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The importance of thinking and working politically in programmes concerned with governance and institutional reform is widely recognised – but shifting from thinking politically to working politically is proving a major challenge. The State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI), a governance reform programme in Nigeria, supports local partners and stakeholders not through the usual accountable grants, but through mentoring, capacity building, relationship brokering and seed funding. This approach is making headway in enabling local partners and stakeholders to think and work in politically savvy ways around locally agreed problems – and its success is demonstrated in tangible examples of more responsive state governance in all the states where the programme works.

There is a growing consensus in development organisations and in research communities that aid concerned with governance and institutional reform is more likely to be effective and less likely to do harm if donor agencies and programmes ‘think and work politically’.1 There is additionally increasing agreement amongst those researching and analysing development processes that this requires an approach from donors which facilitates locally led, politically smart, iterative, collaborative work on locally relevant solutions to locally agreed problems.2

As a governance reform programme, SAVI is making progress in supporting local partners and stakeholders to take the lead, to think and work in politically savvy ways, to focus on locally agreed problems, and to progress in organic, fluid, diverse and constructive working partnerships. SAVI has succeeded in creating this flexibility by side-stepping the constraints associated with grant funds, the usual form of donor support to ‘demand-side’ governance.3 Instead, SAVI invests in recruiting and training small teams of staff indigenous to each state to facilitate locally driven change, supporting local partners and stakeholders through behind-the-scenes mentoring and capacity building, relationship-brokering and seed funding.

This paper shares SAVI’s experience, learning and challenges as a contribution to current debates. It starts with a brief review of current literature. It goes on to illustrate SAVI’s evolving approach through three case studies, followed by an analysis of learning.

What the literature says

The importance of donor agencies and programmes working on governance and

FRONT COVER Radio plays a vital role in raising and sharing important issues for citizens • Photograph: SAVI/George Osodi
institutional reform ‘thinking and working politically’ – grappling with the messy realities of local power and politics and ‘working with the grain’ of local culture – is widely discussed and agreed. Otherwise, institutional reform programmes all too easily produce results characterised by what Andrews terms ‘isomorphic mimicry’ – ‘best practice’ reforms and solutions that look good to an external funder, but do not necessarily change anything or engage significantly with the complexities of the local political economy. Typical examples are policies and laws that are debated and passed but never implemented. Too much focus on this type of result in turn leads to ‘capability traps’, as those seeking donor support focus on the types of reform that leverage funding, rather than the types of reform that make a real difference in their own context.

To date, political economy analysis (PEA) has been the main tool promoted to assist donor-funded programmes to think and work more politically. However, according to recent discussion, the impact of political economy analysis on programmes has been disappointing and ‘donors have found it hard to move from thinking politically to working differently’. The concern is that in practice, PEA has largely been reduced to a high level technical input, with limited impact on development practice.

There is a convergence of current thinking on the need for approaches to move beyond analysis to action, to accommodate the locally grounded, iterative, messy and un-plannable nature of change. In this context, Fisher and Marquette are calling for ‘third generation political economy analysis’ focusing on practical applied approaches; Booth and Unsworth are showcasing the effectiveness of ‘politically smart, locally driven’ initiatives; and Andrews, the effectiveness of interventions characterised by ‘Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation’. Amongst other things this involves developing local solutions to local problems and learning by doing, experimentation, reflection and adaptation. These are all in addition to long-standing recognition of the value and importance of supporting collective action through multi-stakeholder partnerships, linking reform-minded actors from demand and supply sides of governance.

SAVI

Spending money differently

SAVI works with citizens, civil society (CS) groups, media houses and State Houses of Assembly (SHoA) in ten Nigerian states, helping them to play their part in supporting more responsive and accountable state governance. SAVI is part of a group of DFID-funded State Level Programmes (referred to as the ‘SLP suite’) working in the same states focused on governance and sector reform.

The way SAVI works has built on learning from DFID-funded programmes in Nigeria since the late 1990s, and has continued to evolve during the course of the programme. From the outset, SAVI was designed to demonstrate a replicable and sustainable approach to governance reform, focusing on processes able to take on a life of their own without the need for external funding. The usual way demand-side governance has been supported in Nigeria is through accountable grants to CS groups. Sustainability beyond the period of donor funding is always an issue, and accountable grant funding also presents some inherent challenges to grant recipients’ willingness and ability to think and work politically:

- Donor requirements for agreed planning frameworks, tight financial forecasting and delivery of pre-planned results undermine grant recipients’ ability to plan flexibility and iteratively, and often inadvertently encourage delivery of ‘isomorphic mimicry’-type results.

- Dependence on external funding tends to result in competitive rather than collaborative relationships between potential recipients, and in plans and activities shaped according to funding opportunities.

- Dependence on external funding has the effect of undermining the credibility of grant recipients as local advocates, making them vulnerable to accusations of being ‘donor driven’ and unaccountable to local constituencies.

Empowerment and Accountability (E&A) programmes all grapple with these issues. In the course of the first two years of the programme, SAVI gradually side-stepped them by managing its funds and supporting governance reform processes in a different way.
SAVI invests in recruiting, training and supporting in-house state teams, who facilitate locally led processes of change. SAVI staff take full responsibility for meeting DFID planning, forecasting, monitoring and reporting requirements, and are fully accountable to DFID. Local partners and stakeholders – with no formal accountability to DFID, and no externally required planning, monitoring or reporting requirements – have complete flexibility to think and work politically, respond to shifting opportunities and momentum for change, and work with the grain of local ways of doing things.

SAVI state teams are made up of staff indigenous to the state, recruited on the basis of their commitment to local reform and willingness and ability to facilitate from behind the scenes. Staff are deliberately selected from diverse backgrounds including previous work with State Governments, civil society and citizens groups, media houses and donor programmes. As such they collectively constitute a neutral broker, able to facilitate working relations between diverse local actors. SAVI invests heavily in staff development and support. Throughout the programme, state teams all meet together quarterly to reflect on their field experience, and for programme development and planning. A central team of national technical advisers and operations managers visit the states providing state teams with hands-on mentoring and capacity building support.

State teams take responsibility for shaping the SAVI programme in each state. In all cases the aim is to facilitate local partners and stakeholders to work collaboratively with each other and with the State Government, on issues that have traction both with the State Government and citizens, and to develop locally relevant practical ways forward. State teams support local partners and stakeholders through behind the scenes mentoring and capacity building, brokering relationships and seed funding.

SAVI’s way of working has evolved throughout the programme – and continues to evolve. Starting in five states in 2008, expanding to three more in 2011 and a further two in 2013, has given the programme ten highly varied learning laboratories. It has also enabled SAVI twice to start from scratch, applying learning from earlier state programmes to newer state programmes.

The three following case studies, from different periods of SAVI’s development, illustrate how SAVI works, how the programme’s approach has evolved in response to learning, and the nature of current thinking and challenges.

Evolving through learning

Know Your Budget Advocacy Project, Kaduna State

In 2010, government decision making in Kaduna State was highly centralised. The State Executive Council had good pro-poor policies such as free maternal and child health care, but the state’s ability to implement these policies was called into question by its history of over-inflated budgets, use of the state budget for political patronage, and repeated failure to achieve budgeted revenue.

Drawing on their own political economy and stakeholder analysis, the SAVI Kaduna State Team identified budget advocacy as a civil society priority for engagement with the state government. They found civil society in general to have limited ability to implement these policies was called into question by its history of over-inflated budgets, use of the state budget for political patronage, and repeated failure to achieve budgeted revenue.

The KYB Project succeeded in galvanising public debate on the Kaduna State budget by producing
accessible, expert analyses of the 2010 and previous budgets; making strategic and effective use of public forums, radio and TV discussion programmes; and engaging both formally and informally with elected representatives and key members of the Kaduna State Government. The actions of the KYB Project, in combination with SPARC’s technical support within the State Government, resulted in the Governor publicly announcing a last-minute 31 billion naira reduction in the over-inflated budget which had been presented to the SHoA – an unheard of response to public opinion and critical analysis. This was an early high profile result for SAVI, celebrated by DFID and by sister SLPs – most notably by SPARC. It was seen, even by sceptics, as a triumph of the demand-side playing their part in putting pressure on the ‘supply-side’ to reform.

However, when SAVI stopped paying for KYB members’ time, some of the high profile members left. Their confrontational ‘name and shame’ tactics, strongly against SAVI’s general advice, led to a serious government backlash against civil society engagement in governance, and direct retribution against those media houses and SHoA members who had played a key part. This critically undermined the potentially powerful but still embryonic relationship between civil society, media and the SHoA in Kaduna, and any chance of constructive engagement between citizens and Government on the budget process in 2011.

The experience and embarrassment of 2010 forced the Kaduna State Government to be cautious in its subsequent planning. Thus, in 2011 the budget presented was 39.2 billion naira less than the finally approved budget of 2010 – reversing a long-standing trend of annually increased state budgets – but was then inflated by the Kaduna SHoA by a further 10 billion naira.

SAVI learning

This experience was pivotal in the evolution of SAVI’s way of working. As a short-term one-off result, it was an undoubted success. Over the longer term, it had significant negative outcomes. Though it created some level of consciousness within the State Executive and SHoA of the need for realistic budgets, it also alerted them to the need to tighten their grip on the civic space, not to allow such events to take them by surprise again.

From then on, well aware of SAVI’s facilitative role, the Executive kept a very close eye on SAVI staff and civil society partners, and the SHoA kept a safe distance from both.

Internally, SAVI staff reflected on what they – and what the KYB Project – could and should be doing differently to promote more sustainable change. The role of SAVI staff, the leadership structure of the group, the competing incentives driving the members of the group, its composition, how decisions were taken and its approach were all retrospectively analysed. Key learning – which influenced work not only in Kaduna State but throughout SAVI – focused on the importance of building constructive mutually beneficial working relationships between government and demand-side players. This focused on taking time to build working relationships rather than rushing into action; facilitating citizen engagement in state governance without money providing the incentive for action; and empowering local stakeholders to shape processes of change, rather than SAVI staff taking a central and controlling role.

Five years on, these lessons are all reflected in the approach being taken by SAVI-supported civil society partnerships in Kaduna, in their collaborative working relationships with the State Government and in their achievements. Partnerships include a re-formed KYB Project, driven by a few of the original group members, now directly and constructively engaging citizens in knowing and influencing their budget at local government and zonal levels.

**Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Advocacy (MNCH) Advocacy Partnership, Kano State**

Through their political economy analysis processes, the SAVI Kano State Team identified the need for improved maternal and child health services as an issue that had traction both with the Kano State Government, and with Kano citizens. It was also a high priority for DFID and for PATHS2, one of SAVI’s sister SLP programmes in Kano State. There was a history of civil society activism on maternal and child health in Kano State – but Civil Society Organisations (whose relations with the State Government Executive tended to be mutually suspicious) were poorly coordinated and not working well with the media or SHoA.
The SAVI Kano State Team – together with PATHS2 – selected credible and motivated civil society representatives and well-respected individuals to form the core of an MNCH Advocacy Partnership. Members were already highly competent and credible in many ways. Responding to the group’s own priorities, the SAVI Kano State Team assisted members to be more evidence-based, and link more effectively with citizens, the media and the SHoA. SAVI also guided the partnership to build their relationship with Government gradually, constructively, and maturely – not naming and shaming and not making excessive and unrealistic demands – but finding entry points where they could ‘be a solution to the government’s problem’, willing to make compromises here and there. A great deal of mentoring support was given to the core partners who were encouraged to lead the process, work well together and bring others on board to strengthen the partnership.

Five years on, the MNCH Advocacy Partnership have established themselves as a highly credible and valued partner to the Kano State Government – their eyes and ears on the ground. They are actively and routinely involved in government maternal and child health planning and budgeting processes and have played an important part in a number of key developments. These include an increase in Kano State Government funds to maternal and child health from 120 to 150 million naira in 2012, and, as a direct result of evidence presented by the MNCH Advocacy Partnership, the introduction of monthly disbursement of maternal and child health funding to secondary health facilities to aid flow of drugs and services in 2013, as well as a 7 per cent increase in health workers salary in 2014.

SAVI learning

There is no doubt that the MNCH Advocacy Partnership is highly motivated, credible and effective. They are also already sustainable and operating without dependence on SAVI support. SAVI’s learning is now focusing on factors that might constrain the extent of the Partnership’s influence – and how to address these. Members of the MNCH Advocacy Partnership are being invited to participate in formal processes of State Government planning and budgeting – but is this where the real decisions are made and the real influencing takes place? How well are Partnership members able to influence the decisions being made behind the scenes through less formal channels? Another question is the extent to which they are reliant for their influence on the role and presence of PATHS2 and other donor funded health programmes in the state. How much has donor interest created an artificial enabling environment for the MNCH Advocacy Partnership to influence the State Government – and how much does this influence, and will this influence in future, reach beyond the formal confines of donor-brokered programmes?

One conclusion from this kind of questioning in SAVI is the need to support local stakeholders to build working relationships with each other and with their State Government that thrive beyond the donor brokered processes.

Supporting an enabling environment for civil society, media and SHoA partnerships, Yobe State

The SAVI programme commenced in Yobe State in 2011, benefitting greatly from learning from the first set of five states. Yobe is one of three states in the far North-East of the country put under a State of Emergency by the Nigerian Government in 2013 because of increasing insecurity caused by the Boko Haram insurgency – and the implications of this have also been significant for the SAVI state programme here.

The SAVI Yobe State Team were in a position to manage local stakeholders’ expectations from the outset – diminishing potential dependency on SAVI, and promoting self-reliance. The state team is currently based in neighbouring Jigawa State and...
operates remotely. Both by design – and through necessity – the programme maintains a very low profile. This heightens the profile and responsibility of local stakeholders and partners, as well as maximising their credit for results achieved.

The Yobe State Team put much greater emphasis on directly engaging with citizens from the start of the programme than the teams in the first five states did. Civic education and public policy dialogue processes have been used to raise citizens’ awareness and expectations of the potential of the media, SHoA and CS groups to raise and represent their voice. Citizens have been directly involved in identifying critical issues to address through radio debates and phone-ins live on air. At the same time, the state team have used organisational capacity self-assessment processes with all the media houses, with as many civil society organisations in the state as possible and with the SHoA as a whole. These widely applied self-assessment processes have proved both enlightening and motivating, raising stakeholders’ aspirations to represent citizens’ interests and stimulating reform processes in their state, whether or not the SAVI Yobe State Team have directly engaged with them further.

All this is serving to create a fertile enabling environment for governance reform. Reform processes and partnerships between local stakeholders and around issues have taken off in multiple, organic and self-starting ways – a far less SAVI-defined and controlled process than in the first five states.

For example, the SHoA, Yobe Broadcasting Corporation (YBC) and Yobe State TV (YTV), are all driving forward their own reform agendas inspired by the Organisational Capacity self-Assessments initially facilitated by SAVI. They are financing their own reform processes, planning and managing their government funding in accordance with their own agreed operational and strategic plans – all for the first time. In accordance with these plans, members of the SHoA have made significant progress in strengthening their independence from the executive arm of the State Government and their role in budget oversight as well as pushing through much needed legislative reforms. YBC have extended and enhanced their radio coverage through introducing new digital equipment, introduced new programmes to cater to specific groups, and provided in-house training for their own staff.

The SHoA, YBC and YTV are all prioritising representation of citizens’ views. SAVI has created opportunities for interaction between media, CS groups and SHoA members and this has led to highly productive working relationships between these players which did not previously exist. YBC has introduced interactive radio programmes to engage citizens in discussion on key issues; initiated live radio broadcast of house proceedings; and started providing free airtime to CS groups on public interest programmes. In 2012, SHoA members started working with credible CS groups and media houses to hold public policy debates through citizen platforms around the state, explicitly designed to generate issues from citizens – community level challenges requiring government action – to be included in the state government budget – the first time this had happened.

Yobe State Government is responding positively to these developments. Five citizen issues (including the rehabilitation of a general hospital, construction of a township road and urban-centred erosion control) were included in the 2013 state budget – a total commitment of about 753 million naira, and implementation has commenced. 35 issues were then included in the 2014 state budget after an expansion of the same citizen engagement processes. Yobe State Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning has now institutionalised civil society involvement in all State Ministries’ defence of their annual budgets in the SHoA, and many State Ministries, Departments and Agencies are now actively engaging with CS groups.
Analysis of learning
Enabling local stakeholders to think and work politically

SAVI’s continually evolving way of working has enabled the programme to make headway on many of the approaches considered by analysts and researchers to be central to thinking and working politically. These include facilitating collective action through partnerships and coalitions; local leadership on local problems; politically smart interventions; and learning by doing.

Collective action through working in partnership

Supporting local stakeholders to work in organic, effective partnerships is central to the way SAVI works. SAVI state teams have direct working relationships with diverse CS groups, media houses and SHoA. They facilitate working relations between these groups, and support them all to engage directly with citizens and work constructively with the State Government.

In the first five states, SAVI state teams were centrally involved in Advocacy Partnerships, whose members were in effect partnering with SAVI. Over time, and particularly in newer states, the emphasis has been far more on local stakeholders partnering with each other, and less and less about their relationship with SAVI. Citizens are also much more directly involved. In the early years of the programme, the emphasis was on working with CS groups, media houses and SHoA as representatives of citizens. Now the programme is getting ordinary citizens involved in dialogue on governance – with civil society, media and SHoA facilitating these processes through public hearings in the House, constituency meetings, interactive phone-in radio programmes, town hall meetings, social media and many other ways.

An early lesson – which strongly influences how partnership works throughout SAVI – was the importance of working in such a way that the strength of partnerships lies in their membership and what members can contribute and achieve together, rather than in financial incentives to work together. The initial KYB project stopped functioning effectively when the SAVI seed funding that was used to contract individual members’ time stopped.

The MNCH partnership, where SAVI has never paid for members’ time, has been operational and active for more than five years. The multiple partnerships in Yobe State have sprung up and operate with no expectation of funding from SAVI.

Some of the organisations that participate in these partnerships receive grant funding from other sources. Some, particularly media houses and SHoA, draw on their own resources to fund activities that are important to them. Some members such as academics and government officials are paid by their employers. Some are ‘concerned citizens’, not representing any organisation. Many participate in their spare time – a voluntary contribution of time for the wider benefit of their community and state.

Overall SAVI supports partnerships to recognise and strengthen the resource within themselves (in terms of their knowledge, skills, networks and access), and to be resourceful in accessing what they need. Partnerships are fluid, with complete ease of entry and exit. Members can strengthen their partnership at any time by bringing the skills and networks they need – and all are free to leave when it no longer suits them to participate. Particular emphasis is placed on accessing locally available, sustainable and diverse in-kind support and funding – in return for locally valued, credible and effective initiatives. The strength of partnerships lies in the common interests and shared values of their members; what they bring to the table in terms of their diverse knowledge, skills, networks and resources; and what they learn and achieve together.

Local leadership on local problems

In all three of the above cases, partnerships’ plans and activities are locally led, and problem focused – but the extent and depth of that local leadership varies. In the first five states, issue identification was heavily influenced by DFID and the State Level Programmes (as illustrated by the initial Know Your Budget Advocacy Project in Kaduna State and the MNCH Advocacy Partnership in Kano State) and ring fenced by SAVI state teams, who explicitly brought together two or three Advocacy Partnerships (APs) in each state. AP members were selected by SAVI staff, state teams had quite a hands-on facilitation role, other SLPs were often closely involved, and AP
members generally focused their influencing efforts on donor-brokered State Government procedures such as Medium Term Sector Strategies. Notwithstanding the success of many of these partnerships, this leaves some questions on the extent to which they are truly locally led and not still in some respects donor driven, and on how sustainable their role and influence will be without this donor presence.

Learning from this (as in the example from Yobe State) SAVI is working at a more strategic level in the newer five states – facilitating an enabling environment for diverse partnerships of local stakeholders to come together on their own terms to work on solutions to locally identified problems at their own pace. These partnerships are not ring fenced by SAVI, and SAVI staff are not necessarily directly involved. This approach is not only generating results more quickly and more widely, but from the outset is less donor defined and less dependent on a continuing donor presence.

**Politically smart interventions**

Partnerships are a means to effective political engagement, not an end in themselves. The SAVI central technical team supports state teams, and state teams in turn support local partners and stakeholders to think and work politically – through formal training, hands-on mentoring, and on the job support. Support to local partners and stakeholders starts with Organisational or Partnership Capacity self-Assessment processes (OCA/PCA), enabling them to identify gaps in their own collective capacities. This includes their knowledge and understanding of the ‘political economy’ of their state, and the critical power relationships, entry points and challenges around their issue of concern down to the level of everyday messy politics, where conflicts of interest are negotiated, bargains struck, and alliances and coalitions made and broken.¹⁹

The case studies illustrate ways in which SAVI thinking and practice has evolved in this respect. In the first five states (illustrated by the KYB Project and MNCH Advocacy Partnership examples), state teams tended to confine OCAs/PCAs, and follow-up capacity building, to the CS groups and media formally identified as SAVI partners. In new states (illustrated by the Yobe example), the approach is much more inclusive. OCA and PCA tools are used with a wide range of CS groups and media houses, and capacity building processes are open to as many as wish to participate. SAVI’s involvement is higher level, more strategic work on the enabling environment for politically smart engagement.

In the first five states, there has also been a tendency to focus largely on visible, formal government policymaking, planning and budgeting processes – aiming for tangible, demonstrable changes in this context. In new states, local partners and stakeholders are often operating far more behind the scenes, focussing on informal influencing processes and using informal methods. Through meetings in the evenings and night; sharing information through phone calls, texts and social media; gathering ‘intelligence’ on political manoeuvrings and opportunities; and winning critical individuals over by presenting the right argument – local stakeholders are encouraged to work with the grain and seek to exercise influence in politically savvy ways.

**Iterative adaptation/learning by doing**

SAVI has gradually lifted donor requirements from local partners. Early partners – such as the initial KYB Project – were required to produce budgets and forecasts; record their own contributions for Value for Money (VfM) purposes; and provide written or video recorded reports of SAVI’s contribution, as evidence of attribution. Over time the programme has learnt not to do this, ensuring that there is no suggestion that local partners are in any way sub-contracted by a donor for a donor, with the compromises this invariably entails.

As a consequence, local partners and stakeholders have complete flexibility to get on with their own work in their own way. SAVI state teams are essentially there to support them to learn by doing, in regular cycles of action and reflection. This involves setting short term goals that are within their capacity to achieve; reflecting on their achievements, progress and challenges; and gradually building their confidence, credibility and ability to take on bigger challenges, set higher goals and influence greater levels of reform. This approach is well illustrated by the MNCH Advocacy Partnership. Members have built their current level of influence in small incremental steps, learning by doing, growing in confidence and stature over time.
SAVIs internal ways of working

SAVI facilitates an enabling environment for local partners and stakeholders to think and work politically in the ways described above by collectively assuming full responsibility for all DFID planning, forecasting, target setting, monitoring and reporting processes. SAVI staff are fully accountable to DFID. Local stakeholders and partners are supported at arms-length. With no formal planning, target setting or reporting requirement from SAVI or DFID, they can set their own agenda for change, and work flexibly – whilst also benefitting from mentoring, capacity building, relationship brokering and seed funding support.

Working through in-house state teams (as opposed, for example, to contracted training providers), means that SAVI can ensure consistency in the programme approach and theory of change, and quality control in relation to capacity building and mentoring. State teams are trained and supported in both content and process through practical demonstration – with the SAVI central technical team modelling in their relationship with state teams the kind of mentoring relationship state teams are expected to have with the partners and stakeholders.

Continual reflection is built into the programme approach. Local stakeholders and partners are able to learn by doing – from what works well and from what works less well – and adapt their strategies accordingly. SAVI as a programme is also able to do this, and, as the above cases illustrate, lessons that have been learned in one state influence approaches in other states.

Internal and external challenges

The approach has significant inherent internal and external challenges.

This way of working confounds expectations across the board. Almost everyone involved in Empowerment and Accountability programming – donors, service providers, staff and local stakeholders – expects a grant fund, and established systems and procedures within the development sector push the vast majority to work in this familiar way. Doing something different encounters resistance, both externally and internally. Commitment, passion, clarity, creativity and persistence have been required, and continue to be required, from the SAVI central technical team, to drive forward this different way of working. It’s a long hard conversion process. Whilst results are now beginning to speak for themselves in SAVI, replication of this approach elsewhere is also likely to require sustained and effective championing from a central core of believers.

Working in this way places huge demands on staff, far greater than the usual grants management function – with significant implications for staff recruitment, support, management and retention. SAVI now recruits and appraises staff on the basis of a set of agreed core values. Having learned that effectiveness is not about having the right knowledge and skill set, but about having the right attitudes and behaviour, SAVI looks for staff who can demonstrate a willingness to support others to achieve from behind the scenes, and to go the extra mile to provide this support. Taking responsibility for, and protecting supported partnerships from the substantial burden of DFID requirements can easily lead to staff burn-out, and highly professional personnel management systems become critical to supporting and retaining staff under such pressures.

Aspects of managing DFID requirements present an on-going challenge. SAVI is finding that local stakeholders are most effective in influencing change when they operate in home-grown, organic, fluid and shifting networks, often behind the scenes. This type of work is challenging to forecast in ways that meet DFID requirements without compromising the flexibility of local actors. It can also be challenging to report and evidence in ways that don’t expose and compromise off-the-radar negotiation and influencing processes.

Conclusion

The importance of thinking and working politically in programmes concerned with governance and institutional reform is widely recognised. Recent discussion on what this means in practice has converged on the need for more flexible development programming that responds and adapts to changing local political dynamics. Research evidence suggests, however, that shifting from thinking politically to working
politically remains a major challenge. Some research\(^2\) is concluding that one of the reasons for this is that significant aspects of current donor practice, such as requirements for delivery of pre-planned short term results, rigid forecasting and disbursement, and pressure to spend, take away the flexibility and incentives programmes and partners require to think and work politically. SAVI’s experience lends some support to this view.

SAVI has made headway in creating an enabling environment for local partners and stakeholders to think and work politically by focusing its support on capacity building, mentoring, relationship brokering and seed funding, side stepping the constraints associated with accountable grant funds. SAVI staff take full responsibility for DFID planning, forecasting and reporting requirements, protecting local stakeholders from the potential distortions these can create. This approach is working. Experience and learning across supported states over time has enabled the programme to create more flexibility and more responsibility for local partners and stakeholders, and deriving from this, greater success.

An ongoing challenge for SAVI and DFID is managing the tension between promoting *technical effectiveness* – facilitating an enabling environment for local partners and stakeholders which allows them to work in locally led and flexible ways – and meeting *administrative requirements* for forecasting spending and planning and reporting results. The aim is always to manage this tension in ways that facilitate effective processes of change – but, when technical effectiveness and administrative requirements pull in opposite directions, this is a major challenge.

Finally, SAVI has evolved into a programme that is not so much about ‘voice and accountability’ or ‘demand side governance’, but more a way of bringing together different local interests around problems they can collectively solve, through various layers and levels of contribution. The approach has potential to leverage change on a greater scale – and this will be further explored and developed in the next phase of the programme.
Endnotes

1 Leftwich, A (2011), Fisher and Marquette (2014)
2 Andrews (2014), Booth and Unsworth (2014)
3 Research and policy debates reject this ‘demand-’ and ‘supply-’ side dichotomy, with evidence demonstrating that governance reform derives from diverse reform-minded stakeholders from government and wider society working together – and SAVI’s way of working supports this. Nonetheless, SAVI was initially designed as a ‘demand-side’ governance programme, and our experience is that governance reform programmes generally continue to be conceptualised along ‘demand-’ and ‘supply-side’ lines. Where appropriate, therefore, we use the term ‘demand-side governance’ in this paper.
4 We use the terms ‘local partner’ and ‘local stakeholder’ throughout this paper. ‘Local partner’ refers to organisations with whom SAVI state teams have direct and ongoing engagement. ‘Local stakeholders’ refers to organisations and individuals who have accessed SAVI support often through participation in occasional training or capacity self-assessment events, but mostly through engagement by local partners, and who have then taken the initiative to take forward reform ideas with little or no further direct involvement from SAVI.
6 Ibid.
7 Fisher and Marquette (2014)
8 Ibid.
9 Booth and Unsworth (2014)
10 Andrews (2014)
11 For example, Gaventa, J. and Benequista, N. (2011), Booth (2012) and Leftwich (2011)
12 For more information, visit the SAVI website at www.savi-nigeria.org
13 The core suite of programmes comprises, in addition to SAVI, SPARC (State Partnership for Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability) – a governance reform programme working with State Governments); ESSPIN (Education Sector Support in Nigeria) and PATHS2 (Partnership for Transforming Health Systems).
14 Learning from the Jigawa Wetlands Livelihoods project (JWL) (2002-07), an issue-based institutional reform programme, and from issue-based project components of the State and Local Government Programme (SLGP) (2004 and 2007) has been particularly influential. In turn these programmes built on learning from the Capacity Building for Decentralised Development programme (CBDD) (1998-2002) about supporting multi-stakeholder issue-based initiatives using a Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) approach.
15 State teams are usually made up of five operational staff and four support staff.
16 The ten states where SAVI works are extremely diverse – large/small population size; urban/rural; reform-minded/traditional; northern/southern; Christian/Muslim/mixture of faiths; conflict-affected/non-conflict-affected.
18 SAVI’s sister programme in the SLP suite focusing on supply side governance reform
21 For example Booth and Unsworth (2014)
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leading the UK Government’s fight against world poverty.

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