Adaptive Programming in Fragile, Conflict and Violence-Affected Settings

What works and under what conditions?

The Case of PERL, Nigeria

Authors: **Melanie Punton and Richard Burge**

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About the authors

Melanie Punton is a Senior Consultant within the Knowledge Hub at Itad. She specialises in innovative theory-based evaluation approaches within and beyond the governance field, including contribution analysis, realist evaluation and process tracing. As a member of Itad's Knowledge Hub she works to distil lessons and share learning and innovation from Itad projects, including on adaptive programming.

Richard Burge is a Partner at Itad leading on its Governance and Institutional Strengthening practice. With over 25 years of experience in international development and politics, he has worked extensively on designing, implementing and evaluating development initiatives related to governance and in fragile and conflict settings. His work has included leading the evaluation and learning on empowerment, accountability and transparency programming for a range of donors and actors and led or contributed to the evaluation and design of politically informed adaptive programming.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

A4EA	Action for Empowerment and Accountability research programme
ARC	Accountable, Responsible and Capable Government pillar
CBDD	Capacity Building for Decentralised Development programme
CSO	Civil society organisation
DFID	Department for International Development
EU	European Union
FCVAS	Fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings
FEPAR	Federal Public Administration Reform programme
IBA	Issue Based Approach
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IMEP	Independent Monitoring and Evaluation Project
JWL	Joint Wetlands Livelihoods project
KADMAM	Kaduna State Accountability Mechanism
LEAP	Learning, Evidencing and Advocacy Partnership
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OGP	Open Government Partnership
PDIA	Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation
PEA	Political economy analysis
PERL	Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn programme
SAVI	State Accountability and Voice Initiative
SLGP	State and Local Governance Programme
SPARC	State Partnership for Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability
SRO	Senior Reporting Officer

Executive Summary

"When you look at Nigeria…the differences in development stages, in government willingness to implement reform, and where quite a lot relies on the big men and the deals that they make, you have to have programmes that are flexible." DFID staff

This paper examines adaptive approaches to aid programming in Nigeria. Through field research and desk reviews, we have investigated some of the assertions around the 'adaptive management and programming' approach, which has arisen in recent years as a response to critiques of overly rigid, pre-designed, blue-print and linear project plans. This is the second of three case studies in a series which explore if and how adaptive approaches, including rapid learning and planning responses, are particularly relevant and useful for promoting empowerment and accountability in fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings (FCVAS).

This case study focuses on PERL (Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn) in Nigeria, a five-year governance programme (2016-21) with a total budget of £100 million. It aims to promote better service delivery through bringing together government and citizens groups to collectively address governance challenges. PERL is viewed by DFID as the final stage of a 20-year investment, building on learning, experience and partnerships from 15 years of DFID-funded governance programming in Nigeria. It was designed to incorporate learning and adaptation through a 'living' theory of change, continuous political economy analysis at different levels, adaptive implementation by location-based delivery teams who are encouraged to be flexible and let partners take the lead, regular learning and reflection, and adaptive resourcing, HR and administrative systems.

The case study draws on a conceptual framework (the 'adaptive triangle') that looks at three types of adaptation – adaptive management, adaptive programming and adaptive delivery – and the interconnections and tensions between them.

What have we learned about adaptive programming?

Fragmentation requires adaptation: Adaptation is not just possible but necessary – although never easy – in complex, fragile, diverse environments. Conflict and fragility in Nigeria make linear planning incredibly difficult, as the context and priorities with it shift so rapidly, quickly making 'step by step' reform approaches redundant or unworkable. Marked differences between regions and states necessitate locally-led approaches, an acute understanding of the political economy, and a capability to rapidly adapt and flex as circumstances change. PERL offers an approach that can accommodate diverse voices and help find consensus solutions to problems. Working adaptively allows PERL to apply different models of engagement in response to varying levels of fragility and commitment to reform – addressing immediate conflict in some areas, post-conflict and recovery in others, and supporting development-minded reform agendas where conditions are more stable. However, while working adaptively is felt to be the only way to make progress in a context like Nigeria, PERL staff stressed that it is still 'fantastically difficult' to make an adaptive programme work in complex fragile and conflict affected environments.

Beyond 'working with the grain': understanding when and how to navigate a reform process requires sophisticated analysis and careful negotiation between various tensions. For PERL, adaptive programming is intertwined with the notion of 'working with the grain': allowing the programme to pivot and respond to ever-changing contextual dynamics, and follow windows of opportunity as they open and close. Our case study uncovers nuances and contradictions within the concept of 'working with the grain', which PERL needs to constantly navigate. Identifying issues where there is genuine traction in a context of contestation, co-option and corruption is not always straightforward, and where donor agendas and resources can create illusory windows of opportunity. There is also a fine line between going with the grain, and ensuring PERL stays committed to activities that will genuinely promote sustainable reform – delivery teams must tread a tightrope between being seen

as a genuine partner, and avoiding being drawn into issues that are politicised and could burn bridges with future administrations.

Beyond an issue-based approach: PERL's approach is stakeholders first, issues second, which helps the programme stay nimble. PERL was designed as more than an 'issue-based programme.' It combines work within specific sectors with reforms to centre-of-government processes including around budgeting and planning. Rather than making a top-down decision about which sectors to work in, delivery teams identify locally specific areas of work in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including government actors, civil society, private sector and media. Issues are therefore viewed as a means to an end, a way to identify broader blockages where PERL can have traction. This helps PERL escape stagnation or being locked in to specific issues with a defined set of sectoral players, avoiding 'permanent pensionable partners' who can become more motivated in sustaining their stake in a programme than adapting to new problems or priorities.

Managing upwards and outwards: protecting space for an adaptive programme requires careful management of donor and consortium relationships. For PERL, navigating the political economy of DFID is as important as understanding the political economy of Nigeria, crucial to create and protect space for adaptive working. While smaller adaptive programmes may 'fly under the radar' to some extent in order to experiment and innovate, the opposite is true for the £100 million investment that is PERL. It is therefore crucial for PERL management to understand and be able to navigate the pressures that DFID faces to demonstrate results for accountability, in order to protect space for adaptive delivery. The 'elephant in the room' is PERL's architecture: three pillars managed by three separate consortia under three separate contracts. Despite various incentives to work together and pockets of strong collaboration within delivery teams, the varied commercial dynamics, lack of centralised management, and diverse history and culture of the three pillars all create challenges that hinder PERL's ability to learn and adapt at a programme level.

Demonstrating results: ensuring monitoring and evaluation systems can demonstrate results without becoming a straightjacket. PERL's M&E system is very sophisticated, emphasising narrative and qualitative evidence and using outcome harvesting and various scales to capture and communicate evidence of change and contribution. However, this has created a huge bureaucratic burden for delivery teams, and it is an ongoing struggle to ensure that learning is appropriately incentivised. A big question also remains: how do we know that PERL's successes are really due to the programme being adaptive? While PERL staff are convinced of the added value of an adaptive approach, most of the evidence is thus far anecdotal. However, there is the potential for PERL's M&E system offers the potential to demonstrate the added value of adaptive working, through comparing the longevity, momentum and sustainability of results achieved by more and less adaptive deliver teams, which would be of great interest to the wider development community.

People matter most: The most important ingredient for adaptive working is recruiting and supporting the 'right people' – with the right skills, networks, credibility and a sense of 'mission'. Our research highlights the importance of a certain type of person at each point of the adaptive triangle. To do adaptive delivery, staff need more than technical skills – they need to be emotionally intelligent, comfortable with ambiguity, and have the soft skills to facilitate, influence, motivate and manage relationships with partners with humility and without money. Adaptive programmers need two sets of skills: understanding and supporting delivery teams on the one hand, and 'buffering' delivery teams from donor structures, requirements and demands that pose a barrier to adaptive working on the other. Finally, adaptive management requires donor champions willing to 'stick their necks out' – in PERL's case, a Senior Reporting Officer who could navigate DFID systems in order to get PERL off the ground as an adaptive programme, with the experience, confidence and charisma to take a risk and champion the approach in the face of institutional challenges.

Section 1: Purpose of the Case Study

This case study seeks to explore some of the assertions around adaptive programming, especially in fragile contexts, as part of the DFID-funded Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) research programme.

Fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings (FCVAS) are messy and ambiguous contexts in which to plan and implement development initiatives. This is particularly true when these interventions are designed to stimulate or support citizen empowerment and government accountability (E&A) – since there remains considerable uncertainty over which E&A interventions work, where and why.[1] As a consequence, external actors are increasingly adopting an adaptive approach to E&A programming. This involves a *compass rather than map* approach, in which real-time political economy analysis, programme monitoring and evidence informed learning, are used in shorter than usual planning cycles to maintain strategic direction. Arguably, this both mitigates risk and maximises opportunity.

This case study is the second of three, forming part of a research project set up to examine some of the assertions around the adaptive approaches to programming, and to explore if and how adaptive approaches, including rapid learning and planning responses (*fast feedback loops[2]* and *agile programming[3])* are particularly relevant and useful for E&A in FCVAS. Each case study focuses on a DFID flagship project, as identified from a desk review of relevant literature. According to this literature, the adaptive programming approach – because of the rapid learning involved - enables an evolutionary cycle of variation, selection and amplification of intervention experiments to trigger pathways of change that would otherwise not be achievable. The first case study examined adaptive approaches in Myanmar, focussing on the Pyoe Pin governance programme. This case study on the Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (PERL) programme in Nigeria builds on the learning and insights from this first case.

Within each case study, we examine the evidence of how iterative and adaptive processes work, and whether this leads to enhanced development outcomes. We focus in particular on the learning component of adaptive programming, firstly, to determine if and how the approach has enabled a better understanding of real-world opportunities and barriers, and connected the programme's evolving *theory of action[4]* to a real-world *theory of change[5]* to generate better development results. Secondly, we seek to establish if and how real-time political economy analysis and programme monitoring approaches adopted, are dependent on *front-line workers[6]* and the extent to which they play a part in embedding local knowledge into programme decision making. To understand better both the barriers and the enablers to adaptive programming, we use the case studies to deepen our understanding of the sources of inertia and opposition (ideas, interests, institutions etc) to adaptive programming and to explain whether and why these approaches have been difficult to adopt and/or implement.

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[1] Itad, Macro Evaluation of DFID's Policy Frame for Empowerment and Accountability. Empowerment and Accountability Annual Technical Report 2016: What Works for Social Accountability. Final version, 2016.

[2] Acknowledging uncertainty and complexity in development has led to an emphasis on rapid feedback loops to connect knowledge gathering to learning and decision making in order facilitate adaptation to changing circumstances and enhanced understanding.

[3] An agile programme is one which is adaptive, iterative and highly sensitive to performance metrics throughout implementation. The shift to agile is based on the notion that it is not possible to design solutions to complex problems: they can only be solved by adaptation and iteration.

[4] A theory of action sets out the strategy and tactics to be adopted for an intervention by a given organisation to explain how the exogenous intervention will achieve the outcomes expected.

[5] A theory of change sets out how endogenous change happens in any given system. See Green, D., Theories of Change for Promoting Empowerment and Accountability in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings, IDS, 2017 [link], and Christie, A. and Burge, R. The Role of External Actors in Supporting Social and Political Action towards Empowerment and Accountability with a Focus on Fragile, Conflict- and Violence-Affected Settings [link].

[6] This term is used to describe a project employee who deals directly with beneficiaries or who is directly involved in delivering project activities.

Each case study has been shaped by questions that examine how adaptive programming relates to the *context* in which programming occurs, the *mechanisms* through which programming is delivered and the *outcomes* achieved. Questions include:

- How do **contextual factors** associated with fragility, violence and conflict suggest the need for, enable or constrain an adaptive programming approach?

- What are the **mechanisms and strategies** employed for adaptive programming – what do they add and how do they work? In particular, how far has programme design enabled front-line workers to engage in regular analysis of power and political dynamics surrounding the programme and what kinds of learning, adaptation, issues and solutions do they lead to in practice?

- What is different about the **type and nature of outcomes** achieved by adaptive approaches vs non-adaptive? Do adaptive programming approaches enable external actors to achieve better E&A outcomes? What is the nature of the flexibility and adaptiveness that is needed in FCVAS and how far do donor practices support this? While the case studies do consider this question and offer some insights, an in-depth exploration of outcomes is not feasible within the time available.

A synthesis of the three case studies will bring together observations and conclusions which could help external actors working to support social and political action in FCVAS to shape programme design, contracting, real-time monitoring and learning and programme management arrangements.

Section 2: An Introduction to our conceptual framework – the 'adaptive triangle'

The case study draws on a conceptual framework that looks at three types of adaptation – adaptive management, adaptive programming and adaptive delivery – and the interconnections between them.

The concept of 'adaptive programming' emerged following a sustained critique of previous approaches to aid that were characterized as over-prescriptive and linear.[7] It is one concept in a number of initiatives exploring ways of 'doing development differently', with names like 'adaptive management', 'Thinking and Working Politically', 'Doing Development Differently' and 'Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation.' While there are nuances and differences, these ideas exhibit enough common ground for one practitioner to describe them as a 'second orthodoxy.'[8] Most discussion and experimentation has taken place in the field of governance and institutional reform, but discussions have spilled over into other sectors such as health and education. Key ideas within 'adaptive programming' include:

- *Context is everything*: political economy analysis is central, and not just at planning stage.

- *Best fit not best practice*: aid programmes need to 'work with the grain' of local institutions, rather than import solutions from elsewhere.

- *From blueprint → flexible, responsive, adaptive programming*: Rather than conduct all analysis and design ex ante, aid programmes should accept that their initial design can only ever be a best guess, and build in the capability to learn from experience and adapt accordingly.

- *Real-time learning*: this requires feedback loops being put in place that allow programmes to learn and adapt as they go, rather than simply evaluate at the end of the programme cycle.

*7* See for example Easterly, White Man's Burden (Oxford, OUP, 2007), Andrews, Limits to Institutional Reform in Development (Cambridge, CUP, 2013) or Levy, Working with the Grain (Oxford, OUP, 2014)

8 Teskey, G. 'Thinking and Working Politically: Are we seeing the emergence of a second orthodoxy? Governance Working Paper Series 1, Abt Associates, 2017 (March) [link].

- *Long-term commitment*: this kind of 'learning by doing' is ill suited to short programme cycles. Most success stories take a decade or more to show significant results.

The first A4EA case study identified two different 'levels' of adaptation within the Pyoe Pin programme in Myanmar: delivery level and programming level. Learning from the first case study suggested there was a third dimension to consider – the role of programme management in enabling or hindering adaptation. The second case study builds on this insight, explicitly distinguishing adaptive management to form an **'adaptive triangle.'** This framing device has been tested and elaborated over the course of the study, and is used throughout our findings and conclusions to explore interrelationships and tensions between delivery, programming and management.

Figure 1. The 'adaptive triangle'
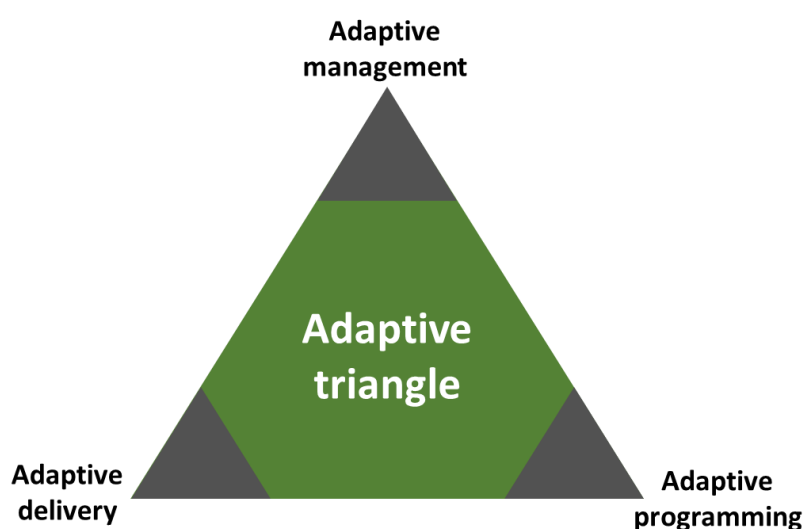
Insights from Pyoe Pin and PERL gave rise to the following working definitions of the three dimensions:

Adaptive delivery is what happens at the 'front line'. It involves staff and partners applying curiosity, evidence, emotional intelligence and instinct to learn, adapt and make decisions in the short term.[9] This includes 'chasing the problem', continually making 'best guesses' on what to do next, responding rapidly to the context and challenges on a daily basis, and then testing and correcting these decisions, employing 'everyday political economy analysis' (PEA) and valuing local knowledge. It includes the informal, natural, everyday interactions that frontline workers have with their partners in government and civil society. It involves being intuitive and instinctive, sensing and reading signals, and being 'good dancers' within the system.

Adaptive programming concerns the more formal processes required to promote and support adaptive delivery. It involves slower, more deliberate and structured processes of stepping back to reflect, conducting more in-depth and focused analysis, and bringing in critical friends to help set new directions. This includes monitoring and evaluation (M&E), strategic reflection and review, and processes to bring reflection and planning together, as well as tools, support and structures that enable and enhance the skills of those doing adaptive delivery.

Adaptive management concerns how donors and commissioners design, procure, fund and manage the performance of programmes in a way that allows adaptive programming and delivery to happen in practice. It is about donor and suppliers creating an enabling or authorising

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[9] This definition draws on the first A4EA case study: Christie, A., Green, D. Adaptive Programming in Fragile, Conflict and Violence-Affected Settings What works and under what conditions? The Case of Pyoe Pin, Myanmar, 2018 [link].

environment for a programme to be adaptive, through programme design and architecture, procurement, commissioning, payment and oversight, providing management and delivery staff with the agency and space to operate in adaptive ways.

> *"All models are wrong, but some are useful"* George Box[10]

As with all models, the 'adaptive triangle' is a simplification of reality. Management does not just sit at the top, but cuts across all three functions. Staff responsible for adaptive programming are often also engaged in adaptive delivery and vice versa. The model does not demonstrate where power lies, which is critical in understanding how, where and when adaptation works; and it does not incorporate relationships between the programme and its partners or the state. Despite these limitations, it has proved a useful lens to unpack how adaptation functions in PERL, and was received positively by PERL staff as a framing device to help understand how adaptive implementation works in practice

Section 3: An Introduction to PERL

This section introduces the PERL programme, the historical drivers that have shaped it, and the features that make it adaptive.

Introduction

The Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn in Nigeria (PERL) programme is a five-year governance programme (2016-21) with a total budget of £100 million.[11] PERL is delivered through three 'pillars', which are managed by separate consortia under separate contracts,[12] but which share a joint working policy: *"one programme, one team, one process, one message."*[13]

- The **Accountable, Responsible and Capable Government (ARC)** pillar works to strengthen government systems, to make them better able to respond to public demand.
- The **Engaged Citizens** pillar works to ensure that citizens and civil society become increasingly more effective at influencing governance reform and delivery.
- The **Learning, Evidencing and Advocacy Partnership (LEAP)** works to strengthen the use of evidence in public sector reform processes.

PERL aims to promote better service delivery in Nigeria, through bringing together government and citizens groups to collectively address governance challenges. It does this through identifying emerging 'islands of effectiveness'[14] at Federal, Regional and State levels, where government actors are demonstrating progress towards reform, and providing support to these reforms (policy, planning and budget development and implementation).[15] At the same time, PERL works to facilitate constructive engagement of citizens, civil society and other non-state groups in policy planning, implementation and monitoring, to help ensure that reforms are *"realistic, relevant, self-generated, locally-driven, evidence-informed and self-sustaining."*[16]

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[10] Box, G. E. P. 'Robustness in the strategy of scientific model building', in Launer, R. L.; Wilkinson, G. N., Robustness in Statistics, Academic Press, 1979

[11] DFID, PERL Annual Review, 2018 (August, draft)

[12] ARC is managed by a consortium led by DAI; Engaged Citizens by a consortium led by Palladium and LEAP by a consortium led by ICF.

[13] PERL, Structure and Management presentation 2016 (August)

[14] PERL, Theory of Change and Results Framework, 2016 (July)

[15] PERL works in seven places, through seven separate delivery teams: at the federal level, in the focal States of Kano, Kaduna, and Jigawa, and through regional learning and reform hubs in the South-West, South-East and North East.

[16] DFID, PERL Annual Review, 2017 (August)

PERL is viewed by DFID as the final stage of a 20-year investment, building on learning, experience and partnerships from 15 years of DFID-funded governance programming in Nigeria. Broadly-speaking there have been three generations of programmes:

The first generation began in 2000, and gradually evolved towards Issues Based Approaches (IBAs) as DFID sought to make its governance work more 'politically realistic.' The move towards IBAs was influenced by a set of Drivers of Change studies undertaken in 2003-04 as well as learning from an earlier Capacity Building for Decentralised Development (CBDD) grant to address resource management conflict in Kaduna using locally led, issue based, multi-stakeholder platforms for dialogue.[17] This first generation included the State and Local Governance Programme (SLGP) which began in 2000/01, and a set of other focal state sector reform programmes. These did not begin as IBAs, but gradually began to incorporate this focus over time as an add-on to their existing work. The programmes had mixed success, but generally failed to build broad coalitions of interest cutting across civil society, government, the private sector and the media, as advocated in the Drivers of Change studies.[18]

Later, the Coalitions for Change (C4C) programme (beginning in 2006/07) brought together public sector management and issue-based projects, attempting to apply an IBA to federal issues, but projects were mostly closer to civil society advocacy campaigns and largely failed to form effective partnerships between government and citizens. Arguably the most successful project in this 'first generation' was the Joint Wetlands Livelihoods (JWL) project, which started in 2001/02 and succeeded in being locally led, issues-based, and multi-stakeholder driven, with a model that did not include NGO grant funding and employed a 'no branding' approach.[19]

In 2007, DFID launched a new suite of programmes, which included SPARC, SAVI and FEPAR: the second generation of governance programming. Experience from SLGP highlighted the challenges of including 'supply side' (government reform) and 'demand side' (civil society and non-state actor engagement) interventions under one programme, given the levels of distrust between the two camps. As a result, two distinct programmes were created: the State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) and the State Partnership for Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability (SPARC) programme. SAVI supported civil society groups, media and elected representatives to promote citizen voice and accountability,[20] while SPARC worked with state governments to support changes in the way strategies and policies were prepared, in order to promote the needs and rights and citizens.[21] A third programme focussed on Federal Public Administration Reform (FEPAR), aiming to strengthen core federal systems and improve capacity to deliver public services.[22]

These programmes were not originally designed to be adaptive. SPARC was conceived as a structured, top down, traditional government capacity building programme. SAVI involved an IBA promoting demand-side actor engagement with government reforms around budgeting and policy making processes, but through a traditional CSO grant-making approach. Particularly in SAVI, expansion into new states offered an opportunity to move towards a more adaptive and flexible model – this process is described further in Box 8 below. However, although the programmes were intended to work together, and identified opportunities to do so in several cases, in reality each programme had specific fixed objectives and outcomes. There was a lack of incentives for genuinely integrated working that would allow the programmes to become more than the sum of their parts.

PERL represents the third generation of DFID governance programming in Nigeria. It is explicitly designed as an adaptive programme, building on learning from previous generations (see Figure 2) –

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[17] Booth, D., and Chambers, V. The SAVI programme: Towards politically smart, locally led development, ODI, 2014 (Oct) [link]
[18] Ibid
[19] Ibid
[20] http://savi-nigeria.org/
[21] http://www.sparc-nigeria.com/
[22] https://feparnig.wordpress.com/home/

including the integration of the issue-based approach demonstrated by SAVI, and the more structured approach to public sector reform taken by SPARC. It aims to significantly scale up the achievements of its predecessors, in part through bringing the 'supply' and the 'demand' side together as two complementary pillars with a common aim – to improve service delivery. This was done to *"reflect the reality that reform is usually driven by the interaction of multiple stakeholders within and outside government,"* while at the same time *"ensure an operational visible separation"* between pillars. This separation was deemed necessary to allow PERL to build trust with government on the one hand (ARC), while providing support to organisations who may be critical of government on the other (Engaged Citizens). [23] The two pillars are managed by the same lead partners who managed SAVI and SPARC, and many of the same staff are involved. A third element – LEAP – was introduced to generate evidence-based learning, building on the predecessor Independent Monitoring and Evaluation Project for the SLPs (IMEP) but with a broader remit. Importantly, PERL was designed to overlap with the end of SPARC and SAVI, *"to ensure no loss of momentum and to protect as far as practical the relationships that have been built and human resources that have been developed within the programme teams."* [24]

Figure 2. The PERL 'river'[25]
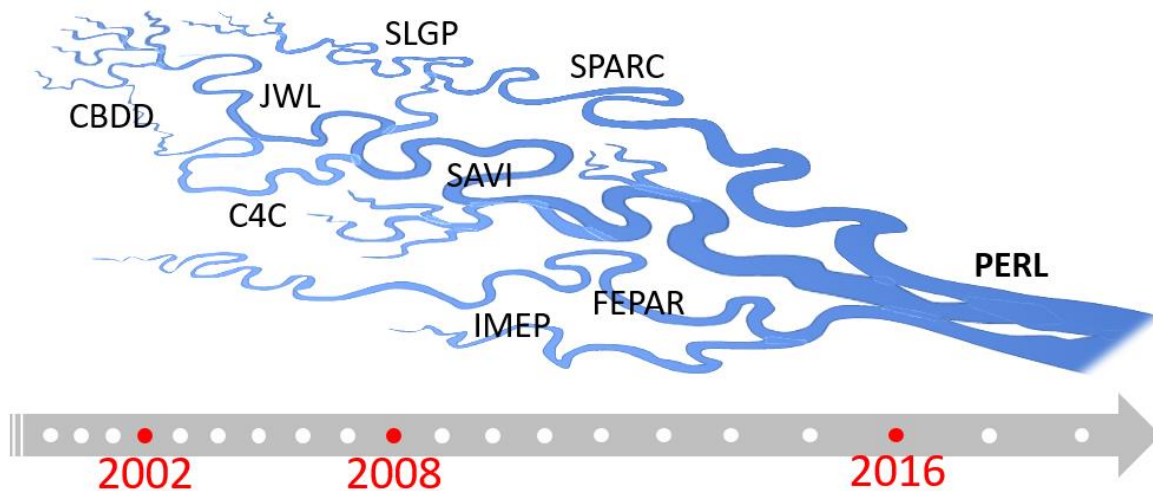
In what ways is PERL adaptive?

PERL was designed to incorporate learning and adaptation at multiple levels: within activities and interventions; within delivery teams and their partners; within each of the three pillars; and across the programme as a whole.[26] Figure 3 reflects some of the key features of PERL's approach to learning and adaptation, as expressed by PERL staff during the case study field research in June 2018.

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[23] DFID, Nigeria Public Sector Accountability and Governance Programme, Business Case, 2015 (March)
[24] Ibid
[25] PERL, A4EA conference presentation, 2018 (July)
[26] PERL, Learning and Adaptive Programme Management Overview, 2017 (September)

Figure 3. Adaptation and learning in PERL

An iterative process where elements are overlapping and interlinked
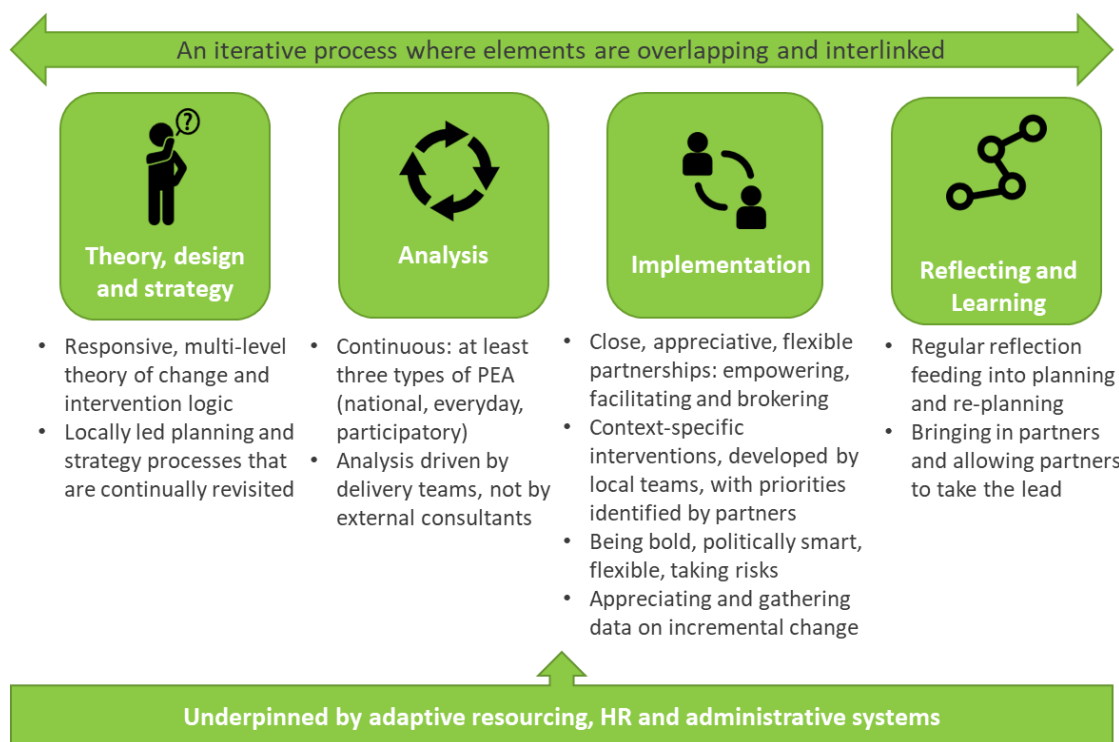
Theory, design and strategy
- Responsive, multi-level theory of change and intervention logic
- Locally led planning and strategy processes that are continually revisited

Analysis
- Continuous: at least three types of PEA (national, everyday, participatory)
- Analysis driven by delivery teams, not by external consultants

Implementation
- Close, appreciative, flexible partnerships: empowering, facilitating and brokering
- Context-specific interventions, developed by local teams, with priorities identified by partners
- Being bold, politically smart, flexible, taking risks
- Appreciating and gathering data on incremental change

Reflecting and Learning
- Regular reflection feeding into planning and re-planning
- Bringing in partners and allowing partners to take the lead

Underpinned by adaptive resourcing, HR and administrative systems

Theory, design and strategy in PERL incorporates a 'living' theory of change and intervention logic, encompassing theories about how social and political change happens as well as theories about how interventions will work within their specific contexts.[27] Planning and strategy processes are locally led, and allow for regular recalibration through revisiting workplans (every 3-6 months), with the opportunity to incorporate new or drop existing partnerships, and add, amend or halt interventions.

Continuous analysis, including Political Economy Analysis (PEA) at three different levels: periodic national and state level analysis, 'everyday PEA' to regularly capture changes in the political environment, and quarterly participatory PEA workshops with state level stakeholders. This analysis informs activities which are responsive to shifting contextual dynamics, sensitive to gender and inclusion, and recognise that *"we are not the only ones working on the problem".*

Adaptive implementation by location-based delivery teams, characterised by close and appreciative partnerships, and empowering partners to identify priorities and create coalitions for change. There is a 'give it a go' approach with staff encouraged to seize opportunities and take risks. Delivery teams are encouraged to be politically smart, flexible, and appreciate (and monitor) incremental change.

Building in regular reflecting and learning at different levels, including partners in these processes and allowing partners to take the lead, which all feeds back into the (re)design of existing or new activities. Staff are encouraged to actively learn across teams, avoiding a silo mentality. Formal reflection points are built in at different frequencies for different levels of the programme, while informal learning and reflection is encouraged on a weekly and daily basis.

Adaptive resourcing, HR and administrative systems underpin all of the above. Flexible funding and administrative systems enable rapid shifts in direction, and free delivery teams from the need to spend certain sums within certain timeframes. Human Resource (HR) management is crucial, with a significant emphasis on recruiting and retaining people who are able to think and behave adaptively, and a strong emphasis on soft skills, mindsets and attitudes alongside technical skills.

While this is the ideal, it is not always easy to realise this approach in practice – as explored below.

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[27] PERL, Theory of Change and Results Framework, 2016 (July)

Section 4. What have we learned about adaptive programming?

This section introduces the main insights from the PERL case study, reflecting on the contextual factors that necessitate, enable and constrain adaptation, the mechanisms and strategies employed for adaptive programming, and the nature and type of outcomes achieved by PERL's adaptive approach. Throughout the findings, we highlight the interconnections and tensions between adaptive management, programming and delivery.

1. Fragmentation requires adaptation

> *"We have many fault lines in Nigeria…religious, ethnic…they divide people. If you bring solutions to them, the solutions will not bed down. You have to work together in finding those solutions, for them to sustain."* Engaged Citizens staff

Conflict, fragility and diversity demands an adaptive, locally led approach

Nigeria is labelled the seventh most violent country in Africa, ranking 148 out of 163 in the latest Global Peace Index.[28] In a country of 190 million people, 500 ethnic groups and languages, and two major religions (Islam and Christianity), diverse groups have found themselves in constant contestation for power, with grievances frequently spilling over into violence and resulting in over 50,000 deaths in the last six years.[29] The jihadist militant organisation Boko Haram continues to pose a threat in the North East, with a surge of attacks since the start of 2018, and a heavy handed response by the military that has driven hundreds of thousands of civilians from their homes.[30] Conflict and fragility make linear planning incredibly difficult, as the context and priorities with it shift so rapidly, quickly making 'step by step' reform approaches redundant or unworkable. PERL staff also feel strongly that this hotbed of tensions necessitates an approach that can accommodate diverse voices and help find consensus solutions to problems. Solutions need to be based on compromise in order to avoid being perceived as favouring one element of society over another, and solutions imposed from outside tend to fail. Playing this role requires deep contextual understanding and trust, which is not established overnight – suggesting the importance of continuity and longevity in a programme like PERL.

There are also vast differences between the regions and individual states in Nigeria, making a 'blueprint' approach inappropriate. Following the elections in 2015, new governments in many of the states have committed to governance reform in response to increasing citizen demands. However, each state has its own localised dynamic of change and development trajectory. Working adaptively allows PERL to apply different models of engagement in response to varying levels of fragility and commitment to reform – addressing immediate conflict in some areas (e.g. the North), post-conflict and recovery in other areas (e.g. the North East) and supporting development-minded reform agendas in others (e.g. Kaduna).

> *"In places with less disruption like Lagos, you could make progress even with a linear mode of thinking…you could almost have a step by step menu because there is less disruption. But in a place like Jigawa, priorities are changing all the time, if there's a bombing what's important yesterday won't be important tomorrow…it's almost impossible to have any level of success in fragile states with linear approaches, because as priorities change, you have to change your approach."* DFID staff member

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[28] Nigeria is one of only two West African nations whose score deteriorated since 2017, along with Niger. Institute for Economics and Peace, Global Peace Index 2018 [link]

[29] Campbell, J., Nigeria Security Tracker, 2018 (June) [link]; PERL, Federal Political Economy Analysis, 2017 (October)

[30] News 24, 'Nigerian soldiers protest as Boko Haram attacks surge', www.news24.com, 2018 (July) [link]; Maclean, R. 'Nigerians forced out by Boko Haram return to ruins and continuing risk.' www.theguardian.com, 2018 (July) [link].

PERL's place-specific workplans are underpinned by at least three types of political economy analysis (PEA), which attempt to stay on top of these complex contextual dynamics, and understand where power lies and how decisions are made. Most of the work of actually doing PEA is led by the delivery teams, supported and incentivised by structures and expertise at the programming level – including nominating PEA Champions, coordinating a national PEA Community of Practice, developing tools and templates, organising learning events and training, and coordinating external consultancy support. This supports delivery teams to frequently update their understanding of the context using a 'political economy tracker' spreadsheet. Every quarter, ARC and Engaged Citizens delivery team staff also convene a participatory PEA meeting with local stakeholders, bringing together government, civil society, media and private sector actors to reflect on the context and what this means for PERL's work over the next few months. These findings are then fed in to place-specific workplans, which are approved at the programme level.

Box 1. Finding an entry point to support conflict recovery in Borno

The humanitarian crisis in the North East of Nigeria has deepened for the eighth year in a row, resulting in the continuing displacement of millions of people, and millions more facing critical food insecurity. Borno state is at the epicentre of the Boko Haram conflict, and its ability to respond effectively is hampered by huge challenges in the capacity and functionality of state government institutions.[31] The story of PERL's work in Borno – as told by the North East Reform Manager for ARC and internal reports – highlights both the challenges of promoting governance reform in conflict affected areas, and the value an adaptive approach can bring.

"When the programme started in 2016, the priority for DFID was to support coordination around recovery. But the coordination environment in Borno is extremely complex and not fully functional. There are multiple layers, a lot of overlaps, the more donors you have the more coordination mechanisms you have, and then it increases the complexity and decreases the effectiveness. It wasn't easy to find an entry point – we tried for a while to support coordination mechanisms but had to shift away from this because we weren't best placed to improve the situation." Ongoing political economy analysis tracks the constantly shifting coordination landscape in Borno, to identify opportunities where PERL may be able to offer strategic support. At the end of 2017, PERL was asked to support the drafting of a State Development Plan, something that PERL has facilitated in other states. However, PERL's PEA suggested that *"due to the upcoming election period and given the amount of work and commitment required from the State government to draft such a plan, in 2018 any attempt in this direction is likely to fail."*

Instead, a decision was made to focus on strengthening coordination capacities at Ministry, Department and Agency (MDA) level. *"This was based on the thinking that if we support health or education with, for example, a sector plan, or other support they might need around planning, public sector management or budgeting, then they will be better equipped to coordinate with donors, INGOs, etc. Coordination is difficult to achieve when key government institutions lack basic governance systems and processes such as clear mandates, human capacities, plans and budgets."* The Commissioner for Water Resources and the Permanent Secretary seized the opportunity to work with PERL *"when they realised the kind of support PERL could provide. They really put their weight behind some major reforms in the water sector."* PERL then supported the development of a water sector plan, to help the Ministry of Water Resources coordinate more effectively with other MDAs, citizens and humanitarian and development partners in the water sector. The plan was verified in 2018, and through this PERL has been able to expand its capacity strengthening work to health and education agencies, through *"using the experience of the water sector to encourage other sectors. We used their words, their testimony, their examples, their advice in a workshop to share knowledge and recommendations with other actors from the health and education sectors."*

Overall, the message from PERL's work in Borno is: *"you find entry points, they aren't working, so you have to adapt and find other entry points."* PERL staff also emphasised the importance of operational and logistical flexibility given the ever-changing security situation. Staff cannot always be physically present and events are frequently cancelled or moved at the last minute, with Borno activities often held in another state. This slows progress, places a burden on stakeholders, and increases costs substantially*: "The transaction time for the North East is double that for other locations."*

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[31] PERL, Conflict Snapshot – North East Nigeria, 2018 (May); PERL, Political Economy Analysis for North East, 2017 (October).

Decentralisation, diversity and discourse help an adaptive approach to work

> *"Nigeria isn't a flat field, it's variated. There's no one place in particular where you can say 'power emanates from here.' This contestation lends itself well to [adaptive ways of working], because you can work with various locations of power to make progress, using strategies that different types of power will find attractive."* ARC staff

State Governors hold huge amounts of power in Nigeria's decentralised political system, underlining the importance of strong state-level relationships, managed by staff who are embedded in the locality and are intimately acquainted with the context and key players. At the federal level, the political space is highly contested – including between the presidency and the vice-presidency, between the executive and the legislature, and within the legislature. ARC staff feel that this lends itself well to working in an adaptive way as it means that there are competing power bases in which to identify opportunities and seek champions for reform.

PERL staff also feel that Nigeria's political discourse and national psyche are both conducive to adaptive, locally led approaches. Parties do not rally behind a particular ideologically motivated development agenda – rather, the discourse is diverse and competitive. "*Nigeria lends itself to an adaptive model because there isn't a strong philosophical development movement around how change is going to happen. It's a blank sheet.*" This is felt to support an approach that seeks to find common ground and bespoke local solutions to problems. There is also a sense that Nigerians "*do not play second fiddle to anyone*" – meaning there is appetite for locally-led processes, and willingness to engage in the potentially indirect 'journey' that an adaptive approach promises.

In spite of this, PERL staff strongly emphasised that the complex fragile and conflict-affected environment in Nigeria makes it "*fantastically difficult*" to work in an adaptive way, despite the fact that this is felt to be the only way to make progress – as discussed in the example in Box 1 below.

2.   Beyond 'working with the grain'

> *"To achieve progress, we need to begin by seeing things as they are, and to work from there. If we do that, we have the possibility of forward movement. This is the essence of working with the grain."* Brian Levy[32]

For PERL, adaptive programming is intertwined with the notion of 'working with the grain': allowing the programme to pivot and respond to ever-changing contextual dynamics, and follow windows of opportunity as they open and close. However, our case study uncovers nuances and contradictions within the concept of 'working with the grain', which PERL needs to constantly navigate.

Working with whose grain?

In a context of contestation, co-option and corruption, 'working with the grain' in Nigeria is complex. The term is often interpreted as supporting and advancing issues that have momentum within government. This is PERL's approach in some states, such as Kaduna (see Box 2) – where is a strong reform agenda, and more advanced technical and institutional capacity. However, ARC staff feel that *"we can't go with the government grain in areas with no commitment to reform"* – in these cases, Engaged Citizens may take more of a lead in harnessing citizen action to push reform agendas forward. In states where *"budgets make no difference – the budget will be passed and then government will make decisions on where cash is released,"* working with the grain means understanding who holds the power, and identifying where their interests and PERL's meet.

Identifying issues where there is genuine traction is not always straightforward, with donor agendas and resources potentially creating illusory windows of opportunity. PERL staff highlighted the risk

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[32] Levy, B., Working with the Grain: Integrating Governance and Growth in Development Strategies, Oxford University Press, 2014.

that government stakeholders put certain reform priorities on the table because they think they are the issues DFID is most likely to support: "*they might say their priorities are health and education, because they know DFID have money for that.*" PERL's PEA processes attempt to understand informal, hidden agendas as much as the formal, visible processes of power, reading between the lines to locate reform processes that are truly locally-led and have traction.

There is also a fine line between going with the grain, and ensuring PERL stays committed to activities that will genuinely promote sustainable reform. While ARC in Kaduna see their role as supporting government on their whirlwind reform journey, they also identified the need to be able to say 'no' to requests that carry political risk for the programme, for example when PERL is asked to support an issue linked to a party affiliation or a particular individual who may no longer be in power after the 2019 elections. Working with the grain requires treading a tightrope between being seen as a genuine partner, and avoiding being drawn into issues that are politicised, that could burn bridges with future administrations. This takes significant tact and diplomacy.

Finally, when government and citizen groups have competing priorities, how can a programme like PERL identify whose grain to go with? From Engaged Citizens' perspective, working with the grain is about harnessing momentum for change from citizens – identifying and working with the issues that civil society groups are raising, the debates that are surfacing in the media – and moving with the trajectories of travel within civic space. This could result in PERL supporting 'multiple grains' in society, following movements for change that come from citizens as well as that come from visible political leaders and systems. A focus on inclusion is key for Engaged Citizens. "*Even if we think that including [marginalised groups] will slow us down or shut down the conversation…we are compelled to include.*" This might involve creating spaces where marginalised groups – migrants, women, people with disabilities or youth – are able to speak openly, while in the long term trying to *"manage them to a point where they feel able to speak when they are in a room with others."*

Avoiding 'going with a lot of grains'

> *"PERL is not about following partners to chase results. If you just follow partners wherever they're going, you won't get anywhere" Engaged Citizens* staff

Going with the grain can lead to numerous and diverse context-specific initiatives in different locations. This has its risks: one of PERL's 'first generation' predecessor programmes, SLGP, was reportedly accused of being a "*hodge podge of 30 or 40 different things*" as the programme sought to capitalise on context specific windows of opportunity. One PERL staff member worried that PERL might similarly be accused of *"going with a lot of grains"* – following numerous localised reform processes and cherry-picking low-hanging fruit. This is not compatible with DFID expectations for PERL: as the culmination of 20 years of supporting governance in Nigeria, there is an expectation of transformational change.

Box 2. Working with the grain in Kaduna

On our first day in Kaduna we visited the ARC offices, set within a sprawling government complex near the centre of town. The charismatic ARC State Reform Manager pointed to the significance of the location: "*this building belongs to the Budget and Planning Commission – that shows you how committed Kaduna State are to reform.*" Kaduna's governor, El-Rufai, was elected in 2015 after a well-fought campaign founded on a plan for the economic revival of the state. He holds widespread public support, and is generally regarded as 'reform minded', pushing forward a state development plan, with what ARC staff felt was an 'unprecedented' level of transparency (the plan was developed through crowd-sourcing and other platforms to gather citizens' input).[33]

An adaptive approach means that ARC can work more closely and effectively with government, moving swiftly to adapt to changing priorities. "*The government have an agenda they want to achieve in four years – and they don't want to wait for anyone. The expectation is that we can adapt and re-align ourselves with new priorities, and we need to be able to respond in days, not just in months or quarters. Even us, working adaptively, we find it hard to operate.*" For example, PERL were not initially working on the Open Governance Partnership, but Kaduna state were ready to sign into it (one of the few sub-national governments in Nigeria where this has been the case), and PERL were in a position to rapidly reorientate to support a state action plan, despite this not being in the workplan. "*Government are not interested in knowing our programming cycle. As a team we quickly need to meet and engage the management and say 'we need to do this directly.'*"

In Kaduna, NGOs have a seat at the table and are frequently working in partnership with, rather than in opposition to government agendas. This presents a range of opportunities and challenges for Engaged Citizens. Staff from a local NGO KADMAM, who has been monitoring the rehabilitation of primary healthcare facilities in Kaduna with support from PERL, described the positive relationship they have with government. "*It goes way back. Any engagement opportunities that come up, the government recommends us for partnerships. Why? Because we provide reliable data that government use. It feels like we are working towards the same goals. This particular government, if you want to relate to them well, you have to get your basic facts right- once they are sure of that, you are a friend to them.*" The Engaged Citizens State Team Leader Abel Adejo explained that the Kaduna government are dependent on data collected by civil society, to help monitor the effectiveness of their rapid reform initiatives.

However, ARC staff described how this fast-paced reform environment can lead to a situation where government is 'running ahead', and it can be challenging for citizens to catch up. "*One of the responsibilities of PERL is to make sure citizens aren't left behind in terms of planning and priorities.*" Engaged Citizens also highlighted the challenges of working on the demand-side in reform minded states. "*These are sometimes the most challenging, because we are working against isomorphic mimicry. Some NGOs are looking to be at the table with government, but aren't necessarily genuinely constituency based, aren't really representing the people.*" Programme analysis from Kaduna highlights the risk that many civil society groups are 'co-opted': happy to be at the table with government as work continues to flow their way, but not genuinely representative of citizen groups. "*The leadership of many civil society groups is politically aligned, the owners of key media organisations play an active role in party politics, and there are few broad-based citizen groups and platforms that cut across party political divides.*"[34]

All of this is happening against a backdrop of recurring security challenges and spates of violent conflict in Kaduna, linked to years of ethno-religious crisis and characterised by mutual suspicion between ethnic and religious groups, conflict between Shiites and the military, tensions between pastoralists and farmers, and regular kidnappings and armed robberies.[35] A vivid reminder of this context was offered in our second day in Kaduna, as we were ready to leave for Zaria to observe the team's participatory PEA in action – but had to abandon the plan due to violent protests in the centre of town, linked to the trial of a local Shiite leader El-Zakzaky. While the Governor is making progress on his campaign promises, this is also creating 'challengers'. The volatile context and history of electoral violence in Kaduna suggests that a highly contentious and potentially violent election period is likely in 2019, which could seriously affect PERL's work.[36] PERL is very aware that relying on a reform-minded executive that may be overturned within a year or two has risks for sustainability, hence its focus on systems strengthening.

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[33] PERL, End of Bridge Period Progress Report, 2017 (April)
[34] Harvested Output Results from Kaduna State, 2018 (June)
[35] PERL, Kaduna Participatory PEA notes, 2018 (January)
[36] Harvested Output Results from Kaduna State, 2018 (June)

3. Beyond an issue-based approach

> *"Issues are a means to an end."* Engaged Citizens staff

As with 'working with the grain', PERL's adaptive approach is closely linked with 'issue-based approaches,' building on Nigeria's long history of experimentation with IBAs described in Section 3.

From issues to processes

PERL was designed as more than an 'issue-based programme.' It combines work within specific sectors with reforms to centre-of-government processes including around budgeting and planning.[37] Learning from SAVI showed that work on service delivery issues alone made it difficult to scale up beyond 'islands of effectiveness' to work on more contentious blockages or corruption – it was better to engage with these through supporting budget tracking, project monitoring and legislative oversight.[38] That said, PERL staff feel that the jury is still out on whether it is more effective to put all their 'eggs in one sectoral basket', to push for large scale change (this is the approach the Kaduna team is taking, with multiple interventions focussed on health sector reform), or to work through centralised systems in a more incremental way.

Issues are defined and prioritised by delivery teams, who are responsible for developing place-specific workplans within the boundaries of the results framework and nationally agreed progress markers monitored at the programme level (discussed further under finding 5 below). Different pillars take different approaches to this. Engaged Citizens' approach is *"decentralised technical decision making, centralised financial management"* – allowing teams to make decisions about priorities rather than work within a fixed budget, with funding flexibly allocated across teams depending on their workflows and priorities each quarter. ARC also emphasises decentralised technical decision making, but State Reform Managers own their own budget (although large expenses need to be centrally approved). This is viewed as important to promoting autonomy and risk taking: *"if you don't have the money, how can you make decisions?"* This is one of a number of key distinctions in the worldviews of PERL's different pillars, discussed further under finding 4.

Stakeholders first, issues second

PERL focuses on identifying locally specific areas of work in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including government actors, civil society, private sector and media – rather than making a top down decision about which sectors to work in. Issues are viewed as a means to an end, a way to identify broader blockages where PERL can have traction. Each of PERL's delivery teams undertook a process of consultation, in order to identify where blockages were at a local level. Engaged Citizens then supports civil society partners to engage with reform processes where they are, rather than *"honing in on one island of effectiveness"*. An example of this has been support towards budget processes by engaging citizens in the whole cycle of budgeting: from identifying priorities, to planning, to implementation, to monitoring and reporting. For ARC, the focus is on working closely with government reform priorities, with the flexibility to shift as priorities do (within the limits discussed in Section 2), and while bringing civil society along.

> *"ARC doesn't say 'do this' but 'can we help with this?'"* Government partner, Lagos
>
> *"Under EU, the World Bank or SPARC [projects], there was no civil society. PERL has helped bring in CSOs. This can bring in more challenges – it is a balancing act. But overall it's a good thing to have someone checking you. You can't see outside government as a civil servant."* Government partner, Jigawa

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[37] DFID, Nigeria Public Sector Accountability and Governance Programme, Business Case, 2015 (March)
[38] Conversation with Helen Derbyshire, Sept 2018

> **Box 3. Pivoting away from 'dead duck' issues in Kaduna**
>
> ARC's State Reform Manager in Kaduna spoke at length about how PERL enables his team to pivot away from issues that no longer have traction when interest wanes among their government partners, allowing ARC to move nimbly to adapt to shifting priorities.
>
> *"We had a discussion with a Commissioner about the need to support a rural assessment – what does rural Kaduna look like? So, we contracted a consultant to support this, they came up with a concept note and so on. But then we realised that interest was dying. It became hard to get the commissioner to come to meetings. She kept saying 'there's no problem.'- So we told her 'let's be open – we don't have any work that is defined as "PERL work," our responsibility is to support government.' That allowed her to open up, and explain that the priority had shifted to understanding interventions in rural areas and how to make them better. We were able to immediately adapt to this, because we are set up to do that.*
>
> *This is very different when compared to SPARC. Whenever we came up with an intervention and the state showed a lack of interest, our job was to persuade government to see the benefit of conducting the activity, to make sure we delivered against our workplan. It's very different now."*

Avoiding 'permanent, pensionable partners'

One potential risk with an issue-based approach is that programmes may become 'locked in' to specific issues with a defined set of partners, leading to stagnation and hindering adaptation.[39] Engaged Citizens staff felt this had happened to some extent in SAVI, where issues were identified at the start of the programme, and coalitions formed around these to drive change. The programme might remain working on the same issue with the same set of people for years, risking creating 'permanent pensionable partners' more motivated in sustaining their stake in SAVI than adapting to respond to new problems or priorities.

In contrast, PERL identifies issues with a wide range of 'stakeholders, not partners,' rather than coming into states with a set of predefined priorities. This helps PERL avoid being funnelled towards a limited range of sectoral partners who have to be consulted on specific problems.

> *"You don't get invited unless you have a stake in the issue…We're looking for partners who are itching to get a solution to the problem, which keeps it alive for a long time."* Engaged Citizens staff

Engaged Citizens has also invested considerable effort into ensuring state teams do not just work with 'the usual players' within well-known NGOs – instead working hard to engage a multitude of actors, facilitating dialogue on a range of issues, rather than hand picking partners from existing networks. Once issues have been identified, potential lead partners are identified based on their genuine engagement with the problems, and the extent to which they represent citizens. Engaged Citizens' focus is then on providing responsive and flexible support, rather than large grants or large-scale capacity building, which also helps avoid getting 'locked in' to issues or partnerships. Partners are not always involved from start to finish and they may have different levels of engagement: "*someone could be a partner for one day, it's that fluid.*" This might involve identifying partners from the 'outside' who may not be directly involved on an issue but have the credibility to talk about the problem, e.g. local government officials or retired professionals (see Box 4). Engaged Citizens also works to gauge the health of these partnerships on a regular basis, using reflection sessions to determine whether partners are using their power to shift the direction to favour their own preferred outcomes. This approach allows them to work with any partner at any time on any specific issue, and exit partnerships with ease at any time in a way which does not damage the relationship. This fluidity is more difficult to emulate on the supply side of governance: ARC is by necessity locked into partnerships with particular governments at federal and state level for at least a four-year period.

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[39] This was noted in the Pyoe Pin case study: Christie, A., Green, D., 2018 [[link]].

Box 4. Engaging a multitude of partners in a constitutional amendment process

In 2017, PERL facilitated the engagement of citizen groups in a national constitutional review process. This helped contribute to the inclusion of financial autonomy for local governments in a constitutional amendment set out by the National Assembly to State Houses of Assembly in September 2017, giving them independence from state government. However, State Governors passed a resolution against local government autonomy, and advised State Houses of Assembly to reject the amendment.

PERL's response was to support the frontline owners of the issue (unions, the National Labour Congress, traditional leaders and women groups) to unify around advocacy, and to be the loudest and most visible advocates for change. In partiuclar, PERL's engagement with the National Assembly and with the National Conference of Speakers played an important part in influencing State Houses of Assembly across the country to hold public hearings on the controversial amendments. *"We started out working at the level of the National Assembly – but getting them to ratify was a struggle. We had to expand our partnerships to include critical stakeholders – they had to buy into it, so they could help get their members on side and push for it. We identified key leaders across civil society, including former members of the National Assembly, who could talk to Governors and promote the need for reform. Getting them to lend their voices, travelling around to talk to State Houses of Assembly on why it's important for bills to be passed, talking to Governors in their rooms as friends and colleagues."*

There was overwhelming support in public hearings for local government autonomy, which strengthened the arm of the State Houses of Assembly. By March 2018, nine states, after holding public hearings, had voted in favour of local government autonomy – explicitly representing public opinion and exercising independence from the Executive, which represented a step change in Nigerian democracy.[40]

4. Managing upwards and outwards

> *"We work on the political economy of DFID, as much as on the political economy of Nigeria. That's how we've survived."* ARC staff

Space for adaptation vs pressure for tangible results

PERL management feel there is a high level of DFID buy-in, in principle, to PERL as an adaptive programme. DFID staff described a context of growing momentum for adaptive approaches, as more programmes have begun to show success with this way of working, while at the same time evidence is beginning to suggest the limitations of traditional, linear approaches to governance. DFID initiatives such as the Better Delivery department are starting to focus attention on the value of adaptive ways of working and provide support and training, and in recent years there has been a move away from 'one size fits all' management approaches, as typified in the new Smart Rules that promote 'empowered accountability' over blind compliance.[41] However, spending £100 million of UK taxpayer money on governance in Nigeria brings a lot of scrutiny, especially at a time in DFID's history where pressure to demonstrate tangible results has continued to increase under successive Ministers of State.[42]

> *"DFID understands instinctively what it means to be adaptive but DFID is under tremendous pressure to show results."* Engaged Citizens staff

In this context, it is crucial for PERL management to understand the pressures that DFID faces and be able to navigate these, in order to protect space for adaptive delivery. In large part, this is about ensuring monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems are set up to demonstrate results without becoming too much of a straightjacket – this comes with its own challenges, discussed further below. PERL staff also talked about the effort channelled into developing strong relationships with DFID, and ensuring PERL is seen as a trusted partner. Capitalising on their strong relationship with

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[40] PERL, Harvested Output Results from Federal-National, 2018 (June)

[41] Wild, L. and Ramalingam, B. Building a global learning alliance on adaptive management, ODI, 2018 (September) [link]

[42] Valters, C. and Whitty, B. The politics of the results agenda in DFID: 1997-2017, ODI, 2017 (September) [link]

DFID, SPARC and SAVI management worked hard for years to encourage and support DFID to plan PERL in such a way that there was a seamless transition, essential to maintaining momentum and relationships.

Managing upwards is a lot to do with communication. PERL management emphasised the importance of finding ways to talk about PERL's results in language donors can appreciate and understand, as well as sell the advantages of adaptive programming in language that resonates with discussions in DFID. This was a lesson learned by the managers of SAVI in the years before PERL, who used the language of emerging movements around Drivers of Change, Issue based Approaches and later Thinking and Working Politically and Doing Development Differently, to talk about SAVI in ways that would resonate with observers and build capital within and beyond DFID, *"tapping into changing development dialogue over the years."*

Being 'on the radar'

PERL's predecessor programmes, including JWL and SAVI, were several orders of magnitude smaller than PERL. Staff felt this allowed them to fly much more 'under the radar', with the space and the agility to enable experimentation and innovation, without as much urgency and pressure to demonstrate results quickly. The opposite is true for PERL. Over the past few years, several other large DFID programmes in Nigeria have closed, leading to pressure for PERL to respond to emerging DFID priorities across various sectors. In some cases, this leads to DFID raising expectations and making promises among state and civil society stakeholders, which can be at odds with PERL's commitment to a flexible, locally led approach (see Box 5). This can put direct pressure on delivery teams, as: *"DFID doesn't say stop, DFID only adds."*

Box 5. Challenges of being on the DFID radar in Kaduna

Kaduna is the closest DFID focal state to Abuja, which has meant a high volume of traffic over the years of DFID advisers, senior management and high-level visitors. Former SAVI staff reported that this led to a lot of mixed messages, and *"raised Kaduna partners' expectations of a conventional donor relationship. We had DFID senior management and advisors going in and having meetings with government and civil society representatives and telling them: we've got a new programme that will be giving grants and building capacity – the reverse of what we were trying to do. All the lead partners from the first year were getting the message from DFID, that it was a traditional 'civil society for hire programme', which affected our relationships with media, civil society etc."*

ARC staff had their own tale to tell. *"A commissioner kept asking for an embedded consultant in her ministry. But we didn't want to do this – we're always preaching sustainability and we felt this was going against that. If someone is working with the ministry and embedded with them, what happens when the consultant leaves? It can lead to a situation where Minister works mainly with the consultant not with technical staff. So, we said 'no – can we please find a way for an expert to come and work with your staff and do things together, so when they leave, staff will be able to continue?' The Commissioner was unhappy about this, and raised it when DFID visited. DFID didn't see anything bad about it and we were asked to work it out. This was a very difficult situation, as the ministry will look at it as though PERL doesn't want to support them. It affects our relationship, and almost undermines PERL's support in that ministry. But we had to find a way around it – we went ahead and provided the consultant, but used our discretion and said 'they won't stay in the ministry, they will be based in PERL's office', so were able to balance the demands. But even with that, the Commissioner wasn't that happy."*

The elephant in the room: PERL's architecture

> *"Fundamentally, we have never had and still don't have a sense of being a single programme."* PERL advisor

PERL's 'three pillars' architecture was frequently painted as the 'elephant in the room' by PERL staff. While the 'one programme' mantra ('we sink or swim together'), and the joint reporting and accountability frameworks create an incentive for Engaged Citizens, ARC and LEAP to work together, staff from all three pillars felt there are various obstacles in the way of effective joint working.

Commercial dynamics present a major barrier – each of the pillars is contracted differently, with different payment by results models, leading to various financial incentives and sensitivities that create barriers to joint working. There is also no centralised management within PERL, which some staff view as a challenge hindering the pillars from working together effectively (although others see this decentralisation as an important driver for negotiation and collaboration between pillars).

> *"It's a £100 million ship on the move, with three captains."* PERL staff member

History also plays an important role. Many of the staff from Engaged Citizens and ARC worked in SAVI and SPARC, so each of the pillars has a strong and distinct sense of identity and vision, as well as diverse systems and processes that have evolved from predecessor programmes. The supply and demand side of governance are also seen as two very different worlds. ARC staff spoke about the caution required when sharing information with Engaged Citizens, given the risk of civil society picking up sensitive information and using it against government partners. Engaged Citizens talked about the challenges of working with a more diverse and fluid set of partners than ARC, with potentially less visible and direct outputs, leading to problems in demonstrating change within the same M&E framework. And as the much smaller and newer partner, PERL staff suggested that LEAP has struggled to establish itself as an independent broker between Engaged Citizens and ARC in the way initially envisioned. *"LEAP was very small to start with…the other pillars had to make space for LEAP which was not there in previous lives. The value of LEAP was initially not understood."*

These challenges have hindered PERL's ability to learn and adapt across pillars at the programme level, although there are pockets of strong collaboration within delivery teams where there are good relationships between ARC and Engaged Citizens staff. *"People do come together. But its people driven. Where you have a successful collaboration, it's where the guys know, trust and get on with each other; when you don't, it's because of personality clashes."*

5.   Demonstrating results

> *"Adaptive programming does not mean a blank sheet. We know what we want to achieve, know the results we want to show, but can't tell you how we want to get those results. The perception of adaptive programmes can be: 'give us 10 million and we'll make it up as we go.' But we knew we wanted to improve government accountability and systems, we just didn't know what bits of government and how to achieve that."* DFID staff

A results framework journey

PERL's initial results framework built on learning from SPARC and SAVI, along with early guidance provided by DFID advisers on what they expected for an adaptive programme such as PERL. It was designed to provide a sound basis for accountability, demonstrating progress towards outcomes, while also measuring learning and adaptation. It included 'process indicators' to capture changes in citizen engagement and accountability alongside 'outcome indicators' to capture tangible shifts in policy and practice – based on the theory that better accountability acts as a driver towards improved and more sustainable delivery of public goods and services.[43] It sought to capture evidence of learning and adaptation, as well as attitude and behavioural change, recognising that these are frequently important signals of future change in formal processes and systems. Outcomes were broad rather than tied to specific issues or sectors, providing a broad direction of travel while leaving space for delivery teams to work on areas with traction, and for these to change over time.

However, this first iteration of the results framework did not survive. DFID needed PERL to communicate results in terms that would justify its 20-year investment in Nigerian governance programming, supporting accountability to politicians and UK taxpayers – which translated into a

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[43] PERL, Results Framework Revised & Justification Note, 2018 (February).

greater focus on tangible evidence of change. The overhauled results framework dropped the focus on process, emphasising changes in planning, budgeting and policies rather than citizen engagement or accountability (although these are still framed in broad terms).[44] Learning is not included in the current version of the results framework, meaning that adaptation is not incentivised.[45]

> *"In any E&A programme, you can get a result by throwing money at it….you can get the government to say what you want and it means absolutely nothing. There's a real danger of this if you don't emphasise processes, and with DFID demanding results every quarter…it incentivises the sort of results you can throw money at."* PERL advisor

Expected results at a conventional 'output' level are now captured in annual workplans, as intervention-specific quarterly progress markers (deliverables), which sit outside of the results framework.[46] Some staff felt this has played a major role in facilitating adaptive delivery, as target setting is more tangible, more specific to particular interventions, more amenable to being adjusted, and more 'owned' by delivery teams rather than by PERL management, M&E teams, or DFID.

Adaptation works despite the M&E system rather than because of it

PERL's M&E system is very sophisticated. It emphasises narrative and qualitative evidence, using outcome harvesting to compile stories of change. The results framework then counts the number of evidenced significant changes where PERL can show contribution, where significance is measured against three scales: the stage in the governance process; the breadth, depth and longevity of impact; and the size of the population benefitting from the change (see Figure 4).[47]

PERL's reporting against progress markers is additional to this. At the beginning of implementation, there were a total of 386 progress markers, tied to specific quarters.[48] Each quarter, PERL reports to DFID against around 50 progress markers, each of which have multiple documents as supporting evidence.

All of this means that PERL is able to highlight specific examples of change that can be attributed to its work, and point to the supporting evidence (see Figure 4 and Box 7), helping meet DFID's need to show tangible results.

> *"If you go to a minister, you've got to be able to show them something – give them an example… As more [adaptive] programmes have started to show that you can have success with this way of working, without neglecting results and monitoring and accountability, there's been a much more favourable response from senior management."* DFID staff

However, the M&E system has also created a huge "*bureaucratic burden*" for both delivery teams and central M&E staff that can be "*suffocating*". Because reporting underpins the payment by results commercial setup, there are also powerful incentives to "*chase progress markers*" rather than focus on learning and adaptation, a focus on progress markers also potentially draws attention away from the results framework itself. PERL's architecture also creates challenges: while the results framework is jointly owned, the progress markers are commercially linked to the ARC and Engaged Citizen pillars, which pulls the programme in different directions. Overall, although many interesting

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[44] For example: 'strengthened public planning, budgeting and polices for better delivery of public goods and citizens,' measured by indicators including ''number of actions effectively addressing service delivery blockages at federal and national levels.'

[45] The most recent DFID annual review recommends that the results framework should change again to capture where lessons have been learned and where approaches have been adapted in response. DFID, PERL Annual Review, 2018 (August, draft)

[46] For example, for a budget support intervention in Kaduna, progress markers included: "2017 expenditure & revenue profiling and cash plan developed" by June 2017; "Analysis of half year budget performance report facilitated to improve budget implementation" by Sept 2017; "Citizens groups and wider stakeholders' actively monitoring and tracking implementation of the 2017 budget" By December 2017 and "Development of 2018 expenditure & revenue profiling and cash plan facilitated" by March 2018. PERL, Y1 Joint Workplan, 2017 (April).

[47] DFID, PERL Annual Review, 2018 (August, draft)

[48] PERL, End of Bridge Period Progress Report, 2017 (April). Note that this number is not fixed and changes annually.

and useful stories are emerging from PERL's M&E system, the sense is that adaptation works in spite of rather than because of it, and that the current focus is much more on "*feeding the DFID beast*" than on learning.

Box 6. The trials and tribulations of M&E

One delivery team staffer smiled ruefully when we asked how well PERL's M&E system was working.

"Initially, the M&E system was one of our major headaches. At one point, we didn't even want to even see a call from the M&E people. There were so many concept notes and papers. People in central M&E seemed not to understand the nature of the environment we're working in at state level. They were saying 'it's adaptive, you guys need to be nimble' at the same time as saying 'you have a quarterly milestone you have to deliver.'

It helps that workplans are produced in the locations. But then, meeting the milestones can still be stopped by partners, as partners change and their priorities change. We then need to put down a narration of why we can't deliver, and hope the central team is on board. Some of the learnings can be better shared through talking than put in any narrative, because they are to do with a particular person, which politically as a programme you can't say as it has a relationship implication. But overall the system is very robust. It's not the fault of PERL management, because for DFID you need to have a results framework that will measure results…but this shouldn't mean that you can't review it to fit into reality on the ground."

PERL support staff in Abuja are very aware of these challenges, and are currently thinking through how they can support their delivery teams better to value learning and incremental change in spite of the disincentives in the current results framework: *"trying to change the dynamics between national support teams and delivery teams to one that's more facilitative and listening rather than telling and instructing*." Part of this involves creating spaces for learning and results to be discussed in a 'non-extractive' manner. *"To help teams realise that it isn't all about hitting progress markers, we used a 'results ladder' process, looking at where results in the quarterly reports sit on the ladder. In one state, the team were initially upset that everything that they were reporting was really low down on the ladder. But as we started talking, all these other stories started coming out about things they had been doing, for example on social media where people were tweeting things to the Governor – the team had been creating a real buzz in the area but this wasn't being reported because it wasn't framed in terms of an output or an outcome."*

Putting learning back into the results framework is felt to be a step in the right direction – but staff are aware that this may have a downside. When learning becomes a measurable outcome, how can management prevent it from becoming overly formalised, and just another box to tick?

What is the evidence that adaptive working is working?

Despite these challenges, there is evidence that PERL is beginning to contribute to significant governance changes at many levels in Nigeria. DFID annual reviews have consistently rated PERL and its federal, regional and state level teams as meeting or exceeding expectations, despite the major risks attached to the programme – and the 2018 review highlighted evidence that the programme is making a significant contribution to improvements in core governance and service delivery processes at Federal level and in the focal regions and states (see Box 7 for some examples).

The big question is: how do we know that these successes are really due to PERL being adaptive? PERL staff point to the importance of the partnerships based, locally led approach, which is promoting ownership and commitment – as demonstrated by examples of partners who are willing to put their own money on the table to contribute to problem solving. "*Nothing is as good as allowing partners or owners of issues to drive it, rather than you dictating to them."* Staff also point out that in an adaptive programme, work doesn't stop or grind to a halt when there are blockages or failures, as PERL can move nimbly when priorities shift or doors close: *"there is the flexibility to change course."* This is down to empowered delivery teams with the agency to take decisions at critical points, without necessarily coming back to seek permission.

While PERL staff are convinced of the added value of an adaptive approach, most of the evidence for this is thus far anecdotal. However, there is the potential for PERL to demonstrate the added value of adaptive ways of working through its M&E system. Engaged Citizens staff felt that there are clear comparators within PERL (and SAVI before it) between interventions and delivery teams that have

been more and less faithful to the adaptive approach. More adaptive teams can reportedly demonstrate greater longevity, momentum and sustainability, and are achieving longer term outcomes not just quick wins (see Box 8). This evidence has not yet been explicitly showcased by PERL, but would potentially be of great interest to the wider development community.

However, PERL staff were also clear that an adaptive programme needs a different understanding of success:

- **Success is incremental**. It's hard to see if you've succeeded when you set a moving target.

- **Successes throws up new challenges.** For example, improving citizen engagement with budget process in Kaduna resulted in submissions four times the size of the budget the following year.

- **How do you know when you're failed**? The ability to rapidly redirect resources away from areas of limited traction comes with the risk of declaring failure too soon. When is it too soon to declare failure, and when should teams try a bit longer?

Figure 4. Quantifying narratives: results from Kaduna (PERL, Place Level Harvest Results, 2018, June)
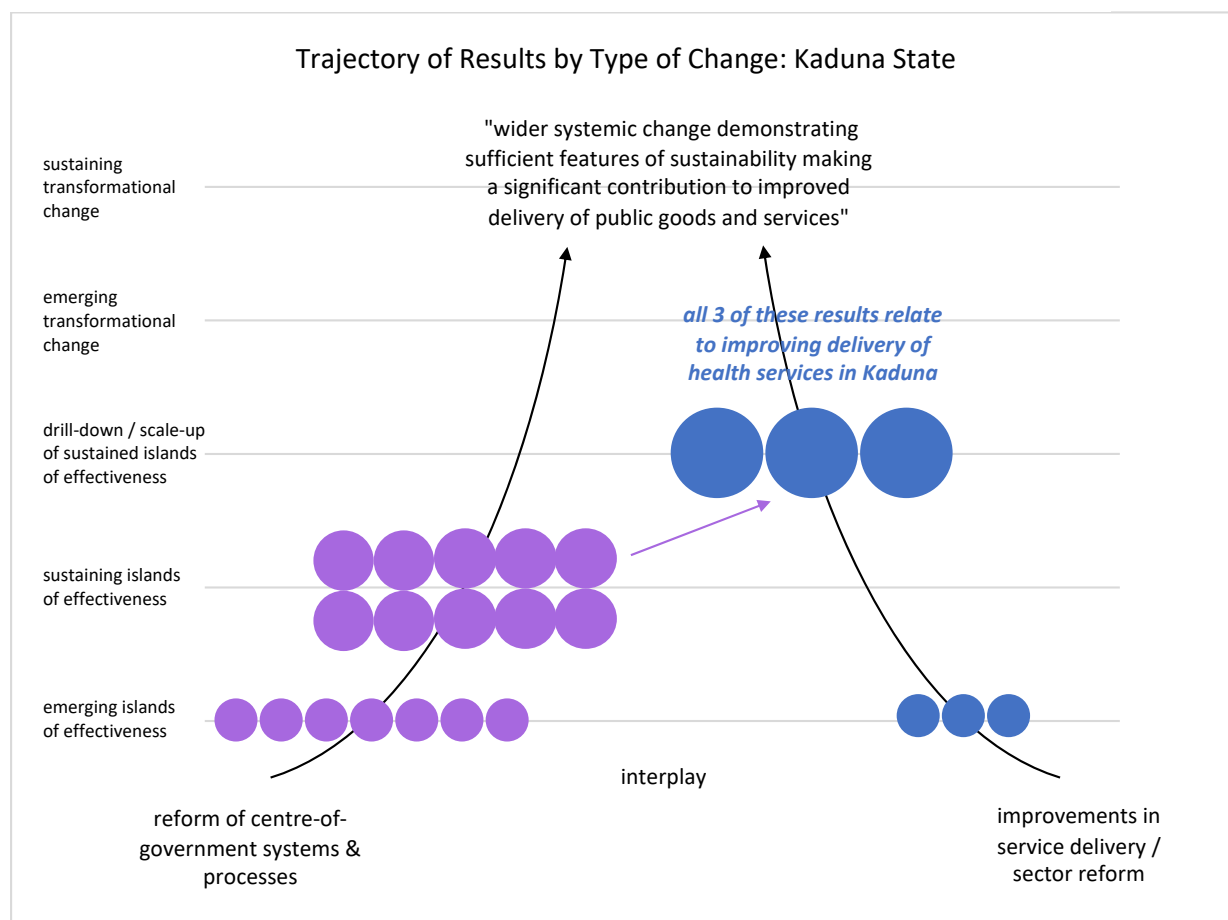
> **Box 7. Examples of significant changes where PERL can demonstrate contribution**[49]
>
> - PERL contributed to further progress on the **Open Government Partnership** (OGP), which creates a platform for constructive engagement between government and citizens. With PERL support, the government of Nigeria drafted its first ever OGP National Action Plan.
>
> - PERL's support to the **Medium Term Sector Strategy process** at the Federal/National level has contributed to an increased allocation of NGN 547 billion (a 34% increase over 2016 allocation) to 14 critical sectors in the 2017 budget, including health, education, agriculture, and water resources.
>
> - In Kaduna, a **primary health care partnership** between the Kaduna State Government, citizens and development partners including PERL, has influenced an increase in the state's health budget allocation from 7.5% to 11.6%; a reduction in average turnaround time for processing and delivering drug orders; and a 20% increase in uptake of health services at night. 84 additional Primary Healthcare Centres have been renovated and upgraded for services as a result of citizens holding government and contractors accountable to deliver on the contract specifications.
>
> - In Kano, PERL supported the State government to use **improved tools to plan the 2018 budget**. Alongside this, work with civil society, traditional leaders and the State House of Assembly has enabled more public participation and challenge in the preparation of the budget – for example through public hearings in the House of Assembly introduced for the first time in 2018. The improved budget planning process and consultation resulted in savings of over NGN 54 billion (£113.7 million) to the state, and the approval of realistic estimates by the Kano Executive Council.
>
> - In Borno, PERL has engaged with civil society, the media and State House of Assembly members to **reduce trust and suspicion, and build coalitions to advocate effectively**. Following initial accusations and counter accusations, these groups are now developing a better understanding of how to work together, producing Action Plans to develop their role in monitoring and overseeing service delivery.

6.   People matter most

> *"It's all about the people."* PERL staff

Arguably the most important ingredient of PERL's success has been recruiting and supporting the 'right people' – with a specific combination of technical and soft skills, networks, credibility and a sense of mission. There has been significant focus in the literature on the characteristics needed to do adaptive delivery well. However, our research highlights the importance of a certain type of person at each point of the adaptive triangle.

Adaptive delivery: finding and retaining staff who can 'throw away the map'
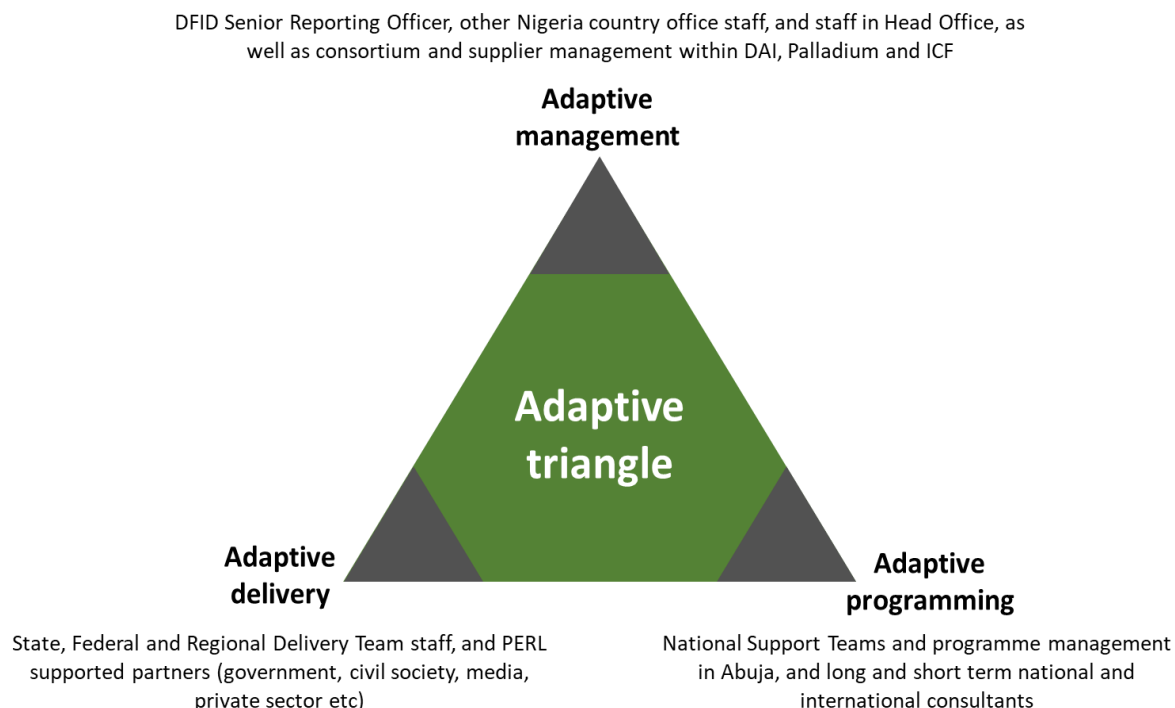
PERL staff emphasised the importance of recruiting (and training, and retaining) people who have the right attitude and soft skills to facilitate, influence, motivate and manage relationships with partners without money, who are emotionally intelligent and show humility.

> *"There are those who can work with ambiguity and those who are frozen by it. Some people need the route map, and others want to throw away the map and say 'let's go and see where the sea takes us.'"* ARC staff

This means looking for staff who are able to work outside of traditional donor-funded approaches and programmes that emphasise transactional grant making, who are comfortable with ambiguity, and who are able to work in a different way. For Engaged Citizens, this means steering away from recruiting staff from the world of professional NGOs, who have often built careers around delivering donor-funded projects on the latest issue of the day. Engaged Citizens also have a preference for generalists over specialists, which often comes with a greater ability to be flexible.

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[49] From DFID, PERL Annual Review, 2018 (August, draft) and PERL, Place Level Harvest Results, 2018 (June).

Figure 5. Where do PERL staff fit in the adaptive triangle?

DFID Senior Reporting Officer, other Nigeria country office staff, and staff in Head Office, as well as consortium and supplier management within DAI, Palladium and ICF

Adaptive management

Adaptive triangle

Adaptive delivery

Adaptive programming

State, Federal and Regional Delivery Team staff, and PERL supported partners (government, civil society, media, private sector etc)

National Support Teams and programme management in Abuja, and long and short term national and international consultants

In most respects, the same characteristics are important on both the supply and demand side. However, Engaged Citizens potentially place a greater emphasis on recruiting staff who come from the locality, are well-networked and who understand and are immersed in the context. This is important in Nigeria, as state loyalty is very strong, and there is often a distrust of outsiders. Engaged Citizens recruits people who are already acting as trusted brokers within the setting, who local stakeholders already have a ready-made respect and trust for, recognising that it takes years to build up those kinds of relationships. Getting the right staff is often equated to getting the right partners, as personal networks provide crucial entry points, both within government and civil society. This means it is vital to find the right people at the start of a project – but this can take time (discussed in Box 8 below). On the other hand, there is a risk that a focus on recruiting existing trusted brokers could lead to the exclusion of those who are already disadvantaged and don't have access to networks or influence with those in power. In Engaged Citizens there was also an emphasis on recruiting staff with a sense of mission, who recognise that "*the citizens are the client,*" and see PERL as a vehicle for them to continue their existing work for the people of Nigeria. This type of person is felt to be more ready to say 'no, this won't work' – because they are driven to achieve real results rather than tick the boxes for the sake of a stable salary.

> *"They're insiders…known people, known as being objective and relatively apolitical and neutral, respected for not being too one-sided." Engaged Citizens staff*

For ARC, it is essential that adaptive deliverers understand civil servants, and are able to work closely and collaboratively with them and spend time understanding their point of view, while at the same time demonstrating the technical skills required to be viewed as credible by government. Most of ARC's technical staff also received training in Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) through a six-month Harvard training course on Building State Capability in 2015/16, [50] which management felt had *"prepared almost 80% of staff to work adaptively."* While there was more emphasis on technical skills by ARC, this was certainly not the be-all and end-all. We heard one story of a team who "*were desperate to get someone technically sound…but we found someone who ended up compounding*

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[50] https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/

our problems because of their attitude. Just having technical competency is not even half of it." As with ECP, ARC has benefitted from team members who have a thorough understanding of the context and the setting – highlighting the value of working with civil servants on extended leaves of absence. *"In locations where we have them, especially in the North, their understanding of civil servants has been helpful at breaking down barriers and building up trust."*

The Pyoe Pin case study raised the questions: are good dancers born or made? In PERL, the sense was that the answer is 'both' – an adaptive programme needs a certain type of person but also an enabling environment that empowers people to 'dance with the system.' This is where adaptive programming comes in.

Adaptive programming: recruiting, supporting and protecting the dancers

> *"Adaptive programming people have to have some of the delivery skillsets to understand the context where they work, to support them in doing that work."* PERL management

The line between delivery and programming is a blurry one – adaptive programmers are also often engaged in delivery themselves (e.g. at the national or federal level), while adaptive deliverers may transition into programming staff as they progress in their careers. The PERL case study suggests that adaptive programmers need two sets of skills. On the one hand, they need to understand the thinking of delivery teams, and be able to support them. This points to the need for an organisational culture of humility, patience and trust. PERL support staff spend a lot of time with delivery teams: *"they're there in the background, understanding their situation on the ground, not advising from afar."* This might lead to a team that looks 'centrally heavy', because programming teams are trying "*to support and take the weight off the shoulders"* of delivery staff. Capacity building is important, but it is essential to find ways to genuinely build additional expertise, rather than 'providing' it to delivery staff from suppliers – and it can be challenging to get this right when under pressure to deliver.

> *"The Engaged Citizens 'National Support Team' continually monitor and assess where support is needed and provide it, both formally and informally, remotely and face-to-face, as and when required, sometimes based on a delivery team's request, sometimes at the request of the central management team, and sometimes where they discover the need for themselves."* Engaged Citizens management

On the other hand, adaptive programming staff also need to be able to act as a 'buffer', to protect delivery teams from donor structures, requirements and demands that are a barrier to adaptive delivery. Programming staff need a reflective 'balcony view', so they can understand both the delivery teams' decisions in the context in which they are operating, and also understand the incentives of the funders and the other pillars of PERL. This 'buffer' function involves finding ways to accommodate DFID demands or requirements without pushing additional burdens onto delivery teams – for example by fielding requests for information, or managing DFID requests to work on particular issues rather than insist on them being included in delivery team workplans.

Programme staff stressed the importance of investing in people after recruiting them, in order to strengthen their skills and retain good staff in the face of higher salaries elsewhere. Active performance management is required. Management in Engaged Citizens (and SAVI before it) have spent a lot of time actively mentoring staff, putting team leaders under performance review where they are failing to work in adaptive ways, but equally rewarding excellent performance with internal promotion – discussed in Box 8.

> **Box 8. Finding the right people: a long journey from SAVI to PERL**
>
> Finding the right staff for an adaptive programme is far from an easy process. Engaged Citizens staff described the gradual and often painful journey, spanning many years and two programmes.
>
> *"At the beginning of SAVI, many of the staff recruited were traditional NGO grant making type of people, in line with the SAVI approach as it was initially conceived."* Not all of them could follow SAVI's evolution into an adaptive programme, and securing staff who could was a gradual process. The first opportunity came during the expansion of SAVI when new states were added. *"In that process, SAVI could start to recruit the right kind of people from the right kind of backgrounds."*
>
> At this point, SAVI changed their recruitment process towards a competency-based process. An independent management consultant was brought in, who helped to re-establish core principles. They started looking for people from the local setting, but not from the development industry and traditional civil society grant making backgrounds: people who had served a role in brokering relations between government and citizens. All of the people recruited in new states had a background of working inside government, but also outside, brokering relations. *"They were not the typical recycled development staff that you usually get, because they know how to manage a log frame and write a report. Nigeria was full of people who had become experts in giving the donor what the donor wants."*
>
> However, a lot of the original staff remained, and some SAVI teams were *"trying to cloak what they were doing in PDIA language…We knew it but it would never come out through formal reporting processes…the problem is that the people good at doing an adaptive approach are often not skilled in crafting reports."*
>
> M&E and VFM analysis proved the key to resolving this impasse. *"For the first few years you can buy results with partners, but they are all driven by project and donor brokering. Once we started looking at scaling up, we developed a comprehensive results tracker."* This analysed all results reported against criteria such as: to what extent are partners driving this result, vs SAVI teams? How much money have teams spent to get this result? This helped expose things that looked good on paper as one-offs. "*Suddenly states reporting fantastic results were not able to report continued results, diminished dependency, and partner led processes. And others who had been underreporting, suddenly we could see that things were multiplying, fruit growing on trees, it became very obvious. VFM analysis means they can't deny how much money they've been spending…VFM was the key."* In the final year of SAVI, this allowed the management team to identify teams who had been doing well and those who hadn't, and putting some teams on performance review measures.
>
> As SAVI transitioned into Engaged Citizens, the programme was able to focus on retaining those staff who really 'got' the adaptive approach (highlighting the importance of the seamless transition between SAVI and PERL). This has not always been easy, and in some cases has meant replacing key staff and seeing slower progress as a result. It can be challenging to get the right people in place at the beginning of a programme within tight timeframes agreed with donors – suggesting the importance of long inception periods in order to avoid hiring the wrong people with the wrong networks, and in doing so setting a team up to fail.

Adaptive management: donor champions willing to 'stick their necks out'

> *"By the time we designed PERL, we had internal DFID staff who knew what they were talking about, who had credibility, had engaged senior colleagues in Nigeria and outside of it – and were very clear what we meant by adaptive programming."* DFID staff

As discussed above, pressure to demonstrate results within DFID programmes can create obstacles to working adaptively. The reason that PERL exists as an adaptive programme in this context is largely due to the championing of the former PERL Senior Reporting Officer (SRO), who joined DFID Nigeria in 2012 and took responsibility for SAVI midway through: the fifth SRO since the start of the programme. Fortunately for SAVI, this SRO "*instinctively and immediately*" understood what SAVI was trying to, and became a key champion of its approach within DFID, eventually playing a lead role in designing PERL. This involved significant work navigating DFID systems in order to get PERL off the ground as an adaptive programme – including conversations with procurement staff to ensure the tendering process was set up in a way that would support adaptive ways of working while also ensuring sufficient accountability for a £100 million programme.

"He was able to do what you would want of an SRO – work very closely with the team, constantly going to visit teams at state level, listen to what they were saying, champion the cause, come along to quarterly meetings. He would pop into office frequently on his way home from work, debating what was going on for hours. When DFID demands came down from on high, he could mediate, push back, and where this wasn't possible, he helped SAVI manage them." PERL advisor

Championing SAVI and then PERL in the face of institutional challenges required confidence, experience and charisma, as well as a willingness to take risks and to act as a buffer between DFID and the programme. DFID staff talked about the importance of being viewed as "*an extension of the team*", not just a programme manager – engaging intellectually in debates about the programme's future, and building confidence with programme staff that 'we're in this together.'

"Adaptive management people are mavericks – they are on a mission too. They believe in trying to change the system to the point they are willing to stick their necks out and buffer and protect a programme, in same way that programme protects delivery." Engaged Citizens staff

However, as found in the Pyoe Pin case study, rapid staff turnover within DFID due to short postings means adaptive champions may not be around for long, creating challenges with institutional memory and risks that new managers may not understand a programme or support adaptive ways of working. PERL's initial SRO champion has now moved on and PERL is now on its third SRO in just two years, which has reduced the level of protection PERL has from DFID demands and accountability challenges.

Section 5. Lessons from PERL on adaptive ways of working

This section offers five lessons on adaptive ways of working, drawing on insights from PERL. These highlight important interconnections and tensions between the three elements of our adaptive triangle.

1. **The case of PERL suggests that adaptation is not just possible but necessary – although never easy – in a complex, fragile, diverse environment like Nigeria.**

   Conflict and fragility lead to rapidly shifting realities and priorities, quickly making 'step by step' reform approaches redundant. High levels of tension and distrust require approaches that can accommodate diverse voices and find compromise solutions, rather than solutions imposed from outside. Vast differences between regions and states means 'one size fits all' approaches are unworkable – different models of engagement are required to respond to varying levels of fragility and commitment to reform. Responding to these contexts requires deep understanding, underpinned by sophisticated PEA that is regularly updated and actively used in decision making (not delivered periodically by fly-in-fly-out consultants), and local staff who are trusted and plugged into existing networks. This kind of programme cannot be implanted overnight. PERL's successes very much build on a 15-year history of governance work in Nigeria, suggesting the importance of continuity and longevity in adaptive programming.

   While PERL staff stressed that working adaptively in a fragile and conflict affected environment is 'fantastically difficult', they also emphasised features of the Nigerian context that provide opportunities for an adaptive approach. Decentralisation and contestation allow PERL to work with various locations of power to make progress, through carefully nurtured relationships at a state and federal level. Nigeria's political discourse and national psyche is felt to lend itself to an approach focussed on bespoke locally-led solutions, rather than centralised blueprints.

2. **Adaptive programming and delivery should be designed to blend together, bound by a common sense of mission and purpose, and a set of adaptive attitudes and skills.**

This case study casts a spotlight on the need for adaptive programmes to recruit emotionally intelligent staff, who are embedded in the locality, and who are able to facilitate, influence, motivate, navigate ambiguity, manage relationships with humility (and without large sums of money), and work outside the traditional donor-funded programme mould. The role of adaptive programming staff is to find, train, support and retain these people, and develop structures that help them to dance without treading on their toes. This requires programme staff to have a lot of the same skillsets as delivery staff, and to foster an organisational culture of humility, patience (recognising that it can take time to get results), a 'getting things done' attitude, and an environment of trust that leaves space for delivery staff to operate. The line between delivery and programming is a blurry one – adaptive programmers are also often engaged in delivery themselves (e.g. at the national or federal level), while adaptive deliverers may transition into programming staff as part of their professional development.

At the same time adaptive programming staff need to balance two roles: supporting front line workers to 'dance with the system', while also managing performance and ensuring accountability. Adaptive programmers therefore need to manage the performance of adaptive delivery staff – this can be difficult when the people good at adaptive delivery are not necessarily the best at communicating their success, and vice versa. Engaged Citizens' experience suggests that filtering out 'bad dancers' can be a long process, spanning several years, and requires sophisticated M&E systems that can monitor how far results are genuinely locally led.

3. **Adaptive management needs to create an enabling environment for adaptive programming and delivery – but in reality might involve a single champion swimming against the tide.**

Adaptive management is about how procurement, commissioning, and systems for accountability are set up to allow agency and space for an adaptive programme to operate. The case of PERL highlights the challenges of ensuring this in reality, despite genuine buy-in among DFID staff and a slowly changing culture at DFID HQ. Spending over £100 million of UK taxpayer money on governance in Nigeria comes with a lot of scrutiny, especially at a time in DFID's history where pressure to demonstrate tangible results has continued to increase under successive Ministers of State. PERL is too big to 'fly under the radar', which means it has to field various challenges to being adaptive and responsive – including pressure to respond to DFID sectoral and state level priorities. The PERL experience emphasises the importance of adaptive programmes having individual champions within donor organisations, who can swim against the tide and who are willing to stick their necks out to protect space for a programme like PERL. This case study also highlights the importance of programme architecture, and the role of staff and supplier cultures and commercial incentives in enabling or constraining programme components to work effectively together to learn and adapt.

PERL's experience also highlights the role of programming staff and structures in acting as a 'buffer' to protect delivery staff from management systems and demands. This requires systems and processes that help answer donor demands for accountability and results, and supporting delivery staff to use them, while at the same time ensuring there is still space for dancing. To do this effectively, adaptive programmers need to have a good understanding of donor politics and priorities – applying PEA 'upwards', not just in the operating context.

4. **One of the biggest nuts to crack is developing M&E systems that can support adaptation and learning, while delivering accountability and results that meet donor expectations.**

PERL's M&E system is very sophisticated, emphasising narrative and qualitative evidence collected through an outcome harvesting approach, and measuring the significance of change by breadth, depth and longevity of impact. This allows PERL to demonstrate specific examples of

change that can be attributed to its work, helping meet DFID's need to show tangible results while recognising the long term, incremental and potentially non-linear nature of change. However, while there is a lot that other adaptive programmes might learn from PERL's approach, it has not been a smooth ride. PERL has had to navigate disagreements over DFID's willingness to pay for learning and process-based outcomes in the results framework, the bureaucratic burden of reporting against hundreds of 'progress markers' tied to supplier payments, and the challenge of developing a system that works across the three pillars of PERL despite the need to monitor very different processes.

PERL is able to demonstrate a number of high-profile results – but how do we know that these successes are due to it being adaptive? Staff certainly feel this is the case, pointing to examples where the partnerships based, locally led approach has promoted ownership to the extent that partners are willing to put their own money on the table, and where PERL has been able to move nimbly in response to shifting priorities or closing doors, rather than work stopping or grinding to a halt as it often would in other programmes. PERL's M&E system also offers the potential to demonstrate the added value of an adaptive approach, through comparing results from delivery teams that have been more and less faithful to it – this evidence would be very interesting to many observers in the wider community.

5. **Adaptive programming requires a (more) compelling narrative**

PERL's experience highlights that a crucial function of adaptive programming is to communicate adaptive delivery in a language management can understand. This is partly about framing the approach in the language of the day – building on experience from SAVI, which consciously framed itself as first an issue-based approach, and later an example of Thinking and Working Politically and PDIA, in order to build interest and capital within and beyond DFID by feeding into and drawing from wider debates on the approach.

It is also about communicating what the programme is doing and – critically for the donor – achieving in practice. Measuring and attributing clear results is inevitably challenging for a governance programme like PERL, where results are non-linear, where instrumental change takes time to emerge, and where it is difficult to describe complex, context-specific results in neat soundbites. But, as the recent DFID Annual Review demonstrates, compelling stories can be told. Showing how adaptive ways of working lead to better outcomes is an important challenge that frontline workers, donors and researchers must continue to grapple with.

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