

Learning, Adaptation and Communications

In brief

SAVI, a DFID funded programme implemented by Palladium, is an adaptive programme, aiming to put learning and adaptation at the centre of all decision-making.

Learning and adaptation takes place in SAVI at three levels: the work of partners; the work of SAVI delivery teams; and the enabling environment of the programme as a whole. Achieving this involves:

- Removing the roadblocks that can prevent creative thinking, such as delivery against top-down pre-set results, pre-determined budgets and fixed technical or financial inputs.
- Creating and investing in space for structured reflection and learning, helping staff and partners to stand back from their day to day work, consider the bigger picture, and think creatively – and use lessons to inform their planning and strategic direction.
- Allowing freedom to fail – halting initiatives that seem unlikely to succeed, and scaling up others where strategic impact is more likely.
- Developing systems to quality assure decision-making, and analyse and report adaptive change processes and results in ways that reinforce good practice internally and meet donor requirements.

Communications focus on informal sharing by partners and staff as an intrinsic part of learning and adaptation at all levels – as well as formal communications for external audiences.

Enabling partners to learn and adapt

Donor-funded programmes supporting citizen engagement in governance are typically grant funds for civil society organisations (CSOs). This approach can make it difficult for grant recipients to adapt their activities to shifting opportunities and momentum in their context, and to learn by doing and reflection – and this in turn impedes their impact. Grant recipients do not necessarily have the skills and experience to work in this way and grant-giving programmes are often not equipped to provide grantees with appropriate guidance and support. Donor requirements for delivery against pre-set targets also curtail grantees' room for manoeuvre. They incentivise the implementation of agreed activities to an agreed timetable, whether or not these activities are gaining any traction or influencing reform.

SAVI is taking a different approach. This has the explicit aim of creating conditions and capacity for local partners to design their interventions and respond appropriately to shifting opportunities and momentum in their context, to build on their successes, and modify approaches that are not working.

Learning and adaptive planning within the SAVI programme

When the SAVI programme started in 2008, adaptive planning was not on the development agenda. From the start of the programme, SAVI's commitment to learning by doing and adaptation has been driven and shaped by the core technical team, building on key staff members' personal experience of previous DFID-funded programmes in Nigeria and their

long-term involvement in successful Nigerian home-grown development. The technical team developed 'knowledge management and communications' processes to serve *internal learning and adaptive planning needs* – as well as to fulfil the external demand for communications materials.

This approach was contrary to conventional practice which, at that time, typically linked knowledge management to external communications. As the development sector was coming under increasing public scrutiny, the need for more accurate, evidence-based and informed external communications drove greater attention to the concept and process of knowledge management within programmes. Typically programmes added a knowledge management and communications component onto their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system to draw out and share learning from quarterly progress reports or annual reviews – answering the donor question: *'What lessons have been learnt of benefit to other/future programmes?'*

In SAVI, this kind of external communications has built on, and in turn played its part in informing, internal communications and learning. SAVI's approach to learning and adaptation resonates with current highly influential debates on 'Doing Development Differently', 'Thinking and Working Politically' and adaptive programming. Learning from SAVI is now contributing to these international policy and programming debates, and increased donor interest in adaptive programming is creating a more conducive context for learning and adaptation within SAVI and its successor programme.

Supporting learning by doing amongst partners

SAVI's approach to supporting citizen engagement in governance

In-house state teams are the delivery arm of SAVI but they do not directly engage in advocacy and influencing activities themselves. It is SAVI *partners* – citizens, groups representing citizens, media staff and organisations, State Houses of Assembly (SHoA) politicians and multi-stakeholder partnerships – who are directly involved in influencing change in their state and it is partners' activities that lead to results.

SAVI state teams play a behind-the-scenes facilitation role – brokering working relationships, and building partners' capacity to think and work politically and adaptively, taking advantage of shifting opportunity and momentum in their context. The overall aim is to promote relationships and strategies of engagement that build on existing momentum for reform in the state and that can take on a life of their own after the programme comes to an end. For further information on this 'Facilitated Partnership Approach' see:

- SAVI Approach Paper 2: Programme Design
- SAVI Approach Paper 3: Theory of Change
- SAVI Approach Paper 4: Thinking and Working Politically
- SAVI Approach Papers 6-10 on Engaging with Different categories of Local Partner
- SAVI Approach Paper 11: Management and Staffing
- SAVI Approach Paper 12: Managing Programme Finances

Enabling conditions for partners to learn by doing

We create enabling conditions for partners to learn by doing in the following ways:

- *State teams take time to identify potential partners* who have demonstrable passion, credibility in the eyes of the public, and a track record of action in relation to the issue in question. Our partners are, generally speaking, not advocacy CSOs who depend on donors and grants for their salary. Many are individuals not groups. Some come from CSOs, media organisations, the SHoA, and government ministries. Others are academics, retired civil servants; they run their own businesses. Many are 'concerned citizens' with day jobs. Individual participation in SAVI partnership activities is often either part of participants' jobs and recognised as such by their parent organisation – or, for many, a *pro-bono* or semi-voluntary contribution to change in their state.

- *We do not provide partners with grants.* We instead nurture partners' mind-sets to be resourceful. This involves:
 - Helping partners to recognise and value the *resource* in themselves. In championing change in their state, they – their knowledge, skills, networks, commitment to reform – are their own primary resource.
 - Helping them to be *resourceful* by making the most of what they have.
 - *Resourcing* others – by performing their function effectively, they become a valued resource in which others are prepared to invest – but on their own terms and in support of their own agenda. This support might come from within their own parent organisations, from other local stakeholders including the media and the state government, or from other development programmes.
- *Partners have no accountability or reporting requirement to SAVI.* Partners are accountable to local constituencies not to SAVI as a programme. They are wholly free – and supported – to devise, develop and change their own activities on the basis of their own timetable, priorities, opportunities and learning.

Fostering a culture of learning

The role of SAVI staff is to add value to partners' ongoing actions by providing them with strategic guidance and mentoring, assisting them to manage working relationships and broker new ones, and giving a helping hand with financial contributions to activities where required.

Partners are supported to 'think and work politically' – analyse the political economy of their context, and use this information to identify entry points, blockages to reform and appropriate engagement strategies. They are encouraged to develop both strategic plans (defining their long-term vision, mission and core values) and short-term operational plans. Operational planning progresses through regular 'learning loops':

- 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.

Scale up and communications

Over time, by achieving short-term goals and learning from their experience, partners gain in confidence, credibility and commitment. Through a process SAVI refers to as 'snowballing', they start to develop higher ambitions, attract wider support and interest, form strategic alliances and achieve greater impacts (See case study). Scale-up happens not through attempting to replicate examples of success, but through organic processes of learning about

what works, building networks, and replicating effective processes of engagement.

Partners' learning largely takes place informally. A lot of the knowledge created is neither captured nor stored, but immediately shared and applied. Where appropriate, partners are encouraged and supported to capture their learning in media clips, hand-outs, social media messages and other forms to engage and influence others. We have not made ourselves – and we discourage partners from becoming – a hub for this kind of learning and knowledge. This would carry the danger of propagating 'how to' blue prints, and of formalising learning, adaptation and communication processes that are more effective when they are diffuse and informal.

Case study: Snowballing results in Niger State

When the SAVI programme started in Niger State in 2013, state government strategic planning and budgeting processes were handled by civil servants and regarded as technical processes that would not be understood by citizens. Civil society engagement with the Niger State Government was ad hoc and one off, and dominated by 'hand picked' CSOs. Through participatory political economy processes and associated radio phone-ins, the SAVI state team began to explore possibilities for collective action in the state – issues around which both citizens and the State Government could coalesce. An early and important entry point to constructive engagement between citizens and the State Government were the national and State Governor elections coming up in May 2015.

SAVI worked with other international development partners to bring together a coalition of media and civil society (CS) partners. This partnership provided media platforms for public debates between prospective candidates for state governor and radio phone-ins for citizens to raise their issues of concern – the first time that this kind of public engagement had happened in Niger State. SAVI did not provide the coalition with a grant but gave behind-the-scenes support through brokering working relationships and providing mentoring and capacity building support helping members to think and work politically, learn by doing and plan adaptively.

Reflecting after the elections and inspired by their success, coalition members resolved that pre-election commitments should not be allowed to die. Drawing on the newly elected Governor's pre-election pronouncements and manifesto commitments, coalition members drew up an agenda for the new government's first 100 days and first year in office. Taking advantage of the fact that one of their members had been appointed as the new Deputy Chief Press Secretary to the Governor, a delegation of CS and media presented this agenda to the Governor. The Governor endorsed the idea of developing a four year blueprint development plan for the State – and contacted SAVI's sister programme SPARC (which was providing direct support to the State Government) to facilitate the process. SPARC, in collaboration with SAVI, organised an initial stakeholders' meeting involving senior government officials, CS and media representatives.

CS and media representatives subsequently worked with government staff on sectoral plans for key sectors, including agriculture, education, infrastructure development, health, gender, youth employment and investment and security. Discussions were thrown open to the public through phone-in programmes and large stakeholder meetings, involving diverse interest groups. The blueprint development process also received extensive media coverage. A harmonising committee drew technical committee inputs together into a draft – and after further discussions, the Blueprint Development Plan for Niger State was approved by the Governor in November 2015.

The Government demonstrated good faith and commitment by implementing some of the measures included as 'first 100 days' commitments. The 2016 budget then drew from the blueprint, and defence of ministerial budgets in the State House of Assembly (SHoA) began in March 2016. What had in previous years been a token process of oversight by the SHoA, signed off in a matter of days, became a far more professional and structured operation. SHoA members used the agreed blueprint to scrutinise sector ministry budgets, and CS and media groups relevant to each sector participated in and observed budget defences. CS and media representatives were present in the SHoA every day of the budget defence process on their own time and of their own volition.

SHoA, media, CS and citizens' attention is now moving to tracking implementation, and participating in influencing the state budget process for 2017.

Supporting learning by doing by SAVI delivery teams

Decision-making on the shape of the SAVI programme in any particular state is devolved to the state team. Through their own political economy analysis and public dialogue processes, SAVI state teams identify issues to work on, local partners to engage with and appropriate support processes. SAVI invests in building the capacity of state teams to undertake this role effectively – taking time to recruit the ‘right’ staff, provide technical support and guidance, and ensure regular opportunities for reflection and learning. (See SAVI Approach Paper 11: Management and Staffing)

SAVI’s Output, Outcome and Impact indicators¹ provide a common structure for activity planning in all states. These are intentionally broad and allow ample space for state teams and partners to innovate and experiment within the parameters set by DFID for the programme and SAVI’s broadly defined approach.

SAVI state teams take responsibility for all SAVI programme planning and reporting requirements. This includes planning support to local partners; forecasting, managing and reporting expenditure in support of local partners’ activities; and monitoring and reporting local partners’ achievements. To this end, each state team has a ‘strategic planning framework’, an ‘M&E framework’ and a ‘results analysis framework’ – described below in Box 1. These guide and support state staff through all stages of the project management cycle, including adaptation and learning. They provide state teams with the guidance and space to analyse and keep a collective record of their progress as they go along and to update or adjust their strategies, workplans and budgets as often as they can. Quarterly and annual review processes are used not simply to package SAVI results for DFID requirements but as an opportunity for structured reflection.

Members of the national technical team support state staff in this, serving as a sounding board and critical friend. Staff from all state teams meet together for quarterly technical group meetings (TGMs). These are used to shape aspects of the evolving programme collectively, as well as to reflect and re-strategise, building collective understanding of complex governance reform processes and to learn from each other.

Staff turnover in SAVI has been relatively low and some staff have been with the programme from the outset. A few of SAVI’s core technical team, external reviewers and DFID country staff have an institutional programme memory going back three generations of DFID programmes in Nigeria, spanning nearly 20 years – meaning that learning is also informed by extensive institutional memory. These processes of reflection, learning and adaptation are largely organic, informal and oral – giving state staff support and guidance but also considerable room for manoeuvre.

Learning from success and failure is essential – but both are challenging. Learning from success can easily lead to grandstanding – and replication of ‘magic bullet’ solutions rather than the processes which brought about change. It can also be hard for staff and partners to admit to and recognise when things are not working well. Considerable effort is needed to create an enabling organisational culture where honest, open and constructive reflection becomes possible and valued.

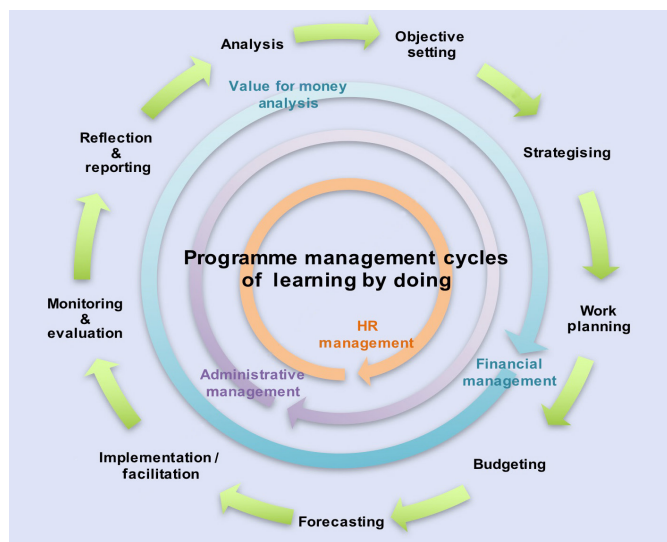
Establishing an enabling environment within the programme to support learning by doing

Management Information Systems

In the early years of SAVI, management information systems were not well developed. State Team Leaders provided narrative reports of their own activities and partners’ achievements to the National Team Leader, and these were summarised and collated for DFID as a Word document. There were no systems for checking what was reported, leaving ample room for fabrication, and lots of inconsistencies in the aggregation process. In developing a more rigorous and effective approach, our systems had first to focus on the reliability and quality control of reporting information – before this could be used for learning and adaptation.

Over the course of the programme, SAVI has developed its own fully integrated set of technical support processes and administrative management systems designed to support staff to learn by doing, exercise some quality control over their actions, and adapt programme interventions accordingly. The aim is for learning and reflection to take place in a continuous series of ‘learning loops’ – with planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), reflection, reporting, analysis and re-planning all being important stages.

Figure 1: Programme management cycles of learning by doing



¹ <http://savi-nigeria.org/resource/savi-logframe-summary/>

The systems we now have in place ensure that:

- Learning and adaptation amongst partners and state teams is enabled by flexibility in management processes – the inner circles in the above diagram – including human resource management, financial management and value for money analysis. Without innovation in these areas, delivery against rigid pre-set targets, budgets and personnel inputs (the more conventional blueprint approach) would have taken away the flexibility required for learning and adaptation to take place. (See SAVI Approach Paper 11: Management and Staffing; SAVI Approach Paper 12: Managing Programme Finances and SAVI Approach Paper 13: Measuring Value for Money for

more information on how flexibility has been built into these systems).

- All stages of the programme management cycle – the outer green circle in the above diagram – are fully integrated. We refer to actions in the lower right-hand-side of the diagram (strategising, work planning, budgeting and forecasting) as ‘strategic planning’, and actions in the upper left-hand-side (M&E, reflection and reporting, analysis and objective setting) as ‘monitoring, evaluation and learning’ (MEL). All SAVI teams, at state and national levels, routinely undertake both sets of actions. Staff Terms of Reference ensure that these processes inter-relate and do not operate in siloes. The key tools developed and used for reporting, planning and analysis are set out in Box 1.

Box 1. Planning and monitoring tools²

State teams use the following frameworks, which are linked Excel spreadsheets, for reporting and planning.

M&E Framework

This framework is for reporting, with reporting formats and associated guidance. It contains: guidance on measuring progress against every indicator; a template for state teams to develop their own M&E plan; data entry sheets for capturing or generating quarterly indicator scores³; reporting templates for narrative detail on activities, results and quarterly progress; and a sheet to report progress against the previous year’s annual review recommendations.

Strategic Planning Framework

This framework is for annual, quarterly and monthly work-planning, with budgeting and forecasting sections and associated guidance. It is a ‘one stop shop’ summarising previously agreed technical commitments, progress and analysis, eliminating the need to cross-reference progress reports. The national SAVI MEL Team keep an updated spreadsheet at the front-end of the framework that presents progress to date in the state in question on each Output, Outcome and Impact indicator, to ensure responsive evidence-based planning on subsequent work-planning sheets. A traffic light system is used to indicate whether progress on a block of planned activity is on or off track, accompanied by guidance and recommendations either from the central Technical Advisory Team, or from the Annual Review Team. State teams flesh out the detail of planned activities on monthly forecasting sheets, which are automatically generated from the annual workplan and budget sheets to ensure consistency and bigger-picture planning.

Results Evidence Sheet (RES)

This is an outcome mapping framework, used by state teams to record Outcome level results (which we define as examples of state government responsiveness to citizens influenced by SAVI partners). Using the RES, state teams give details on the government action, as well as the back story – the governance context, what SAVI did, what partners did and what others did to influence government action. They categorise the result according to whether it is a new result or builds on a previous result; as well as according to a series of axes looking at the type, scope, scale and trend of government action and level of attention to issues of social inclusion and gender equality.

Use of Management Information Systems data

Reporting

Information from these frameworks feeds directly into quarterly and annual progress reporting formats agreed between SAVI and DFID Nigeria. The national MEL Team and SAVI management staff aggregate information from each state M&E framework into a single M&E framework every quarter. The use of Excel spreadsheets now makes this process comparatively quick and easy – although an enormous amount of work was involved in setting up the reporting sheets in this way.

Analysis

The frameworks enable us to analyse historical trends in each state, as well as undertake cross state comparisons, on a wide range of factors. These include efficiency measures such as ‘score versus spend’ on each output (reflecting improvements in partners’ functionality and effectiveness), and the ratio of SAVI to partners’ contributions to partners’ activities (as a measure of partners’ diminishing dependency on SAVI). They also include effectiveness measures such as trends over time in the type, scope, and scale of

² All these tools can be found at <http://savi-nigeria.org/resources/>

³ See <http://savi-nigeria.org/resource/moving-targets-widening-nets-monitoring-incremental-adaptive-change-empowerment-accountability-programme/> and <http://savi-nigeria.org/approach/defining-and-measuring-results/>

government responsiveness in comparison to score versus spend on Output indicators. A number of visual tools (graphs, pie-charts, bar charts, dash-boards of traffic lights and arrows) built into the spreadsheets and directly linked into the reporting information, can provide immediate visual comparative or historical trend analysis of progress against indicators, and on the type and trend of results. (See SAVI Approach Paper 13: Measuring Value for Money for further information on this).

Internal learning and adaptation

From mid-term onwards, SAVI partners have been achieving striking results – in terms of playing their part in influencing their state governments to be more responsive to citizens. Our approach to learning, adaptation and communications with staff and with partners has been critical in achieving this. As our M&E frameworks and associated analysis have become more sophisticated, they have demonstrated that our partners are getting the greatest results when what they do is locally led, politically smart and adaptive and this in turn helps to reinforce this approach.

This has also helped us to highlight and address some internal accountability challenges. Our analysis is now more effectively highlighting where initiatives are not working – helping staff to reflect more openly on approaches they have taken that are not leading to results, and make changes and progress accordingly.

Future directions

Our system for learning, adaptation and communications continues to evolve. The systems we have now, whilst effective and helpful, are over complex and in need of simplification. They themselves are the product of messy and iterative learning and adaptation, responding to internal challenges and to ever-changing DFID reporting requirements. Decision-making is also highly decentralised – with learning and adaptation by state teams and partners being encouraged but not enforced. We recognise a need to introduce more rigorous oversight of state team decisions – to scale up or scale down engagement with particular partnerships without taking away local leadership, responsiveness and room for manoeuvre. Both of these will be a priority in our successor programme.

Supporting learning by doing in the wider context of voice and accountability programming

SAVI was designed to demonstrate a sustainable and replicable approach to citizen engagement in governance. The results framework includes an output to ensure lessons learnt are shared with other development partners in Nigeria to facilitate scale-up through wider replication. Early efforts to package and present SAVI learning were curtailed due to a lack of receptiveness. Over time, SAVI learned that other programmes were picking up, adapting and applying learning from SAVI – and that most adaptation could be traced back to private interactions and collaborative activities. Informal communications proved far more effective and influential than formal communications and public marketing.

A complementary strand of activity took the form of higher level strategic engagement in international policy debates. SAVI's approach and experience was found to wholly resonate with highly influential debates on 'Doing Development Differently' and 'Thinking and Working Politically', adaptive programming and new approaches to supporting social accountability.

In this context, we have taken a more formal approach to communications, documenting aspects of how SAVI works in a series of Approach Papers – such as this one – and producing a series of analytical thinkpieces in conjunction with DFID Nigeria.⁴ We are keen to share our learning, benefit from the experience of others seeking to work in more adaptive ways, and play our part in influencing a more adaptive approach to development programming overall.

A direct outcome of this work is the adaptive design of the successor programme to SAVI, the Engaged Citizens Pillar (ECP) of a wider governance reform programme, Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (PERL). DFID has designed the entire PERL programme around the concept of learning and adaptive management and bringing demand- and supply-sides of governance reform together. (For the design of the PERL programme, see SAVI Approach Paper 15: SAVI's Successor Programme.)

⁴ <http://savi-nigeria.org/resources/>

Practical tips and conclusions

- From inception, programme design needs to incorporate space, time and funds for ongoing reflection and learning by doing – investing in skills and systems for structured reflection, learning and adaptation.

- Planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring, reporting and analysis all represent important stages of reflection and learning by doing. Staff and partners use the knowledge they gain from these processes in planning what to do next, adapting their activities on the basis of what is working and what is not, and responding to new opportunities and shifting momentum for reform.

- Very often communication of learning is most influential when it is diffuse and informal, part of providing solutions to development challenges others have acknowledged and made a priority.

- External communications are most influential when they derive from and influence internal learning, demonstrate credibility through results, and are clearly distinct from marketing.

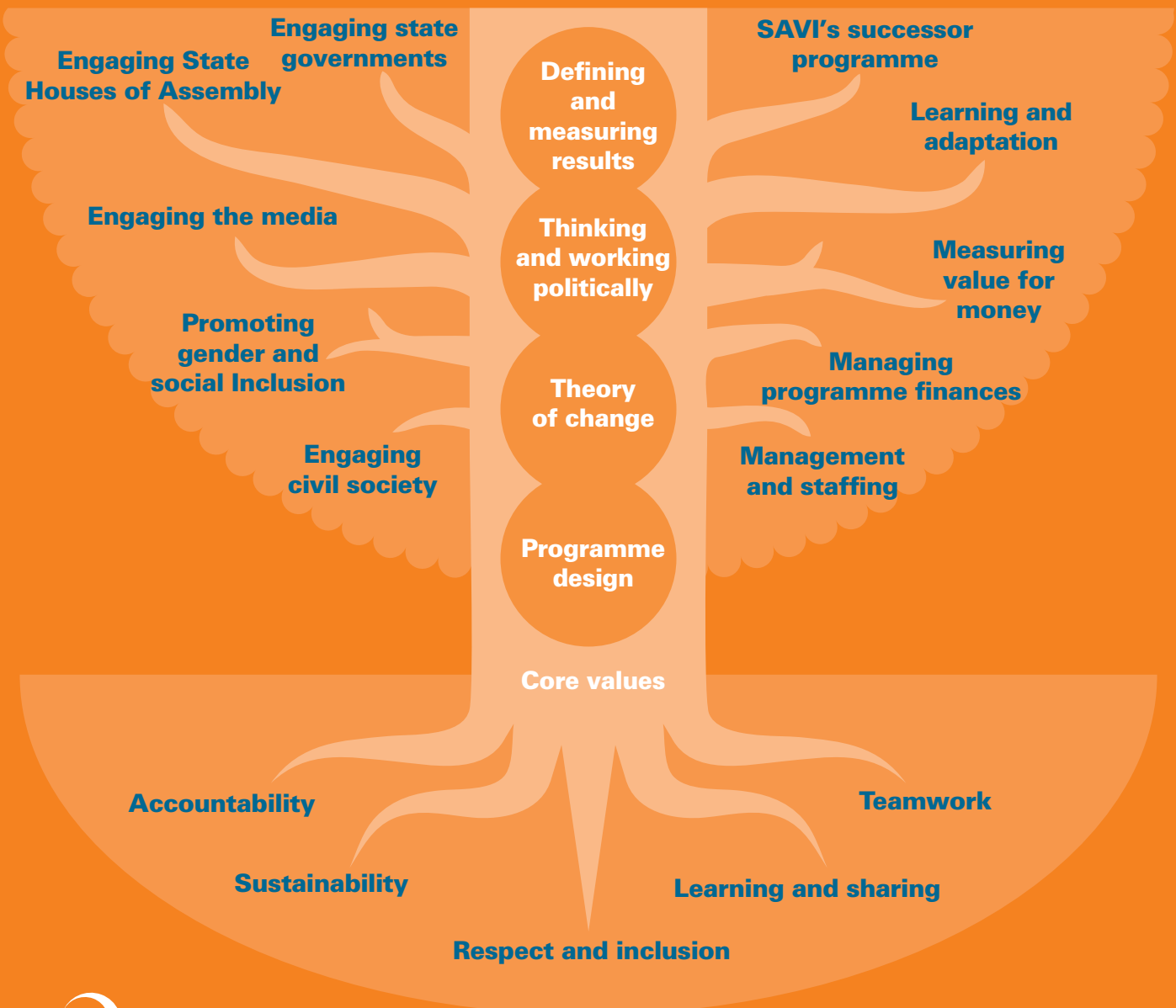
SAVI's 'knowledge tree'

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.

Email connect@savi-nigeria.org **Web** www.savi-nigeria.org **Twitter** @savi_nigeria **Tel** 00 + (234) 803 575 7955

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