Engaged Citizens Constitituency Influence Story No.8:

Issue Based Coalitions: From better roads to ending fuel subsidy, the many faces of collective action on public issues in Nigeria

When Nigeria's early years of democracy failed to deliver sought-after development aspirations, 'issues-based approaches' supported by UK international development offered hope for transformational, pro-poor change. Over the past 20 years, coalitions of media, civil society, businesses, labour unions and government insiders have come together around diverse issues – to fight for better governance, fairer budgets and improved services. From local successes in advocating for improved roads to national headline-grabbing advocacy wins, issues-based coalitions have improved Nigerian governance. Powerful committed coalitions like these will be needed to tackle big issues of the day emerging over the next 20 years, and in the face of new governance challenges.

In 2004, five years after Nigeria's transition from military to civilian rule, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) stood back to reflect on development assistance in the country. It was apparent that building state capability on its own was insufficient to address deep-rooted structural issues impeding progress. The notion that capacity-building alone could drive change proved insufficient, given entrenched power structures and political elites resistant to reform. Working with government alone too would not suffice.

DFID governance advisers in Nigeria emphasised the transformative potential of 'issue-based' approaches, highlighting their ability to reshape institutional power dynamics and impact broader structural realities. Issue-based programming involved supporting broad-based coalitions of actors, both inside and outside of government, who would work together to demand change around a specific topic. Through sustained institutional changes, issue-based strategies would be able to instigate new political behaviours and economic relations, ultimately facilitating pro-poor growth and transforming Nigeria's political economy.

Issues-based Approaches' Many Guises

The UK government has now been implementing issue-based programming in Nigeria and elsewhere for over two decades. However, there have been diverse interpretations of the issue-based approach, and diverse ways for issue-based coalitions to be supported by programmes, depending on different starting points and different programmatic aims.

In some contexts, potential agents of change have had limited capacity – be it technical, managerial, operational, or financial. Here, programmes have been tasked with the foundational work of capacity-building, a process demanding time. Other contexts have presented more urgent issues requiring immediate attention. In these scenarios, the focus has been on coalition-building, harnessing the collective strengths of individuals and organisations with pre-existing capacity.

Programmes' aims have further shaped the approach to issue-based programming. Some programmes' primary remit has been to build organisational capacity; for others it has been to facilitate governance reforms, without an explicit requirement to build capacity. This has dictated how programmes work on issues and with whom, including whether they work with more or less capable partners.

The mandate of the UK government's Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (PERL) programme in Nigeria, for example, has been to deliver tangible reform outcomes rather than build capacity per se. Therefore, PERL, while strengthening capacity as part of its work to promote reform, has always had reform outcomes as its primary strategic guide. PERL's issue-focused initiatives – in sectors ranging from basic education and primary healthcare to disability rights and humanitarian assistance – have been complemented by more systems-focused reform-aimed interventions, including to fortify public financial management, and strengthen accountability mechanisms and policy and planning processes.

Learning from Experience

In addition to the UK government's requirements, the PERL approach has been heavily influenced by insights gained from its predecessor programmes, especially the UK-funded State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI). SAVI was designed to build issue-based coalitions and learned many lessons on issues-based approaches.

First, the programme recognised the importance of identifying tangible, tractable and feasible issues that closely aligned with local service delivery priorities and governance processes. In line with this, the SAVI team learned to consult with local communities and political leaders to identify priority issues, using a variety of mechanisms, including public policy dialogues, town hall meetings, radio phone-in programmes and participatory budgeting processes.

SAVI also recognised that successful issues-based programming depended on mobilising self-motivated local stakeholders who would be at the forefront of interventions. This required the programme to act as a behind-the-scenes facilitator that enhanced the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder coalitions by brokering new relationships and networks, mentoring and selective capacity building. SAVI's job was to help coalition leaders to be savvy and resourceful and to develop and deliver their own influencing strategies.

An important lesson PERL took on from SAVI was on how to fund and facilitate coalitions. Initially, SAVI experimented with the idea of employing financial mechanisms, such as grants, to manage issue-based coalitions. However, this idea was swiftly discontinued. It reinforced donor ownership through accounting for how the grant

was spent, including approving plans, agreeing objectives and establishing reporting mechanisms. It became evident that while financial incentives may have a place in specific situations, they should be employed very judiciously in coalition-building. SAVI staff were quick to shift the narrative away from 'issue-based projects' (IBPs) to 'issue-based partnerships' to promote local ownership, collective responsibility and mutual accountability – what they called 'de-projectisation'.

Coalition leadership and membership was premised on the ability to share, pool and attract locally sustainable resources, to avoid the pitfalls of donor dependency and coalition in-fighting over money. SAVI shifted to providing limited financial resources for mutually agreed-upon events and activities. The emphasis was placed instead on offering technical 'strategic thinking' support, assisting partners in navigating political dynamics, and fostering an environment conducive to reflection, learning, and adaptation.

PERL's approach to issues-based working has been very much based on these lessons. The programme applied at least three different approaches to issues-focused work. It supported national coalitions to drive action on specific issues, linking national action to state level action; it supported state coalitions to establish permanent dialogue and accountability mechanisms to sustain and scale-up issue-based action within and across sectors [see **Story 7 – Kaduna SLAMs: Strengthening Governance in Nigeria through Co-Created, State-Led Accountability Mechanisms**]; and it bolstered regional platforms to promote cross learning between state coalitions and link them more tightly to government processes.

Fuel Subsidy Coalition Win

In 2022 alone, Nigeria's fuel subsidy – a government policy of subsidising the cost of gasoline and other petroleum products for consumers – cost the country a monumental £7.9 billion[i] ($10 billion) amid widespread corruption and inefficiency in the distribution of benefits. Roughly 40% of Nigeria's revenue was spent on fuel subsidies in 2022[ii] and, according to the Debt Management Office, the government had to borrow 1 trillion Naira (£1.9 billion) to finance this.[iii] While keeping fuel affordable for the past four decades, the subsidy had now crowded out resources that could have been invested in growth, employment, and public services. The consequence? A slew of economic challenges, from sluggish growth and soaring unemployment to an ever-expanding fiscal deficit. Despite the severity of the issue, the federal government remained reluctant to act, 'kicking the can down the road' for the next government to deal with it.[iv]

From July 2022, fearing continued inaction, PERL facilitated a coalition to champion and sustain public discourse on the subsidy. The programme brokered partnerships between concerned civil society groups, the private sector, organised labour, and the media. Other development partners like ActionAid joined forces with PERL to support the coalition.

Technical and logistical support was provided to the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) to facilitate a policy dialogue on the fuel subsidy regime. Participants at the event delved into critical aspects of the subsidy, including its inherent challenges, the lack of political will by successive governments to address the issue and implications for citizen engagement. They concluded that fuel subsidy was unsustainable, agreeing government should immediately begin to explore alternative energy sources to reduce dependence on fossil fuels. They also agreed how to work together to generate public discourse and advocate for change.

Coalition members were encouraged to engage with the public through the media, amplifying their voices on radio stations and in newspaper opinion columns. Additionally, PERL produced a documentary featuring expert insights and coalition perspectives, empowering the public to make informed decisions based on evidence. Coalition members, such as the BudgIT Foundation, hosted public policy dialogues aimed at fostering consensus on effective fiscal resource management, including fuel subsidy reform.

May 2023 saw a landmark development, with removal of the fuel subsidy by a newly elected national leadership that had made this a pledge in their election manifesto, and inaugural speech – a significant stride toward Nigeria's long-term economic stability. However, the absence of palliative measures to mitigate the immediate impact of rising fuel costs has left many Nigerians grappling with the financial strain of the transition away from the subsidy. This provision of

palliatives had been a key feature of the citizens charter and pre-election media debates championed by the coalition, where commitments were made by the major political parties and their candidates. Continued citizens engagement with the media before, during and after the national elections, mounted public pressure, making this a substantial pre-election issue, and subject of national discourse post-election. This also softened the resistance from some of the leading national civil society groups and labour unions.

Joining Forces for Local Government Autonomy

In Nigeria, basic service delivery has long been impaired by the restricted financial and administrative autonomy of the nation's 774 local governments, which are overshadowed by state government control. State governors and vested interests have staunchly opposed granting greater autonomy to local governments, fearing the loss of power and financial opportunities that such a shift might entail. The federal government had also not given this issue much attention, until recently.

In March 2022, a glimmer of hope emerged as Nigeria's National Assembly passed two bills aimed at bolstering governance at the subnational level. These bills sought to confer administrative and financial autonomy upon local governments. Yet, for these bills to become amendments to the constitution, they required a majority vote in 24 out of the country's 36 State Houses of Assembly to ratify them.

PERL embarked on a strategic intervention to ensure the bills' favourable reception and consideration by State Assemblies. Collaborating with partners, PERL facilitated dialogues on local government autonomy, aiming to garner public support across the nation to boost the momentum of the bills' passage in all 36 states.

Central to PERL's efforts was the formation of a coalition comprising relevant labour unions, civil society organisations, media outlets, and other citizen groups, all advocating for the bills' ratification. Through technical assistance, PERL empowered key stakeholders like the Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) to effectively champion the cause. Members of PERL's national team sensitised NULGE executives across Nigeria's 36 states and supported them with clear communications on key strategies for advocacy on the ratification of the bills, including through direct engagement in the State Houses of Assembly. All NULGE state presidents committed to leverage their networks for advocacy until the necessary 24 states voted in favour of the bills.

Box 1: How issue-based coalition working has empowered Nigeria's labour unions

Sharing the experience of issue-based coalition working on local government autonomy, Akeem Ambali, the National President of the Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) said, *"it was this coalition platform that changed the dynamics for the campaign for local government autonomy in Nigeria. In the past, each organization had different agenda. We had fragmented and discordant voices. The forces against local government autonomy took advantage of the fragmentation and pushed for rejection of local government autonomy. Now, the table has turned. All the key stakeholders, ALGON, NUT and NULGE, we now speak with one voice and our coalition is more formidable!"*

[see corresponding **Human Angle Story No.8**]

Crucially, PERL fostered collaboration where none existed before. NULGE galvanised support across the nation, mobilising influential voices and resources for the advocacy campaign, including from the media, civil society and organised labour. It was the first time the union joined forces with other players to advocate as part of the constitutional amendment process, markedly strengthening its advocacy power.

PERL also supported a range of media partners – traditional and social media – to establish a media partnership to drive advocacy. This partnership provided a vehicle for organising media engagements that helped shape public conversations around the issue and sensitised citizens on the benefits of effective governance at grassroots level. Newspaper articles, radio town halls, TV appearances and social media drove a public conversation around the issue.

By December 2022, 12 out of 15 State Houses of Assembly that had considered the bills voted in favour of granting autonomy to local governments. Things were looking good. But by the closing date, March 2023, a total of just 18 Houses had ratified the bills – six short of the target. Nevertheless, this was a marked

improvement on the vote in 2019 when only eight SHoAs voted in favour of similar bills. Unperturbed, the coalition renewed its efforts as soon as a new National Assembly was sworn in, after the 2023 elections, to convince them to renew the Bill for another attempt in 2024/25. They organised a fresh round of media debates and public dialogues, strategically aligning their agenda with that of the incoming administration and the economic and security challenges facing the country. This culminated in the Federal Government filing a lawsuit in May 2024 against all 36 State Governors for violating the 1999 Constitution, and on 11th July 2024, the Supreme Court judged in its favour, granting full financial and political autonomy to Nigeria's third tier of government.[v]

Critical to the success of this campaign was the engagement of labour unions at national and state level, building consensus between them, establishing strong relations with community leaders and media houses across the nation, and strategic engagement with political leaders based on learning from past experience (and repeated failings) on how to generate the required public pressure and political will for this reform to scale though [see also **Story 5 – Local Government: The final frontier in pursuit of better grassroots services in Nigeria**].

Regional Approach to Reform

In Nigeria's dynamic landscape, PERL's initiatives have taken on various forms, addressing specific challenges and seizing opportunities across different regions. One such approach unfolded in the southwest, where the programme bolstered regional platforms to promote learning and healthy peer competition between states. These regional platforms have often been instrumental for bringing governance and service delivery issues to the forefront, across states, and have helped advocacy actors learn from each other's approaches and build broader networks in their efforts to improve public services.

A strong illustration was the strengthening of the Development Agenda for Western Nigeria (DAWN) Commission. Under PERL's guidance and support, DAWN has evolved into an active force promoting regional integration and policy coordination. Exchanges facilitated by DAWN have spurred initiatives like Osun State's online publication of financial and legislative information as well as the establishment of regular town hall meetings across the region.

PERL also played a key role in setting up the Southwest Legislative Reform Implementing Committee (SLRIC), a think tank to coordinate legislative reform in the region. Drawing from lessons in Lagos State, SLRIC led efforts to harmonise legislative rules across the states, with a provision for constituency engagement. Thanks to this, state legislatures in the southwest began bringing citizens into the legislative process, to share their needs and to support budget tracking. As a consequence, in states such as Ondo, Ogun and Lagos, citizens' demands have been reflected in annual state budgets.

DAWN and SLRIC have also been used as a vehicle for organisations to join forces on common issues in different states and to share their learning across states. For instance, with SLRIC's support, citizens in Ogun State leveraged insights from Lagos State and successfully campaigned for better road, market and motor park construction.

Another example is PERL's collaboration with the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC), which mobilised grassroots stakeholders through the Civil Coalitions for Good Governance (CCGG) and Good Governance Committees (GGC). PERL helped the JDPC spread its successful approach by facilitating regional events and brokering linkages between the CCGG and GGC groups and State Houses of Assembly. In one example of a citizen win in Ogun State, citizen dialogue with electricity distribution companies, inspired by cross-learning, led to more than 200 households getting pre-payment electricity meters. Three business managers in the electricity company were exposed as corrupt, with the money they had been siphoning off monthly used to increase the power supply to the area.

With PERL's support, these regional coalitions became more effective at facilitating citizens engagement in governance processes – mostly from paying more attention to the political economic, to synchronise civil society interests with those of the state, and power mapping to engage strategically with the key influencers and reform champions. They also learnt that to deal with issues of service delivery reforms also requires engagement with a broader set of stakeholders, from public service and private service providers, as well as citizen groups – a

more 'all-inclusive' process of engagement that promotes behaviour change, convergence around a common problem and collective action to bring about a sustainable change.

Success primarily came from taking a collaborative approach that brought together diverse stakeholders, fostering a sense of community and shared ownership. It also came from sharing widely the knowledge they gained from this. PERL often facilitated peer learning among their members, encouraging experience sharing between states and among regions, providing opportunities for recognition, support, and funding from other partners. This is not to say that they didn't face significant challenges along the way – including weak internal structural arrangements, poor communications, and inadequate resources – that hindered their progress and sustainability. But by learning what worked, what didn't, and why, several regional initiatives/coalitions were able to optimize their strategies, foster effective peer learning, and leverage the incentives required to drive meaningful changes.

Urgency Needs to Drive Future Issues-Based Coalitions

Two decades after DFID outlined its thinking on issue-based programming for Nigeria, the nation continues to grapple with significant development challenges that require urgent political as well as technical solutions: energy poverty, economic instability, food insecurity, ongoing conflicts and a corresponding rise in criminality. Addressing these obstacles demands robust national, regional and state level coalitions and partnerships equipped to address major political issues and navigate the entrenched power dynamics.

As we have seen, the issue-based approach has proven to be efficient and effective on such 'big issues'. Many lessons have been learned and these now need to be adopted to develop and sustain big issue-based coalitions at scale that link both horizontally and vertically. This does not need to wait for additional resources or new capabilities to emerge. In this version of issue-based working, coalition partners now need to pool their own resources and efforts, with each member making their own contribution and taking a share of the responsibility for driving change, while external aid functions as a supplementary catalyst rather than a driving force. PERL's 'de-projectisation' of the issue-based approach has been a critical factor in its success. When such collective action is underpinned by a sense of local ownership, drive and accountability, Nigerians are extremely capable of tackling seemingly insurmountable challenges.

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[i] https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/09/07/in-just-100-days-nigerias-new-president-has-made-bold-reforms

[ii] https://theconversation.com/nigerias-fuel-subsidy-removal-was-too-sudden-why-a-gradual-approach-would-have-been-better-222224

[iii] https://www.pwc.com/ng/en/assets/pdf/fuel-subsidy-in-nigeria-issues-challenges-and-the-way-forward.pdf

[iv] https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/04/petrol-subsidy-removal-buhari-hands-over-tough-problem-to-tinubu/

[v] https://punchng.com/breaking-supreme-court-grants-lgs-financial-autonomy/