



Improving the odds for progress in Nigeria

Victoria Chambers and Clare Cummings, with David Booth*

*The authors are grateful to those who have commented on this report, including Hamish Nixon and Leni Wild. Responsibility for its content, however, rests with the authors alone.

Demonstrating potential in a challenging context

As we await the outcomes of Nigeria's delayed elections, it is clear that this is a country where development outcomes do not improve easily. With a large economy and an abundance of natural resources, Nigeria's potential is enormous. Yet it suffers from a lopsided economy, growing inequality and persistently widespread poverty. Weak institutions, lack of political accountability, and economic and social tensions underlain by sharp ethno-regional divisions and pervasive regional violence, make development progress in Nigeria particularly challenging.

However, challenging does not mean impossible. Two public sector governance programmes working in ten of Nigeria's 36 states are showing that, even in exceptionally challenging political and socio-economic contexts, tangible advances can be made. These programmes have achieved worthwhile results by:

- facilitating multi-stakeholder partnerships to address issues that really matter locally, and
- adopting internal management arrangements that, within certain limits, support flexible, iterative and adaptive ways of working.

This policy brief examines the experience of the two programmes, showing how they have demonstrated the potential for change with innovative working methods. It then considers the programme management arrangements that have made these ways of working possible. Finally, it sets out some remaining constraints faced by programme leaders in further operationalising the approach.

The State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) and the State Partnership for Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability programme (SPARC) were designed as complementary public sector reform inventions with DFID funding from 2008. The six-year initiatives were intended to have a collective impact on selected Nigerian State Governments' use of resources and ultimately their ability to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Together, they have shown that even in a country like Nigeria, there are ways of contributing to change that improves the lives of poor people.

SAVI was designed to work on the 'demand' side of state governance. Its role is to support State Houses of Assembly (SHoAs), mass media organisations and civil society to take action on public sector problems. SPARC aims to support solutions to technical challenges identified in state government systems and processes, and thereby enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of governments' use of public resources. The programmes have collaboratively contributed to reforms at the state level that have the potential to improve development outcomes significantly for the poor and marginalised.

The domestication of Nigeria's gender policy for application to Muslim populations in the Northern state of Jigawa, which has Shari'ia law, is one example. In July 2013, Jigawa state became the first of the Northern states to draft and approve a state gender policy. SPARC supported the development of the state's Comprehensive Development Framework, which identified gender exclusion as a weakness to be addressed. SAVI supported a civil society coalition, the Gender and Social Inclusion (GSI) partnership, which helped the state navigate the culturally sensitive process of policy negotiation. The process generated new, shared understandings of the relevance of gender inclusion in Jigawa and its consistency with Shari'ia law. The state government is now driving the implementation of the policy, including attaching tangible indicators and goals to it.

Another example is a breakthrough on disability policy and legislation in Lagos state in 2012. The SAVI-supported Lagos Civil Society Disability Partnership (LCSDP) lobbied for the Special Peoples Law on Disability to be passed as the first ever private member's bill by the Lagos State House of Assembly. Following passage of the law, the government has established a state-funded office to implement it, the Lagos State Office of Disability Affairs (LASODA). Since then, LCSDP have received funding from Lagos state to provide

technical support to LASODA and have worked with ministries to mainstream disability issues in work-streams and budgets. Lagos's success in this area has caught the attention of state Executives, Houses of Assembly and civil society groups in neighbouring states, many of whom have begun championing similar reform processes at their own expense.

Other SPARC- and SAVI-supported initiatives have contributed to change in which states become more capable of managing their resources. These include:

- state governments in Lagos and Kaduna setting up their own agencies to manage the reform process, the Office of Transformation (Lagos) and the Bureau of Public Sector Reform (Kaduna);
- in Kaduna state, a build-up of critical public opinion around the budget process, leading in 2010 to radical trimming of an over-inflated state budget;
- legal precedents set in Lagos which improve the prospects for the financial and staffing autonomy of SHoAs;
- limitation of corruption by means of community monitoring of state government infrastructure contract implementation in Jigawa;
- reform of tax registration in Kano where the state governor was assisted to improve the tax-payer database when SPARC helped mobilise banks, citizen groups, tax administrators and people working in the informal sector to collaborate in the venture.

Ways of working

The two programmes have had their share of failures and frustrations. But their successes seem to be consistently attributable to an approach combining three features.

Facilitating multiple stakeholder engagement to address locally salient issues

The programmes have concentrated on building the capacity of state-level actors to address locally salient but politically tractable issues. They have made heavy use of self-assessment techniques that mobilise intrinsic motivations and engender constructive engagement and collective action. In SAVI, the approach has evolved from supporting formal campaigns to more informal networking among like-minded stakeholders and achieving reforms by working behind the scenes. SPARC uses facilitated self-assessment techniques to assist government partners to identify key issues and begin to develop their own solutions, based on the particular economic and political circumstances of the state. The two programmes have also engaged with each other to encourage common interests to emerge.

Iterative learning processes

The programmes' approaches draw on current implementation experience as well as on positive and negative lessons from earlier DFID-funded initiatives. Significant areas of learning have been: the drawbacks of issue-based initiatives where the issues are identified in advance by donors; the strengths of partnerships that are formed without the artificial stimulus of donor funding; the value of learning by doing, of collaboration across states and of on-the-job training; and the importance of recruiting and retaining staff with tacit knowledge of state-level political economies.

Adapting to opportunities and constraints

Particularly for SPARC, which works directly with state governments, adaptability has been crucial. SPARC created an approach it refers to as the 'three legged stool'. Each state team has three government-strengthening work-streams – focused on policy, public financial management, and civil service reform – but resources can be shifted between them according to changes in political context. In Anambra state, for example, the programme shifted resources from improving cash forecasting to developing medium-term sector strategies. In Katsina, resources were focused on reforms to human resources when it became clear it was a technical area with political buy-in. SPARC's political engagement in different states has revealed unexpected diversity in their capacities, history and political settlements. In response, the programme has adopted three different approaches to engaging state governments, adjusting its work and the tools it uses to different state conditions.

Programme design and management

None of this would have been possible without arrangements that are broadly supportive of flexible, iterative and adaptive working. In SAVI, the programme design and decisions of the implementing organisation have permitted programme leaders to apply the knowledge they have gained about what works in the Nigeria context. They have been allowed to adapt and apply the facilitated multi-stakeholder engagement approach that was pioneered by earlier DFID-funded initiatives in Nigeria, rather than use the one-sided stimulation of demand for better governance as suggested in the initial programme design.

SAVI programme leaders were also able to decide how they supported civil society partners. They chose not to use the standard model of awarding competitive grants to civil society campaigns. This makes an important difference to the relationship between the programme and its partners (SHoAs, media houses and civil society partnerships). Unlike other donor initiatives, SAVI does not transfer to partners any responsibilities for reporting against a programme logframe, protecting their capacity to work in a politically smart way on the issues identified by them.

Similarly, SPARC was grounded in previous experience of DFID initiatives in Nigeria. For its part the programme pursued a flexible set of management arrangements through the adoption of guided self-assessment for its state clients, and giving increasing management authority to its state team leaders. As noted, the SPARC programme design allows expenditure allocations to be shifted from one area of work to another according to perceived changes in political traction, allowing the programme to respond flexibly to opening and closing opportunities for reform. Together these steps enabled a diversity of reform areas and approaches to emerge.

Limits to enabling conditions

The experience of the SPARC and SAVI programmes reveals the potential of flexible working to achieve results in even the most difficult of political-economic contexts. However, the same experience underlines the importance of programme designs and management arrangements allowing this flexibility and also highlights significant barriers to donors and implementing organisations operationalising this type of approach. The design and management of SAVI and SPARC have been broadly flexible, yet their conception as ‘supply-side’ and ‘demand-side’ governance interventions has prevented them from realising their full potential.

SPARC, as a means of providing technical assistance to government, uses diagnostic tools based on frameworks such as the PEFA (Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability). Such tools may focus attention on institutional gaps that arise from comparison with an international standard. Particularly in areas such as public financial management, there may then be a tendency to focus on a limited set of best practices. A discussion is needed on how to combine the attainment of any essential ‘minimum standards’ with the adaptive and locally-led approaches highlighted here; it is possible the answers lie in different approaches to sequencing of reform efforts.

SPARC’s three-legged stool allows it to respond to opportunities for reform as they arise by shifting resources, thereby responding when there is traction and working around barriers when there is not. However, this flexibility may limit SPARC’s attention to creating and testing alternative ways of solving problems. The programme design could do more to allow experimentation with alternative approaches and to encourage the documentation of failed or less successful initiatives as they are undertaken. It is anyway not proven that, by seeking results where they can be found, the three-legged stool generates an increased ability to return to the previous workstreams later. On a final issue, the centre of government focus and institutional partnerships of SPARC have limited its ability to work directly with sectoral organisations, and thus identify development problems from their sectoral roots and work back to the governance constraints that shape them.

SAVI has been free to experiment with alternatives to standard ways of working with civil society and has been able to build partnerships that cross the divide between ‘supply’ and the ‘demand’ sides of governance improvement. However, its design and management as a governance intervention seems to have limited its

ability to work backwards from a service-delivery problem to addressing relationships among political and social actors in the way that most effectively solves the problem.

While programme managers are increasingly monitoring success in terms of tangible development results, the outputs by which the programme is formally assessed continue to centre upon the self-assessed capacities of the institutional actors (SHoAs, media houses and civil society partnerships). It is at least arguable that SAVI's potential would be realised more fully if it were assessed more exclusively in terms of its ability to address pressing development problems.

In addition, both programmes' ability to fully adapt, apply learning and exploit opportunities has been restricted from time to time by DFID directives, reflecting changing donor priorities and concerns at the country level. Both programmes also experienced less success engaging and integrating their problem-solving approaches with sectoral institutions and concerns than they did in working together with each other.

Conclusions

A developing body of literature on development stresses that in challenging and complex political and economic environments, it is especially important to work through locally led interventions which are politically smart and problem-driven. However operationalising these principles in practice has proved difficult. Donor agencies and practitioners are grappling with internal and external challenges to supporting flexible and adaptive development programmes.

In Nigeria, SPARC and SAVI have been demonstrating elements of how this can be done in the context of large aid-funded programmes. ***Both initiatives have made headway by facilitating multiple stakeholder partnerships to address issues that are salient and politically tractable within particular states.*** Worthwhile and potentially important results have been obtained in the areas of gender policy and disability, and small but significant steps have been taken towards improving the way state governments raise and utilise public resources.

The two programmes use ways of working that draw on accumulated understanding of what works and what does not in the Nigerian context. The lessons drawn from previous experience include the importance of supporting individuals and organisations that are self-motivated to engage in collective problem-solving, rather than using donor funds to shape reform agendas. Within certain limits, iterative and adaptive working has been adopted as the basic method of programme implementation. Managers have encouraged this by allowing the support provided by the programmes to vary widely between states and by limiting the burden of reporting against donor-defined logframes for partners.

The SPARC and SAVI experiences have demonstrated the potential of innovative ways of working with aid in the Nigerian context, but also illustrate constraints on the full realisation of that potential and suggest areas for further improvement. The set-up of the two programmes is limiting in two respects.

First, ***the conceptual distinction between 'supply' and 'demand' sides of the problem of improving governance is unhelpful.*** SAVI has in practice been left free to pursue its multi-stakeholder facilitation approach, brokering constructive relations both among its 'demand-side' actors and between them and parts of the executive branch of government. For SPARC, working exclusively to the executive has a certain practical appeal, but it also traps the programme in centre-of-government capacity building, inhibiting its ability to work on service-delivery problems.

Second, ***while both programmes have an orientation to locally salient issues and in practice adopt a good deal of learning by doing, neither is primarily issue-based.*** The outputs that SPARC and SAVI are expected to deliver according to their basic design are improved governance capacities. While the use of self-assessment techniques helps to moderate the solution-driven aspect of the technical support, it can only do this up to a point. More can and should be done to encourage partners to discover their own solutions to public management challenges and do so in an explicitly problem-driven way, so that the nature of the required capacities and relationships is an end-point rather than a starting point.

It follows from this assessment that future programming that aims to build on the experience of SPARC and SAVI should have *two features: it should be based explicitly and from the outset on multi-stakeholder facilitation, and it should be firmly issue-based, not driven by a commitment to filling preconceived gaps in governance capabilities*. The potential for change revealed by SPARC and SAVI will not be fully realised unless this reorientation happens.

As the national elections in Nigeria loom, and as the country faces enormous challenges from Boko Haram and fluctuating oil prices, public sector reform may seem like an unlikely political priority. Donors working with Nigerian partners to promote reform for poverty reduction will need to be able to respond to the unstable political environment, understanding changing incentives and interests within politics, and identifying individuals and organisations who may emerge as allies for promoting reform. While this will be a very demanding task, the experience of SPARC and SAVI provide important lessons for future governance engagement in Nigeria, and show that even in challenging and unstable environments, significant reforms can be achieved against the odds.

References

Booth, D. and Chambers, V., 2014. 'The SAVI programme in Nigeria'. London: ODI.

Booth, D. and Unsworth, S., 2014. 'Politically smart, locally led development', ODI Discussion Paper. London: ODI.

Chambers, V., Cummings, C. and Nixon, H., 2015. 'Case study: State Partnership for Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability: Study of the SPARC approach to governance reform'. London: ODI.

Derbyshire, H., Fraser, S., Mwamba, W., 2014. 'Rising to the challenge: Supporting "problem driven iterative adaptation" and "politically smart, locally led" approaches through a donor-funded programme – The experience of the State Accountability and Voice Initiative in Nigeria'. London: DFID.

Wild, L., Wales, J., Booth, D., Cummings, C., Foresti, M., 2015. 'Adapting development: Improving services to the poor'. London: ODI.



ODI is the UK's leading independent think tank on international development and humanitarian issues.

Our mission is to inspire and inform policy and practice which lead to the reduction of poverty, the alleviation of suffering and the achievement of sustainable livelihoods.

We do this by locking together high-quality applied research, practical policy advice and policy-focused dissemination and debate.

We work with partners in the public and private sectors, in both developing and developed countries.

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material from ODI Reports for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. As copyright holder, ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI.

© Overseas Development Institute 2015. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (CC BY-NC 3.0).

ISSN: 2052-7209

Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
Tel +44 (0)20 7922 0300
Fax +44 (0)20 7922 0399



This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.