



Department  
for International  
Development

## Thinking and Acting Politically

Supporting citizen engagement in governance:  
The experience of the State Accountability and Voice Initiative in Nigeria



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# Thinking and Acting Politically

## Supporting citizen engagement in governance: The experience of the State Accountability and Voice Initiative in Nigeria

Despite massive donor investment in demand-side governance initiatives since 2000, extensive DFID-funded research has found no overall trend of improved citizen engagement in governance. Building on lessons learned in programmes funded by DFID Nigeria over the past decade, the State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) is succeeding in supporting more responsive state governance, and a sustained pattern of constructive engagement between citizens and state governments is beginning to emerge. SAVI is achieving these results through supporting partners to think and act politically to a far greater extent than previous programmes were able to.

Citizen engagement with state level governance in Nigeria is typically characterised by minimal government responsiveness to citizens and mutual suspicion among demand side players and between government and CSOs. In this context, SAVI is supporting groups of citizens, the media and state legislatures to play their part in governance in effective and politically intelligent ways. By brokering constructive working relationships and providing behind-the-scenes mentoring and capacity building, SAVI is fostering partners' confidence, credibility and effectiveness. Partners and state governments are learning from positive experiences of working together and applying this approach to other areas of their work without the continuing stimulus of external funding or ideas.

Political scientist David Booth has questioned whether it is possible for official development agencies to achieve the quality of understanding and management flexibility required to 'work with the grain' of local culture and facilitate locally owned processes of change<sup>1</sup>. SAVI's experience suggests that it can be done – through changing the modality of aid away from grant giving and predefined capacity building programmes, to hands-on facilitation and knowledge building.

This paper has been written to share some of the working methods, lessons and insights emerging from SAVI's experience to contribute to debates on effective governance programming within DFID.

### The challenge of designing effective demand-side governance programmes

Recent research<sup>2</sup> reveals that much of the positive change in citizen engagement in governance derives from 'home grown' citizens' initiatives, rather than the incentive of funding from outside.<sup>3</sup> Whilst some voice and accountability projects have had positive impacts on attitude and behaviour change, these effects have tended to be highly localised<sup>4</sup>. Research has also highlighted some worrying negative side-effects of funding to this sector. These include the damaging effect funding has had on some citizens' movements<sup>5</sup>, the proliferation of donor dependent advocacy CSOs with weak links to ordinary citizens, the danger of monetising processes of citizen demand, and weak sustainability of citizen engagement beyond the period of donor funding<sup>6</sup>.

Based on evidence of what is working as well as what is not, research and evaluations are consistent in concluding that the design of demand-side governance interventions and expectations of change need to be based on clear understanding of the political economy of the context and “work with the grain” of local ways of doing things<sup>7</sup>.

Capacity for political economy analysis (PEA) is built into new DFID empowerment, accountability and governance initiatives, and is commonly used to identify appropriate issues for support and engagement, as well as to analyse risk. It has proved more difficult, however, for programmes to embed a political economy approach into *implementation* strategies and to define *how* to support working with the grain of local culture.

For example, the DFID-funded Coalitions 4 Change programme (C4C) in Nigeria is rightly credited as a pioneer in using political economy analysis to analyse the political landscape and bring together coalitions of demand and supply-side actors to advance reform<sup>8</sup>. However, the innovative political economy approach struggled to maintain momentum once coalitions were set up. Actors brought together to work on highly complex and contentious issues such as anti-corruption and extractive industry accountability, struggled to form working relationships with each other, and to engage meaningfully with the issues. A significant part of their challenge was that they had no experience or support in how to build on the political economy analysis that brought them together, and to use this thinking to inform their planning and action.

This experience resonates with wider re-thinking on governance reform. Drawing his evidence from research conducted by the Africa Power and Politics research programme, Booth concludes that there has been no real change in practice on the ground despite improved political economy analysis. He suggests that there is as yet insufficient practical guidance on how else donor money should be spent, and calls for programmes that are “addressing collective action blockages” to “make this explicit, so the evidence base can be built around what does and doesn’t work”<sup>9</sup>. This article is a response to that call.

## Support to thinking and acting politically

### Aid modality

SAVI’s way of working combines the strengths and insights of a political economy approach to governance, with the strengths and insights of a participatory learning and action approach to citizen empowerment. This approach resonates with recent analysis of governance reform which concludes that success depends on highly adaptive and flexible approaches, and a style of management oriented to learning<sup>10</sup>.

Whilst most demand-side governance programmes support civil society groups through grants and limited capacity building support, SAVI has shifted the aid modality – the way the programme achieves its objectives – to facilitation and knowledge sharing. This approach recognises that the demand-side governance challenge is about institutional blockages and related capacity limitations, more than it is about funding gaps.<sup>11</sup>

Planning and decision-making in SAVI is largely decentralised to state-level programmes<sup>12</sup> and state staff are recruited, trained and supported to work as hands-on facilitators of locally-driven change. They provide seed money for partners’ initiatives in small and diminishing amounts, but focus largely on tailored learning and mentoring processes that build partners’ functionality and effectiveness as agents of citizen voice. Support is tailored to address gaps in partners’ knowledge, skills, and working relationships that they themselves prioritise through regular self-assessment, learning and reflection processes.

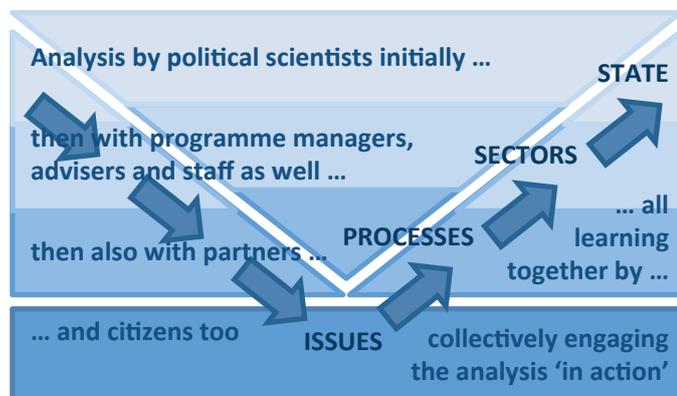
### Participatory political economy in action

Supporting staff and partners to think and act politically is central to the SAVI programme. This means enabling them to analyse and understand the realities of power relations that shape change in their state, and use this political intelligence to inform their decision making. This includes decisions by SAVI staff on the issues they focus on, the partners they work with, and the decisions and expectations of these partners as they pursue their issue of concern.

A critical part of SAVI's approach to achieving this is that staff and partners are supported to conduct political economy analyses, and update political intelligence, *themselves*. The aim is to generate analysis that, without sacrificing rigour, is accessible, engaging, useful and applied. Political intelligence should become normal and central to the thinking and planning of staff and partners. One SAVI member of staff describes why:

*"We wanted to know the history of politics which is shaping current thinking... the things that drive the development agenda from politicians' point of view. Where is the direction of government? Traditional leaders – do they really have power? What kind of power can they give you..? Information goes round. People will be telling you you'd better go and talk to him... Through informal contacts you can get to understand the mindset of the people in power and you get at the informal system of power. You need to know where to pitch your tent."*<sup>13</sup>

### A Participatory Political Economy Approach

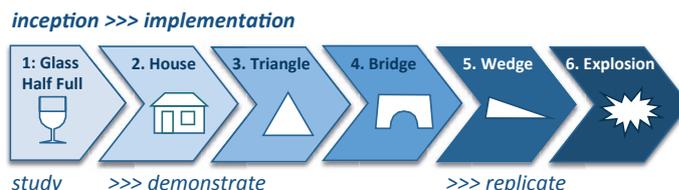


*Engaging the local political economy from the top down and back up again: 'learning by doing', analysis by application*

### Theory of Change

Political intelligence gathering processes, and the decision making resulting from them, are embedded in SAVI's theory of change. This is a simple, easy-to-understand-and-remember framework which SAVI staff and partners use to plan and monitor change, as well as to reflect on and enhance their own effectiveness. The stages of the theory of change are reflected in and consistent across all SAVI self-assessment processes, all programme outputs and activities, and in indicators of incremental change.

### SAVI's Theory of Change



**Glass Half Full:** In all states, the SAVI programme starts with extensive political economy and state drivers of change (S-DoC) studies<sup>14</sup> conducted by SAVI staff. Through these, state staff build their understanding of the local political economy<sup>15</sup> and identify issues that have traction across government and citizens. They are also able to identify and draw together diverse demand-side partners who are demonstrably passionate, credible and committed to playing their part in a collective approach to action.

**House:** SAVI's behind-the-scenes mentoring to partners begins with supporting them to gain the trust and respect of others, and increase their effectiveness. Known as 'getting their own house in order', partners are urged to harness their collective knowledge and networks as their key resource and diminish their dependency from day one. Partners are encouraged to build their inclusiveness, responsiveness and accountability to citizens, their evidence-base to support and advocate for citizen's demands, and their understanding of the politics and power relations involved at every level.

**Triangle:** The next stage is to break down barriers and build bridges between groups of citizens, their elected state level representatives and the media. SAVI fosters opportunities for these partners to work together, recognising and drawing on each other's strengths and opportunities. By doing so, partners can start to reinforce each other's voice, enhance each other's relationship with citizens and hold one another to account.

**Bridge:** This stage is about facilitating constructive engagement between demand-side players and the state government on a number of fronts. Partners are supported to operate in a politically savvy way. This means understanding the policy, planning and budget processes they are seeking to influence; forging alliances with key actors in government; identifying entry points; framing their arguments and marshalling their evidence to influence change; and planning in incremental stages through 'learning by doing' and reflection.

While the first four stages collectively form a model for demand-side partners to be accountable, credible and effective agents of citizen voice and accountability, the following stages concern the replication and dissemination of this approach.

*Wedge:* SAVI encourages partners to adapt new approaches they have found to be effective to their lobbying work on other issues, in other sectors, and in neighbouring states. The effectiveness of SAVI partners attracts the attention of other demand- and supply-side actors, demonstrating how the business of governance can be done differently and more effectively, and in a self-sustaining way.

*Explosion:* The legacy of SAVI's approach will be demand-side players who can create, support and make use of opportunities for constructive engagement with their state government on behalf of its citizens without SAVI's support – or that of any other donor. By linking up accountable, credible and effective demand- and supply-side partnerships from all sectors to form a common front, SAVI is helping to generate a sustainable critical mass for change in the way citizens engage with governance, reducing the need for further donor investment.

The three examples that follow illustrate different dimensions of working politically around a common core approach.

## Case Studies

### Know your budget, Kaduna State

#### Political economy analysis

In 2010, decision making in Kaduna State was highly centralised. The State Executive Council (ExCo) had good pro-poor policies such as free maternal and child health care, but a history of over-inflated state budgets, use of the state budget for political patronage, and repeated failure to achieve budgeted revenue, called into question the state's ability to implement its policies. The State House of Assembly (SHoA) was closely tied to the ExCo, and a lot of their business took place behind closed doors. Kaduna state was a divided community at the level of the political elite, resulting in divide and rule politics, but also potential entry points into political debate.



SAVI/George Osodi

Exchanging money for corn in Northern Nigeria.

SAVI's S-DoC analysis identified budget advocacy as a civil society priority for engagement with the state. This was particularly in view of the importance of a realistic budget to any progress on service delivery. Despite a number of previous donor funded budget tracking initiatives, CSOs were found in general to have weak formal access to information from the state government and SHoA, limited understanding of government systems, and limited skills and effectiveness in influencing budgets.

#### The *Know Your Budget* partnership

The SAVI state team drew together the *Know Your Budget* (KYB) civil society partnership made up of the handful of civil society groups and academics with sufficient expertise to conduct budget analysis and engage state actors. Individual members had previously produced high quality critical analyses of the state government budget, but with no government response.

With SAVI behind-the-scenes support on how to influence change more effectively, the KYB partnership succeeded in galvanising public debate on the Kaduna state budget. Drawing on information from other donor-funded programmes, credit rating agencies, and personal contacts in the state government and SHoA, they produced accessible, expert analyses of the 2010 and previous budgets. They made strategic and effective use of public forums, radio and TV discussion programmes, and engaged both formally and informally with elected representatives and key members of the state government.

In an unprecedented, coordinated articulation of citizen voice, the budget drew informed and critical attention from elected representatives, citizens and the media. The government, in an unheard of response to public opinion, announced that it was removing 31 billion naira from the previously over-inflated budget.

## Analysis

This was a striking result, demonstrating the possibility to chip away at one of the key areas of contestation in Kaduna state. It set a precedent for citizen oversight of the budget and sent a message to the government that someone informed and able to galvanise public opinion was watching. A great deal of positive comment came from those who saw the role of demand-side governance principally as one of putting pressure on otherwise reluctant states to reform.

Despite this, KYB experienced two major pitfalls. Firstly, KYB partners adopted an aggressive 'name and shame' approach (strongly *against* SAVI's advice) which led to a government backlash from which the relationship between civil society and the Kaduna State Government has yet to fully recover. Secondly, KYB was led by professional civil society activists, and when the funding stopped, their activity stopped. SAVI has learned two important lessons from this experience: (i) the risks presented by focusing on short term results and (ii) the danger of mistaking professional advocacy groups for whom advocacy is a job with ordinary citizens whose demand for accountable and responsive governance and services is about their lives.

## Disability partnership, Lagos State

### Political economy analysis

In a break with the patronage networks of the former governor, the current governor of Lagos state publicly invited civil society groups and the private sector to make constructive contributions to a more rational governance process. With the former governor remaining powerful in the SHoA, devolving some power had the potential to act as a counter-balance. Amongst many other priorities, the governor announced his ambition for the state to become a globally recognised model 'mega city', including recognising international standards on inclusion to accommodate the needs and aspirations of all citizens.



SAVI/George Osodi

Men attend constituents meeting in South East Nigeria.

SAVI S-DoC analysis identified disability as a critical issue of inclusion which had hitherto received limited attention. Disability affected a large constituency of citizens, was represented by vibrant civil society groups, and impacted across society including the influential middle class.

### The Lagos Civil Society Disability Policy Partnership

SAVI state staff brought together the Lagos Civil Society Disability Policy Partnership (LCS DPP). Members included people with and without disabilities, who had previously worked individually and competed for donor funding to bring about change.

SAVI state staff assisted partners to work together, strategize in a politically intelligent way, and work effectively and extensively with the media and with elected representatives. It took a long time and painstaking support for LCS DPP partners to unlearn their 'placard carrying' mindset, and focus instead on constructive engagement with the state. Equally, it took time and subtle advocacy from group members to convince stakeholders in the state government and in the SHoA to participate in a process of constructive engagement with civil society. The group were able to identify key potential partners in the state government and the SHoA, including first time elected representatives keen to meet the expectations of their constituents.

The group successfully championed the Lagos State Special Peoples' Law on disability rights, passed by Lagos House of Assembly as its first ever private member's bill.

LCSDPP applied their ability to think and act politically and ‘work with the grain’ to consider how they might get the governor’s attention and support:

*“When it came to the Governor, [the group considered] what does the Governor listen to? What kind of programme does the governor watch on TV? What newspapers does he read, which programmes does he monitor, where does he worship, who does he hang out with? The Governor is someone who plays football – the group did analysis of all of that. They started engaging with people around him to attract his attention. He became directly interested in their cause and called twice – once live on a radio phone-in and once on TV. He made a commitment on air to meet with them. This was their entry point to build on.”*

After signing the bill into law, the governor established the Lagos State Office of Disability Affairs (LASODA) to implement the law, and announced that LASODA would work with LCSDPP as their technical partners. This arrangement is continuing and has been budgeted for in the 2013 Lagos state budget. LCSDPP has started providing support to mainstream disability into Lagos state government sectoral plans.

At the request of disability lobbying groups in neighbouring states, LCSDPP is providing mentoring and practical support to help them achieve similar objectives. State governments, SHoAs and citizens in neighbouring states are now linking with LCSDPP and LASODA on their own initiative, with little investment or support required from SAVI.

## Analysis

Disability as an issue could be said to be a ‘low hanging fruit’ where token progress is possible without challenging the dynamics of power central to governance. However, in this instance, disability provided a comparatively non-threatening entry point into demonstrating to civil society, the state government and the SHoA, how the business of governance can be done differently. The success of this on-going partnership is helping to bring formal institutions of responsiveness and accountability to the forefront of governance, and to contribute to improving the law making, representation and oversight functions of the SHoA. Through

politically intelligent collective action, the group have played a significant part in ensuring not only that a new law is passed, but also that it is funded and implemented, and that constructive citizen engagement is continuing. The ripple effect in neighbouring states is demonstrating the power of effective processes of citizen engagement to replicate without external stimulus.



SAVI/George Osodi

Road construction in Northern Nigeria.

## Project monitoring group, Jigawa State Political economy analysis

The present governor of Jigawa has publicly committed to instituting transparency and accountability in the state. While, as elsewhere in Nigeria, government projects are used as a source of patronage, the governor insists on quality work. He has established a Due Process Office, nominated a well-known, trustworthy person as its manager and even demolished building works handled by his friends that have been found to be below standard. SAVI’s S-DoC process identified this commitment to quality projects as an entry point for constructive citizen engagement with government – creating a potential win-win for improved services for citizens and progressing the governor’s own reform agenda.

Historically, the relationship between government and civil society in Jigawa state has been characterised by mutual suspicion and mistrust. Government agencies have been reluctant to release planning and budget documents and doubt civil society groups’ skills and knowledge. SAVI’s S-DoC process found substantial knowledge and skills gaps amongst civil society groups, despite previous heavily donor-funded advocacy and budget tracking initiatives.

## The Project Monitoring Advocacy Partnership

SAVI brought together an existing major civil society coalition working on budget tracking, with a number of community-based organisations. SAVI mentored members to ensure accountability to citizens by pursuing issues affecting their own communities, and giving feedback to community members on what they were doing. SAVI also built the skills of group members in evidence-based advocacy and strengthened the relationship between civil society members, the media and the SHoA. They facilitated strong links to relevant government ministries, departments and agencies and greatly improved group members' understanding of government systems and processes.

*“Political economy is absolutely a revelation for our partners. Civil society have always done budget tracking. But we take them through political economy analysis of the budget – understand who is in the budget, understand the budget making strategy, understand where your contribution will be useful – otherwise you are just making noise. Now there is no case they will take up without conducting a political economy analysis.”*

The group's representative from the Babura Patriotic Movement (BPM) used his new knowledge and skills to assist his community to observe the development of a road in their local area. BPM took control of this whole process themselves, drawing on their own networks and resources. They accessed the Bill of Quantities from the Jigawa State Due Process Office and found that the road was both shorter and narrower than had been agreed. Further scrutiny revealed that compensation due to those who had lost their homes had been pocketed by government officials and local leaders.

Armed with this evidence, and in spite of receiving threatening messages and warnings from the local government, BPM petitioned relevant government agencies and copied in the governor and members of the SHoA. The group's resilience and persistence resulted in the governor personally visiting the site, ordering a review of the contract and arrest of the culprits. The SHoA recovered 47 million naira from the original contract, bought the perpetrators to justice, repaid compensation and rewarded the community by extending the road

a further 2.5 kilometres. Three ward heads were found guilty of complicity. The district head took this matter to the Emir, who ordered their removal and replacement.

The government of Jigawa state has now invited BPM to continue to work with them monitoring infrastructure developments in their area. BPM are providing assistance to other citizen groups on how to gain credibility and work with government departments both in neighbouring local government areas in Jigawa state and in neighbouring states.

## Analysis

In this case, citizens are playing a direct, valuable and constructive role in supporting responsive and accountable governance – and greater government transparency is promoting greater government accountability. Citizens from BPM not only accessed relevant information from the government, they made productive use of it. They asked relevant questions of government, and got an appropriate and constructive response. As with the example of the disability partnership from Lagos state, this demonstrates how the business of governance can be done differently and in a self-sustaining way – to everyone's credit and increasing everyone's legitimacy.

## Conclusion

Current DFID-supported research and thinking on governance argues that the most promising approaches are iterative and adaptive, building on locally established ways of doing things<sup>16</sup>. Booth questions whether it is possible for official development agencies to have the quality of understanding, skills and management flexibility to work in this way<sup>17</sup>. SAVI's experience suggests that it can be done – through changing the modality of aid away from grant giving and predefined capacity building programmes, to hands-on facilitation and knowledge building.

Changing the aid modality has a number of benefits. Because there are no grants of the usual kind, there is no call for proposals, no partners' results frameworks or donor reporting requirements<sup>18</sup> – and therefore none of the dangers of elite capture and diversion from locally rooted efforts that these complex procedures commonly entail. Direct support to citizens' own initiatives

is made possible without the danger of grant funding monetising citizens' engagement with their government or distorting and weakening their incentives for engagement. The civil society partners who engage are those motivated by locally rooted concerns rather than by the funding, and media and SHoA partners progressively invest their own resources in the processes of change and learning they prioritise.

Because partners have no results frameworks requiring activities and targets to be pinned down in advance, partners can plan in an iterative, adaptive way; in regular cycles of action, learning and reflection. Sustainability and 'working with the grain' is embedded from the outset. SAVI encourages partners to recognise and draw on their own culture as a key resource, and develop knowledge, skills and networks – particularly between citizen groups, media and state legislatures – that they can continue to draw on, and pass onto others, without the need for external support.

SAVI's experience fully accords with the observation that the demand-side governance challenge is about institutional blockages – about ways of doing things – rather than funding gaps. In all states, citizen groups, the media and state legislatures have needed support in thinking and acting politically, strategically and collectively. Many CSO partners have previously participated in donor-funded capacity building programmes, but these have not addressed this need. SAVI's approach to capacity building is on-going, hands-on, facilitative, and applied. It builds partners' skills in the areas they prioritise through processes of self-reflection and learning, and encourages an approach of learning by doing. The deliberately behind-the-scenes approach means that partners – rather than the SAVI programme – take responsibility for decisions and actions, and take credit for achievements. Small successes build confidence to take on bigger challenges. Partners' confidence, credibility, legitimacy and sense of social responsibility are all gradually strengthened through a process of learning by doing and self-discovery. Through this, they start seeing the potential for transforming patterns of governance more broadly.

Finally, SAVI's experience raises questions about the definition of a result in demand-side governance. Demand-side governance programmes frequently emphasise one-off and high profile change such as policy reform. As the *Know Your Budget* example illustrates, impressive short-term results can easily be at the expense of longer-term and more meaningful institutional change. SAVI's experience is that effective citizenship and responsive governance are learned through action and build over time. The programme makes extensive use of self-assessment baseline and monitoring processes, which are both enlightening and empowering for partners, but also allow the measurement of incremental institutional change. Most significance is attached to examples of state government responsiveness that result from on-going processes and trends of citizen engagement, show signs of taking on a life of their own and grow and multiply.

Nigeria is widely recognised as a challenging context for governance reform. Through taking a radically different approach to supporting it, SAVI's experience demonstrates that external support can succeed in facilitating significant shifts.

# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Booth (2012)

<sup>2</sup> Africa Power and Politics Research Programme (2007-12); Citizenship, Participation and Accountability Development Research Centre (2001-11); Centre for Future State (2000-2010)

<sup>3</sup> Booth (2012)

<sup>4</sup> Citizenship, Participation and Accountability Development Research Centre (2011), Benequista, Gaventa and Barrett (2010), Menocal and Sharma (2008)

<sup>5</sup> Bano (2012)

<sup>6</sup> Booth (2012), Booth (2011), Menocal and Sharma (2008)

<sup>7</sup> Booth (2012), Booth (2011), Menocal and Sharma (2008), McGee and Gaventa (2011), Unsworth and Moore (2010)

<sup>8</sup> Carothers and de Gramont (2013)

<sup>9</sup> Booth (2012)

<sup>10</sup> Andrews et al

<sup>11</sup> Booth (2012)

<sup>12</sup> SAVI works in 10 Nigerian States. Five state programmes started in 2008/9, three in 2012, and two are just starting up.

<sup>13</sup> All quotations in this article are from SAVI state level staff.

<sup>14</sup> Through State Drivers of Change (S-Doc) meetings and surveys, SAVI staff drill down from analysing the macro level of the political economy of the state, into sectors and sub-sectors, governance processes and service delivery issues –the level at which potential partners engage. Through these processes, staff identify issues with a firm foundation of citizen demand as well as traction with the state government, and assess the current level of engagement of demand side players.

<sup>15</sup> SAVI's approach to conducting political economy analysis (PEA) analysis has evolved over the course of the programme, seeking to attain an appropriate and practical balance between staff engagement and quality of analysis. Staff now work hand-in-hand with political scientists in conducting state level PEA. This both builds capacity and ensures an appropriate level of rigour.

<sup>16</sup> Booth (2013)

<sup>17</sup> Booth (2013), Booth (2012)

<sup>18</sup> SAVI state staff take responsibility for monitoring and reporting.

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