

Theory of Change: empowering citizens to engage in governance

In brief

SAVI's theory of change is a simple, practical guide that staff and partners use to plan and to monitor change – as well as to reflect on and enhance their own effectiveness. It sets out broad stages of attitude and behaviour change over time to facilitate effective citizen engagement in governance processes, systems and structures.

It serves as a guide for staff, partners and citizens to think and work politically, primarily through the formation of strategic alliances and partnerships. Its content is consistent with research conclusions about what works in practice in promoting more responsive and accountable governance. The stages of the theory of change provide the basic framework for all SAVI's programme planning, monitoring, and reporting.

Learning from experience

In recent years, research and evaluations on demand-side governance reform in developing countries¹ have reached a number of consistent conclusions about what works and what doesn't work in promoting reform. All are agreed that:

- In designing governance reform programmes, an understanding of the *local political economy* (i.e. local power dynamics, key players and vested interests, motivation for reform, usual way of getting things done etc.) is critical to choosing issues to work on, partners to work with, strategies and expectations of change.
- Partners in empowerment and accountability programmes like SAVI (including citizens, civil society groups, media houses and elected state representatives) need support and skills to *think and work politically*. This doesn't mean supporting partners to engage in party or

oppositional politics – but supporting them to understand the politics and power dynamics of the situation they are seeking to influence, and to plan and adapt their interventions in the light of this knowledge.

- *Governments and citizens (the supply- and demand-side) need to work together to bring about reform* with motivation coming from both sides. Change is not brought about by citizens pressurising an otherwise reluctant government to reform, but by identifying and harnessing motivation and momentum for reform from both government and citizens.

SAVI's theory of change has evolved alongside the emergence of these conclusions – informed by direct experience of governance reform initiatives in Nigeria and learning on the ground. It is wholly consistent with the above conclusions.

Developing our theory of change

Many donor-funded programmes are now required to have a fully worked out theory of change from the outset. SAVI was in the fortunate position of being able to define its theory of change over the first three years of the programme, and all programme staff were involved. Certain aspects were clear from the outset, drawing on the past experience of the core team. Other aspects drew on the experience of SAVI staff working in states – analysing the results partners were achieving, and reflecting on the common processes involved. While the broad framework is now in place, interpretation and application continues to evolve, as we gain better understanding of local reform processes, local stakeholders, and alignment of interests.

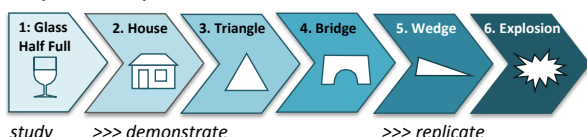
Summarising our theory of change

SAVI works with citizens, civil society (CS) groups, media organisations and State Houses of Assembly (SHoAs) in ten Nigerian states², helping them to play their part in supporting more responsive and accountable state governance. The aim is to support demonstration initiatives through which local partners experience processes and working relationships that result in more responsive government policies, budgets, projects and services. These processes and working relationships are designed to be replicable and sustainable without external donor support – contributing, in step changes, to more responsive, accountable and inclusive state governance.

Our theory of change depicts this process of demonstration and replication over time – defined by a series of broad stages, each broken down into a number of steps or components.

Theory of change

inception >>> implementation



Stages of the theory of change

Stage 1: Glass half full: The starting point for the SAVI programme in any state – the inception phase – is for state teams to recognise that they are looking for and dealing with a ‘glass half full’. Citizens, civil society groups, and others representing citizens or giving them voice are already engaged with their state government

in campaigning and reform processes of various kinds. SAVI’s aim is to scan and map this demand-side environment, identify such initiatives and the people behind them, and understand the wider political economy context in which they are working. This includes:

- Citizen involvement in influencing and monitoring state government policy, budget and planning processes – on issues that are a priority both for the particular state government and citizens of the state (such as urban water supply, or maternal and child health).
- Citizen involvement in evolving democratic processes (such as SHoA constituency engagement or citizen monitoring of government projects).
- Efforts by state politicians and mass media organisations to represent citizens views more effectively – in fora such as public hearings, phone-in radio programmes, and town hall meetings.
- Efforts to raise public awareness of the role of citizens in governance – in turn raising public expectations in relation to local politicians, media channels and the state government itself.

In all states, SAVI state teams work with the SHoA and with select media organisations that demonstrate interest in representing citizen’s views and that have traction both with the state government and citizens. They also draw together – either directly or indirectly – multi-stakeholder platforms and advocacy partnerships around issues or democratic processes. These can be loose alliances, social networks, formal partnerships, or a combination of all three – as determined by the partners, by state teams, the evolving local context, and informed by learning by doing. These platforms and partnerships involve diverse local stakeholders (individuals and organisations) who have credibility with citizens and with the state government and a commitment to collective action. In the earlier days of SAVI, some of these advocacy partnerships were made up entirely of non-government stakeholders. Increasingly they now also involve government staff, actively bridging demand- and supply-side interests and perspectives.

Stage 2: House: SAVI support to partners – Advocacy Partnerships (APs), SHoA politicians and civil servants, media house executives and staff – is provided through brokering and facilitating

working relationships, mentoring, capacity building and seed funding rather than through accountable grants. (See SAVI Approach Paper 2: Programme Design.)

SAVI's behind the scenes mentoring to partners begins with supporting them to gain the trust and respect of others, citizens especially, and increase their effectiveness – known as 'getting your own house in order'. State governments, civil society groups, the media and elected representatives all suffer from a poor public image in Nigeria. There are high levels of mutual mistrust and disrespect, and all have a reputation for being easily bought off by the highest bidder.

State teams support all partners to strengthen their links with and accountability to citizens. APs focused on particular issues achieve this mainly through community- or facility-level policy monitoring and evidence gathering; media partners through interactive programming; and SHoA politicians through improving constituency relations and public access to the House. For the latter, initial work raising public awareness of the constitutional role of politicians in representing citizens' interests and managing public expectations of them, is important to create a conducive enabling environment – before most politicians are ready to face their constituency.

SAVI state teams also respond to priorities identified by partners through Organisational Capacity Assessment (OCA) or Partnership Capacity Assessment (PCA) processes (see SAVI Approach Paper 2: Programme Design and SAVI tools). Further 'getting your own house in order' activities, typically involve supporting partners to:

- Take more responsibility for their own decisions and actions from the outset – thereby managing their expectations of support from SAVI.
- Recognise, value and harness their own knowledge, networks, skills and commitment as their key assets and strength – and expand their staff/aides or partnership/platform to include individuals and organisations with the knowledge, networks and skills they need.
- Build their evidence-base to better support and advocate for citizens demands.
- Build their understanding of the politics and power relations surrounding their issues at every level to enhance their advocacy strategies, including within their own organisations.
- Make better use of their existing financial resources, and identify additional funding where necessary. SAVI provides complementary seed funding in small and diminishing amounts. The resourcefulness of partners increases with the success and growth of collective action as they progress through the remaining stages of the theory of change.

Stage 3: Triangle: The next stage is to break down the barriers that exist and build bridges between APs, elected state level representatives and the media. Up to this point, SAVI's support to each set of partners is separate, and largely internally focused. Now having made progress on getting their own houses in order, partners have more to offer as well as more to gain from working in a wider partnership with each other.

SAVI fosters and encourages opportunities for these diverse partners to work together, usually in the context of advocacy on specific issues or engagement in specific democratic processes, recognising and drawing on each other's strengths and opportunities. State teams encourage the formation or strengthening of tri-partite platforms for joint strategising, planning, learning and sharing. They also encourage media staff, and SHoA staff and politicians to participate in APs. Through these experiences, partners start to reinforce each other's voice, enhance each others' relationship with citizens and hold one another to account. Partners begin to realise through experience that they can accomplish more by working together than they can separately.

Stage 4: Bridge: This stage is about facilitating constructive engagement between demand-side partners and the state government. SAVI works closely with sister DFID-funded programme SPARC which supports supply-side governance reform in the same states. SPARC staff seek to open doors and create spaces within state government policymaking, planning and budgeting processes for civil society, the media and SHoA to break down barriers and build bridges between citizens and government.

With assistance from SPARC, and through the participation of government staff in many advocacy partnerships and platforms, SAVI is able to support its partners to operate in a more politically savvy way than they might otherwise have done in influencing government action. In practice this means helping partners to:

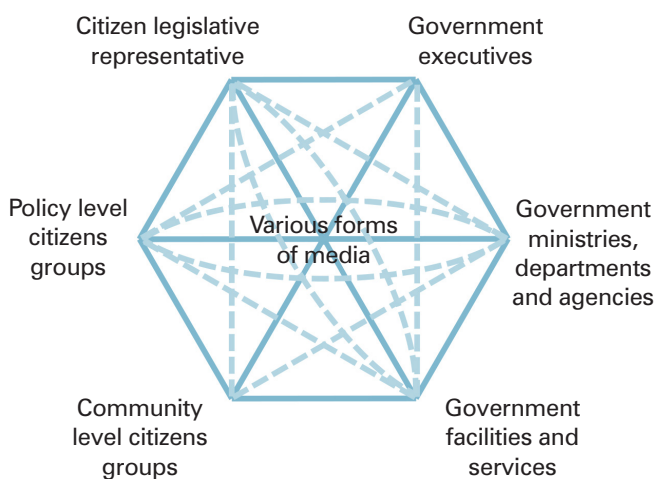
- Appreciate the complexity of actors and processes involved in bridging the demand- and supply-sides of governance.
- Better understand the policy, planning and budget processes they are seeking to influence and identify appropriate formal and informal entry points.
- Forge alliances and working relations with key actors within the various levels of government.
- Build their case, frame their arguments and marshal their evidence to influence change.
- Plan in incremental stages through learning by doing and reflection, focus on short-term achievable targets

and build their confidence and credibility to take on bigger challenges.

- Channel citizen demands at all levels of government – from the governor and his executive council, through ministries and local governments, down to community level facilities and services – simultaneously and strategically, in a well co-ordinated manner.

This final point is critical. Bridges between levels are as important as bridges between citizens and government at each level. In the Nigerian context, this usually means tackling state-specific issues simultaneously at executive, departmental and facility level, and national issues simultaneously at federal, state and local government level. The 'bridge' stage of our theory of change is often referred to within SAVI as the 'hexagon', to reflect the levels of vertical as well as horizontal interplay involved.

Hexagonal (vertical and horizontal) bridging



These first four stages of the theory of change collectively form a model for partners to be more accountable, credible and effective agents of citizen voice. Through this stepped approach, partners are engaging constructively with their state governments on policy issues and democratic processes of public concern and achieving notable results (see SAVI⁴ results). The remaining two stages of the theory of change concern replication and dissemination.

Stage 5: Wedge: SAVI encourages partners who are achieving results through the above approach to reflect on how they are working and what they have learned, and to strengthen their relationships with each other. These partners are encouraged to apply their learning to their advocacy work on other issues, in other sectors, in other regions of their state and in neighbouring states – to explain it to others and share their story. The effectiveness

of these partners in achieving results also attracts the attention of other government and non-government actors – demonstrating how the business of governance can be done differently, more effectively and in a self-sustaining way. This serves to scale-up partners' achievements, and also to consolidate them. By this stage, SAVI's provision of support to partners is limited to technical advice, mentoring and other forms of encouragement where required, with little or no funding support. Activities are being driven almost entirely through the resourcefulness of the partners.

Stage 6: Explosion: The final stage of the theory of change is to push forward to a critical mass of citizens, civil society groups, media houses, SHoA staff and politicians and government officials who are actively engaged in participatory, responsive and inclusive governance. This is about further spreading the word demonstrating to others the benefits of this better way of working. SAVI makes deliberate efforts to engage the interest of non-government and government coordinating agencies to showcase demonstrations.

The legacy of this approach will be credible and committed government and non-government players who, by working together, are able to create, support and make use of opportunities for constructive engagement between state governments and citizens without recourse to external support. Linking up the many individuals and organisations across civil society and government that are involved in constructive and effective processes of citizen engagement in governance, has the potential to build, until empowered citizens and responsive governments become the norm.

How the theory of change is used

As a result of their involvement in its evolution and on-going development, SAVI staff and partners all understand, own and use this theory of change. The stages are part of the day-to-day language of staff and partners alike. The theory of change serves as a reference point for cycles of planning, implementation, reflection and learning by partners, staff, advisers and managers throughout the programme.

Facilitating partnerships

The stages of the theory of change set out the processes involved in facilitating partnerships of different kinds: between SAVI and other development programmes; amongst diverse demand-side players in different contexts; and between demand- and supply-side stakeholders.

- SAVI Approach Paper 2: Programme Design

Engaging and empowering partners

The theory of change is incorporated into all of the self-assessment tools we encourage partners to use to reflect on their own capacity, strengths and gaps, as well as to define their capacity building priorities, strategic objectives and activity plans.

See:

- SAVI Tools: Organisational capacity assessment (OCA) and partnership capacity assessment (PCA)⁵
- SAVI Approach Paper 6: Engaging with Civil Society
- SAVI Approach Paper 7: Engaging with the Media
- SAVI Approach Paper 8: Engaging with State Houses of Assembly
- SAVI Approach Paper 9: Promoting Gender and Social inclusion
- SAVI Approach Paper 10: Engaging with State Governments

Defining and measuring results

The theory of change constitutes, in effect, a diagonal axis through SAVI's results framework. It is used to establish output level baselines, milestones and targets, and measure incremental progress against these progress. As these changes come together over time to achieve tangible Outcome and Impact level results such as changes to government policies, projects and budgets, the theory of change is also used to reflect back on the processes of SAVI support and citizen engagement that contributed to these. This in turn enables learning from what is working well and what is not.

See:

- SAVI Approach Paper 5: Defining and Measuring Results

Practical tips and conclusions

- SAVI's theory of change works well because it is a simple, easy to understand, practical tool with broad applicability that really helps staff and partners to plan and monitor their work.
- Its practicality derives from the fact that it has been developed over time through reflecting on experience. It's interpretation and application continues to evolve.
- Integrating the theory of change with the results framework works very well – they operate collectively as highly effective tools for strategic and operational planning and for qualitative monitoring and evaluation.

Endnotes

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

² Five from 2008: Enugu, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, and Lagos; three from 2011: Katsina, Yobe and Zamfara; and two from 2013: Anambra and Niger – all with national support provided from Abuja

³ savi-nigeria.org/resources/

⁴ savi-nigeria.org/results

⁵ savi-nigeria.org/resources/

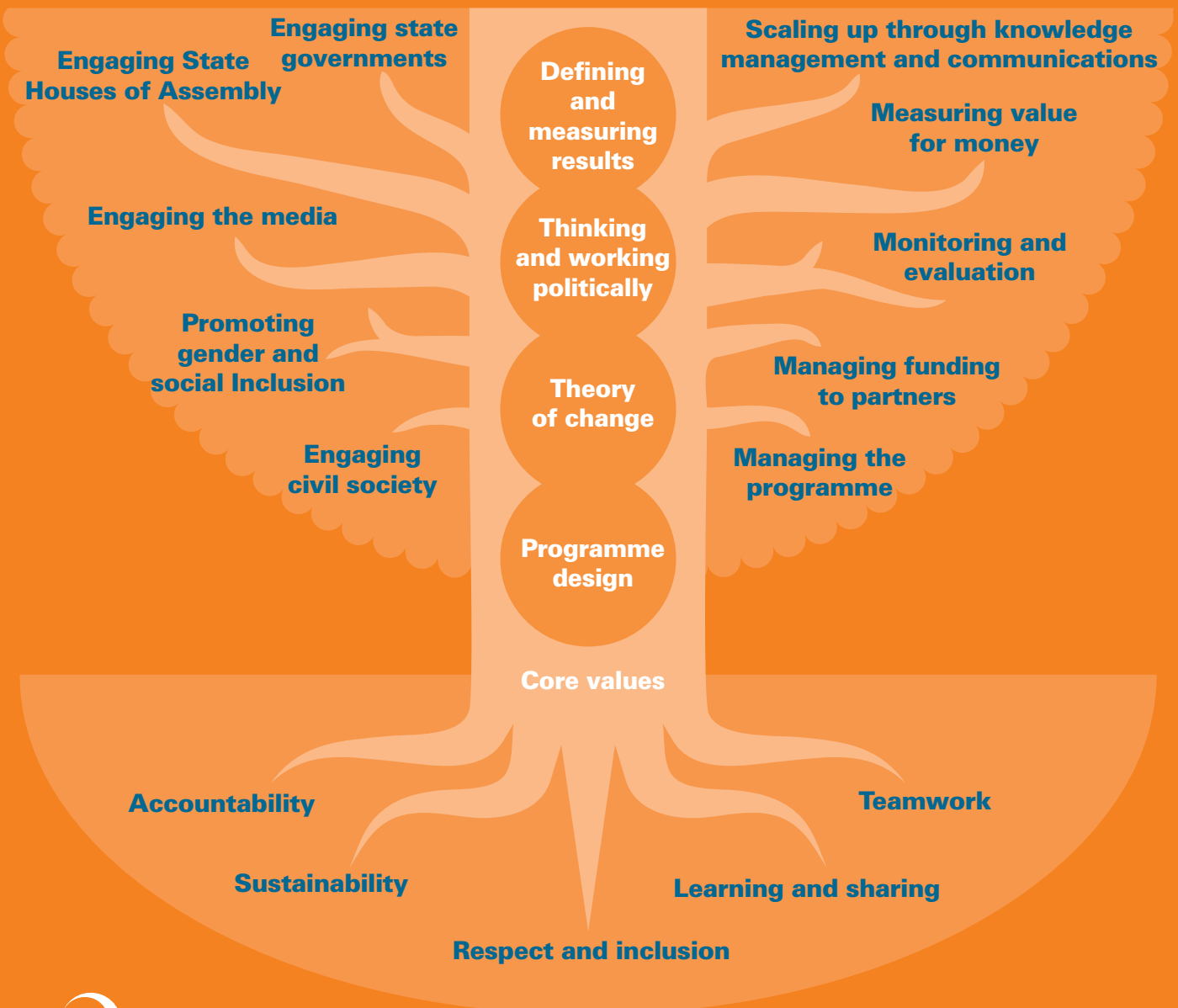
SAVI's 'knowledge tree'

The State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) is a DFID-funded programme working in ten Nigerian states promoting a culture of constructive citizen engagement in responsive state level governance. Decision-making in SAVI is largely decentralised to state level, and state staff are supported and trained to be facilitators and mentors of locally driven change. Through providing behind the scenes support, SAVI is equipping groups of citizens, the media and state legislatures with the confidence and credibility to play their part in governance in politically smart and effective ways.

SAVI's Knowledge Tree depicts how the programme works. The roots are the core values that inform everything that SAVI does. The trunk is made up of four inter-related processes that give structure to all aspects of the programme. Left hand branches describe SAVI's working relationships with partners. Right hand branches concern internal functioning and relations with DFID.

This paper is one of a series explaining these different processes and relationships.

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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