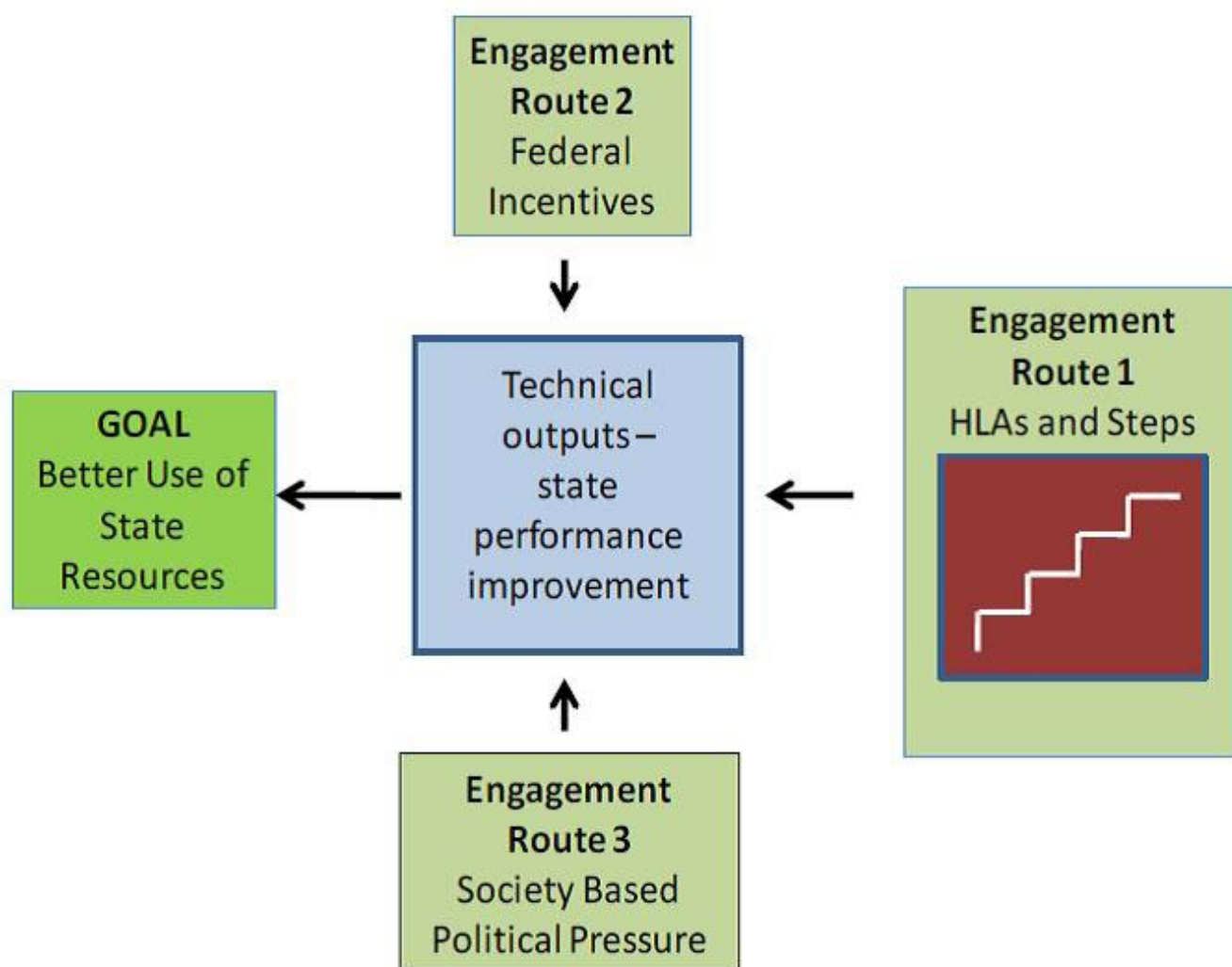
1.2 Conceptual framework and research methods

In part, this report examines the extent to which the design of the programme, and its implementation, can match the ambitions represented in its theory of change. However, equally, reviewing SPARC’s experience can make a valuable contribution to understanding tensions or trade-offs that may be present in the design of PSR programming. Two such tensions – one of breadth and one of sequence – stand out in particular:

- Between the holistic understanding of governance failure as having multiple, interrelated dimensions and a tendency to propose systemic reform, and an awareness that highly contextualised, flexible and locally driven approaches may be more successful at creating reform opportunities (Blum et al., 2012; Booth and Unsworth, 2014; Lewis, 2011; World Bank, 2012);
- Between the desire to support a set of core state functions that are seen to provide a foundation for other reforms and service delivery, and the likelihood that these reforms may be the most difficult to approach directly or initially, not least because they are complex and likely have political economy dimensions that undermine reform efforts.

Key elements in understanding how well SPARC has navigated these tensions, and indeed the extent to

Figure 3: SPARC/SLP routes to address political factors



Source: SPARC (2013a).

which they can be successfully bridged, include issues of sequencing and the extent to which the programme has been able to move flexibly between work streams and work in coordination with the other SLPs. Furthermore, the PMU was keen to examine the extent to which SPARC represents a way of working that is politically smart, adaptive and locally led.⁴

To meet the various objectives of identifying key lessons for successful PSR, comparing SPARCs approach to these and to other programmes and formulating some conclusions, the report adopts a framework based around a review of 10 key insights in current PSR thinking (see Box 5 in Section 2.5). The study draws on a varied evidence base, including a literature review that summarises the main lessons emerging from more or

Box 3: Key features of the current SPARC model

- Structured around state-level teams;
- Uses PEA to identify key governance problems and related political constraints;
- Aims to address these by providing technical support flexibly across three distinct work streams: PS&ME, PFM and civil service reform;
- Attempts to coordinate support to vertical (sectoral) and horizontal (cross-government) reform dimensions, in part through partnership with other programmes;
- Has adopted distinctive sequencing and engagement strategies according to state characteristics.

Source: Author interviews and project documents.

4 For example, with specific reference in the terms of reference to Andrews (2013).

5 Philipp Krause (ODI), Nick Manning (independent), Pallavi Nuka (Princeton), Sumedh Rao (GSDRC), Bryn Welham (ODI) and Jennifer Widner (Princeton).

Box 4: Research methods:

- Literature review of recent academic publications regarding PSR interventions and independent and donor evaluations of PSR programmes.
- Document review of core SPARC programme documents.
- Semi-structured telephone interviews with PSR experts.
- Semi-structured interviews, conducted in person or via telephone, with SPARC staff, former SPARC staff, state government partners, current and former DFID governance advisors and other key individuals with experience of SPARC or the SLP suite.

less successful efforts at promoting PSR in developing country contexts, interviews with six PSR experts⁵ and an examination of SPARC, SLP and DFID programme documents to assess the extent to which the SPARC approach and its implementation reflects similar insights to these emerging themes. In addition, we interviewed 22 individuals with significant experience and knowledge of the programme in London and Abuja to understand how the programme functions in practice. All those interviewed are either current or past SPARC, SLP or DFID staff members (see Box 4 for a summary of research methods).⁶

⁶ Interviews with programme staff and stakeholders were undertaken on a confidential basis and are referenced in the report using simple codes: 'S' = SPARC staff member, 'N' = not staff but SPARC stakeholder, e.g. DFID staff, and 'E' = expert on PSR.

2 Emerging theory in public sector reform

The literature on PSR in developing countries has recently enjoyed somewhat of a resurgence centred around a set of related ideas and lessons learned about stressing the importance of more localised, flexible and learning adaptation methods for supporting institutional change. These ideas and their prescriptions are not new; in fact, they underpin much of the thinking prevalent in development policy literature in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in the field of agriculture and livelihoods (Brinkerhoff and Ingle, 1989; Chambers, 1983; Hirschmann, 1967; Hulme, 1989). Rather, they have been conceptually ‘upcycled’ by the recent generation of literature being applied to institutional reform programmes. Prominent new concepts include ‘problem-driven iterative adaptation’ (Andrews, 2013), ‘politically smart, locally led’ development (Booth and Unsworth, 2014), ‘development entrepreneurs’ (Fabella et al., 2011) and escaping ‘capability traps’ (Pritchett et al., 2010).

This new emphasis on PSR has developed in response to the poor performance of earlier PSR interventions, which typically aimed for large-scale reforms, using a large amount of TA drawing on received institutional forms (‘isomorphic mimicry’), and with limited participation from government partners in designing the programme. The more nuanced reform studies cited above emphasise that working and learning iteratively in this way is recommended as a way of avoiding instances whereby the desired *de jure* characteristics of an institution exist (e.g. an armed, uniformed, ranked police force) but *de facto* do not function (Pritchett and de Weijer, 2010).

This recent shift in thinking on support for effective PSR has a number of major implications for external PSR assistance programmes, and adopting such an approach requires significant changes in the way large PSR programmes are designed and implemented. However, support for this way of working is growing.⁷ Taken together, these concepts broadly imply the importance of detailed political analysis in the design, implementation and monitoring stages of PSR programmes, a focus on specific and locally determined problems and allowing for flexibility and experimentation throughout implementation to confront complexity and uncertainty. In this worldview,

support for PSR in developing countries is described as a brokering and facilitating task as much as or more than a technical challenge. External support for reform may be tacit, not highly publicised and delivered through allies outside of the executive branch of government, and reforms must be perceived to be desirable by politicians and officials responsible for their implementation.

This section distils these new approaches into four groups of principles. It is important to note these principles are intended to help guide the analysis of SPARC’s design and implementation, but should not be considered an evaluation framework, for two reasons. The first is that these principles relate primarily to engagement strategies, and therefore cannot be used to evaluate the quality or appropriateness of specific technical solutions adopted by the programme. Second, there are, as alluded to above, tensions inherent even within these principles – for example between particular local and flexible reforms and foundational centre of government reforms, or the relative importance of civil society engagement – and part of the challenge is to find the most appropriate balance between them. Nevertheless, these principles form a useful framework for analysing the implications and challenges of these ways of working across interventions in a range of sectors and contexts. Table 2 in Section 3 presents a summary of SPARC’s positioning in relation to each.

2.1 Use problem driven and locally led approaches

2.1.1 Take a problem-solving approach

Emerging theory considers PSR as being fundamentally about identifying local problems and changing values and behaviour, rather than simply solving technical problems (Blum, 2014). As Andrews et al. (2012), Grindle (2013) and others argue, solutions to local problems rarely come from replicating best practice from elsewhere or through linear planning by external agents. Rather than beginning with preconceived ideas of what works, PSR should start with a degree of agnosticism on how to bring about reform in a given county. This requires defining problems in terms of functions, not

⁷ See, for example, <http://doingdevelopmentdifferently.com/>

forms; working with local stakeholders to develop solutions to problems using their knowledge of the local context; understanding stakeholder incentives and how they may prevent reform; and having an empirical understanding of the problem to be solved (Blum et al., 2012).

2.1.2 Enable local ownership

Solving public sector problems requires knowledge of the local situation and collaboration with stakeholders to devise entrepreneurial approaches to reform. As we have noted above, these ideas are not new; participatory approaches were prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s. Where recent thinking differs from these conventional participatory approaches is in its definition of 'local'. Booth and Unsworth (2014) emphasise the importance of reform processes being both *locally owned* and *locally delivered*. This involves focusing on problems that have local salience – which matters to those most affected by them – and giving priority to local leadership and networks to negotiate and develop solutions. This can be communities and local leaders but also national government.

With regard to external technical support for reform, the literature calls for external PSR support to be integrated into the existing structure and culture of the beneficiary government and move beyond traditional technical skills to include skills in managing and monitoring people (IEG, 2008). Integrating training into organisational structures and gaining the support of line managers for training is thought to increase the effectiveness of training as a tool for PSR (McCourt and Sola, 1999). There is also an emerging argument for greater emphasis on improving learning. Pearson (2011a, 2011b, 2011c) argues that understanding the local and organisational culture is important for enabling an organisation to learn from the training it receives.

2.2 Think and work politically

2.2.1 Use political economy and contextual analysis to inform PSR programmes

Recognising the complex and political nature of PSR is critical to developing a programme able to negotiate political as well as technical constraints (IEG, 2008). The design of PSR support should be based on a detailed understanding of the relations between public organisations and political and social structures. Bunse and Fritz (2012) find there is tentative evidence that investing in more explicit PEA of PSR in a given country can be useful for PSR. They propose that a country's context be reflected in the operational design of a PSR programme and PEA be used to identify reforms that are a politically feasible stretch from the current situation. The World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) (2008) recommends beginning with basic reforms that generate political support for the reform process. Identifying

political incentives for further reform and strategizing as to how these can be strengthened should also be an explicit component of PSR (Bunse and Fritz, 2011).

Over the past decade, development agencies have been attempting to produce more sophisticated analysis of country contexts, notably through the increased use of PEA. DFID has been at the forefront of this shift, and thinking about ways in which its in-country programmes can most effectively engage with the national processes driving change, notably with the introduction of 'Drivers of Change' in 2003. At the same time, there has been more recent criticism that PEA can become a cumbersome or 'box-ticking' exercise that is not utilised effectively in a dynamic sense. For example, Booth and Unsworth (2014) emphasise the importance of being able to use political knowledge as well as gather it. This requires reform practitioners to use their political knowledge creatively and intelligently, with the ability to work with politics or around politics according to their understanding of what will be most effective in each particular context.

2.2.2 Engage a broad range of stakeholders

Recent literature draws attention to the importance of engaging with a range of actors – political leaders as well as civil service officials at different levels of the bureaucracy. To solve public sector problems, practitioners may work with various different stakeholders, including those who are less prominent but who are responsible for implementing the reforms more senior government officers order (Andrews et al., 2012). For example, Roberts and Andrews (2005) found that, in Ghana, the implementation of budget reforms between 1998 and 2002 stalled because political will for reform had stagnated and reform ownership had failed to go beyond the central agencies to the actors responsible for implementation.

Some studies suggest that, as well as working across the civil service, engaging with civil society is also important for supporting PSR reforms. Research by Benequista and Gaventa (2011) argues that building citizen capabilities is often ignored but is crucial for improving service delivery through collective action at all stages of the service delivery process. However, the literature is divided on the relative importance of investing in civil society voice and demand for reform. Gaventa and Barrett (2010) warn that negative outcomes may occur, such as reprisals against those who oppose the *status quo*, or a sense of disempowerment if the state fails to respond to citizen demands. Booth (2005, 2011) also argues that public discussion about public policy is not necessarily effective for creating greater downward accountability in typical aid-dependent poor countries. Crook (2010) argues that public pressure is likely to be effective only if it is aligned with organisational incentives.

In sum, there is growing support for understanding development problems as collective action problems for which coalitions of different stakeholders are necessary for developing solutions (Booth, 2011, 2012). Rather than

describing state–citizen relations in terms of supply and demand, this new analysis recognises that civil society rarely has unified interests and voice. As such, engaging with a broad range of local actors and facilitating dialogue and coalition-building is important for overcoming development problems, including reform of public sector processes and institutions.

2.2.3 Focus on pockets of effectiveness

Compatible with a problem-solving approach, recent literature also suggests focusing on areas of effectiveness. Such ‘pockets’ (Leonard, 2008) or ‘islands’ (Crook, 2010) of effectiveness refer to competent managers, areas or sectors within a largely weak public sector. Crook (2010) argues that, rather than embarking on large-scale PSR reform, identifying existing talented and committed public sector agents and encouraging their way of working is a more effective way of developing a better organisational culture. For example, Antwi et al. (2008) suggest that, in Ghana, the Civil Service Performance Improvement Programme attempted to implement too many reform activities at the same time. This resulted in staff being overburdened and unable to take advantage of opportunities as they arose (Scott, 2011). The literature does not identify common or important starting points on which further reforms can be built but rather emphasises that initial reforms should be relatively simple, correspond to a government’s reason for engaging in a reform programme and build political support for further engagement.

2.3 Be flexible and responsive

2.3.1 Be experimental and adaptive

The problem-solving approach also calls for an experimental approach to finding solutions to the problems identified. Scholars such as Leftwich (2011) emphasise the need for political entrepreneurship by key agents to find ways of overcoming political constraints to reform. Political entrepreneurship involves experimenting and adapting PSR activities according to ongoing results and changing circumstances. Instead of having a fixed design and implementation plan, adapting a PSR programme during its delivery and using results-based lending instruments are increasingly seen as factors for success in PSR (Blum et al., 2012). To take a problem-solving approach, PSR may therefore need to be flexible and not restricted to achieving reform objectives in a fixed manner to a set timescale. For example, a core UK government team, including DFID forestry experts, achieved a successful initiative tackling illegal logging, working for over a decade researching, networking and negotiating with the partner government to design voluntary partnership agreements on timber harvesting and production (Booth and Unsworth, 2014).

Andrews et al. (2012) propose a ‘problem-driven iterative adaptation’ approach, which they describe as having ongoing feedback loops to inform new solutions and allow deviation from the initial plan. This approach emphasises ‘purposive muddling’, in which reforms are incremental and emerge through trial and error as reformers learn what works and why and build on short-term results that generate support for further change (Andrews, 2013). This argument draws attention to ensuring proposed reforms are politically feasible and practically implementable and supports the call for focusing on an institution’s function over its form.

2.3.2 Seize windows of opportunity

In line with recommendations to take a flexible approach to PSR, recent literature advocates seizing ‘windows of opportunity’ for reform. For example, an opportunity could arise when a change in fiscal conditions creates greater pressure for reform or if a change in government means new office-holders have lower stakes in maintaining the public sector *status quo* (Bunse and Fritz, 2012). Plans for large-scale reforms should not be rigid but instead be ready to respond promptly to opportunities as they arise (ibid.). While taking advantage of such an opportunity may not result in wider public sector change, it may achieve tangible, immediate results, which are important for maintaining support for the reform process. Reid (2013) suggests supporting a diverse portfolio of reforms and making interventions sporadically over a long time period as opportunities emerge could be an effective approach to PSR. Grindle’s (2004) analysis of why education reforms in Latin America were adopted despite the political odds being stacked against them also points to how unexpected opportunities and convergences can emerge. Key operational questions here should involve the appropriate time period for such flexibility and the mechanisms for authorising the relevant course changes.

2.3.3 Allow sequencing of support to be flexible

Much recent literature on the most effective sequencing of PSR is inconclusive, suggesting there is not one particular sequence of reforms that is most effective, and, instead, reforms should be sequenced according to the political economy context of each country (Rao, 2014). This approach is in contrast with approaches that emphasise a common set of foundational reforms and functions that must be supported initially (e.g. Ghani and Lockhart, 2009; Schick, 1998).

While the literature does not suggest a fixed sequence for PSR, there is some guidance on how to structure reforms for PFM. However, these are very broad priorities, and Welham et al. (2013) suggest that, in practice, PFM functions are heavily interlinked and reforms cannot be approached separately. The authors argue that, in all reform cases, an in-depth analysis of local context and

constraints is necessary for designing a reform programme that fits domestic capacity and ambition.

2.3.4 Use south-south skill-sharing and networking

There has been an increase in sharing experience and TA between developing countries, supported by development organisations (Rao, 2013b). There has been little evaluation of this, but there are indications that this is most effective when the exchange is context-specific and interaction between participants is promoted (ibid.). Mechanisms for South–South skill-sharing include the World Bank’s South–South Experience Exchange Facility, the New Economic Partnership for Economic Development’s African Peer Review Mechanism (on governance) and a capacity-building instrument, Public Technical Assistance, advocated by the European Network of Implementing Development Agencies. Such mechanisms aim to strengthen public institutions through the transfer and exchange of expertise and experiences between peers, enabling independent networking and knowledge-sharing (ibid.).

2.4 Use integrated approaches

Another strand of learning on PSR programmes emphasises the need for integrated and comprehensive approaches. The IEG evaluation of the World Bank’s work on PSR (2008) calls for a better framework for civil service reforms, which should take a broader approach and make civil service reform a central component of PSR. Civil service reform interventions have focused on improving pay and conditions using performance management or monitoring. However, this has been found to be difficult to implement and has not always produced the expected results (Rao, 2013a). Rather than having a narrow focus on pay and performance management, it is proposed that introducing broadly merit-based systems is more effective at incentivising public sector staff (Bebbington and McCourt, 2006; Scott, 2011). However, such thoroughgoing reform of the civil service is usually politically very difficult because this is likely to go against the ability of existing civil servants to create and allocate favourable positions in government. One proposed way of addressing civil service performance is to improve the links between personnel management and financial management information systems in order to take a seemingly more technocratic approach to highly politicised problems (Rao, 2013a).

The literature that advocates taking an integrated approach to PSR could be perceived as sitting in tension with that strongly supporting a problem-driven approach, seizing opportunities and allowing reforms to be locally led. On close examination, however, this tension may be

Box 5: Ten principles for more effective public sector reform

- Do, and *use*, PEA;
- Take a problem-solving approach;
- Engage a broad range of stakeholders;
- Be experimental and adaptive;
- Be locally led;
- Focus on pockets of effectiveness;
- Seize windows of opportunity;
- Allow sequencing of support to be flexible;
- Use South–South skill-sharing and networking;
- Take a broad view of institutional change.

Source: Cummings (unpublished).

overstated. Taking a broader approach to PSR does not necessarily imply addressing all issues simultaneously but rather recognising the complexity of the public sector, that problems are always interrelated and that a singular focus on pay and conditions, for example, is not the only way to reform a civil service. Nevertheless, there are genuine issues and questions surrounding viable sequences of reform, and it can legitimately be asked if these sequencing questions are thornier in relation to core, or centre of government, reforms such as policy and public finance. In the end, the question may be to ask how the more flexible approaches can lead to, and support, sustainable institutional and behavioural change over time.

2.5 Summary

Together, these 10 factors provide an overview of key principles for PSR emerging from recent literature and practice. They can be summarised as thinking and working politically; using a problem-driven and locally led approach; being flexible and responsive; and considering the holistic nature of public sector functioning. Taking a more politically aware approach, which prioritises particular problems of importance to beneficiaries, changes the role of donors and development organisations from being suppliers of TA to being facilitators for reform. Ultimately, it requires donors and development organisations to relinquish control of the reform process, and support government partners to develop solutions to their problems, making donors’ own goals of secondary importance. In the following section, we consider SPARC’s design and implementation in light of the broad dimensions of this new public sector reform agenda.

3 SPARC and public sector reform theory and practice

SPARC did not emerge in isolation. The programme built on learning from the limitations and opportunities identified by its predecessor programmes, and was designed and evolved in parallel with these emerging PSR recommendations over the past 15 years. Although SPARC became operational in 2008, the suite of SLPs grew out of a decade of learning and reflection around governance programming options in Nigeria. While the SLP suite of interventions was designed before the most recent generation of literature on more effective approaches to PSR, many elements of these prescriptions, such as using PEA and adopting a problem-(or 'issue'-)based approach, go further back.

DFID Nigeria commissioned one of the first DFID Drivers of Change (a political economy approach) studies in 2003, and in the mid-2000s the country team that undertook this analysis was actively thinking about how it could be operationalised (S12, N6, N4, N5). The ambitious study used PEA to inform the DFID Nigeria 2004-2008 Country Assistance Plan (CAP) and had a far-reaching impact on programming. Three key outcomes emerged from this process: the DFID CAP was aligned with the government's National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS); support was given to coalitions of actors; and a new 'issue-based approach' was adopted (Lewis, 2011).

In response to these internal DFID reflections, SPARC's predecessor programme, SLGP, underwent extensive modification, notably experimenting with the new issue-based approach. Issue-based projects were selected to improve service delivery within sectors that had traction with both government and the public. The idea was that they would demonstrate concrete examples that would put pressure on government to implement reforms elsewhere (S12, N6, N4, N5). However, as SLGP came to be replaced by the SLP suite, there was a perceived need to locate smaller issue-based interventions within a more comprehensive and structured framework that contributed to cross-sector and cross-government reform. In this respect, SPARC can be seen as an attempt to marry learning about politically informed and issue- or problem-based programming with comprehensive approaches to PSR. The possibilities and limitations of such a marriage are central to understanding SPARC's successes, where it may not yet

have gone far enough and where there may be higher-level structural constraints to its operating as intended.

Nigeria is an exceptionally challenging country in which to work on governance reform. SPARC and its predecessor programmes have achieved significant successes considering the complexity and instability of Nigerian state governments. SPARC is working with state governments that are vastly different in their capacity, culture, history of donor engagement and political settlement, which makes delivering a governance reform programme as a whole especially complex. In this respect, SPARC is an ambitious programme, aiming to take a new approach to governance reform and implement it simultaneously in very different contexts. The rest of this section examines SPARC's design and implementation in light of the three broad dimensions of the new PSR doctrine outlined in Section 2.

3.1 Locally led and problem-driven approach

A central theme in the latest thinking on supporting PSR concerns locally led development. As Booth and Unsworth (2014) describe, locally led development should be both locally owned (focused on problems that have local salience for beneficiaries and some of those in power to solve them) and locally negotiated and delivered (facilitating local leadership to find solutions to their problems). In the SPARC design, local ownership is sought in three principle ways across the intervention cycle:

- The identification of problems to be resolved;
- Training of state government partners in technical skills; and
- Enabling inter-state knowledge-sharing.

3.1.1 Locally led problem identification

With respect to problem identification, the use of self-assessment tools has been a key way of enabling state government counterparts to identify their own shortcomings, which are then supported by change plans and AIAs. PEFA and SEAT exercises form the basis for the benchmarking at the beginning of the engagement between SPARC and the state government. SEAT is a self-assessment tool designed by SPARC that is loosely based on some of the PEFA scoring principles and can be applied to other areas of PSR through the identification

and scoring of indicators and dimensions. SPARC encourages state governments to use PEFA and SEAT to assess the weaknesses in their current processes through a participatory workshop involving a group of key informants from state government, facilitated by SPARC and informed by previous baseline studies (SPARC, 2011b). SPARC then works with state government partners to develop a reform plan with baseline data from the PEFA and SEAT assessments, either as part of a state's own development planning process, through a Governance Change Programme or, in the new states, as an AIA (SPARC, 2014a).

Using PEFA and SEAT to identify where government systems and processes do not meet international standards can be seen to be encouraging state ownership of the reform process and taking a problem-driven approach, which has been found to be important for assessing a state's capacity for reform (SPARC, 2014g). Following initial problem identification using PEFA and SEAT, SPARC continues to encourage state leadership in solving problems through the use of decision points in state work plans (S12), and annual performance reviews that SPARC and state government partners use to shape subsequent reform planning (SPARC, 2014a).

A clear example of how SPARC has taken a problem-driven approach is the Lagos Executive Council (ExCo) retreat organised with the DFID office in Lagos. Slow implementation of the reform change plan in Lagos led to the holding of a retreat to discuss how progress on reforms could be better communicated to DFID and to Lagos citizens (SPARC, 2014f). A notable outcome of this retreat focusing on solving a particular problem was the creation of open access to elected state officials and key administrators through their emails and telephone numbers, which aimed to improve communication, transparency and accountability between the state government and citizens (ibid.). Other focused government engagement sessions like this have been held that have also been effective for facilitating state government partners to find solutions to specific problems (ibid.).

Evidence of state government partners taking the lead in solving problems can be found in states that are increasingly deciding to fund reforms instead of relying on SPARC support. For example, following an initial introduction to corporate planning, Kaduna state set up the first official Bureau of Public Sector Reform at the state level to manage the reform process. Similarly, in Lagos, the governor launched the Office of Transformation. Further examples of state governments taking leadership of reform processes include the Yobe state government rolling out mandate mapping following appreciation of the process by civil servants (S13), and the Lagos state government expanding the use of Medium-Term Sector Strategies (MTSSs) to other sectors following successful pilots in education, health and environment (SPARC, 2014i).

A further particularly prominent example of a problem-driven and locally led reform supported by SPARC is tax reform in Kano. Based on Lagos state's experience, the governor of Kano set out to increase state revenue by improving the tax payer database, linking staff rewards to results and performance and increasing taxpayers' trust in the system (SPARC, 2014d). Senior government representatives championed the reform and its implementation involved a wide range of stakeholders; citizens, banks, tax administrators and the informal sector. The reform benefited a wide range of stakeholders: revenue officers have an incentive to increase revenue; there is better collaboration between formal and informal sectors and government; and education and communication programmes have increased taxpayers' confidence in the system (ibid.). This example demonstrates that, when there is senior state government interest in solving a problem, such as tax registration, SPARC has been able to support a state government to solve the problem themselves.

However, there can be a tension between the emphasis on locally determined and owned problems and the reversion to a fairly limited set of technical interventions, particularly as the issues relate to centre of government processes such as PFM functions or multi-year planning. On the one hand, an approach of addressing only problems that have local political salience may result in key central government functions remaining unaddressed, while relying too heavily on formal assessment tools such as the PEFA framework can steer towards a limited set of technical shortcomings and therefore a limited menu of solutions. The appropriateness and success of these solutions can vary, and need not always be negative. For example, reviews of SPARC activity (2014a) show that some fairly standard core reforms, such as implementing approaches to tackle budget realism, can perform quite well across multiple settings, whereas other tools, such as MTSSs are attempted frequently but are much spottier in their uptake. One way to understand these differences drawing on the wider experience of PSR is to focus on solutions that emphasise *function* over form: while budget realism is a functional competency that could conceivably be tackled from several angles and stages in the budget process, an MTSS may focus more on the adoption of the form of a particular tool than on the underlying function – to successfully link plans and budgets over a given timeframe (Andrews, 2013).

This tendency to emphasise a limited set of forms may become more pronounced when prominent international sets of indicators – such as the PEFA – form the basis of needs assessment. Experience has shown that this 'mimicry' of best practice forms over functions is more common among 'upstream' (e.g. planning and budgeting) PFM functions rather than 'de facto' and 'downstream' functions (Andrews, 2013). In fact, the PEFA Secretariat has recognised several areas where the checklist approach of the PEFA framework may focus on the formal nature

of PFM systems over their functional outcomes (including budget credibility) and revisions to the framework were underway in late 2014 (Tommasi, 2013). An alternative approach – or one that attempts to bridge these tensions – might focus on linking particular PFM reform activities to the specific requirements of the partner development objectives. As such, PFM sequencing and support activities – while recognising some core principles – would vary depending on whether the focus is to be on promoting macroeconomic stability (debt service), efficient allocation of resources (budgeting), service delivery (effective execution and varying emphasis on salaries, goods and services and capital depending on the sector) or even state-building (identification and mobilisation of sustainable revenue sources) (Welham et al., 2013).

3.1.2 Providing TA while enabling local ownership

SPARC faces a challenge in integrating its position as a standing TA facility with a facilitative role in identifying and developing PSR options with state government: SPARC's engagement with state governments is based largely on supplying technical support, which offers an entry point for SPARC to discuss governance reform but also raises expectations among state governments of high-level TA and, in some cases, of funding for equipment and foreign study tours (SPARC, 2014b). Having a TA-led model could constrain how locally owned a programme can be, since state government counterparts may expect high-level technical tools even if these are overly complex for the existing state government capacity. Ensuring the support provided is appropriate for the current capacity can be difficult but is important for avoiding what Pritchett et al. (2010) describe as 'premature load bearing', whereby civil servants fail to absorb and implement TA. SPARC's institutional appraisal recognises that the low skills levels and motivation of many state employees is likely to limit the effectiveness of TA, and a number of SPARC programme staff expressed surprise at the lack of government capacity and communication between civil servants. In order to address this, there has been an attempt to tailor the TA delivered accordingly. Nevertheless, the lack of cross government communication and coordination at the state level makes SPARC's aim to link up work across work streams within state government ambitious, although it has registered some impact in improving cross-government communication and outcomes. Procurement is one area in which this has been the case, because SPARC has engaged all ministries together (S1, S13).

Recognising the tension, SPARC's updated theory of change (SPARC, 2014a) notes that, 'An overarching conclusion drawn from positive case studies is that administrative reform works best when the design is 'home-grown', innovative, has a clear incentive framework and is well integrated with other reforms.' Facilitating government partners to devise and implement solutions to their problems is crucial for local ownership and

leadership of a reform programme. One way that SPARC has approached this tension positively is where reform activities have been embedded in governments' own structures, such as Kaduna's Bureau of Public Service Reform, Katsina's Human Resource Management Department and the Lagos Office of Transformation (SPARC, 2014a). Furthermore, as SPARC has evolved, the programme has offered a range of context-specific tools that state government partners can adapt to fit their circumstances, for example mandate mapping, corporate planning and basic human resource management systems (ibid.). These are meant to be basic systems, not international best practice tools but systems considered best practice in Nigeria (ibid.).

An example of how such tools have been effective in addressing specific state needs is the corporate planning initiative developed in Kaduna to support the state government to improve the performance of its MDAs (SPARC, 2014c). Corporate planning emerged as an appropriate approach because it met the Kaduna state government's objectives and also fitted with other SPARC activities in the state (ibid.).

SPARC has also in some of its activities endeavoured to use the mode of delivery of its technical support to increase state counterparts' ownership of reforms. SPARC reflects recommendations on building civil service capacity through its learning-by-doing approach to staff training and its learning-from-others approach through the South-South exchange process. A good example of this is Zamfara state's effort to learn from Jigawa on procurement legislation.

Instead of classroom-based methods, more practical, 'on-the-job', training is provided, which ensures training is directly applicable to service officials' work (SPARC, 2013b). In addition, the Knowledge Management work stream has tried to communicate technical reports to state partners in a more digestible language and format. For example, one of the outputs of the review of the knowledge management support to the State Peer Review Mechanism (SPRM) was the production of a simplified guide to states for documenting and sharing their reforms (SPARC, 2014h). SPARC is also now looking to build the capacity of SPARC state offices to provide assistance on a more responsive basis, particularly regarding the use of budget documentation and International Public Sector Accounting Standards reporting templates.

Beyond these examples of designing and delivering TA that is responsive to particular needs in a given state, some other recent PSR programmes reviewed for this study provide lessons on encouraging greater local formulation and leadership of reforms. Examples of this are the World Bank's Pay and Performance Project in Sierra Leone (Roseth and Srivastava, 2013) and the DFID-funded Budget Strengthening Initiative (see Box 6). In Sierra Leone, the World Bank programme spent considerable time establishing relationships with government agencies,

overcoming initial mistrust and reluctance on the part of the government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) to take ownership of the reform programme. Eventually, having taken a relatively open approach to the choice of reform areas and reform paths, the Bank team and GoSL discussed the political economy challenges and institutional capacity constraints to reform. The process of discussing problems and constraints also resulted in GoSL actors changing from being disparate groups of actors to becoming a cohesive team committed to the reform.

The Pay and Performance Project also used a results-based lending instrument, which was chosen so GoSL agencies and individuals could find their own paths to achieve agreed targets (Roseth and Srivastava, 2013). To encourage GoSL to take up this approach, simple early-stage indicators of success were used which guided the government's first steps and enabled early wins to maintain state partners' confidence. Following this, more weight was placed on the advanced stage indicators to create space for experimental approaches to reaching these later outcomes.

3.1.3 Immersion of staff

To improve the efficacy of SPARC's TA to state governments, it is important for SPARC to assess not only what is actually required and realistically useful but also how international technical experts can best address these needs. Currently, TA aims to support sustainable reforms by training state partners in new skills. Consultants who have many years of experience working in the same states are likely to have strong understanding of the starting capacity of those being trained and the limitations they face in implementing what they learn. Yet it is difficult for international technical consultants to spend time teaching and mentoring civil servants, providing on-the-job training and following up on training sessions when they are not permanently or substantially based in Nigeria (S11). While there has been a tendency in 2014 towards increased use of state teams over short-term TA, it is not clear whether this has facilitated mentoring approaches or been a side-effect of increased difficulties in posting international staff. A recent SPARC case study (2014d) emphasised the need for the programme to build state government partners' ability to apply and implement TA, being aware of state capacity to absorb change. In line with recent PSR literature, the study recommends building capacity by coaching and working in day-to-day partnership to apply a reform tool.

One experimental approach to improving the quality of TA is the 'fiscal ethnography' undertaken by the social impact firm, Reboot.⁸ A team of national and international staff were embedded in a state government for 18 months to observe how the government systems worked and the culture of the organisation and people working in it, and to earn their partners' trust. The knowledge they gained

Box 6: The Budget Strengthening Initiative

BSI draws on expertise to support fragile and conflict-affected states to build more effective, accountable and transparent budgets. It provides demand-driven strategic advice, technical support and capacity development to partners in fragile states, who set their own agenda for the assistance BSI provides them. It is flexible in the assistance it provides, which includes high-level policy advice and TA at the international, national and subnational levels.

By establishing a relationship of trust with its partners in ministries of finance and planning through long-term embedded advisors, BSI works to their priorities and seeks solutions to problems they identify, exploring ideas in confidence and from a perspective independent of donor partners. This involves developing annual work plans with government partners and also responding to direct requests from government. For example, in South Sudan BSI funded internet connections for the South Sudan Directorate of Planning; in Liberia the programme conducted an urgent costing of the poverty reduction strategy. BSI has an operational structure that allows it to be highly responsive to assistance requests and to deploy experts and remote advice within a matter of days. It also facilitates peer learning, as between the South Sudan Ministry of Finance and the Ugandan government.

Given the fragility of the states in which BSI works, government requests tend to be *ad hoc*, so BSI also places a lot of emphasis on helping broker solutions to recognised problems and building consensus across stakeholders. This attention to facilitating problem-solving is one of the programme's features that sets it apart from other PFM reform programmes.

Booth (2013) identifies the following core values that have enabled organisations such as BSI to engage constructively in institutional change processes:

- Not having a pre-established influencing agenda;
- Finding solutions to problems and facilitating change;
- Performance monitoring that rewards learning and adjustment;
- Being answerable to local stakeholders.

Source: Booth (2013); Cox and Robson (2013); Tavakoli et al. (2013); www.budgetstrengthening.org/

and the relationships built then enabled the Reboot team to tailor their tools and training to the specific needs and priorities of the state government. However, while Reboot was reportedly good at understanding the process side of

8 See <http://reboot.org/case-studies/context-driven-programming-for-governance-reform-nigeria/>

things, its lack of technical expertise limited the success of the programme's reform initiatives (N8). This reminds us that it can be a challenge to find the right balance between technical expertise and process expertise.

To increase these efforts, SPARC could learn from other governance reform programmes that focus on making TA demand-led. In addition to BSI (Box 6), the Africa Governance Initiative (AGI)⁹ focuses on providing basic skills and responding to governments' demand for support to achieve the reforms they have prioritised (Tavakoli et al., 2013). In Sierra Leone, AGI worked closely with the Office of the President to resolve blockages to the delivery of politically important public goods, such as electricity and free health care. While this sometimes meant solutions to blockages were *ad hoc* and discretionary, there is some evidence that resolving problems across government has begun to improve relationships between ministries that previously worked in silos (*ibid.*).

3.2 Thinking and working politically

3.2.1 Political engagement

As described in Section 1.1, the design, implementation and monitoring of SPARC reflect calls for a more thorough understanding of political constraints to reform processes. The programme explicitly recognises in its theory of change the critical importance of political engagement, acknowledging that the political as well as technical challenges to reforms must be overcome if the anticipated outcomes are to be achieved (SPARC, 2009a, 2013a). The programme defines political engagement as 'the analysis of the political economy context and interaction with political actors in order to assess the constraints and opportunities for policy and institutional reform' (SPARC, 2014a). In this respect, political engagement through a diverse set of practices is evident at all stages of SPARC's programming cycle (see Section 1.3).

Formal PEA has been integrated into the programme design, implementation and monitoring stages to provide an understanding of what drives political systems and incentives generally (S7S; SPARC 2012a, 2012c, 2013a). The programme has also focused on experimenting with ways to do this more effectively. During the programme's inception phase, in collaboration with SAVI, SPARC undertook internal state-level political economy assessments¹⁰ in each of its states as part of its baseline activities (SPARC, 2009a, 2013b). These studies looked at the broad political economy dynamics within each state (key characteristics, nature of obstacles and identification

of opportunities for change) in line with DFID guidelines.¹¹ These analyses informed the development of the two-year SPARC work plans, along with the state change matrices and change plans developed with state government partners, which intended to capture the state's intentions for reform (SPARC, 2009a). In theory, this permitted the programme to identify the sectors and areas where reforms were likely to be politically challenging or not, highlight effective entry points at the state level and prioritise SPARC activities based on a realistic assessment of the level of political commitment to reform which exists (SPARC, 2009a, 2011a; S8, S12, S14).

SPARC has also used PEA to inform the ongoing implementation of the programme. Following the 2011 elections, political economy updates were undertaken in the original five states to inform work planning reviews about which work streams should be continued and which should be reduced or suspended (SPARC, 2012a). This second round of studies also built on learning from the original reports. The first PEAs were considered complex, and state teams had difficulty drawing out the strategic implications of their findings (*ibid.*). To try to overcome these difficulties, the second round studies were made more participatory, with state programme managers (SPMs) being involved in the process: a guide was produced, state teams were encouraged to carry out their own analyses and meetings were held to discuss findings and implications. In addition, they were also undertaken in collaboration with SAVI. The state teams reported that this approach was much more accessible and felt their understanding of governance constraints could contribute to the programme plans (*ibid.*).

To varying extents within states a more informal form of PEA also exists, drawing on the tacit knowledge of the state teams. While this analysis is not presented in written form, many SPMs noted that it was more useful than formal documents from an operational perspective (S8, S12, S14). The informal analysis depends largely on the political knowledge, skill and networks of the SPMs, who are on the ground working to develop relationships and identify champions within their states (S11, S14).¹² In some cases, this has enabled SPARC state teams to make decisions about where to focus TA, identify opportunities and assess the extent to which particular sectors, states or issues would receive traction and how to generate political will (S13).

In another innovation over larger-scale formal PEA, a rapid baseline study was used in the new states into which DFID expanded programmes in 2012, in order to inform the AIAs. Decisions concerning which sectors SPARC should work in did still draw on state team knowledge of the political context. In the absence of PATHS2 and ESSPIN in

9 See <http://www.africagovernance.org/africa/pages/our-approach>

10 Along with the SEAT, the PEA constituted the programme's baseline design.

11 The studies followed the guidelines for PEAs as set out in the DFID How-to-Note on political economy (DFID, 2009).

12 SPMs have access to different networks of stakeholders, which can be a political set of actors or more civil servants.

Niger and Anambra, the respective SPARC state teams chose to work on agriculture where they perceived there to be more political traction (S2). There is a sense in the SPARC PMU that SPARC engagement in these states is effective and the absence of DFID sector programmes contributed to this because the programme was free to work in the sector where political traction appears to be strong (S2).

SPARC's experience points to some ways to expand and improve political engagement, in terms of informing programme design but particularly during implementation. Stakeholders largely describe PEA as initially tending towards being an overly formal tool. Practice suggests, however, that more effort to complement these formal exercises with systematic, but informal and ongoing, analysis, drawing more on the tacit knowledge of state-level staff, would be valuable. PEA could be more effective if it included informal knowledge of state government partners' interests and motivations, their networks and the sociocultural values affecting how people behave (S1, S13). This finding is echoed in the SPARC case study on its political engagement (SPARC, 2014b), which recommends the PEA process be adapted to better enable the articulation of state teams' tacit political knowledge. For example, in the early stages of SPARC, 'innovation diaries' to record ongoing comments and decisions were suggested and begun. They were abandoned when reporting became cumbersome and the information seemed to be being gathered elsewhere. However, some respondents acknowledged that this could have been a useful way of capturing how reforms were achieved, even as quarterly reports and weekly meetings continue to have a role to play (S13). Recording and sharing tacit and cultural knowledge through a medium such as a programme diary could enable SPARC staff to better identify opportunities for reform, learn from experience and tailor future work accordingly.

3.2.2 Capacity and constraints to working politically

Booth and Unsworth (2014) argue that working in a politically smart way in a developing country context is not just about being politically informed but also about being politically astute – that is to say, having the capacity to work with or around the political constraints in intelligent and creative ways. So, is SPARC's work politically astute? As noted above, the state-level PEAs provide critical information on the contextual factors at state level that are important for assessing levels of political engagement. However, as noted above, and in a recent internal assessment of SPARC's political engagement approach (2014a), there are a number of areas where state-level PEA could improve:

- PEAs have tended to focus on profiling powerful individuals and have been weak on analysing the nature of informal institutions at the state level. In particular, limited analysis of the role of the influence of sociocultural factors on public servants' and politicians'

motivations for reform (i.e. Islamic values) represents missed opportunities for more strategic thinking about long-term change.

- Although the approach to PEAs has been modified to ensure the state teams take greater ownership of the process, not enough has been done to facilitate the articulation and use of state team members' extensive tacit knowledge of the political context.
- The formal SPARC PEA has been overly focused on overall political context of the state rather than problem-driven analysis relating to SPARC's interventions areas – that is, the politics of the budget itself.

Moreover, while the SPARC approach to political engagement does reflect calls for a more thorough understanding of the political constraints to specific reform processes, translating the analysis into alternative operational models remains challenging. SPARC puts a great deal of emphasis on assessing where there is political willingness, but other factors constrain or shape the ability to act on this knowledge. Some of these constraints stem from contractual and design issues. SPARC evaluation reports have found that the programme's design and broader DFID priorities can make it difficult to operationalise PEA findings. This was confirmed in interviews by key programme staff.

SPARC's ability to use the findings from the PEA carried out in the inception phase of the programme in 2008/09 were constrained from the outset by the design and contracting of the SLP suite. In accordance with DFID's agenda on achieving the MDGs, health and education were the key sector focus of the SLP suite and, although the suite included a growth and employment programme, this did not start until 2011. In all the states in which the initial PEAs were carried out, the studies indicated very little political traction for health and education reforms, flagging instead support for reforms in sectors such as agriculture, water, infrastructure and job creation. Yet the SLP suite did not have expertise in these areas and so, from the outset, the programme was unable to use its PEA to inform its work (N4, N5, S12). As a result, SPARC was directed to work on sectors (health and education) that did not necessarily reflect the findings of the PEA or state plans.

Other aspects of the early SPARC contractual arrangements hampered efforts to turn political analysis into political action. For example, despite SPARC's explicit recognition of the need for political engagement, in the inception phase of SPARC DFID explicitly prohibited the programme from engaging directly with politicians, as this was supposed to happen through the use of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) signed between state governments and DFID, which were never put in place. This restriction was later lifted, allowing direct engagement with governors, among others.

There have also been tensions relating to how states are selected for SPARC support. SPARC's original five states

were inherited from its predecessor programme, SLGP.¹³ However, tensions between the political analysis and DFID's global priorities became clear when DFID was keen to expand its footprint to a number of northern states, in line with its focus on poverty reduction in the poorest areas. Despite a PEA showing that expanding SPARC to Zamfara and Katsina would be unlikely to achieve anything, DFID decided to roll the programme out to these states anyway, ignoring the results of the PEA (N4, N5, S2). The PEA does not have to be the only form of analysis informing a programme's development under the current way of working, but the early experience of SPARC demonstrates that the PEA may be side-lined if the results do not align with DFID's global agenda, a problem that is likely to be repeated in other settings and among other donors.

While at the state level SPARC has flexibility to apply findings from the PEA by moving resources between work streams, SPARC's flexibility in moving resources to other programmes in the suite, such as SAVI, is limited. Although the suite is designed to work collaboratively on collectively identified issues, the current design does not incentivise this behaviour in practice. For example, even if the results of a PEA suggest investing more work in the civil society voice component of the SLP in a certain state could be beneficial, transferring resources from SPARC to SAVI – through a budget line for cross-programme activities – while feasible, requires a high level of willingness and creativity on behalf of the programme managers and a good working relationship, which is not a given in practice. Consequently, although SPARC ensures regular PEA updates are carried out at the state level, the challenge of how to apply PEA findings remains. Changes to both the design and contractual arrangements of SPARC and the SLP suite might be necessary if SPARC is to move from 'thinking politically' to 'working differently' (Rocha Menocal, 2014).

Despite the structural constraints of the programme, there are examples where SPARC has been capable of finding ways to work on issues for which there are political constraints. The programme has often been successful at achieving this when it has worked closely with SAVI, since SAVI provides additional ways of engaging with and influencing the state governance system. For example, in Enugu, SPARC and SAVI collaborated to address the number of factors hindering progress on procurement reform (SAVI and SPARC, 2014). Although the executive was unlikely to be persuaded directly to reform procurement practices, SPARC and SAVI identified other ways of creating pressure and capacity for procurement reform. SPARC supported the development of a Procurement Bill, and, together with the Enugu head of service, took charge of building the capacity of 100 government officials in procurement practice. Meanwhile,

SAVI supported the creation of media platforms, including a specific radio programme during which the attorney-general and commissioner for justice explained the need for procurement reform to the general public and government officials. Both SPARC and SAVI used high-level advocacy to push the governor and his cabinet to pass the bill to the state assembly, where SAVI could also foster support for the bill to be passed into law (*ibid.*). This demonstrates SPARC's ability to understand the political and technical constraints preventing a reform and find ways of overcoming them, especially when SPARC is able to draw on SAVI's facilitated partnership approach, which can influence civil society and the assembly.

In addition to working with SAVI, SPARC has demonstrated the ability to work politically on its own. One example is in Kaduna, where SPARC found resistance to a cross-government mandate mapping exercise (SPARC, 2014b). The Kaduna state team was aware that a main concern of the state government was the lack of supervision of Islamic schools, which were accused of spreading militancy. The team tapped into this concern and presented mandate mapping as a way of more clearly defining regulatory mandates. This enabled SPARC to build commitment to the mapping exercise while addressing one of the government's own priorities (*ibid.*).

To work in this way requires not only political knowledge but also skill to identify and use opportunities to overcome political barriers. Within SPARC, it is largely the responsibility of SPMs to use their state-specific political knowledge, skill and connections to lead their team in this work. A SPARC case study (SPARC, 2014b) reports that the strong personal connections of many SPMs with senior civil servants and political office-holders is important to their ability to negotiate governance reforms such as these. However, this also presents its own constraints. Further empowerment of these managers is an important foundation for enabling politically smart programming.

SPARC's understanding of working politically can be seen in its extensive work on political engagement. As this section describes, many instances of in-depth political engagement with a range of actors, especially senior civil servants and political office-holders, have enabled SPARC to work within and around political constraints. However, SPARC's political engagement tends mostly towards understanding the political economy context and interaction with political actors in order to assess the constraints and opportunities for reform (SPARC, 2014b). As a result, most of SPARC's political engagement involves identifying political constraints and opportunities and shifting resources accordingly. It may be that SPARC's ability to move resources within and across work streams using the three-legged stool model means that, while it can

13 The process of developing NEEDS and the State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies (SEEDSs) in the early 2000s was used as an input into the selection of the SLGP states. However, these tools were criticised at the time for furthering development partner agendas rather than prioritising the Nigerian context (N3, N5).

be flexible in its response to the political context, its political engagement has focused less on thinking creatively about how to generate political leverage or how to adapt technical solutions to fit the context (SPARC, 2009a; E1, N5, S12).

For SPARC to expand the way it uses political knowledge and engagement, it may be necessary to pay more attention to problem-solving and experimenting with new interventions. For example, SPARC's PEA could be more problem-focused so that political knowledge can be applied to specific operational problems as they arise. As recommended by the SPARC case study on political engagement (SPARC, 2014b), developing PEA tools that assist state team staff to articulate a problem they encounter and to apply PEA to it could be useful for finding ways of overcoming political constraints. SPARC's design and implementation respond well to calls for greater political analysis, and by far the most significant barriers to working more politically lie with structural and contractual constraints related to donor imperatives. However, SPARC could do more to use the political skills of its staff to find ways to work around or within political constraints, adapting technical tools to fit the context and leveraging support for reforms through nurturing informal alliances of likeminded bureaucrats and identifying shared priorities (Booth and Unsworth, 2014; Rocha Menocal, 2014).

3.3 Working iteratively and adaptively

3.3.1 Flexibility

SPARC has worked flexibly and been responsive to context through its capacity to shift resources between different work streams and its flexibility about the configuration of state partners with which the programme works at the state level.

The 2013 Annual Review (Robson et al., 2014) comments that, 'the balance of support between work streams differs each year for each state and, as such, appears to reflect the best opportunity to make progress' and describes how SPARC gradually scaled up assistance based on identified need and the likelihood of success, rather than allocating large budgets from the beginning. Moreover, a recent assessment of how SPARC's political engagement has informed programming decisions (SPARC, 2014b) indicates that there have been changes in expenditure allocation, both as a result of shifting resources when anticipated political traction has not been forthcoming and where political engagement has delivered better results.

In practice, the SPARC PMU has been open to shifting resources between the three internal work streams (at the state level and overall) as well as between states (N7, S2, S3, S4, S5, S8, S14). Although SPARC is unlikely to entirely shut down work streams within particular states, there are many examples where funding has been shifted between work streams. For example, resources have been shifted from PSM to PFM in Enugu; towards human resources in Katsina when it was the only technical stream with any

political traction; and in Anambra from cash forecasting to MTSS (S4, S14). While state teams require approval from the national PMU, as long as they have a valid justification the SPMs indicated this was not a problem. This has developed organically as the programme has been implemented (S13). The SPARC PMU puts this ability to shift focus between work streams down in part to the capacity of the SPMs to be responsive.

As noted at the start of this section, this flexibility to adjust work streams within the larger framework, a 'three-legged stool' approach, can be seen as an attempt to combine politically smart and locally led initiatives with the awareness of the holistic nature of some governance challenges. Within each state, the SPARC programme works on a number of areas at the same time, which fit together within an overarching framework for balanced, strategic reform, thus aiming for depth of reform within breadth.

There are echoes of this approach in relatively few other PSR programmes, although DFID's PSR programme in Bangladesh, the Public Sector Capacity-Building Project: Managing at the Top (MATT), offers one example (Wildig et al., 2013).¹⁴ However, the Bangladesh programme did experience difficulties with this model. MATTII aimed to achieve depth and breadth by beginning with major investments in senior management training (depth) but leaving a number of outputs comparatively undefined so the programme could engage with wider human resources issues later. However, it was found that the managing consultants focused their efforts on the outputs for training, which were the most detailed in the design, and that wider human resources reforms were not substantially developed (ibid.).

In comparison with the Bangladesh programme, SPARC has a more balanced design, with outputs defined in all of the work streams rather than having some that are highly developed and others that are not. The managing consultants of SPARC are able to exploit the freedom in the programme design effectively. Nevertheless, it is important to remain watchful in any programme that embodies a flexible activity framework to avoid a tendency to 'crowd' activities around those most easily or clearly identified and monitored, possibly reinforced by contractual incentives.

SPARC has also shown flexibility in working with a broad range and varied configurations of state partners depending on both the context and the work stream. SPARC's work plans were developed collaboratively with a variety of local, national and federal stakeholders. At the state level baseline activities were participatory, involving self-assessment by state employees and politicians and joint annual reviews. The state technical streams focus on working with stakeholders who have an incentive to work with SPARC. For example, in some states, SPARC has focused on working with skilled technocrats who have an interest in the reform processes on the assumption that

they will have the incentive and ability to persuade the governor of the need for a reform (N2, S4, S13).

In each state, the networks of contacts of individual SPMs play an important role in directing reform support towards the particular partners, and the political astuteness of the SPM is critical (S4). Where SPMs are connected to political actors, SPARC has worked with these. In other states, SPARC has drawn on SAVI's knowledge of the political context to engage with informal networks of public service officials and worked in collaboration with the other SLPs (S2). For example, in Kano, SPARC worked with public service officials who were pro-reform and influential within government in order to lay the groundwork for future reform efforts (SPARC, 2010). SPARC collaborated with sector programmes in Kaduna over budget realism (N5, S4, S11)

SPARC has also worked with other DFID and non-DFID programmes to support PSR. For example, 'In collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), SPARC provided technical support to the [Katsina Education] ministry on the review and revision of the Education Sector Plan. The revised Education Sector Plan was then used to produce the first Katsina Education MTSS, which has now been approved by the World Bank/Global Partnership for Education' (SPARC, 2013b).

3.3.2 Knowledge sharing

The Knowledge Management stream of the SPARC programme aims to disseminate learning from reform activities at the state level among SPARC states, and to subsequently motivate non-participating states to access reform advice available through the SPARC programme. Local ownership is facilitated through enabling inter-state knowledge-sharing, reflecting recent calls for greater South-South learning and the need for reforms to be context-specific and not transplanted from Western bureaucracies (Rao 2013b). The SPARC knowledge management plan facilitates South-South learning and networking through a number of key mechanisms. It aims to increase learning between Nigerian states, twinning states already in the programme with new states and holding Governance Share Fairs as a forum whereby states can come together to showcase their experience and successes and learn from each other. The 2013 Resource Centre and other online resources are another way in which SPARC aims to share its resources, tools and ideas within Nigeria and beyond, using social media as well as a website and providing a paper pocket guide for those with limited internet access. There is some evidence of state government taking tools and shaping them for their needs (S9) (see Box 7 for some concrete examples of these).

Another, more informal, way in which knowledge-sharing is facilitated is through the retention of SPARC programme staff, in particular through movement across states. This has worked as a means of keeping expertise within the programme and has also enabled lesson-learning

Box 7: Concrete examples of state-state learning

- Benue copied Lagos' work on computerising land registry files.
- Zamfara adopted the Kaduna approach to multi-year budgeting.
- Zamfara learnt about procurement legislation from Jigawa.
- Niger adopted the Lagos approach to Budget Call Circulars and the inclusion of revenue forecasting and ceilings (as a result of movement of SPARC staff between states).

Source: Interviews in Abuja with programme staff.

between states such as Lagos, Kano and Jigawa (N6, S13). For example, a state team member from Lagos was able to share lessons learned to assist Niger improve its budget call out. Drawing on his contacts in both states, this sped up the reform process (S13).

Approaches to working involving the creation of thematic communities of practices have also had some success. During the latter part of SLGP, a community of practice on budget classification facilitated learning between Kano, Kaduna and Jigawa (S11). These relationships have since facilitated learning in other areas: for example, Zamfara learnt from Jigawa's success in reforming procurement practices. The knowledge management tools, focused on sharing experiences between state teams and between state governments, have been broadly shown to be effective in terms of taking a successful approach and replicating it while also adapting it to a state's own needs and capability (SPARC, 2014g). This reflects calls from the PSR literature to take a 'best fit' rather than 'best practice' approach.

3.3.3 Iteration, adaptation and experimentation in SPARC design and implementation

SPARC's design and way of working has evolved significantly since its inception through the introduction of a number of modifications to the design and implementation of the SPARC programme. This has happened both formally through the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) stream as well as informally, as individuals have adapted the way they work and suggested changes.

Additional formal mechanisms for learning iteratively through interactions with stakeholders (both national and international) have been created as SPARC has been implemented. These include the annual internal review process, SLP Independent Monitoring and Evaluation Project (IMEP) evaluations, community of practice meetings and regular Programme Development Group and SPM meetings. These processes have on occasions provoked serious reflection about new ways of addressing

problems. In Kaduna, the idea for a state-level MoU between the state government and all development agencies present in the state – the Development Cooperation Framework – emerged when SLP programmes, led by SPARC, advised DFID that DFID sector MoUs would be counterproductive and not support government in understanding the interconnectivity of reform, particularly given the presence of the World Bank and the UN. Elsewhere, an important outcome of the reflection process was the introduction of state-level log frames following the expansion of the SPARC programme in 2011/12. During its inception period SPARC had proposed introducing separate log frames for each state, but DFID preferred to adopt MoUs between the SLP suite and each state instead. In practice, the MoUs were never signed and, as a result, SPARC ended up working with national log frames but using state work plans. When the programme expanded in 2012, SPARC adapted this approach and introduced state-level log frames (S1, S6).

Learning and adaptation also occurred through reflection within the SPARC programme itself. Arguably, the most fundamental change to SPARC's design occurred in 2012, following an analysis of how the programme measures political commitment, when the state-level categories and AIAs were introduced. Grounded in the implementation experience of the SPARC programme, this acknowledged that states were markedly different and would require different approaches (SPARC, 2013a; N5). To organise the programme it was practical to put each participating state into one of three categories – A, B or C – based on a measure of their level of political commitment to reforms – with a corresponding support approach (see Box 2).

This design allows for a more context-specific implementation of the programme: assessing political commitment by a process of review and decision-making that allows for judgements on how the programme is progressing and enabling state teams to move between different 'implementation approaches'. This reflects an attempt by the programme to 'go with the grain' of existing institutions and modify public sector interventions according to the context of each state and, within reason, enables the programme to allow for the dynamic nature of context. For example, in Kaduna, a 'light' corporate planning worked on elements that were attractive to technocrats and was introduced with some success (S12). New tools, such as the AIAs, have been introduced in states where political commitment is expected to be low but whose potential is promising (S3, S12, S14).

SPARC's flexibility to adapt its approach has enabled some TA interventions to be tailored to the political context and capacity of the state. A clear example of this is in Lagos, where the SPARC team tried to encourage consolidation of the numerous state government bank accounts. Lagos government partners resisted this, and the SPARC team realised this was because the importance of patronage relationships in the banking sector made

it unfeasible for the state to use only one bank (SPARC, 2014b). However, state partners came up with an alternative solution in the form of the Nigerian Inter-Bank Settlement Platform, which gave the treasury an overview of all its accounts through a single window (*ibid.*). Rather than abandoning the reform, SPARC supported the state's decisions to move to the locally proposed solution. This is an example of combining political knowledge with an adaptive approach to TA, thinking creatively and adjusting technical tools to work within political constraints.

The 2011 mid-term review (SPARC, 2011b) found that, in general, the approaches used in each state had been very similar. However, as described further below, there has been significant change in the programme since then, particularly with regard to SPARC's approach to being adaptable and flexible. The 2012 evaluation report (SPARC, 2013c) suggests a radical way of enabling SPARC to be more creative and adaptive would be to reframe state-level planning and log frames on the basis of local barriers and most meaningful entry points. SPARC has since consolidated its state-specific approach, adopting state-level log frames to increase specificity in design and monitoring. Although there are constraints in SPARC's design that can make responding to new opportunities difficult, the programme's attempt to operationalise political economy knowledge and encourage building work plans around state-level PEA is experimental in itself (SPARC, 2014a). This has gained the programme recognition that it is unusual in its attempt to make PEA more practically useful.

There are thus a number of positive examples of how SPARC staff have been able to learn from experience and adapt their work accordingly, not least in the way SPARC has developed since its inception and adopted different approaches for engaging in different states. Moreover, staff turnover is relatively low and institutional memory is strong – with many of the senior managers having also been involved in SLGP. Nonetheless, the programme has not benefited as much as it could from this memory, and there are important ways it could increase its ability to learn from its experience, in particular by improving its management of tacit knowledge. On the other hand, staff turnover within DFID (a succession of different governance advisors have had responsibility for SPARC) has posed significant challenges in this respect and has limited the ability of DFID to reflect on SPARC's ongoing experience and encourage learning and adaptation (S6; Watson et al., 2012).

Working politically is often an iterative process that requires trial and error, thinking creatively and testing different ideas on how to overcome a particular political constraint (Leftwich, 2011). While SPARC has documented examples of when it has been successful in overcoming political constraints to reform, there are fewer examples of experimentation and learning from failed initiatives. SPARC's work in Lagos shows attempts were made to address debt management, internal audit and internally

generated revenues, among others, but these trials did not work. Although this may appear to be a failure, it is an example of how the Lagos state team experimented with reform interventions and, on finding some failed, was able to develop other, more successful, interventions instead (SPARC, 2014b). Recent PSR literature advocates a creative approach to solving problems and underlines the importance of being able to learn from failure as well as success. It is understandable that SPARC prefers to report success than failure, but failed attempts are also useful for understanding how best to support reform. An attempt to document some examples of past SPARC ‘failures’ and the lessons learned from them would be a useful exercise for SPARC to undertake as a means of informing future activities.

The aforementioned introduction of ‘innovation diaries’ as a way of capturing tacit knowledge is an example of experimentation. However, the utility and accuracy of the diaries was not optimal, given they were written by knowledge management officers with limited oversight of the ‘bigger picture’. As a result, they were rapidly discarded. SPARC is currently considering how a different form of blog could be used to ensure tacit knowledge is recorded in real time; however, an earlier attempt to adapt the idea of the diaries to better serve their purpose may have proved productive (SPARC, 2014e). More important than the specific form used is that the framing of this reporting and sharing should encourage the documentation of failures and lessons learned without concerns about recording and communicating them. Normal formal reporting channels, whether monthly or quarterly, are rarely able to produce the right tone to encourage such experience-sharing.

Learning iteratively and experimenting with new ways of working to overcome political constraints to reform is a key theme in the PSR literature and reflects the recognition that understanding political barriers and trying to work within them is critical. While the knowledge management work stream strongly promotes learning iteratively, working experimentally is not explicit in SPARC’s design and there are limited examples in SPARC documentation. SPARC has demonstrated an ability to adapt its support for PSR, moving from ‘best practice’ TA towards ‘best fit’ arrangements for the local context, but the design could place more emphasis on experimenting with new approaches for PSR (SPARC, 2014b). Given the expanded reach of the programme across states, there may be room to attempt parallel interventions for similar issues and examine outcomes.

3.4 SPARC within the suite

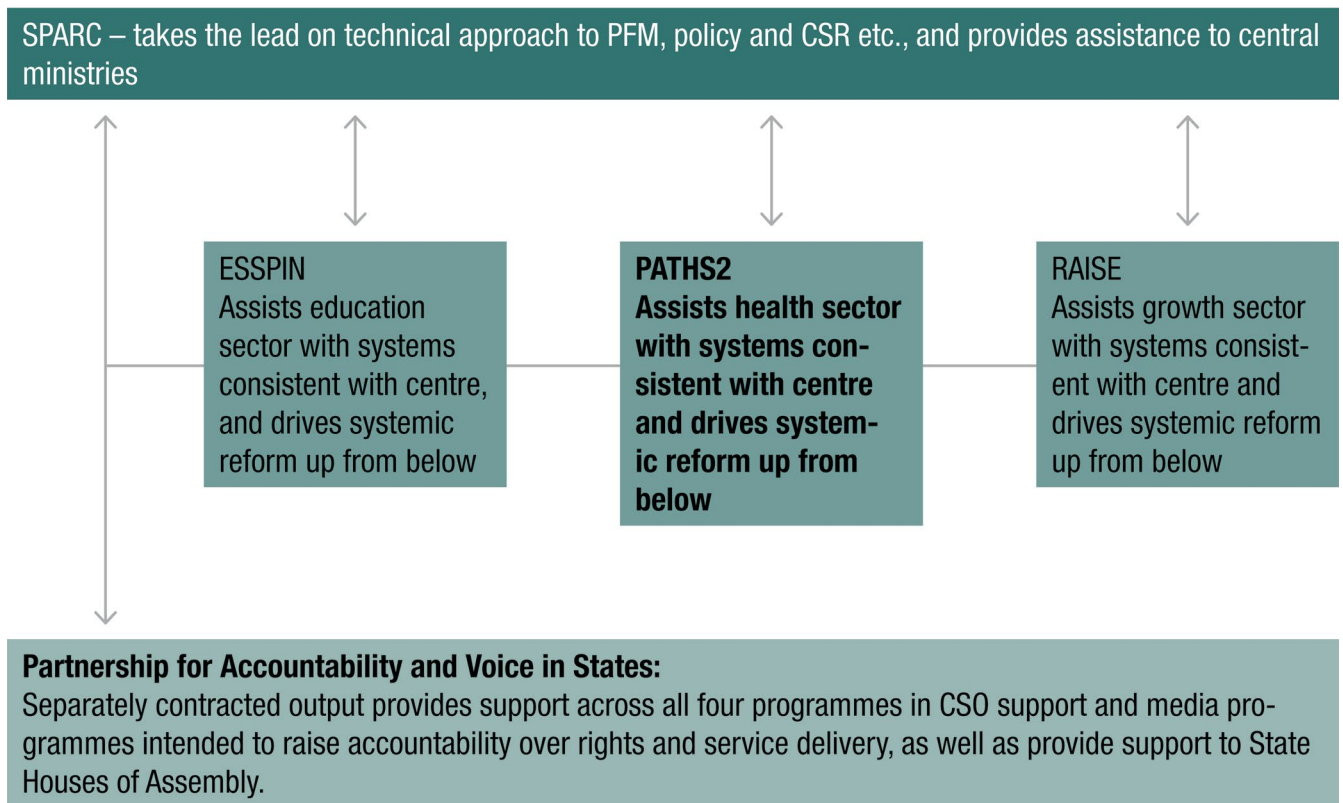
The objective of the SLP suite and of the individual SLPs is the same: to ensure ‘Nigeria’s resources are used efficiently and effectively to achieve the MDGs’. Under this overarching goal, each SLP has its own purpose and outputs. However, the design and subsequent

operationalisation of the SLP suite significantly constrains SPARC’s ability to achieve its own objectives and work in a politically smart and adaptive way. The following subsections explore problems in the assumptions on which the design of SPARC and the suite are based, and changes that could be made to the suite to enable SPARC to increase its impact and effectiveness. Figure 4, drawn for the original design of the suite, depicts how the programmes were intended to work together. This shows SPARC as the lead programme for the suite, informally giving SPARC responsibility for coordinating the work of the other SLPs. However, beyond the initial conception of the suite, respective sector specialists drew up each programme’s memorandum separately, and no accountability or strategic suite management structure was created. The individual programme memoranda for the main SLPs make little reference to the synergies between programmes, and this is also missing from the project frameworks. The suite design does not provide any basis for accountability for contractors’ performance in relation to their collaboration with the other SLPs (Watson et al., 2012). As a result, the SLPs, which were contracted out to different organisations that also undertook a large part of the programme design work, had no particular incentive or structure to enable them to work together flexibly towards the common purpose of the suite (ibid.). The three sector SLPs are also far larger than SPARC and have their own governance and voice and accountability components. This means that, while SPARC is meant to contribute to achieving the suite’s overarching goal by working with the other SLPs, the other programmes have little incentive to work with SPARC.

Not only is there a lack of incentives for the sector programmes to collaborate with SPARC, but also at times they have been in tension with SPARC’s work. For example, in Kaduna, ESSPIN wanted the state government to dedicate more resources to the education sector and thought SPARC should help achieve this increase. However, SPARC refused because it was working on budget realism, not on advocating a greater budget share for the SLP sectors, which would have been in contradiction to its locally determined work plan (N5, S1, S10).

The suite’s design gives SPARC the role of ‘supplying’ technical governance assistance and makes SAVI responsible for fostering ‘demand’ for reforms. This division of governance reform into separate and distinguishable ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ components has been re-examined in the more recent literature, which frames governance problems as collective action difficulties rather than through the lens of opposition between state and non-state actors (Booth, 2012). SAVI has been successful in moving away from its design as a ‘demand-side’ programme and is working effectively by facilitating multi-stakeholder engagement and collaboration over shared problems involving elements of civil and political society (Booth and Chambers, 2014). SPARC, by design, remains a ‘supply-side’ programme, offering TA to state

Figure 4: SPARC and the suite (original conception)



Source: modified from DFID (2007).

partners in the central ministries. This emphasis on the supply–demand approach to governance reform is in tension with the problem-driven approach through which a development organisation may attempt to engage a wider range of stakeholders to solve collective action governance problems. While it is outside the remit of SPARC itself to reframe its mandate in such a way, it is important to consider that, to fully apply problem-driven approaches, such a programme would require effective coordination and even integration with the efforts of other partners, something that has proven difficult thus far across the suite.

The suite’s design, which separates governance into demand (SAVI) and supply (SPARC) and separates this from the sector programmes, impedes SPARC from engaging on service delivery sector issues and confines it to working on high-level government systems and processes where it is harder to generate tangible outcomes. The focus of the suite on health, education and economic growth as priority sectors undermined the use of PEAs to shape SPARC’s focus. However, since DFID lifted this restriction, SPARC has been more able to work on the sectors PEAs identify as politically salient. This is an example of SPARC adapting its design. For example, in Enugu, SPARC has been able to work on developing an MTSS in five sectors, none of which had a DFID sector programme (S4, S14). In Niger, SPARC and SAVI have chosen to work on

agriculture, given a political interest in developing this sector. Similarly in Katsina, health was dropped in favour of education (SAVI and SPARC, 2014; S2). Consequently, the value of having a suite with a set of predefined sector programmes is questionable. A recent SPARC case study (SPARC, 2014a) suggests that one way of engaging more in service delivery outputs could be by increasing the sector focus of budget analysis. There has been some analysis of sectoral budget allocation and budget performance but there could be greater collaboration with other SLPs on sectoral PFM issues to demonstrate the relevance of PFM to tangible service delivery outcomes. However, achieving the more collaborative working this would require between the SLPs remains a challenge (ibid.; S4).

Overall, the lack of strategic management of the suite by DFID, high turnover of advisory staff and the presence of distinct DFID advisors for each SLP have contributed to a lack of ‘institutional memory’ (Watson et al., 2012) and inability to learn and improve the suite as the implementation of the programmes has progressed. Without a structure for managing and coordinating the suite effectively, SPARC has been inhibited in its ability to deliver outcomes at the service level, and at times has been undermined by the activities of the service sector programmes. For example, as observed above and in Section 3.1.2, the fixed sectoral programmes – themselves

determined by donor or national priorities – limit the ability of the suite to respond to varying locally driven sectoral priorities, so this approach would severely constrain an already limited degree of flexibility and the ability to act on certain ‘centre of government’ functions.

A less radical restructuring approach would address the design of the suite on a state-by-state basis. A major problem with the SLP suite’s current design is that it is based on the assumption that state governments and DFID share the same goals regarding improving MDG status. However, this is usually not the case, as seen in the variable and fluctuating state expenditure on public services (Watson et al., 2012). The suite’s underdeveloped theory of change, which chose health and education as key sectors for intervention, was not based on a PEA of

opportunities for reform in the states. In order for SPARC to be able to better operationalise PEA findings and be more demand-led, responding to priorities of state leaders, it should be able to select the sectors in which it engages. Acknowledging that development outcomes can still be achieved through engaging in sectors that are not MDG priorities is important. For example, improving agricultural productivity could facilitate an increase in employment and income generation. Therefore, as Watson et al. (2012) and others have proposed, redesigning the SLP suite at the state level, so interventions respond to the specific opportunities for reform in each state, may be more effective and would enable all SLPs to work more in line with the latest recommendations for PSR support.

Table 1 summarises the examination of SPARC’s design and implementation in light of the 10 principles of public sector reform detailed in Sections 2 and 3 above.

PSR principle	How it features in SPARC
Do, and use, PEA	SPARC has an expansive political engagement strategy with a strong emphasis on understanding political constraints and how they affect the potential for reform. However, SPARC could increase its application of political knowledge for solving specific barriers to reform or problems with government processes. There are also some structural programme constraints to the application of PEA to decision-making, based in the technical focus of the programme and DFID donor priorities.
Take a problem-solving approach	Problem identification is done through state self-assessments and one of three forms of SPARC–state government reform agreement. This occurs at the beginning of SPARC’s engagement and so presents a problem-driven approach. However, SPARC’s remit to work with state government on technical reforms may lead the programme to work also on problems that have less local salience with service users. The self-assessment tool, PEFA, is also criticised in literature for being rather prescriptive.
Engage a broad range of stakeholders	SPARC has experienced numerous successes when non-state as well as state actors have been involved in a particular reform. SPARC has learnt that having well connected SPMs is very valuable and that engaging with political office holders as well as senior civil servants is important for increasing political commitment to reform. There are many examples of how SPARC and SAVI have worked effectively together to reach a range of stakeholders who contribute to a reform being passed, but the SLP suite design does limit cross-programme collaboration at times.
Be experimental and adaptive	SPARC documents do not provide many examples of experimentation, but this owes partly to reporting success and not failure, so the process of experimentation is not captured. While SPARC has experimented with a new approach in some instances, the three-legged stool approach means there is a tendency to move resources to a more politically salient issue rather than to create and test other approaches to solving a problem. SPARC is very adaptive, however. The programme has changed significantly since the outset, responding to learning from ongoing reviews and evaluations, changing its design as well as responding to changing contexts within states.
Enable genuine local ownership	SPARC’s engagement with state governments does promote local ownership by using self-assessment tools, jointly developing a reform plan and reviewing progress with state partners annually. Mechanisms for knowledge-sharing between states encourage state governments to make reforms independently, and there are examples of how state governments have adapted TA tools to meet their needs and capacity. In comparison with some other PSR programmes, however, SPARC could place greater emphasis on problem-solving as well as problem identification being led by state government partners.
Focus on pockets of effectiveness	SPARC state teams use PEA to identify individuals with state government who may be receptive to and capable of introducing reforms. The three-legged stool approach aims to enable state teams to move resources to ‘pockets of effectiveness’ identified through PEA in order to work with interested state partners on opportunities for reform. However, SPARC’s design is more problem-focused, in line with PSR literature, which means state assessment tools are more likely to identify and focus on weaknesses than on strengths – and by highlighting the range of weaknesses may cause overoptimistic and broad reform programmes.
Seize windows of opportunity	SPARC state teams use PEA to identify opportunities for reform and the three-legged stool approach enables SPARC to move resources to PSR issues that have been found to have political traction. SPARC’s ability to seize opportunities is, however, partly constrained by the SLP suite’s design, which prevents resources being moved to other state programmes where opportunities may be greater. The presence of sector SLP programmes in states where SPARC works may limit the programme’s ability to work on other sectors where opportunities may be greater.
Allow sequencing of support to be flexible	The PSR literature emphasises that sequencing of reforms should be appropriate to the opportunities in a specific reform context and the three-legged stool approach reflects this understanding. While some SPARC documents identify logical sequences of reform, such as beginning with mandate mapping, the programme recognises that political constraints may prevent a logical sequence from being followed and that allowing sequencing to be flexible can be more important for gains to be made.
Use South–South skill sharing and networking	SPARC has greatly increased its facilitation of South–South skill-sharing and networking as it has developed. Numerous mechanisms for inter-state knowledge-sharing and networking have been created, with clear examples of success. Knowledge-sharing mechanisms are used to encourage local ownership of reforms as well as to motivate state governments to make reforms as a result of competition with other states or by drawing on personal contacts in other state governments.
Take a broader approach	The recommendation to take a broader approach to PSR sits in tension with taking a problem-driven approach to reform and is seen in SPARC. There is also a tension within SPARC between pursuing DFID’s wider development objectives and focusing on locally salient issues. SPARC uses the three-legged stool approach to try to link together specific reforms and enable changes in different areas to build on each other. There are some instances where this has been achieved, and it appears to be more successful in states with more developed governments, such as Lagos. The design of the SLP suite limits SPARC’s ability to work down the delivery chain to address a problem as whole, but there are some examples where high-level reforms have been linked to service-level improvements by SPARC working with the suite’s sector programmes.

4 Conclusions

SPARC represents an ambitious and innovative approach to addressing challenging governance issues in varying and complex environments. It has evolved out of a set of experiences of state-level programming in Nigeria and attempts to respond to and combine aspects of this history in a comprehensive framework. In particular, the programme tries to combine earlier approaches, incorporating an emphasis on PEA and issue-based interventions with the desire for more integrated, holistic and strategic public sector reform initiatives that respond to national and international objectives including the MDGs. It also has absorbed and responded to wider evolution in the PSR community of practice, particularly in relation to the importance of context and political economy in implementing PSR assistance, and the need for flexibility in the face of uncertainty in development trajectories. One way to interpret SPARC – and therefore better understand its strengths and weaknesses – is as an attempt to navigate a set of four interconnected tensions in the design of PSR programming. In brief, these tensions are as follows:

- Strategic and comprehensive approaches to public sector reform versus an emerging body of theory, which supports politically salient, locally driven problem identification and solutions development;
- The need for flexibility and adaptability to seize opportunities in response to political conditions and unfolding results versus the requirement to measure progress against a set of results and to programme resources in line with strategic objectives;
- Governance and public sector reform as a means to improve centre of government functions versus sectoral approaches driven by concrete service delivery weaknesses or development objectives;
- A common programme design meant to cover and expand across the country versus the varied political and capacity environments represented by different Nigerian states.

SPARC, and by extension the SLP as a whole, addresses these tensions through a particular combination of three design features that is unusual in the universe of PSR programmes: an emphasis on contextualisation, the three-legged stool and the SLP suite. This concluding section reviews the design and implementation of these features based on the analysis in this report, and suggests additional avenues for managing these tensions or gaps in theory and practice.

4.1 Contextualisation

The first feature is an emphasis on contextualisation through PEA, participatory baseline assessments and locally agreed action plans, and the classification of states into distinct intervention approaches. Aspects of this emphasis – for example the application of formal PEA – date from the inception of the programme, but arguably the most important innovations have emerged through the process of implementation. In particular, the development of the political engagement activities described in Section 3.1 to engage political rather than bureaucratic actors and the introduction of tools such as AIAs and the tripartite classification of states have been key innovations that inform state-level activities.

However, there have also been limitations on the ability to use this contextualisation to shape the nature of SPARC engagement to local conditions. The design of the programme around the provision of TA, and a theory of change that interprets political constraints primarily in terms of their impact on the adoption of technical reforms, means that potentially more facilitative and low-tech approaches to confronting locally identified problems may be foregone in favour of TA. This issue echoes the finding in a recent portfolio review that the DFID governance portfolio is heavily geared towards addressing capacity constraints (Barnett, 2014). This potential bias may be reinforced to an extent by the reliance on diagnostic tools for problem identification, such as SEAT for PS&CME and PSM and PEFA for PFM, which can lead to an emphasis on form over function and upstream over downstream reforms. The relative success of realistic budgeting reforms in several states points to the value of a functional definition of a PFM reform problem over the lack of, or application of, a particular formal tool. Finally, the placement of the programme within the broader DFID strategic and management environment has at times limited the scope for contextualisation, for example through early limitations on political engagement strategies, the identification of sectoral priorities and even potentially the selection of states.

It should be clear that these issues relate primarily to *a priori* structural aspects of the programme design as well as the donor environment, rather than failures of implementation, at least in the latter phases of implementation, when additional political engagement tools were employed. As the Nigeria governance engagement evolves, a discussion over the relative importance of contextualisation versus donor frameworks,

and the advisability of less TA and more facilitative interventions, may be a fruitful exchange between donor and implementer. Within the programme or its successors, however, it may also be worth making continued effort to expand the kind of TA offered to include brokering and facilitation functions. Technical inventories such as the PEFA could also be supplemented with ground-up problem identification, and state-level PEA could be supplemented with specific issue-based analyses. Throughout the programme, ongoing reporting procedures could encourage documentation of tacit knowledge and lesson learning from what does and doesn't work.

4.2 The three-legged stool

The second key design feature is the use of complementary but flexible work streams: the so-called 'three-legged stool' of support to policy processes (PS&ME, PFM and PSM). The use of this structure is intended to combine the concept of comprehensiveness with flexibility. On the one hand, the provision of support across the three work streams recognises that PSR and governance failures are rarely one-dimensional. On the other, this allows for changes to support across the mix of work streams so that one work stream may in some sense substitute for others when there may be more or less traction to achieve results in a particular area of PSR.

SPARC's three-legged stool does demonstrably allow for responsiveness and flexibility in the allocation of resources: evidence from political engagement case studies and the interviews for this study indicate a number of examples of resource reallocation across work streams. In general, this has been interpreted as in response to a lack of political traction on one set of activities. In effect, this flexibility represents both an opportunity and a cause for caution. The ability to continue engagement through shifting resources, and contribute to improvements in one or another of the workstreams while others encounter difficulties, can conceivably move forward reforms in the new channel, and may indeed generate momentum for a return to other necessary reforms in the neglected channels. However, it may equally be possible that the ability to shift resources will have the effect of undermining the comprehensiveness of reforms or weaken the incentive and necessity to broker and facilitate political changes that are behind the lack of traction in the first place. It is an empirical question for future studies to examine the effectiveness of resource realignments in strengthening political engagement in other areas.

Unfortunately, as also noted in the recent political engagement case study, it is difficult to isolate evidence of how political engagement and resulting shifts in programme attention across work streams contributes to the objective of comprehensive reforms that take hold sustainably. In short, the three-legged stool does succeed in the objective of providing flexibility, but more evidence

is needed to understand how that flexibility in turn can support the direct resolution of comprehensive governance failures that begin with a lack of political traction. In short, this means viewing comprehensiveness as a dimension that may be spread over time, as well as across reform work streams. A possible way to encourage this would be to accompany any politically informed shift in resources with an explicit tactical assessment of whether and how resources should eventually be reoriented back across the legs of the stool. A second approach would be to explore the possibilities for more explicit experimentation – for example by implementing different approaches and sequences to shifting resources when confronted by similar barriers, say in civil service reform, and formally assessing the results. Both these approaches would be supported through the recommendations for strengthening joint review made in the recent political engagement case study.

4.3 The suite

The third design feature SPARC uses to navigate the tensions described above, and particularly that between the need for cross-government reforms and sectoral imperatives, is **the placement of the programme within the suite of SLPs**. The suite was conceived of to enable a combination of horizontal and vertical reform assistance between cross-government capacity development and sector assistance. However, the operationalisation of the suite has introduced limitations to this potential. The individual programme designs, contracting, management and results monitoring arrangements do not generally support strong coordination. The design of the suite directs SPARC's focus on technical central governance reforms and limits its traction on the vertical dimension of TA, which is outside of its remit. There are even instances where the defined sector focus of the other suite programmes can run in tension with SPARC's emphasis on locally driven reform, and, paradoxically, some of SPARC's most sector-focused work has been in the absence of the suite's sector programmes.

The interaction between SPARC and SAVI is deserving of particular attention, not least because these two programmes were initially conceived of as part of the same programme. The division of the two gives SPARC the role of 'supplying' technical governance assistance and makes SAVI responsible for fostering 'demand' for reforms. This limits to some degree the possibilities for a more collaborative or collective action-based approach to governance problems for SPARC, although SAVI in its own right has been able to engage across the putative supply-demand divide to some degree. While it is outside the remit of SPARC itself to reframe its mandate in such a way, it is important to consider that, to fully apply problem-driven approaches, such a programme would require effective coordination and even integration with the efforts of other partners, something that has proven difficult thus far across the suite.

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