

Participatory Political Economy:

Supporting partners and
staff to think and act politically

In brief

Thinking and acting politically is central to the SAVI programme. We support staff and partners to analyse and understand the realities of power relations that shape change in their state, and to use this knowledge to inform their decision making. This includes the decisions made by SAVI state teams relating to which issues and partners to engage with and support, and the decisions made by SAVI partners on ways to advance government responsiveness in relation to their issue of concern.

SAVI's aim has been to promote an approach to political economy analysis that is rigorous at the same time as being accessible, engaging and effective – and for politically smart thinking to become normal and central to the planning of staff and partners.

Experience in Nigeria has contributed to recognition by aid agencies internationally that understanding the realities of power relations – going beneath formal structures of power to reveal the underlying interests, incentives and ways of doing things that enable or frustrate change – is central to development effectiveness.

DFID-funded research and evaluations¹ are consistent in concluding that the design of demand-side governance interventions needs to be based on clear understanding of the political economy (PE) of the context. Capacity for PE analysis is built into many new governance initiatives, and is commonly used to identify appropriate issues for support as well as to analyse risk. However, it has often proved more difficult to embed PE understanding into design and implementation processes including day-to-day decision-making and expectations of change. Drawing his evidence from research conducted by the Africa Power and Politics research programme, political scientist David Booth concludes that despite improved PE analysis, there has been no real change in practice on the ground².

SAVI's experience in Nigeria suggests that a number of factors tend to come together to cause this problem:

- PE analyses are often conducted at a macro level – and don't come down to the level of sectors, issues, actors and structures where demand-side governance interventions happen and partners operate.
- PE analyses are generally conducted by political scientists, and communicated in reports or formal training courses. Front line staff and partners – who are not political scientists – tend to have little or no involvement in formal PE research and analysis, and struggle to apply theoretical knowledge to their work. Partners own informal political intelligence can be extensive but is often undervalued and undeveloped.
- Partners in grant programmes agree their outcomes, outputs and targets at the start of their period of funding, and report progress against these. They often have *very little flexibility* to change their focus, level of ambition or activities once they are agreed. Consequently there is little room for manoeuvre to respond in a flexible and adaptive manner to the ever-changing PE of their context.

SAVI's participatory approach to PE analysis is designed to address these challenges.

1 Eg Africa Power and Politics Research programme (2007-12); Citizenship, Participation and Accountability Development Research Centre (2001-11); Centre for Future State (2000-2010)

2 Eg Booth, D. (2011), Working with the Grain and Swimming against the Tide: Barriers to uptake of Research Findings on Governance and Public Services in Low Income Africa, ODI Working Paper 18, London: Overseas Development Institute

There are two distinct and complementary phases to SAVI's engagement with PE analysis:

- *The initial phase conducted by SAVI state teams, supported by political scientists.* At the start of the SAVI programme in any particular state – the inception phase – state teams are supported to investigate the PE of their context to identify issues and partners to engage with and support.
- *The operational phase conducted by partners, supported by state teams.* Once partners are identified, they are supported by SAVI state teams to think and act politically in all aspects of engaging with their issue of concern.

In both phases, the emphasis is on equipping staff and partners with the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to analyse and understand the realities of power relations that shape change in their state. In turn they use this knowledge to inform their decision-making. For all of the tools relating to the processes discussed below go to *Tools* under *Resources* on the SAVI website.

Inception phase: supporting staff to think and act politically

The first stage is for state teams to understand the PE of their state, identify existing momentum for change, and build on this through their selection of issues and partners to engage with and support. There are several parts to this process:

Macro level Political Economy (PE) Analysis

Local political scientists support SAVI state teams to carry out macro state-level PE analysis, to begin to identify the issues and actors that have traction with state government leadership. This involves, amongst other things: understanding where the state government is spending money; which sectors are favoured and why; what is influencing decision-making and who is benefitting. SAVI staff gather and analyse PE information, with political scientists providing hands-on mentoring to deepen their enquiries, understanding and interpretation.

State-level Political Economy Analysis

Studies focus on three areas of enquiry:

1. The political and economic history of the state

- power relations at the state-level and their origins
- federal/national (and international) influences
- means used for achieving and sustaining power in the state
- implications for use of institutions and governance in the state

2. Key structural features, formal and informal institutions and agents presently shaping the state

- at state-level (within and outside government)
- in health, education and other key sectors
- at local government-level
- in key areas of planned governance reform and service delivery improvement

3. Implications for change

- the climate for reform in the state
- key human and infrastructure development issues
- space, voice, security, accountability and legitimacy issues

Political scientists write up the PE analysis for external reporting and monitoring purposes, and their reports are quality assured by external consultants to ensure an appropriate level of scientific rigour and compliance with external requirements. The findings and analysis are fully owned and understood by state teams.

State Drivers of Change (S-DoC) Analysis

With continuing support from local political scientists, SAVI state teams then drill down from the macro level of the PE of the state to the level at which most of SAVI's potential partners operate. This means into sectors and sub-sectors, specific service delivery issues and the governance processes affecting them. The purpose of this is to identify issues and actors that have traction with a wide range of actors in civil society, as well as with government staff in specific ministries, departments and agencies.

In conducting these studies, state teams (most of whom come from the state where they are working) draw on and build their own contacts and networks. They engage across civil society, government, media, academia and the private sector, asking questions about key agents and institutions, understanding linkages, and exploring the dynamics of interest, influence and power.

Stakeholder Analysis

As issues with traction across government and civil society begin to emerge, the next stage is to map relevant civil society actors including civil society groups and opinion leaders, the media and elected representatives in the State Houses of Assembly. Using Stakeholder Analysis, state teams reflect on their levels of power, interest and influence; their inter-relations and alignments; and their potential for cooperation or threat in relation to the issues identified. This analysis acts as a filter in determining which issues have the greatest potential for alignment of interests and constructive collective action.

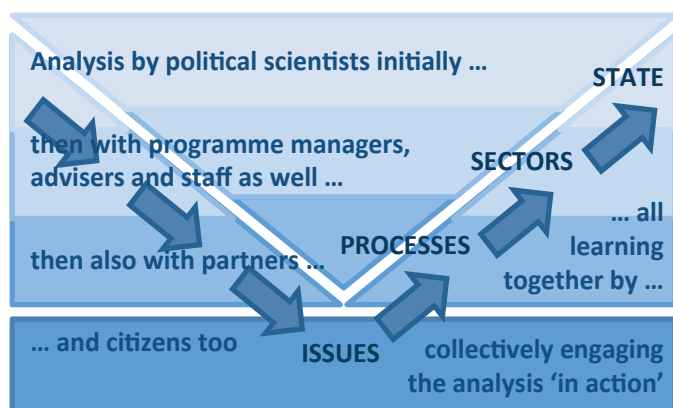
Public policy dialogue

Issues that show greatest potential for collective action between government and civil society are then subjected to public debate, to assess their level of traction with citizens. This involves the use of interactive public media such as radio phone-ins and open public meetings to explore the issue from the citizens' perspective, identify community level activists, and bring potential civil society and government partners round the table to engage with citizens.

Over time, SAVI has placed increasing emphasis on citizens' direct involvement both in selecting issues and in selecting partners. This makes sure that SAVI support to civil society engagement in governance is grounded in citizens' needs and priorities from the outset. It also makes clear to potential partners that their accountability as demand side agents of change is to citizens and not to SAVI.

Operational phase: Supporting partners to think and act politically

A Participatory Political Economy Approach



Engaging the local political economy from the top down and back up again: 'learning by doing', analysis by application

Having learned to think and act politically through engaging in PE analysis, drilling down into key sectors, processes and issues, and engaging citizens in public policy dialogue with citizens, SAVI state teams in turn help partners to see their issue in its wider political context.

Partners are supported to consider the formal and informal, visible and invisible ways that power operates in the immediate context of their issue – and to use this intelligence to inform their planning on a continuous basis. Because SAVI supports partners with mentoring rather than grants and partners are not tied to an agreed budgeted plan of action, partners have complete flexibility to adapt their strategy as their PE understanding grows, and as the power dynamics they are grappling with shift and change.

Engaging partners in PE analysis

Support to partners starts small and familiar with their issue of concern and its immediate justification with citizens, drawing and reflecting on the public policy dialogue. As partners engage in the debates and begin supporting citizens in advocacy and monitoring, they begin to see and understand the forces at play for and against them, and learn how to strategise their next moves.

First their thinking broadens to the professional content of their advocacy messages – their evidence and strategic arguments. It then goes into the bigger picture of interconnectivity with other issues through engaging – with other SAVI-supported Advocacy partnerships – in common processes of government policy-making, budgeting and planning within and across sectors. This brings them to consideration of the broader state context of power between sectors and between the major power blocks operating within the state.

As they work their way up through these levels of political interplay, partners are supported to engage in and repeatedly revisit their Stakeholder Analysis. This helps to deepen their understanding of the power dynamics between key political stakeholders at each level and at each point in time; to devise appropriate strategies to engage them, and to monitor changes in key stakeholders' levels of power, interest, influence, co-operation and threat.

Through trial and error, partners begin to build up a picture of who and what are the drivers of change at each level and stage of the process, and gradually get to understand the macro-level political economy of their state as they join forces with others working in other sectors. No single partner may have the whole picture, but between them they hold enough parts.

Meanwhile, SAVI staff continually draw on their partners experience and learning to revisit and revise/update their own PE and S-DoC analysis, keeping abreast of significant changes and adjusting their own support strategies accordingly.

Practical tips and conclusions

- Participatory Political Economy Analysis (PE) is politically smart contextual analysis, rather than academic PE in the way it is often seen and understood. The aim is to transform the way staff and partners understand their state, their role and their potential to influence change, providing a critical basis for effective decision-making and collective action.

- Critical to success are:
 - Building partners understanding and skills in conducting their own PE analysis.
 - Hands-on practical support to enable partners to ask the right questions, analyse findings and apply this intelligence to their planning strategically and continuously.
 - Flexibility in partners plans so that they can take account of their growing understanding, and the ever changing political economy of their issue and context.

- Good political scientists don't always make good facilitators of participatory PE analysis. Look for those willing to simplify and de-mystify their work, share their knowledge and skills, and mentor others.

SAVI's 'Knowledge tree'

SAVI is piloting a new approach to identifying and supporting partners. This breaks with convention in many ways in order to improve impact. We have broken our approach down into key components – depicted in the form of our 'knowledge tree' – to make it accessible, useful and adaptable.

Each component is described in detail in an Approach Paper.

Like a real tree, the trunk and branches of the programme grow from the bottom up: starting from the roots. The roots are our core values which inform everything that we do. The trunk is made up of strong inter-locking processes that support each other, and all other aspects of the programme. The branches on the left are SAVI's key working relationships with partners. The branches on the right deal with internal programme management and relations with our funder.

For more information, visit our website www.savi-nigeria.org/approach



SAVI supports groups of citizens, their elected state-level representatives and the media to be informed, credible and effective agents of citizen voice and accountability, able to play their part in promoting responsive, accountable and inclusive governance.

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