

Nine lessons from Issue-based programming

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Photo credit: Tree surviving rising sea levels in Timor Leste @Laure-Hélène Piron

Summary

Issues-Based Programming (IBP) is a development approach which mobilises stakeholders to drive change around locally defined issues. This paper examines its application in several countries through case studies of UK-funded projects and assesses IBP's effectiveness, highlighting successes and failures. Key success factors highlighted by the research include:

- identifying tangible, tractable and feasible issues,
- clustering and building on issues,
- having a vision for transformational change,
- linking analysis to action,
- facilitating locally led and self-motivated stakeholder engagement,
- mobilising the right combination of skills,
- ensuring effective programme leadership,
- using grants sparingly and strategically, and
- enabling flexible and adaptive programming.

Ultimately, the paper argues that while IBP presents challenges, it has already demonstrated positive results including in difficult political contexts. The approach warrants further investment linked to experimentation, research and evaluation.

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1. Introduction

Issue-based programming (IBP) is a distinctive approach to international development programming focused on addressing locally defined issues that provide a rallying point for domestic stakeholders to mobilise and drive change. Focusing on the critical question of how to bring about change, IBP works with such stakeholders to analyse problems, develop solutions and drive the reform process. This contrasts with more conventional approaches to development practice that have tended to rely on predetermined programmes and projects that are often designed by outsiders and that supply ideas and solutions to the beneficiaries.

Although IBP is still fairly unusual in development practice, there is an increasing number of examples of its application. Although there has been no formal evaluation of its effectiveness, there is a growing body of practical experience and evidence on results, providing lessons on the promise and pitfalls of the approach.

This policy and practice paper brings together experience on the application of IBP from UK government-funded projects, provides evidence on their results and highlights the factors leading to success or failure. It aims to identify lessons that can serve as guidance for practitioners, as well as unanswered questions that require further discussion and research. The evidence is drawn from project documentation and the author's experience of working on IBP, both as an evaluator and as an implementer in diverse country contexts. The paper expands on an earlier review of IBP in Nigeria by bringing in evidence from additional programmes in Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Myanmar, Nepal, Rwanda and Tanzania.¹

¹ Williams, G., Derbyshire, H. and Kulutuye, S. (2021) 'Lessons learned from operationalising issue-based programmes: the experience of UK programmes in Nigeria'. Unpublished report prepared by PERL/LEAP for FCDO Nigeria.

2. What is issue-based programming?

A working definition of IBP is as follows:

Issue-based programming is an approach to development programming where the focus is on addressing a particular problem or issue, which is used to mobilise multiple stakeholders to identify required reforms and to drive the change process.²

The aim of IBP is to focus development interventions on tangible issues or problems around which local actors can come together to demand and drive change. By seeking to foster and harness locally led change processes, IBP contrasts with more traditional approaches to development policy and practice.³ The latter, more conventional, approaches often emphasise technical solutions to externally identified problems and typically operate at a broader level, focusing on sectors, sub-sectors, broad-ranging governance processes or service delivery systems. They commonly include a combination of capacity-building, organisational development, and technical and financial assistance aimed at strengthening government effectiveness and non-governmental organisations. IBP, by contrast, adopts a more narrowly targeted approach, focusing on specific issues, and encouraging active policy engagement by national or local actors.

IBP can be recognised by its focus on specific issues, which can be defined as tangible problems that groups of citizens care about sufficiently to consider or actively engage in collective action. These include the provision of public goods and services, and other policy, institutional or legal problems that directly affect people's well-being. Table 1 provides some examples of programmes using IBP approaches funded by the UK government through the then Department for International Development (DFID) and now Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).⁴ Typically, these have worked on a diverse portfolio of issues that have been adapted over the course of the programme as the context has changed and new problems have been discovered.

² Issues can be defined as problems that groups of stakeholders care sufficiently about to consider or engage in collective action. There is a distinction between the issue-based programming approach and problem-focused approaches such as Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) in that the term 'problem' covers a wide set of policy challenges which may or may not generate wide public interest. For example, improving debt management systems might be a suitable problem for PDIA and experimentation around institutional reforms, but wouldn't make a suitable issue for IBP since the number of stakeholders who would be sufficiently motivated to mobilise around this would be quite limited. Essentially, issues can be considered to be a sub-group of policy and institutional problems that are suitable for mobilising broad based stakeholder engagement.

³ This distinction was originally presented in Pycroft, C. and Butterworth, R. (2005) ['Where capacity is not the only problem: moving from generic capacity building to support for issues-based change in Nigeria'](#). Capacity Development Brief 12, September. Washington, DC: World Bank Institute.

⁴ The term 'issue-based programming' is not universally recognised. While some programmes explicitly identify with IBP approaches, others do not use the term and may adopt different labels encompassing elements of IBP. This variability complicates efforts to identify a clear sample of programmes that have definitively adopted IBP.

Table 1. Examples from UK-government funded programmes using Issue-based programming

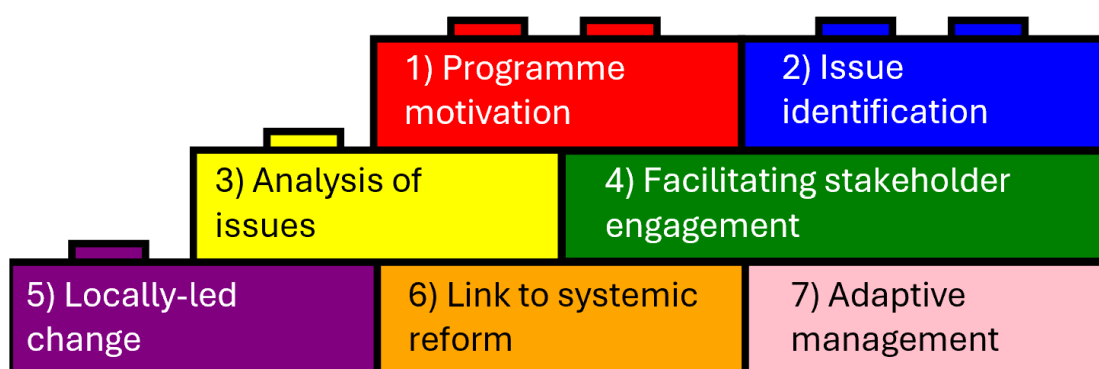
Name of programme (including hyperlinks)	Country of operation	Duration and funding	Issues selected
Pyoe Pin (part of Civil Society Strengthening Programme)	Myanmar	2007–2016 approx. £17m	Issues were selected from multiple sectors including education, health, land and resource governance, rule of law, extractive industries and fisheries.
Economic Policy Incubator (EPI) (part of Accelerating Investment and Infrastructure in Nepal)	Nepal	2015–2024 £39m	The programme addressed clusters of economic policy reform issues, including special economic zones (SEZs), simplified business regulations, provincial economic and fiscal planning, COVID-19 relief and employment programmes.
State and Local Government Programme (SLGP)	Nigeria	2001–2008 £25m	SLGP focused on tangible service delivery issues linked to core governance problems; water and waste management were the most common themes.
States Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI)	Nigeria	2008–2016 £32m	SAVI supported partners from civil society, media and state legislatures to form Advocacy Partnerships on a range of core governance and health and education service delivery issues, working in collaboration with partner programmes.
Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (PERL)	Nigeria	2016–2024 £133m	PERL focused on service delivery issues in health and education complemented by core governance reforms, including budget transparency, budget participation and monitoring, and tax reforms.
Programme for Agile Governance and Climate Engagement (PACE)	Nigeria	2024–2028 £39m	A new programme started in 2024. Issue selection will focus on core governance reforms, service delivery issues and climate action.
Ikiraro cy’itembere (or Multi-donor Civil Society Support Project)	Rwanda	2015–2021 £10m	Issues included disability, gender-based violence, social protection, agriculture policy reform, coffee sector development and local governance. A key feature of all of the IBPs was to link civil society advocacy to government policy processes.
Support to the Jogorku Kenesh (S2JK) (part of Governance in Action)	Kyrgyzstan	2016–2022 £9m	S2JK focused on clusters of economic policy issues including tourism, agriculture, textiles and garments, investment promotion and SEZs, tax and social security reforms, the open skies initiative and e-commerce.
Institutions for Inclusive Development (I4ID)	Tanzania	2016–2021 £7m	Selected issues were addressed across multiple sectors and locations, including menstrual health, solid waste management (Dar es Salaam), inclusive education, urban planning (Dar es Salaam), urban markets (Mwanza) and urban water supply (Singida).
Transparency and Accountability to improve economic development and service delivery (TRACTION)	Malawi	2017–2026 £17m	Selected issues include seed certification, import system reform, product certification, transparency and accountability in public procurement, education transparency and accountability, land reform and local investment planning.

Source: [DevTracker](#) data

3. Typical features of Issue-based programming

There is no standard, defined model of IBP. However, the programmes reviewed in this paper all have similarities, and it is possible to identify a set of typical features that are commonly observed in such programming. These building blocks are illustrated in Figure 1 and explained in the paragraphs that follow. Much like building with Lego, programmes have selected and combined these blocks in different ways, indicating a considerable heterogeneity of IBP styles.

Figure 1: The building blocks of Issue-based programming



1) Programme motivation

IBP is motivated by a mission to understand and contribute to locally driven social, economic or political change rather than seeking to supply preconceived or imported solutions.

2) Issue identification

The starting point for IBP is to identify which tangible issues are of concern to groups of stakeholders and which can provide a rallying point around which they can engage in processes of change. Issues are defined in terms of weaknesses in the provision of public goods and services, or other policy, institutional or legal constraints affecting people's well-being.

3) Analysis of issue

Facilitating stakeholder engagement on an issue requires an understanding of why the issue exists and possible pathways of change. Programmes use political economy analysis tools, including problem analysis, stakeholder analysis and testing of alternative pathways of change.

4) Facilitating stakeholder engagement

IBP typically involves supporting stakeholders (sometimes in broad-based coalitions including government and/or non-state actors) to engage collectively on an issue of concern.

5) Promoting locally led change processes

Issues are addressed through locally led change processes rather than externally imposed technical solutions. Programmes often adopt a behind-the-scenes, brokering role, employing a variety of strategies to nudge or enhance locally led change processes. This can include bringing stakeholders together in new configurations, supporting advocacy and media campaigns, generating new evidence, offering seed funding and selectively providing technical assistance.

6) Linking issue to systemic reform

Some issue-based programmes have followed a model using issues as an entry point to promote broader social, economic or political change. For example, by focusing on a specific service delivery problem, issue-based engagement can reveal underlying problems with the government budget or procurement system, including pervasive rent-seeking and patronage politics. In this way, some issue-based programmes have sought to trigger a snowball of domestic political action, starting with narrowly defined issues and moving towards strengthening demand for more systemic reform.

7) Adaptive programming

Particular management arrangements are required to support IBP in relation to programme leadership, staff recruitment and support, and building systems for monitoring, evaluation, learning and adaptation.

4. Evidence on results

There have not been any formal, thematic, multi-programme evaluations that would enable a comparison of the effectiveness of issue-based and traditional programmes. However, individual reviews of issue-based programmes indicate that these are often very effective in delivering results. A key source of evidence are DFID/FCDO’s programme completion reviews (PCRs) and annual reviews, which indicate that all of the programmes listed in Table 1 have performed well according to expectations.⁵ Seven of the ten projects achieved annual review scores of A (met expectations) or A+ (exceeded expectations) for all of the years that they operated. Overall, the annual review scores for the sample of IBP programmes reviewed in this paper exceeded the average for all FCDO programmes.⁶

Table 2. Evidence on the results of issue-based programmes

Programme	Evidence on results
Pyoe Pin, Myanmar	The PCR notes that Pyoe Pin far exceeded its performance targets and supported 31 coalitions, 26 of which continued activities after programme closure. It notes that Pyoe Pin made an important contribution to institutional reform in the fisheries and forestry sectors, supported successful civil society advocacy leading to Myanmar signing up to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, helped civil society adapt to the changing political context and established networks for highly vulnerable groups (e.g. sex workers). ⁷
EPI, Nepal	The PCR noted the positive contribution of EPI to improving the investment environment and identified key achievements, including the passage of the SEZ law, operationalisation of the first SEZ in Bhairahawa, investor-friendly provisions (e.g. use of digital signatures) and the strengthening of the provincial governance system. ⁸ An ODI review assesses EPI as having clear policy influence and promising results. ⁹
SLGP, Nigeria	The PCR and other reviews found that several of the issue-based projects supported by SLGP had a positive impact (e.g. on water supply and solid waste management). However, it was not clear that these had extended beyond islands of reform to deliver governance or institutional reform. ¹⁰
SAVI, Nigeria	For its PCR, SAVI provided 157 case studies showing how it and its advocacy partners had contributed to improved policies and practices, resulting in better service delivery and development outcomes, including for the poor and marginalised. Overall, it had a moderate impact on legislative change and had improved advocacy and accountability processes. SAVI outcome indicators provide evidence on the improved functionality of civil society, media and State Houses of Assembly, as well as greater interaction between these actors. SAVI was successful in building inclusive, sustainable and replicable models for constructive citizen engagement in state government policy, planning, service delivery and accountability processes. ¹¹

⁵ PCRs and annual reviews are not fully independent reviews. However, they are usually undertaken by FCDO or third-party consultants rather than programme implementers, which provides for a level of rigour and partial independence.

⁶ A 2020 review found that the most common annual review score is an ‘A’. The annual review scores for the programmes reviewed in this paper were between ‘A’ and ‘A+’. Pyoe Pin (Myanmar), EPI (Nepal), S2JK (Kyrgyzstan), Ikiraro (Rwanda), I4ID (Tanzania), SAVI (Nigeria) and PERL (Nigeria) have all scored ‘A’ (results met expectations) or ‘A+’ (results exceeded expectations) scores for every year of annual review. The other programmes have occasionally scored ‘B’ (results modestly below expectations) for individual years but have generally performed well and averaged ‘A’ over their duration.

⁷ [Burma Civil Society Strengthening Programme, Programme Completion Review](#) (2016).

⁸ [Accelerating Investment and Infrastructure in Nepal, Programme Completion Review](#) (2024).

⁹ Booth, D. (2018) [‘Incubating policy for economic transformation, lessons from Nepal’](#). ODI Report. London: ODI.

¹⁰ State and Local Government Programme, Programme Completion Review.

SLGP, End of Project Review (2008). Not available on DevTracker.

¹¹ [SAVI, Project Completion Review](#) (2016).

PERL, Nigeria	For its PCR, PERL documented 26 Most Significant Changes that it contributed to. Significant results were seen in terms of improvements in education and health spending, governance and outcomes, as well as core governance reforms connected with improved budgeting, revenue management and local governance processes. PERL monitoring indicates that these reforms have grown in scale, impact, inclusiveness and sustainability over the course of the programme. ¹²
Ikiraro cy'itembere, Rwanda	Despite a challenging relationship with government during the early part of the programme, Ikiraro overcame its slow start to succeed in bringing civil society and government actors together to discuss, design and implement policy changes. The PCR reports that the programme contributed to policy changes in the following areas: disability policy, social security classification, reconciliation policies, animal diseases and value chain regulations, reforms to the Crop Intensification Program, Kigali and secondary city planning, entrepreneurship policies for small and medium-sized enterprises, and district performance contracts. ¹³
S2JK, Kyrgyzstan	S2JK substantially adapted its strategy following the October 2020 revolution and refocused away from supporting Parliament to supporting issue-based coalitions. Significant economic policy reforms were achieved in the following areas: tourism, agro-insurance, textiles and garments, investment promotion and SEZs, tax and social security reforms, the open skies initiative and e-commerce. ¹⁴
I4ID, Tanzania	The PCR reports that I4ID engaged in 36 reform issues in 7 thematic areas, achieving significant results in solid waste management (8 issues), urban water (3 issues), urban spatial planning (5 issues), menstrual health management (7 issues), urban women vendors (2 issues), and inclusive education (9 issues). While making a positive assessment of these results, the PCR concludes that the fact that I4ID worked in seven diverse workstreams made the programme lose focus and distribute its resources thinly. ¹⁵
TRACTION, Malawi	The latest Annual Review reports mixed progress across TRACTION's portfolio of issues. ¹⁶ An ODI review makes a similar finding and states that, while TRACTION has had some successes, its 'hit rate' is rather low. It finds that, across the programme's seven workstreams, only one (seed certification) has a strong claim to success. Four others – Streamlining Product Certification within the Malawi Bureau of Standards, Transparency and Accountability in Public Procurement, Primary School Improvement Grants and Categorisation to Enhance Local Investment Planning and Economic Responsiveness – have achieved limited results so far. There is not yet enough evidence to assess progress on the Import System Reform Project and the Land Reform Project. ¹⁷

Taken together, this evidence indicates that IBP often delivers significant and sustainable results. Programmes have also worked well in challenging political contexts, including Rwanda, Tanzania (under the authoritarian leadership of President Magafuli), Myanmar (during its failed democratic interlude) and Kyrgyzstan (during a period of democratic backsliding). Table 2 indicates an impressive number and breadth of policy changes that these programmes have contributed to. However, the evidence also indicates that several programmes have had rather mixed results, showing that success is not guaranteed. The following section explores the factors identified from the above programmes that explain their successes and shortcomings.

¹² PERL, Programme Completion Review (2024) Not yet uploaded to DevTracker.

¹³ [Rwanda Multi-Donor Civil Society Support Programme, Project Completion Review](#) (2021).

¹⁴ [Governance in Action, Annual Review](#) (2021).

¹⁵ [Promoting More Inclusive and Accountable Democratic Institutions in Tanzania, Programme Completion Review](#) (2022).

¹⁶ [TRACTION, Annual Review](#) (2022).

¹⁷ Kelsall, T and Sharp, S. (2023) '[Issue-based programming in challenging contexts: learning from Traction Malawi](#)'. ODI Learning Brief. London: ODI.

5. Success factors for Issue-based programming

The findings from completion reviews and practitioners' experience of designing and delivering issue-based programmes have highlighted nine important success factors for IBP.¹⁸

1) Identifying tangible, tractable and feasible issues

The selection of appropriate issues to work on is a critical success factor. Three particular criteria appear to explain which issues have resulted in effective interventions:

- *tangibility* – the issue must be connected to problems that people care about and that directly affect their lives and livelihoods;
- *tractability* – domestic stakeholders must be interested in taking up the issue and engaging in advocacy and change processes; and
- *feasibility* – there must be realistic prospects for reforms succeeding, taking into account the actors and interest groups that may support or oppose change. In more authoritarian contexts, feasibility also depends on the selection of issues where political leaders will tolerate or welcome citizen engagement.

Box 1. Selecting issues in authoritarian political contexts

The Ikiraro programme in Rwanda got off to a difficult start because the government perceived it as seeking to give voice to political opponents. However, it was able to build trust by selecting issues that the government had already suggested as being suitable for citizen engagement. At the beginning of the programme, these included disability policy, social protection policy and regulation of the coffee value chain. Over time, and as the programme built trust with the government, it was able to engage on more sensitive issues (see Table 2).

In Tanzania under President Magafuli, the I4ID programme faced significant challenges in an increasingly restrictive and repressive political context. As in Rwanda, the programme found a way to operate by selecting issues that the government did not perceive to be politically sensitive (see Table 1).

2) Clustering and building on issues

One of pitfalls of IBP has been the tendency of some programmes to take on a portfolio of issues that is too diverse and disconnected and that offers limited

¹⁸ Williams, G., Derbyshire, H. and Kulutuye, S. (2021) 'Lessons learned from operationalising issue-based programmes: the experience of UK programmes in Nigeria'. Report prepared by PERL/LEAP for FCDO Nigeria.

prospects for scaling-up (e.g. see PCR findings on I4ID programme in Table 2). The most successful programmes have found ways to cluster the selection of issues around a particular sector or theme so as to develop synergies between issues. These issues can be connected over time so as to focus on broader reform objectives.

Box 2. An example of an approach to clustering – S2JK Kyrgyzstan

S2JK is an example of a programme that implemented a successful clustering approach. All of the programme’s interventions had a strong economic policy focus, and they were often linked to each other. For example, several interventions were designed to support small and medium-sized enterprises by working on different aspects of the tax, social security and regulatory environment. Another cluster of interventions focused on broader investment climate issues.¹⁹

3) Having a vision for transformational change

One of the risks of IBP is that a programme will succeed in initiating reforms in a few selected areas but that these will remain islands of success without scaling-up to bring about more transformational change. This risk is particularly important when programmes select issues over a broad range of policy topics and do not attempt to focus or cluster their engagement. More successful programmes have selected, designed and connected their interventions in ways that are intended to create opportunities for scale-up and sustainability.

Box 3. Linking service delivery issues to core governance problems

PERL in Nigeria has supported numerous interventions working on service delivery problems in health and education. These have extended into addressing connected core governance problems, particularly around public expenditure management. PERL’s initiatives have been tracked year on year, and have provided evidence of scale-up, wider adoption and systemic improvements in governance. The SAVI programme in Nigeria also succeeded in institutionalising new models of citizen engagement in budget and policy processes that have been strengthened further through support by PERL.

4) Linking analysis to action

Another critical success factor is the quality of the analysis of the issue and how this analysis is used to inform the intervention strategy. The issue analysis requires understanding the political economy factors that have created the problem and are blocking change, including an assessment of the institutional context and

¹⁹ Laws, E. and Rinnert, D. (2022) [‘Working politically to support economic reforms in Kyrgyzstan: lessons from an issue-based programme’](#). ODI Report. London: ODI.

stakeholder analysis. The analysis should identify potential pathways of change to address the issue, including opportunities to find common interests between stakeholders to enable collective action.

Box 4. Example of tools for issue analysis

One example of a promising approach to issue analysis is the Ikiraro programme in Rwanda, which developed an issue analysis template using political economy analysis tools for problem analysis, stakeholder mapping, institutional analysis and pathways of change. This was applied systematically to every issue addressed by the project for decision-making on whether engagement would be feasible and, if so, to guide the development of the intervention strategy.²⁰ The effectiveness of Ikiraro engagement was reviewed every three months during quarterly strategic reviews. S2JK in Kyrgyzstan further developed and institutionalised the use of the issue analysis template.

5) Facilitating locally led and self-motivated stakeholder engagement

The effective mobilisation of locally led, self-motivated stakeholders (whether in formal coalitions or more flexible forms of engagement) is essential to the success of IBP. Facilitating this collective action requires programmes to adopt a brokering and facilitation role aimed at bringing stakeholders together, discovering common interests and helping them develop advocacy and influencing strategies.

Different programmes have adopted different approaches to coalition-building, some preferring formal structures (sometimes backed by funds) and others using more flexible and informal approaches, where different combinations of stakeholders come together depending on the issue in question and the opportunities of the moment.

Box 5. Variable geometry of coalitions

S2JK in Kyrgyzstan adopted a variable geometry with different coalitions that brought together different elements of civil society, the media and government depending on the issue and the timing. Particular individuals, who were passionate about the issues, acted as reform champions, but the project sought broader participation to guard against the risk of powerful actors capturing coalitions. Many coalitions were temporary, short-lived and informal arrangements that worked best when they were focused on bringing about specific actions and targeted reforms.²¹

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Laws, E. (2022) [‘Addressing economic problems through politically smart coalitions: core lessons from S2JK’](#). ODI Article Report. London: ODI.

6) Mobilising the right combination of skills

IBP requires programmes to provide two different types of skills and knowledge:

- 1) *facilitation skills* and contextual knowledge to mobilise stakeholders and build coalitions, and equip them to engage effectively in policy and governance processes;
- 2) *technical knowledge* to engage on the substance of the issue of concern.

The most successful programmes have combined these skills. However, providing all of these skills in a single programme is challenging, and requires leadership and a considerable investment of time and resources for staff recruitment and development. It has generally been easier to mobilise the necessary range of skills when the selection of issues is not too broad, and those programmes that have focused on clusters of issues (e.g. S2JK and PERL) have found it more straightforward to match technical competence to facilitation skills.

7) Ensuring effective programme leadership

Effective leadership is a common feature of successful IBP. In many cases, this is based on the personal commitment of programme leaders to making a tangible difference to people's lives and to demonstrating a strong sense of accountability to the communities they are seeking to help. Programme leadership must be able to motivate staff to make the additional effort needed for IBP, which requires deep investment in understanding the problem, building relationships with stakeholders and providing continuous and flexible support to project partners.

8) Using grants sparingly and strategically

Donor funding, when poorly managed, can distort incentives and undermine the effectiveness of IBP. Making grant funding available to project partners can shift incentives towards competing with peers to secure grants and delivering on reporting requirements to the donor, which can reduce self-motivation, incentives for collaboration and the ability of partners to advocate effectively for change. While issue-based programmes need to provide financial support for some activities, the more effective ones have used these resources sparingly and intelligently and built on the self-motivation of partners as far as possible.

Box 6. SAVI: supporting coalitions without grants

SAVI in Nigeria intensively supported coalitions of civil society, the media and parliamentary actors to engage in policy issues but relied on their self-motivation as the primary driving force. Rather than providing grants, SAVI supported the coalitions through mentoring; technical support to planning, advocacy and accountability work; and limited direct funding of planned activities such as training events, workshops, research activities and communication campaigns. This approach proved very successful for selecting motivated partners with a genuine interest in the issues they were engaging with and building long-term capacity in advocacy and accountability work.

9) Enabling flexible and adaptive programming

IBP requires a high level of flexibility to respond to changing opportunities and adaptation to change course based on lessons learned about programme effectiveness. This requires flexibility in partnerships (the ability to bring in new partners and drop partners quickly), flexibility in planning and resources (the ability to scale activities up and down) and flexibility in results frameworks and payment milestones (balancing pressures to deliver results with space for experimentation and risk-taking), combined with regular opportunities for reflection and learning, resulting in an adaptation, for example of the strategy or theory of change.

Box 7. Innovative approaches to reporting results

Several of the programmes reviewed in this paper have adopted innovative approaches in the design of results frameworks to enable flexibility, adaptation and programme learning. For example, PERL did not define its results in advance. Instead, it retrospectively documented and provided evidence on Most Significant Changes in the reform areas where it worked and where there was evidence it had made a significant contribution. I4ID in Tanzania included in its results framework indicators of the level of effectiveness of the programme in adaptation, learning and being politically aware. These were generated through a self-assessment and third-party monitoring process.

6. Conclusions

This policy and practice paper has brought together evidence on a distinctive but under-researched style of development programming referred to as Issue-based programming. IBP is noticeably different to conventional approaches to development programming by virtue of its focus on mobilising engagement by national or local actors on narrowly defined issues in response to local demand. This contrasts with mainstream development programming, which continues to rely on more solution-driven models of externally delivered technical and financial assistance.

The evidence presented in this paper shows that many issue-based programmes have had impressive results. They have worked well across a variety of country contexts, including in more restrictive and volatile political contexts. A key advantage of IBP that enables programmes to remain effective in restrictive political contexts is their ability to select issues carefully within the limits of what is tolerated or welcomed by more authoritarian leaders and to attempt to gradually push the boundaries.

In an era of highly stretched aid budgets, IBP is attractive because it demonstrates how a large number of policy reforms can be delivered at moderate cost, while also showing the relevance and continued influence of the donor country. The approach also indicates the continued relevance of the governance agenda, while clearly linking this to practical problems, often connected to service delivery or economic policy.

The main criticism of the approach is that some issue-based programmes have only achieved islands of success without demonstrating a pathway to more systemic reform and transformational change. While this is a valid concern and probably the greatest challenge confronting IBP, several of the programmes reviewed in this paper (e.g. PERL and S2JK) have found ways to scale up and connect their issue-based projects and influence policy at a high level. This snowballing effect, whereby initial engagement in narrow issues leads to more systemic change, is probably the most promising aspect of IBP, although further examples and practical experience is needed to demonstrate how this can best be achieved.

The comparative experience of issue-based programmes across different countries has provided practical lessons on success factors for IBP. The nine success factors highlighted in this paper provide important guidance on what must be put in place to make IBP effective. It must be emphasised that it is extremely challenging to deliver all nine success factors at once. There are high risks that several of the key conditions for successful IBP will be missing, leading to poor outcomes. However, the challenges of IBP need to be compared with the risks of pursuing more conventional approaches, which are often not fit for purpose or suited to working in difficult political contexts.

IBP is not yet widely used in development programming, but has significant potential and proven results. Delivering on this potential will depend on further research and sharing of experience between programmes, which has been limited to date. It would be desirable to establish a community of practice around IBP and programmes using this approach, and to subject the approach to more formal lesson-learning, research and evaluation.

About this Policy and Practice Brief and The Policy Practice

The Policy Practice is a network of development professionals who take a political economy approach to supporting positive change in developing countries. We undertake strategic and policy work including political economy analysis, programme designs, reviews and evaluations. Our multidisciplinary approach uses the political economy perspective to understand the processes of socioeconomic change and their effect on the implementation of development programmes.

This paper is part of a series of Policy and Practice Briefs that share our insights in a changing world.

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