

# Thinking and Working Politically: supporting partners and staff through a participatory approach to political economy analysis

## In brief

Thinking and acting politically is central to the SAVI programme. We support staff and partners to analyse the power relations that shape change in their state, and to use this knowledge to inform their decision-making. This includes decisions made by SAVI state teams relating to the issues and partners they engage with and support, and the alliances and partnerships they help to facilitate. It also includes decisions made by partners on ways to advance government responsiveness on their issues and processes of concern. Partners are encouraged to start their ambitions and activities small and go to scale gradually. They use flexible and adaptive approaches, learn from experience, and gradually build their confidence, credibility and networks – resulting in higher ambitions and higher impact over time.

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This applied approach to political economy analysis is rigorous at the same time as being accessible, engaging and effective. It results in politically smart thinking becoming normal and central to the day to day planning and action 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.

There is general agreement that development assistance works best, and is least liable to do harm, when the people designing it are thinking and working politically<sup>1</sup>. To date, political economy analysis (PEA) has been the main tool promoted to assist donor-funded programmes to think and work more politically. But the impact of this on programmes has been disappointing and 'donors have found it hard to move from thinking politically to working differently'<sup>2</sup>. SAVI's experience in Nigeria suggests that, in the context of empowerment and accountability initiatives, a number of factors tend to come together to cause this problem:

- PEAs 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.
- PEAs 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 political economy 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 these are agreed. Consequently they have little room for manoeuvre to respond in a flexible and adaptive manner to the ever-changing political economy of their context.

There is a convergence of current thinking on the need for approaches to move beyond political economy analysis to politically smart action, to accommodate the locally grounded, iterative, messy and unplannable nature of change. Analysis of successful initiatives suggests that they share a set of features. These include support to local solutions to local problems; constructive relations among key players to enable them to build on shared and complementary interests; learning by doing, experimentation, reflection and adaptation; and grappling with the messy realities of local power and politics in intelligent ways.

SAVI's participatory approach to PEA, discussed in this paper, is designed to enable staff and partners to think and work politically within the context of the programme's facilitated partnership approach to governance reform (see SAVI Approach Paper 2: Programme Design).

There are two distinct and complementary phases to SAVI's engagement with PEA.

In both phases, our aim is to ensure that staff and partners have the knowledge, skills and confidence to analyse, understand and engage with the realities of power relations that shape change in their state. We start by helping staff and partners to appreciate and value what they already know and then equip them with the additional knowledge and skills they need. They are supported to unlock their own analytical potential, with decreasing dependence on external support, and use their own political savvy to inform their decision-making.

### **Initial phase: supporting SAVI staff to think and work politically**

The first stage is for SAVI state teams to understand the political economy of their state, identify existing momentum for change, and build on this through their selection of issues and partners to engage with and support. The processes involved

in doing this have evolved during the course of the SAVI programme – current step by step guidance for SAVI staff can be found in the Tools section of the SAVI website<sup>3</sup>.

There are several parts to the PEA processes:

#### **Macro-level PEA**

Local political scientists support SAVI state teams to carry out macro state-level PEA. This involves, amongst other things: appreciating the history and long-term trend of the state's political economy; understanding where the state government is spending money; which sectors are favoured and why; what is influencing decision-making and who is benefitting, including attention to issues of gender and social inclusion. SAVI staff take responsibility for gathering and analysing political economy 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.
  - Gender equality and social inclusion.

These same local political scientists usually write up this PEA for external reporting and monitoring purposes. Their reports are then quality assured by national and international consultants to

ensure an appropriate level of scientific rigour and compliance with external requirements. But, critically, the findings and analysis are fully owned and understood by the SAVI state teams.

### State drivers of change (S-DoC) analysis

With continuing support from local political scientists, SAVI state teams drill down from the macro level of the political economy 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 is to identify issues and actors that have traction with a wide range of actors in civil society, as well as with elected government officials and 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 up 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. In the later operational phase of the programme, SAVI staff draw on their partners' experience to revise/update their own PEA and S-DoC analysis, keeping abreast of significant changes and adjusting support strategies accordingly.

### Stakeholder analysis

As issues with traction across government and civil society begin to emerge, the next stage is to map relevant government and civil society actors. This includes key government officials, their political and economic associates, local opinion leaders, and other key influencers within and outside the state including those amongst civil society groups, the media and elected representatives in the State Houses of Assembly (SHoAs). 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 each issue identified. This analysis acts as a filter in determining which issues and stakeholders have the greatest potential for alignment of interests and constructive collective action.

### Capacity assessment

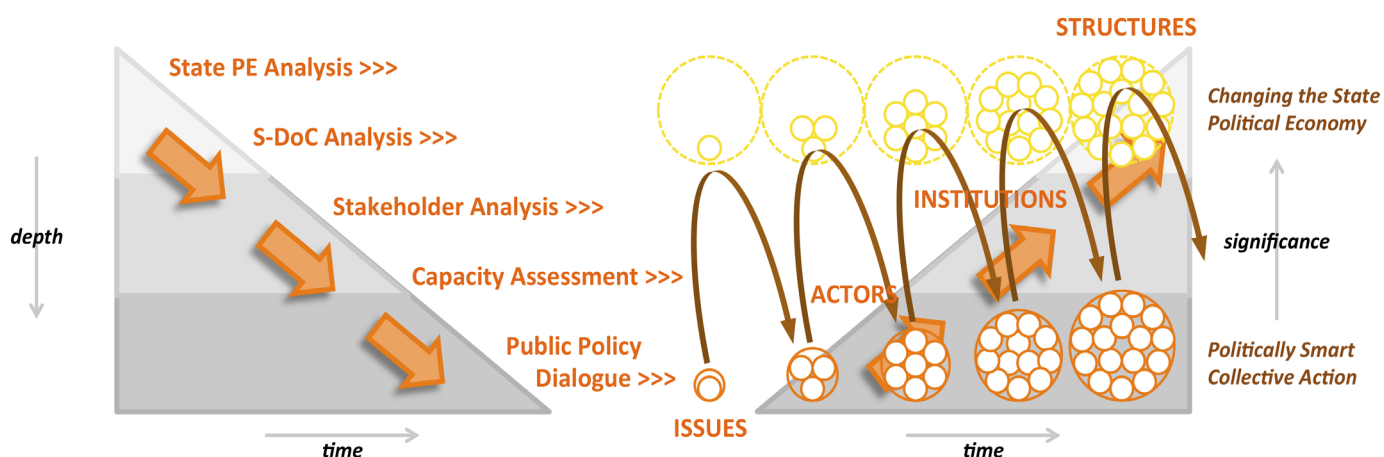
Another filter used to shortlist issues and identify potential partners is the organisational capacity of different bodies within the state as agents of citizen voice. State teams support the SHoA and as many media houses and civil society organisations (CSOs) as possible to conduct self-assessments using tailor-made Organisational Capacity Assessment (OCA) tools<sup>4</sup>. Organisations score themselves on a range of aspects of their internal and external functioning. These reveal their comparative strengths and weaknesses, helping state teams decide who to engage with, and in the case of the SHoA, which functions to focus on first.

### 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 and identify activists who are otherwise off the donor and SAVI radar. SAVI plays a behind the scenes role facilitating public policy dialogue. Interactive public media such as radio phone-ins and open public meetings are used to explore each issue from the citizens' perspective, and bring potential civil society and government partners round the table to engage in open debate. 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, priorities and participation 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.

Through the above filtering processes, SAVI state teams shortlist and prioritise issues and processes to engage with and local actors to support – to demonstrate locally driven, effective, replicable, sustainable and productive processes of citizen engagement in governance.

## Operational phase: supporting partners to think and work politically



### **The role of state teams**

SAVI state teams, having themselves learned to think and work politically in turn help partners – Advocacy Partnerships, SHoA staff and politicians and selected media houses– to think and work politically. SAVI provides partners with behind the scenes hands-on strategic support. This includes raising issues for discussion and debate; mentoring and inspiring partners to realise their inner potential; providing guidance at the appropriate time and place; and providing encouragement to prepare for challenges ahead and sustain the momentum of change.

### **Smarter planning**

We use the following checklist to encourage and support what we call 'smarter planning' (further details of this are provided in the Tools section of the SAVI website<sup>5</sup>). The aim is to complement the broad steps of the theory of

change by asking partners the right questions and triggering the right discussions to stimulate thinking and working politically. We start small and familiar with partners' own issue of concern or the roles and responsibilities of their organisation. Inception phase public policy dialogues are drawn on to encourage partners to reflect on and begin to strengthen their own legitimacy with and accountability to citizens. We support partners to consider the formal and informal, visible and invisible ways that power operates in the immediate context of their issues and/or their organisations – and to use this intelligence to inform their planning on a continuous basis. As partners begin supporting citizens to engage in governance processes, they start to see and understand for themselves the forces at play for and against them, within and outside their own organisations, and learn how to reflect on their experiences and strategise their next moves.

#### **Smarter planning checklist**

1. *Seeing your place in the bigger picture* – looking beyond your own organisation and immediate issue of concern.
2. *Understanding the power and politics at play* – the formal and informal, visible and invisible ways power operates in the immediate context of your issue/organisation.
3. *Valuing the resource in yourselves* – as well as being resourceful and becoming a valued resource to others.
4. *Clarifying and focusing on your public mandate* as agents of citizen voice and accountability – who are you accountable to?
5. *Getting the technical content right* – building your knowledge, evidence and strategic arguments.
6. Formal and informal influencing skills – *building the effectiveness of your formal and informal influencing strategies*.
7. *Recognising, recording and reflecting on results* – and learning from these in a flexible and adaptive manner.
8. *Building and managing internal and external relationships* – thinking strategically and recognising interconnectivities.
9. *Thinking and working inclusively* – reaching out to excluded groups, embodying and championing inclusion.
10. *Managing the momentum of reform* and dealing with setbacks.
11. *Managing resistance* and the unintended consequences of change.
12. *Managing visibility and sharing credit* – for wider replication and spreading the momentum.

As partners work their way up through increasingly significant levels of political engagement, they are supported to repeatedly revisit their stakeholder analysis until this becomes intuitive. This helps to deepen their understanding of the power dynamics between key political stakeholders at each level and at each point in time. It also helps to devise appropriate strategies to engage key stakeholders; and to monitor changes in their 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 key 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.

### **Learning by doing**

Because SAVI supports partners through brokering relationships, mentoring and seed funding rather than grants (see SAVI Approach Paper 2: Programme Design), partners have no reporting requirements and are not tied to an agreed budgeted plan of action or pre-defined set of results. They have complete flexibility to adapt their strategy as their political economy understanding grows, and as the power dynamics they are grappling with shift and change. State teams encourage and support partners to have both strategic plans (defining their long term vision, mission and core values) and short term operational plans. Operational planning progresses through regular 'learning loops' consisting of:

- Analysing the situation they are seeking to influence – the nature of the problem, the constraints to change, their own capacity to influence change, possible entry points – to the point of understanding *where to start*.
- Developing a plan of action focused on a realistic and achievable *short term goal*.
- Putting the plan into action – testing their strategy and their understanding of the situation.
- Reflecting on what they have done and achieved – what went well, what didn't, what could they do differently – informing the next stage of activity.
- Planning the next stage – building on the learning they have gained.

### **Snowballing**

Over time, by achieving and learning from short-term goals, partners gain confidence, and their credibility and commitment grows. Through a process we refer to as 'snowballing', they start to attract wider support and interest. They see the need to form wider strategic alliances and partnerships with other key players outside their immediate partnership or organisation in order to achieve longer-term goals. This sends them on a trajectory of ever wider partnership building with other non-government and government actors, striving to break down barriers and build bridges, to support one another in the pursuit of mutually beneficial objectives (see SAVI Approach Paper 3: Theory of Change). As partners' alliances grow, they develop greater ability to take on larger challenges, and attain higher-level results. Our monitoring tracks partners' trend of ambition and impact over time (see SAVI Approach Paper 5: Defining and Monitoring Results).

## Practical tips and conclusions

- Participatory PEA is politically intelligent contextual analysis, rather than academic political economy analysis 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.

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- Critical to success are:
  - Unlocking partners potential to do their own PEA and make thinking and working politically intrinsic to all they do.
  - 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.

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

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- It's often best to manage the knowledge required for thinking and working politically implicitly rather than explicitly. If official reports have to be produced, keep them brief and diplomatic – and find other ways of sharing the more politically sensitive details with those that need to know.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> [gsdrc.org/go/professional-development-reading-packs/thinking-and-working-politically](https://gsdrc.org/go/professional-development-reading-packs/thinking-and-working-politically)

<sup>2</sup> Fisher and Marquette (2014)

<sup>3</sup> [savi-nigeria.org/resources](https://savi-nigeria.org/resources)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

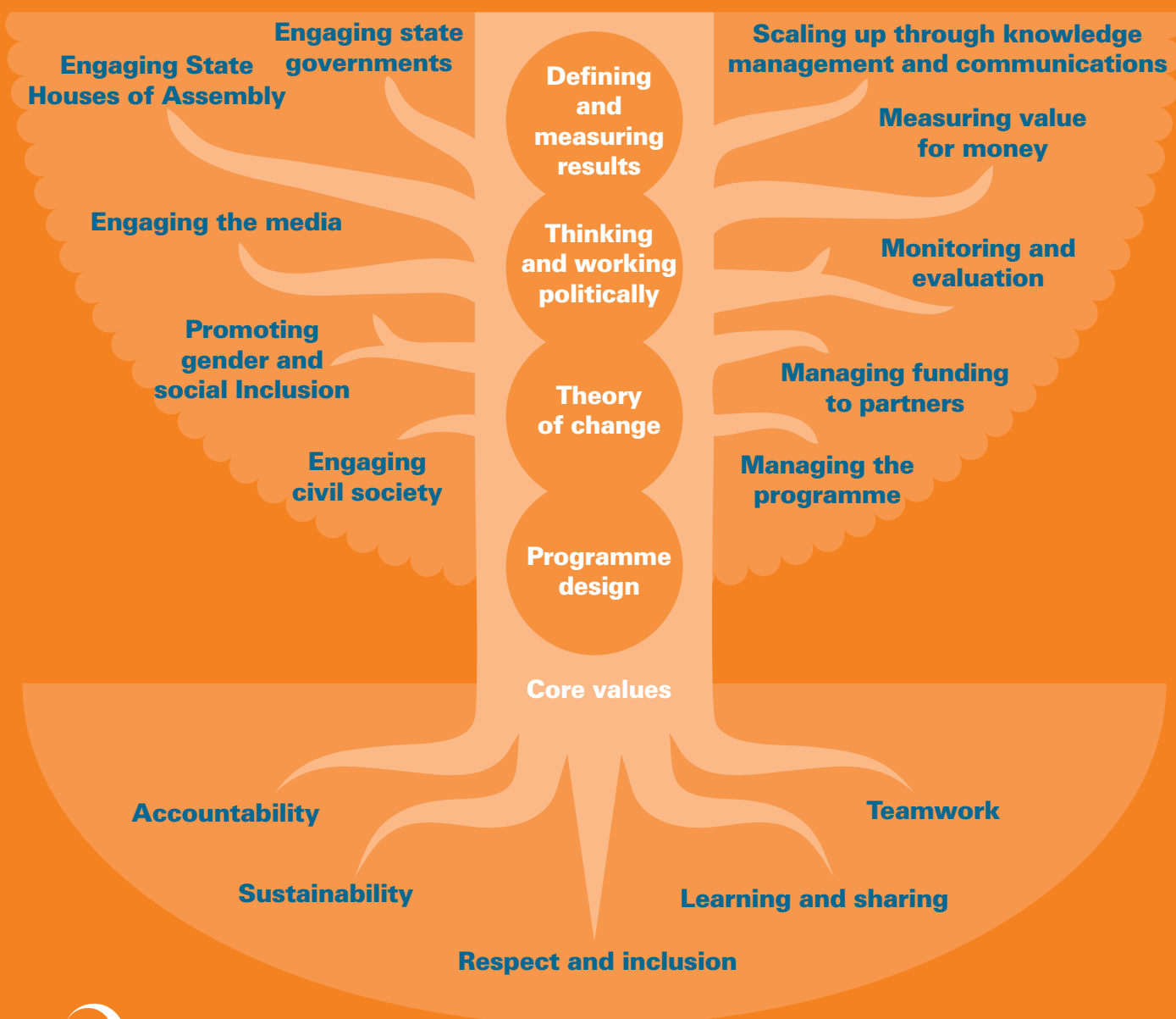
# SAVI's 'knowledge tree'

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](http://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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