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PERL's Approach to Localisation / Locally Led Development

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Introduction

Localisation, or locally led development, has gained significant traction in development policy circles in recent years. At the 2022 Effective Development Cooperation Summit in Geneva, Switzerland, 21 Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members together with 22 foundations signed the International Statement on Supporting Locally led Development.[i] Building on previous declarations such as the Locally Led Adaptation Principles (2021), the Grand Bargain/Grand Bargain 2.0, Busan Principles, Paris Declaration, among others, the statement recognised the need for local stakeholders to have agency in development cooperation with respect to the framing, design, delivery, evaluation as well as control over resources and accountability.[ii] Despite increased momentum around localisation/locally led development, there are continuous conversations on a modality for advancing development cooperation that is genuinely locally led. The discourse centres on the idea of shifting power and resources from external actors to local stakeholders in developing countries for the purpose of enhancing aid effectiveness and sustainability of development programming.

Interestingly, while the idea of locally led development was still going through formative iteration in global convenings, FCDO's Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (PERL) programme had already embedded localisation principles in its design and delivery in Nigeria. This learning piece is a contribution to the discourse on localisation/locally led development by drawing on the unique experiences of PERL in Nigeria.

PERL was a 5-year governance programme financed by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), designed to support Nigerian government's efforts aimed at strengthening the making, implementing and tracking of public policies, plans and budgets for the purpose of improving service delivery and reducing poverty. Twice extended, it ran for a total of 8 years. The programme was delivered through three pillars: The first pillar, *Accountable, Capable and Responsive Government* (ARC) focused on strengthening government systems to reduce opportunities for corruption and make them respond to public demands effectively. The second pillar, *Engaged Citizens* (ECP), strengthened the capacity of citizens to hold government to account. The third pillar, *Learning, Evidence and Advocacy Partnership* (LEAP), supported the other two by providing robust evidence and lesson learning on public sector reform.[iii]

Building on the momentum of previous governance reform programmes, PERL aimed to address governance challenges by strengthening local institutions and fostering more transparent and accountable governance processes. Its approach integrated the lessons learned and successes from earlier investments in governance reform, aiming for impactful and sustainable improvements. The approach of PERL drew on the fundamental works of the State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) and the State Partnership for Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability (SPARC). Each programme made major contributions to Nigeria's governance reform process, therefore preparing the ground for PERL's targeted interventions.

At the state and local levels, SAVI concentrated on improving collective responsibility and accountability, with transparency, openness and inclusiveness, thereby encouraging public involvement in governance. Reinforcing SAVI's values, PERL's Engaged Citizens pillar (ECP) carried on these initiatives by supporting the Open Government Partnership (OGP) framework and other initiatives geared towards empowering citizens to hold government to account at all levels. By means of increased citizen involvement strategies, PERL not only built on SAVI's legacy but also enhanced public sector responsiveness and accountability. On the other hand, SPARC focused on enhancing the capabilities of state and local government institutions to improve service delivery. By so doing, PERL's Accountable, Responsive and Capable Government pillar (ARC) built on SPARC's legacy by enhancing the functionality of governance systems. This initiative was in line with SPARC's focus on enhancing capacity and improving institutional efficiency, with the aim of enabling state and local governments' capacity to provide more effective services and respond to citizens' demands.

Conceptualising Localisation/Locally Led Development

There are different perspectives on what localisation/locally led development means. Indeed, the debate on what constitutes localisation/locally led development has gained increased momentum among the donor and development community. According to OECD-DAC, "localising humanitarian response is a process of recognising, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action to better address the needs of affected populations and prepare national actors for future humanitarian responses."[iv] On the other hand, Oxfam defines localisation as "a process through which a diverse range of humanitarian actors are attempting, each in their own way, to ensure local and national actors are better engaged in the planning, delivery and accountability of humanitarian action while still ensuring humanitarian needs can be met swiftly, effectively and in a principled manner."[v] The basic elements of locally led development, whereby local actors take ownership and control of development programming, is equally evident in the definition provided by Global Affairs Canada, when it referred to localisation as "shifting decision making, resources, power, capacity and project/programme management to local partners (including national and local governments, and/or national and local civil society organisations)."[vi]

For the purpose of this analysis, it is necessary to treat the two concepts discreetly, beginning with **'localisation'**. Without prejudice to the various conceptualisations, it is possible to see localisation as the process of shifting the planning, implementation, and management of development resources and initiatives from international or national agencies to local actors. The aim is to ensure that development efforts are more relevant, sustainable and effective by leveraging local knowledge, resources, and capacities. Localisation recognises that a one-size-fits-all approach is often ineffective. By involving local actors, localisation aims to create sustainable development outcomes that can be maintained beyond the duration of external support.

On the other hand, **'locally led development'** goes a step further than localisation by ensuring that local actors not only participate in but actually lead the development process. It emphasizes the leadership role of local stakeholders in identifying priorities, designing interventions, and driving implementation and evaluation. Local actors lead the development initiatives from start to finish, with external actors playing a supportive or facilitative role. Locally led development ensures that all segments of the community, including marginalized and vulnerable groups, are involved in the development process. This is because local actors are often more attuned to the specific challenges and opportunities within their contexts, allowing for more innovative and adaptive solutions.

Major Perspectives on Localisation/Locally Led Development

UKAID: *"We will work towards a more inclusive and more locally led approach where countries have their own clear vision, approach and narrative, about their development and progress. This increases the likelihood of development success. It is right for development to be increasingly designed and delivered by local people and organisations, especially typically marginalised groups, including women and girls, indigenous people and local communities. UK policy advice, technical knowledge, and funding will be more sustainable when we partner with those who best understand local needs and realities, and when they determine their own development."*

UKAID White Paper on International Development (November 2023).

USAID: *"Localisation is the set of internal reforms, actions, and behaviour changes that the Agency is undertaking to ensure our work puts local actors in the lead, strengthens local systems, and is responsive to local communities. Localisation is more than directing awards to local organizations. Instead, it requires us to shift how we perceive local actors, valuing their knowledge, respecting their expertise, championing their agency, recognizing their commitment and integrity, and engaging them as partners rather than as our agents and beneficiaries."*

Samantha Power, USAID Administrator, Localisation at USAID: The Vision and Approach (August 2022).

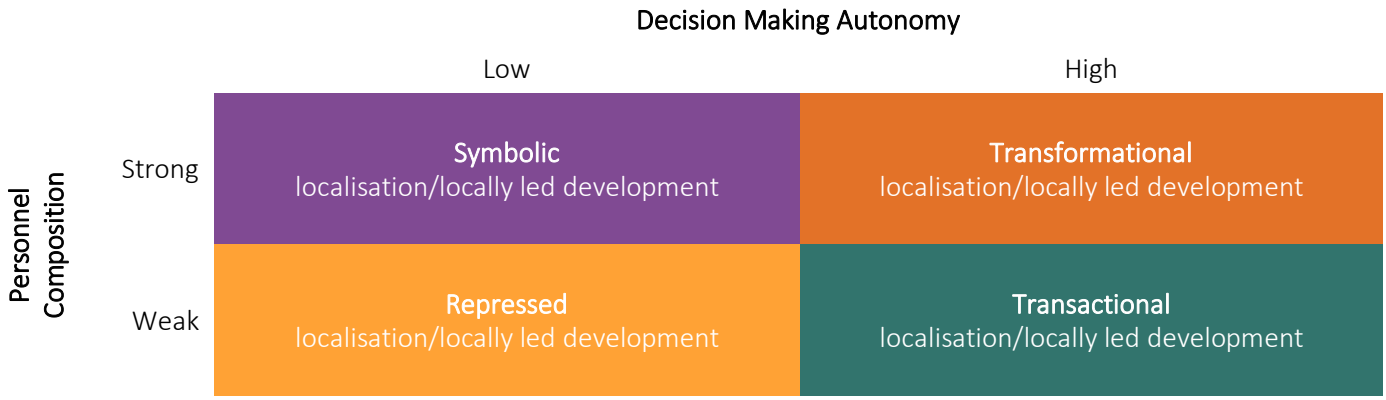
Typology of Localisation/Locally Led Development

Building on what OECD-DAC referred to as "enablers shaping locally led development cooperation"[vii] and drawing from the definitions provided by other major partners, ***localisation/locally led development*** could be distilled into two important dimensions: *composition of personnel* of the investment and the degree of *decision-making autonomy* the programme is able to exercise.

Personnel Composition: Traditional approach to development programming, for various reasons, is characterised by a mix of expatriate and local personnel where the asymmetry pendulum swings decisively in favour of the expatriates. Meanwhile, localisation/locally led development presupposes a situation whereby the composition of programme personnel at strategic, tactical and operational levels comprises nationals and local experts. With respect to the composition of programme personnel in the context of localisation/locally led development, therefore, some questions could be asked: Is the programme wholly staffed by nationals? Are the technical advisers/assistants/consultants sourced locally? How diverse is the programme team at senior, middle and lower levels? How well does the hiring and team development reflect the multiple layers of diversity and inclusion?

Decision Making Autonomy: This describes the extent to which local actors set their own development agendas; develop and implement solutions; use their capacities, leadership, and agency to promote equitable change; and ensure that positive outcomes can be sustained by local actors. In determining the extent of decision-making autonomy, some questions are crucial: Are local actors able to define their priorities, set the agendas, make critical decisions at strategic, tactical and operational levels? Do local actors own, drive and lead the definition and framing of the problems as well as development of solutions? Are local actors tied to pre-determined logical frameworks, or do they exercise agency over "what success looks like" in line with contextual realities? What degree of freedom do local actors exercise in the allocation, deployment and utilization of financial resources? What does the framework for reporting and accountability look like?

Figure 1. Typology of Localisation/Locally Led Development



Explaining the Typology

Category 1: ***Repressed localisation/locally led development*** *(Weak PC, Low DMA):*

A donor investment programme could be described as "repressed" when it has weak personnel composition. In other words, there is large number of foreign expatriates, vis-a-vis locals/nationals and the decision-making authority is tied to programme headquarters with little or no room for local input/adaptation to local context. While this quadrant would seem out of tune with contemporary thinking in the development community, the approach adopted during the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) in the 1990s might fit in as a classic example. It is also possible to find recent examples in programmes funded by some international financial institutions with fixed logical frameworks where little or no room exists for adaptation to local contexts.

Category 2: ***Symbolic localisation/locally led development*** *(Strong PC, Low DMA):*

Another category of localisation/locally led development could be said to exist where the programme has significant local presence in the personnel composition, but the local personnel are "figureheads" with little or no actual decision-making authority. Agendas, priorities, goals and the logical framework are pre-determined and imposed from programme headquarters. In this case, localisation/locally led development is mostly symbolic.

Category 3: ***Transactional localisation/locally led development*** *(Weak PC, High DMA):*

In certain instances, some donor investments would have high decision-making autonomy, but the programming design and delivery is driven by a network of grant-based local subcontractors. Local NGOs, CSOs or in some cases, government agencies, are contracted to deliver various components of the programme. Each subcontractor is paid upon meeting specified milestones. As soon as the fund dries up, the intervention disappears without leaving a trace. This is transactional localisation/locally led development.

Category 4: ***Transformational localisation/ locally led development*** *(Strong PC, High DMA):*

This is an ideal space for genuine localisation/ locally led development. In this case, the personnel composition of a programme is drawn from recipient/beneficiary context and there is high decision-making autonomy that enables local actors own, drive, manage and lead design, delivery and evaluation of the programme. In this case, local actors define their priorities, set the agenda, identify the problem, develop solutions and implement the programme. Through continuous learning and adaptation, such a programme evolves to becoming more and more localized and locally led with the passage of time. A good example is PERL which, following on the foundations laid by its predecessor programmes (SAVI and SPARC), developed a unique way of working that enabled local actors define their priorities, set the agenda, identify the problem, develop the solutions and implement them.

The PERL Experience in Nigeria

PERL Design

PERL was designed to be a politically smart and adaptive programme in terms of its context, mechanisms and outcomes. PERL's approach emphasized local ownership of development processes by working closely with local actors that are organically embedded in the specific issues/problems that fall at the intersection between governance reform and service delivery. This approach ensures that local actors play a central role in shaping and implementing governance reforms which generates long-term impacts while conforming with UKAID's view of locally led development. Anchored on three pillars (discussed earlier), it was built on a responsive multi-level theory of change and intervention logic driven by locally led planning and strategy development processes that are continually revisited and adapted as the multi-layered, periodic Political Economy Analysis (PEA) dictates.

Strengths: PERL's notable strength in relation to localisation/locally led development derives from its flexible and adaptive design which enabled it to modify its approach based on outcomes of regular PEA. Driven by problem-driven iterative approach (PDIA) and the principle of thinking and working politically (TWP), PERL was able to adjust to working in non-linear ways to suit local environments. This flexible design is suited for contexts where, as local actors take the lead in defining the problem and developing solutions, political and administrative environment could throw programming design off balance. At the early stage of the programme in Borno State, for example, the government requested PERL to support the drafting of a State Development Plan in 2018. However, PERL's PEA suggested that the period was close to 2019 elections and any investment in the drafting of a state development plan on the eve of election was going to fail.[viii] Therefore, a decision was made to focus on strengthening the coordination capacities of ministries, departments and agencies.

As an adaptive programme, PERL's design emphasised the importance of 'working with (and at times against) the grain' of existing institutions rather than attempting to transplant ideas and institutions from elsewhere. This aligns with the spirit of transformative localisation/locally led development as shown in Figure 1. This implies that PERL was able to seamlessly adjust its focus as local partners' priorities shift. Initially, PERL was not working on Open Government Partnership (OGP) in Kaduna State. But when the state government under the leadership of Governor Nasir El-Rufai decided to sign up for OGP in 2016, PERL was able to rapidly adjust to support the development of State Action Plan, even though it was not in its annual workplan.[ix]

Weaknesses: Adaptive programming and "working with the grain," the hallmarks of PERL's approach to localisation/locally led development, was sometimes stretched particularly where there were competing or conflicting priorities or preferences. For example, "gender equality" is a controversial concept in some parts of Nigeria. According to a PERL team member, "when we noticed we were not making progress, we had to review and think again strategically. Instead of using "gender equality," we shifted to "social inclusion" which is more encompassing, and it gained traction."[x]

Inasmuch as PERL justifiably prides itself as a uniquely adaptive programme, its strategic adaptive capacity sometimes got stretched where there were competing priorities or there were procurement concerns around VfM. For example, in Kaduna State, a Commissioner requested PERL to provide an embedded consultant in her Ministry. PERL was always preaching sustainability of locally-led initiatives. Providing an embedded consultant in a ministry was considered to not align with that principle. The thinking was, if PERL provided an embedded consultant in the Ministry, what would happen when the consultant's contract expired and s/he left the Ministry? PERL offered an alternative approach whereby a consultant was hired to support technical staff of the Ministry for a specified period after which the Ministry staff takes the assignment forward. Not satisfied, the Commissioner reached out directly to DFID (now FCDO). DFID did not see anything wrong with her request and asked PERL to work it out. PERL was able to balance the demand with its commitment to transformative and sustainable locally-led development by providing a consultant. However, instead of the consultant being resident in the Ministry, they were hosted in PERL's office and they offered technical support to the Ministry staff as and when required.[xi]

PERL Delivery

As a politically smart and adaptive programme by design, the implementation of PERL was driven by location-based delivery teams, characterised by close and appreciative partnerships, and empowering partners to identify priorities and create issue-based coalitions for change. Delivery teams were encouraged to be politically smart, flexible, and recognise (and monitor) incremental change. PERL delivery was enabled by flexible funding and administrative systems that allowed for rapid shifts in direction, and freed delivery teams from the need to spend certain sums within certain timeframes. Also, PERL's Human Resource Management was structured with significant emphasis on recruiting and retaining people who were able to think and behave adaptively, and a strong emphasis on soft skills, mindsets and attitudes alongside technical skills.

In practice, PERL used the multilayered PEA at different levels of government to identify issues with political traction on the ground and supported local partners to tease out the salient entry points for interventions and change. According to a leading PERL team member, "we had this principle called working-behind-the-scenes. We provided support from behind, allowing partners to own the agenda setting process, without coming with any predetermined issues. Using the issue-based approach, we provided local partners with technical, financial and logistic support to drive the process."[xii]

Another major distinguishing attribute of PERL that enabled it to apply localisation/locally led development principles in its delivery is its ability to play a brokerage role in navigating potentially countervailing interests, rather than stepping into the ring to push for reform directly. For example, in the campaign for financial and administrative autonomy for state legislatures, PERL supported the Conference of Speakers, Forum of Clerks and other local actors to take ownership and lead the process. Similarly, when there were divergent interests among key local actors in the struggle for local government autonomy,[xiii] PERL offered the crucial strategic platform to enable local actors harmonise their interests and forge a united front, which eventually succeeded in restoring the autonomy of local government in Nigeria.

PERL Team Leaders and FCDO Lead Adviser, PERL June 2024

Strengths:

- Politically savvy, locally led way of working with different Nigerian partners helped to deliver promising development results. Examples include achieving successful outcomes in politically charged issues such as financial and administrative autonomy for state legislatures and local government, among others.

- In-depth and timely analysis to understand the local political economy context, and to identify local demand for reform and issues with political traction. The outcome of regular PEA was used to guide intervention areas where local partners were empowered to take leadership. This enabled PERL to apply the 'transformative' variant of localisation/locally led development.

- Intense engagement with stakeholders working in a facilitative and brokering role. Another leading PERL team member points out that, "PERL was deliberately designed to be locally led in its approach. We went through a series of engagements with local partners to define the issues, prioritise the issues with resonance for both government and citizens and focus on those issues with service delivery angle. Issues on health, education and agriculture were prominent while increasing organizational capacity to generate revenue, among others, were agreed through a consultative process."[xiv]

- Monitoring and evaluation systems that focused on measuring results against specified problems rather than rigid attachment to a logframe. PERL adopted a flexible approach that allowed local partners to provide accountability to their constituents and respective communities, rather than being accountable to PERL. A leading PERL team member indicated "we didn't have a logframe that is locked; what we had was a flexible results framework that is reviewed periodically and adjusted accordingly."[xv] Another leading PERL team member elaborated further thus, "local actors own the issue; they drive the issue. They don't have any accountability to us, rather, they have accountability to their constituents."[xvi] Hence, autonomy of decision making by local actors, PERL was able to apply transformational localisation/locally led development in its programme delivery (see Figure 1 Typology).

- Management systems that enable flexible adaptation of programme activities and adjustment of resource allocation. As an adaptive programme, PERL delivery teams were obligated to apply learnings through co-creation with partners. As a result, PERL was able to align resources with the emerging insights from PEA and insights from the field.

Weaknesses:

- Whenever government and citizens' priorities compete or collide, adaptive programming enters murky waters and figuring out which priority to support becomes challenging. For example, despite compelling evidence that fuel subsidy was a huge drain on government revenue, public opinion was not in favour of its removal. Successive governments simply avoided the issue. From July 2022, fearing continued inaction, PERL facilitated a coalition to champion and sustain public discourse on the fuel subsidy. The programme brokered partnerships between concerned civil society groups, private sector, organised labour, and the media. Through sustained campaigns by relevant local actors acting through coalitions, public opinion shifted, and the subsidy was eventually removed. Therefore, the experience of PERL suggests that applying localisation/ locally led development could be challenging, but working in politically savvy ways offers the pathway to navigating complex issues.

- "Working with the grain" sometimes generates complexity that requires careful navigation to avoid being drawn into highly combustible, partisan issues which could be camouflaged as the incumbent government's agenda. In other words, locally led approach could lend itself to capture when local actors disguise partisan interests as local priorities. There was an instance when PERL had to say "No" to requests that carried "political risks" in Kaduna State. PERL was asked to support an issue linked to a particular political affiliation or a particular individual who was unlikely to be in power after 2019 elections. PERL had to navigate the delicate Faultline between being locally-led and positioning itself as a genuine partner and being drawn into issues that were politicised, which could damage trust with future administrations. This is a balancing act that locally-led development is likely to come up against from time to time.

Elements of Locally Led Development the PERL Team Applied with Relative Ease:

This includes bringing together the 'supply' and 'demand' sides of governance intervention under a 'co-creation' arrangement that enabled local partners to set the agenda, identify the problem and collectively develop solutions. Rather than allow the traditional approach to advocacy, whereby civil society and government see themselves as arch-enemies, PERL fostered constructive relationships between citizens and government through productive collaboration to improve accountability and effective service delivery. For example, State Led Accountability Mechanisms (SLAMs) in Kaduna State served as collaborative frameworks through which governments and citizens worked together to ensure accountability and effective service delivery. In particular, citizens working under the aegis of the Kaduna Maternal Accountability Mechanism (KADMAM) uncovered instances of unscrupulous practices in hospitals where patients were made to pay higher than approved user charges. The culprits were reported to the State Commissioner of Health who took prompt action by removing the Medical Director and transferring those staff from the affected hospitals.[xvii] This was possible because the PERL team, Engaged Citizens and ARC working as one unified programme, catalysed convergence and synergy among local actors comprising of citizens and government to produce significant change in service delivery.

Implementing partners' autonomy to make programmatic choices and decisions enabled PERL to seamlessly adopt localisation/locally led development in programme delivery. As an adaptive programme that was designed to think and work politically, the PERL team had a system that allowed them to give freedom to local partners to exercise autonomy to decide what level of governance to engage, which locations, what issues and most importantly how to engage. PERL's flexibility and adaptability offered team the opportunity to build trust among local actors.

Elements of Locally Led Development the PERL Team Found Relatively Challenging:

In some cases, a combination of political, technical and personal interests as well as the complicated structure of government incentives slowed the pace of applying locally led development. For example, Kano State under Governor Ganduje suddenly declared free and compulsory basic education in the state without putting in place policy and structures to deliver it. The implementation was handed over to a Special Adviser to the Governor, instead of the Ministry of Education and State Universal Education Board (SUBEB). The PERL team had to bring together the various clusters of local actors. The challenge was, who controls what? The power struggles among the local actors made locally led development a complicated exercise. Nevertheless, PERL was able to get the relevant local actors to forge consensus and work together to support implementation of the agenda.

On the other hand, another complicated internal incentive structure, payment by results (PbR), was a major barrier to TWP. The PbR was expressed through "progress markers" tied to milestones. The logic of PbR was justified on the ground of getting contractors to deliver results effectively. However, it had the unexpected consequence of diverting the focus from thinking and working politically in an adaptive manner towards becoming a "milestone-based" programme.[xviii]

Elements of Locally Led Development PERL Shared with Others for Wider Application

Through its series of dissemination activities, events and platforms, PERL shared its learnings with wide range of development programmes, partners and other key actors. Among others, World Bank's State Fiscal Transparency, Accountability and Sustainability (SFTAS) project and USAID's State Accountability, Transparency and Effectiveness (State2State) project are worth mentioning.

World Bank's SFTAS project: In the design and development of its key results areas (KRAs) and disbursement-linked indicators (DLIs), the World Bank's SFTAS made specific mention of relying on PERL's technical assistance (IDA's Programme Appraisal Document, 2018, p.18). It went further to state clearly that PERL "will continue to provide critical TA support to several states during the implementation of this Program."

USAID's S2S: The design and delivery of the project also benefited from PERL's learnings. In particular, PERL shared with S2S its PFM tools, and its Governance Assessment and PFM Rapid Assessment Tools. The latter were combined into a single assessment tool which S2S teams now use with state governments.

Conclusion & Recommendations

One major lesson from PERL's experience in the application of localisation/locally led development in Nigeria is that no one-size-fits-all approach would deliver optimal results. There could be different pathways to implementing locally led development in programme design and delivery. However, the experience of PERL suggests some good practices that are worth noting:

- Transformative localisation/locally led development that truly empowers local actors to take the lead in defining priorities, setting the agenda and implementing solutions requires regular/periodic PEA. The results from PEA enable the programme to not only gain insights into key issues of concern to local stakeholders, but are also useful in mapping the context in relation to the power dynamics as well as the suitable entry points.
- Participatory, consultative and co-creation principles helped PERL to build trust and catalyse an active community of reform-minded local actors across a broad spectrum in government, private sector and civil society. By so doing, PERL not only succeeded in setting in motion sustainable reform coalitions, it also forged empowered constituencies of stakeholders around specific issues in core governance areas as well as in service delivery.
- A local team with decision making autonomy (the transformational quadrant in Figure 1) and deep knowledge of the context as well as the capacity to build and nurture relationships with a wide network of local partners, was a huge asset for PERL in applying localisation/locally led development principles.
- PERL's experience of applying transformative localisation/locally led development in Nigeria clearly indicates the need to balance supporting frontline workers to "flow with the tide" of priorities of local actors with managing performance and ensuring accountability. In other words, the application of localisation/ locally led development principles conducted in a manner that enables the programme to keep its focus on desirable results and outcomes.

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[xii] Interview with John Mutu, PERL-ECP Team Lead (15/8/2024).
[xiii] Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) and National Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) initially held divergent views on the modalities for paying primary school teachers. As a result, NUT withheld support for local government autonomy. This cleavage was exploited by opponents of local government autonomy. PERL supported Democracy Vanguard, a platform that enabled NUT, NULGE and other relevant stakeholders to make provision for a special fund to cater for the payment of primary school teachers. This brokerage role paved way for a stronger coalition which eventually succeeded in bringing about constitutional reform that restored the autonomy of local governments in Nigeria.
[xiv] Interview with Ifeanyi Peters, PERL-ARC Team Lead, (18/8/2024).
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The opinions expressed above are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)

PERL is the FCDO's flagship Public Sector Accountability & Governance programme in Nigeria since May 2016

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