

Sailboats Not Trains: Adaptive Management in Nigeria SACE



This document is part of a series exploring the USAID Strengthening Advocacy and Civic Engagement Program's systems approach to achieving sustainable improvements in accountability and governance. See companion documents at <http://www.chemonics.com/sacelearning>.

Sailboats Not Trains: Adaptive Management in Nigeria

SACE

Implemented by Chemonics, USAID's five-year Strengthening Advocacy and Civic Engagement (SACE) Program in Nigeria differed from typical civil society organization (CSO) capacity development projects. SACE prioritized adaptive management with its partner organizations as the key to achieving real gains in governance and accountability. Recognizing the fluid, unpredictable nature of development interventions in sensitive, politicized contexts such as Nigeria, this approach allowed SACE to plan for sailboats, not trains¹. Rather than using grant funding to support selected CSOs to implement a linear project strategy defined up-front in the grant proposal and focused on management-centered capacity development approaches, SACE worked with CSOs using a politically aware, ecosystems-based approach to create and promote engagement with other like-minded organizations to enhance their ability to adapt their interventions and respond appropriately in a rapidly changing, complex environment.

The objective of the SACE project was to strengthen Nigerian civil society's ability to influence the development and implementation of key democratic reforms at the national, state, and local levels. To achieve its objectives, SACE adopted a system-thinking approach based on the principles of accountability ecosystems (see box) to improve accountability and governance. This approach emphasized digging below the surface of political systems to understand the underlying incentives, relationships, and power dynamics that shape government responsiveness. Additionally, the approach employs tools to understand the range of actors, institutions, and organizations involved in promoting – or undermining – accountability, how they relate to each other, and who was affected by their decisions.

Principles of Accountability Ecosystems

- Mapping and analysis of accountability ecosystems
- Vertical and horizontal integration strategies
- Strategic use of varied and complementary tactics
- Learning and adaptation
- Thinking and working politically

Learning and adaptation drove the success of the SACE approach. SACE used a mix of operational and process-oriented tools for adaptation, improved by the SACE team over the life of the project and in response to CSO feedback, to ensure they were simple, easy to use, and adaptable for CSOs working in a variety of geographic contexts with varying levels of technological connectivity across Nigeria. The project's implementation strategy used these tools to schedule time and space for clusters of CSO groups working on joint advocacy goals² to reflect on the landscape of their political ecosystem and think and work politically to adapt their programming and advance their policy objectives.

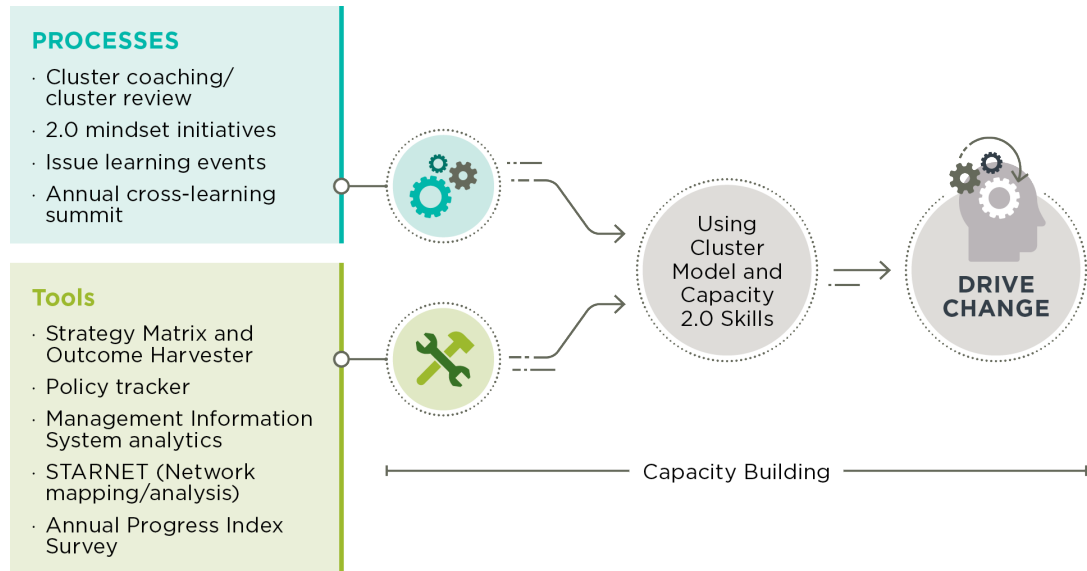
¹ Kleinfeld, R. (December 2, 2015). "In Development Work, Plan for Sailboats, Not Trains." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from http://www.ssir.org/articles/entry/in_development_work_plan_for_sailboats_not_trains. (Accessed December 1, 2018).

² A more complete description of the SACE project's design, cluster model, and co-creation process can be found in the briefs "The Nigeria SACE Approach," and The Nigeria SACE Co-creation and Inception Process."

What Did Adaptive Management Look Like in Nigeria SACE?

SACE used a mix of operational and process-oriented tools for adaptation. The program's implementation strategy infused clusters with the understanding that their work plans were 'living documents' that cluster staff would revisit at set intervals throughout the life of the grant. The adaptation processes were designed to

Exhibit 1. Key Operational Tools for Adaption



create the time and space for the project's 18 cluster groups to work collectively in a coordinated way and instill cluster groups with the freedom to change course or tactics as needed. The SACE project team introduced these tools to cluster groups and trained anchor CSOs and key cluster members to use them in their cluster meetings to assign responsibilities, track progress, and share progress updates to all cluster members.

Key Operational Tools for Adaptation

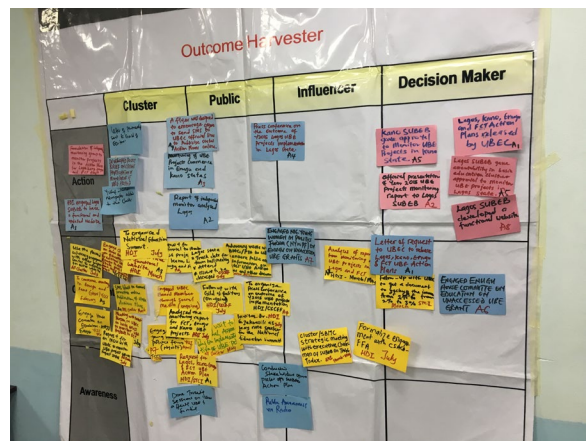
SACE developed and adapted four key performance tools that anchored information and data collection for cluster activities, tracked and measured progress towards the policy objective, and assessed the successes and setbacks of the cluster's advocacy strategy, driving the cluster's ability to adapt programming to achieve its policy objective.

Political economy/windows of opportunity analysis. SACE cluster groups undertook political economy analyses twice a year (and on an ad hoc basis throughout the year when needed) to determine the underlying reasons, motivations, and interests of institutional and individual actors in the ecosystem. They used these analyses to update the grant project's baseline analysis, identify and update emerging windows of opportunity, and navigate risks that could impact achieving project and policy objectives. In the Women Lead Agriculture Cluster, anchor CSO Women Advocates Research and Documentation Center (WARD-C), based in Lagos, conducted an analysis with their Benue, Kwara, and Enugu state cluster members to assess new windows of opportunity to contribute toward activities to push informed debate on women farmers support bills in each state. Using this tool, the clusters members were able to identify ways to think and work politically in each of their states and iterate their tactics to reflect changing political conditions on the ground.

Advocacy Strategy Matrix and Outcome Harvester. This matrix was a tool for the strategic design, management, and tracking of the advocacy activities targeting different audiences against intended policy outcomes. The matrix was divided into three levels of advocacy activity: awareness, commitment, and action with four target audiences: cluster members, public, key influencers, and decision-makers. The outcome harvesters were large, laminated posters framed on the wall during each policy cluster meeting. Cluster groups would attach

sticky notes to post specific activities in each quadrant of the matrix and over time track the landscape of the cluster's advocacy activities. The tool captured a snapshot of cluster activities at any given time and served as a recordkeeping mechanism for the clusters to identify areas where they needed to diversify their members, bring on new allies, or see gaps in their advocacy strategies. Toward the end of the program, the matrices were digitized into the project management information system, enabling trend analysis and capturing the efficacy of the levels of effort of each advocacy type to inform future planning by existing or future clusters.

Human Development Initiative (HDI), the anchor CSO for the Accountability in Education Cluster, advocated for budget transparency in education funding and increased quality and accessibility for primary and secondary education. The Strategy Matrix and Outcome Harvester from its June 2018 cluster review meeting (pictured, right) categorizes the priority activities to be conducted by each cluster member in yellow and completed activities in blue. It also shows, in pink, how completed activities led to actions taken by decision-makers in line with the cluster's outcome objectives. The outcome harvester served as a management tool to assist in adapting activities when needed while providing a visual representation of the advocacy landscape, and to show specific responsibilities of each cluster member.



HDI Strategy Matrix and Outcome Harvester, cluster review session, Lagos, Nigeria, June 2018.

STARNET. CSO partners mapped institutional relationships through the STARNET online platform (relaunched as Pando in 2018). The platform allowed them to visualize their positions relative to other organizations in the ecosystem and see their organizational relationships in real-time, broken down by an organization's role in the ecosystem. These roles could include networker, facilitator, and knowledge/research generator. It also showed CSOs which other organizations, donors, policymakers, media, or private sector groups connected to them, and what role those stakeholders might play (positive or negative) in program objectives. STARNET allowed anchor CSOs and cluster groups to see real-time representations of their networks and pull in or drop out organizations to support their work as it evolved and as advocacy plans adapted over time.

STARNET Network Map



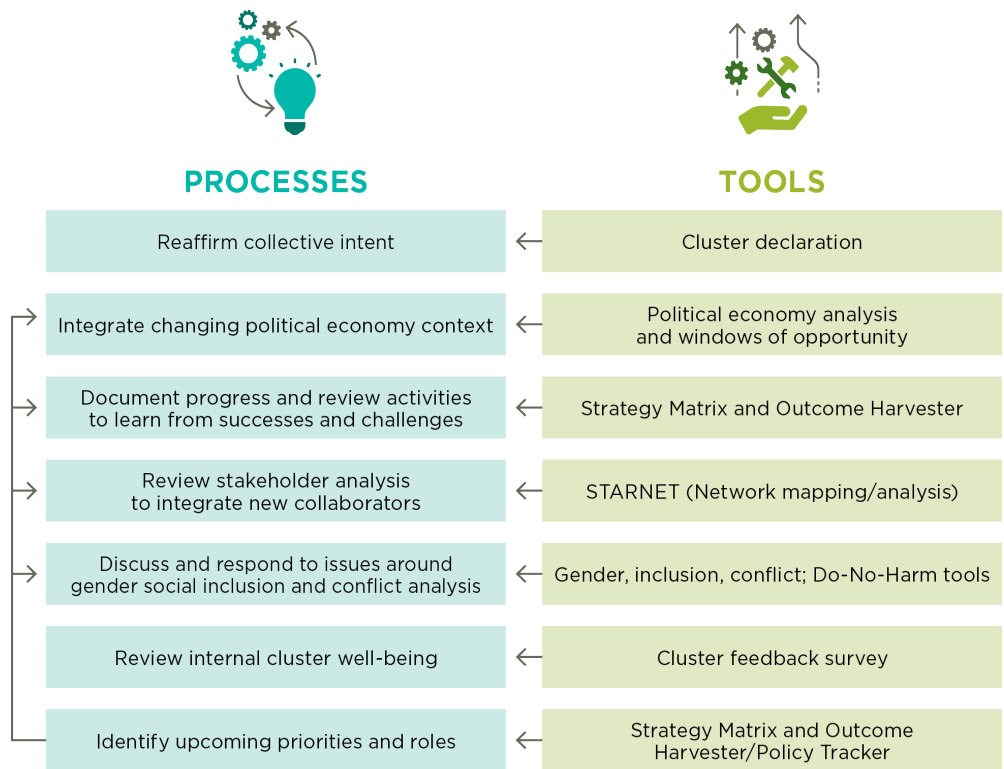
Continual communication. With limited grant budget for travel and in-person meetings, and with each cluster containing between five to 10 cluster members, continual communication between clusters and the SACE team

was essential to the management, adaptation, and monitoring process. To facilitate communication between cluster members and other SACE cluster groups, SACE program staff created WhatsApp and other electronic discussion groups, allowing clusters to share information about activities, solicit advice about tactics, and communicate updates to record in the policy tracker to the anchor CSO and the SACE team. Being able to stay in constant contact about cluster activities and reporting successes and failures allowed the cluster groups to use in-person meetings and formal cluster review sessions to focus on collective thinking about larger strategy issues and adjustments in tactics.

Key Process Tools for Adaptation

Regular cluster engagement was key to the adaptation process and to achieving cluster-level and project-level results. In its implementation strategy, SACE built dedicated time and space for reflection at the cluster and project level. At the cluster-level, anchors and cluster members came together during formal cluster reviews to check in, review progress, reevaluate, debate strategies and tactics, and make changes based on successes or failures. At the project level, SACE convened an annual learning summit with project partners, bringing cluster groups together for cross-cluster learning and reflection about how their work was contributing to SACE development objectives.

Exhibit 2. Cluster Review Process



Leadership from behind: From the SACE team to anchor-cluster-led coaching

Cluster coaching and reviews. Twice a year, with support from SACE program staff, the anchor CSO facilitated a cluster review session with its cluster members. The review process (see Exhibit 2) involved reaffirming the collective intent of the cluster group, reviewing and updating the political economy and windows of opportunity analysis to ascertain changes in the accountability and political landscape, identify new windows of opportunity or new blockages or setbacks, and collectively discuss the strategies and tactics needed to advance advocacy, engagement, and public awareness and efforts to achieve program and policy goals.

The cluster review process served as a critical nexus for learning and adaptation between the anchor organization, individual cluster members, and the SACE team. During these sessions, cluster groups engaged in vigorous debate about the grant’s implementation strategy, whether the plan was achieving its intended results,

whether cluster members were living up to their commitments to the group, and what, if anything, the cluster needed to change to make sure they achieved results. Actions taken during cluster review sessions included: deciding to drop cluster members who were not delivering on their commitments; adding new cluster members to fill skills or networking gaps identified in the political economy and windows of opportunity analysis; and renegotiating work plans, budgets, and timelines in the light of new evidence about opportunities or constraints.

Cluster review meetings served as a forum for cluster members, not just anchors, to demonstrate their own knowledge and understanding of their work and share strategies and give advice to their cluster colleagues. They also served as a way to hold each other accountable for meeting cluster commitments. The process of completing the Strategy Matrix and Outcome Harvester as a group and putting the sticky notes in the relevant box generated discussion, debate, and challenges. Members of each organization would recount what activities they did or didn't accomplish and what they may need to do differently to achieve their common goal.

Over the course of the project, cluster coaching and reviews emerged as the most important learning and adaptation process facilitated by SACE. The process nurtured the mindsets of anchor and cluster members to be resourceful and thoughtful about how they worked, communicated, and collaborated with cluster partners, and helped them to adapt their work as needed. As time passed, the benefits of collaboration became more apparent as anchor CSOs were able to do more, individual cluster members saw their organizational reach amplified by the advocacy of their anchor and with the strength of the cluster behind them, and the clusters made real, measurable gains towards their policy goals. As described by Joel Bisina, executive director of Leadership Initiative for Transformation and Empowerment (LITE)-Africa, anchor CSO for the Accountability for Resource Management of Niger Delta Institutions cluster, "In unity, we have greater strength."

Clusters Adapting Tactics

After its formation and inception in 2015, the Inclusion in Education cluster struggled to gain access to state education plans. Repeated visits to the state-level Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) offices yielded no results. The cluster also was unable to gain traction to form state-level joint-monitoring committees. During a cluster review meeting in late 2016, the cluster resolved to use more aggressive tactics to demand these plans, having relied primarily on letter-writing and advocacy visits to the ministries. The cluster revised their implementation plan by:

- Submitting requests under the Freedom of Information Act to compel the state ministries to release state plans
- Undertaking high-level meetings to the National UBEC to demand collaboration by states

These dual tactics yielded instant results. The executive secretary acquiesced to the cluster's demands, releasing the state plans and writing to the state-level directors to collaborate with and incorporate the cluster members in their activities. In Kano, Enugu, and Lagos states, this led to the successful petition to allow CSO monitoring of basic education projects in November 2017 and joint monitoring and collaboration that was key to the cluster achieving some of its policy outcomes.

Annual learning summit. The annual learning summit brought together SACE staff, CSO anchors, and cluster members to review progress toward program objectives. Where cluster coaching sessions were focused on the specific details of monitoring, planning, and adapting cluster advocacy strategies, annual learning summits were designed to be forums for reflection about how the work of the clusters contributed to project outcomes and how the organizations themselves were changing how they worked. The summit was preceded each year with the administration of the Annual Progress Index assessment, which solicited information on the progress made by each cluster against its policy objectives.

Using the results from the index and evidence collected through the Strategy Matrix and Outcome Harvester and the cluster coaching sessions, the annual learning summits focused on having each cluster conduct higher, impact-level outcome harvesting using a Most Significant Change methodology to examine how their advocacy

work contributed to the policy change. Clusters would identify their priorities for the coming year and the group would identify project priorities that would enable the clusters to achieve their goals.

In this way, the annual learning summit became the key learning and adaptation arena for SACE in the way that cluster reviews were for clusters. It provided a specific forum for cluster groups to come together and collect and deliver critical feedback among their members, share experiences cross-clusters, and help SACE gather feedback to plan how it needed to adjust its implementation or operational strategies to support its CSO partners and stay on track to achieve program results. The summits also examined operational issues and how SACE's approach contributed to strengthening the internal capacity of cluster members, whether the cluster model was creating more effective civil society collaboration, and how well the project was doing in meeting its objectives to strengthen accountability and governance.

Practical Lessons Learned

Embedding a culture of adaptive management and flexibility in the project design. SACE program gains in governance and accountability depended on the policy successes of its 18 policy clusters implementing strategies with individualized work plans. Unlike traditional civic engagement projects, neither Chemonics, the SACE program team, nor USAID mandated a specific strategy or set of activities. They also did not expect implementation to take place on a static, linear track. The SACE program design required the clusters to individually conceptualize and plan the steps they believed were best suited to achieve their policy objective. If an initial strategy or activity did not bring about the expected result, or if the political conditions on the ground changed, the cluster changed course in another direction, much like a sailboat and unlike a train driving on a fixed, prescribed track and schedule.

Programmatic flexibility must go together with operational and donor flexibility. Following a prescribed, linear process would not have achieved the results SACE produced. When changes happened in the local context, whether it was newly elected officials, new government policies, or newly adopted legislation, it required a willingness for the cluster to modify objectives, strategies, or tactics. It also required the SACE team and USAID to allow these changes and the uncertainties that accompanied them. SACE's adaptive management approach required flexibility by all parties to operate under the uncertainty of a flexible work plan. Conversely, it required the clusters to record their successes, setbacks, and failures and share them with SACE staff and USAID. Flexibility and adaptive management require trust among cluster members, between clusters, and between the clusters, the SACE program team, and USAID. That trust can only be established by mutual transparency and accountability, which were the SACE goals for good governance.

Build in time for learning, reflection, and adaptation. The cluster review process enabled each policy cluster to determine its own 'best fit' solution and path to success. For example, the strategy and activities of the education cluster had to be different from the extractives cluster because of the nature of the sector, level of political power at play, and the geographic location of the activities. The annual learning summit allowed the SACE program team to bring all 18 cluster groups together to review the work of the others and see how their individual efforts could be enhanced by adopting tactics of other clusters. It also allowed the SACE program team to see how the collective cluster efforts contributed to achieving program results with adjustments as needed. According to annual learning summit responses and survey results, nearly 160 organizations gave coaching and review meetings the highest rating for supporting them to achieve policy outcomes.

Use and transfer tools that are simple and effective. The Strategy Matrix and Outcome Harvester and WhatsApp communication groups served as simple, easily replicable tools, especially for organizations with limited means, to develop adaptive management systems and processes. The outcome harvester reaped big outcomes for learning and adapting strategies and tactics throughout implementation. It provided cluster groups with a visual representation of their work and progress made toward their objectives. This allowed the cluster groups to track the incremental change toward policy objectives and assess how the variety of tactics used at different levels of

the ecosystem helped move the cluster towards their goal. If the selection of tactics and activities were unhelpful for decision-makers or people with influence to advance the policy process, it allowed them to discuss as a group why and what could work better.

Even though the SACE project ended, these tools are already being used by cluster members in their work funded by other donors. For example, new clusters focused on open government partnership in the Niger Delta, extractives, and education launched without SACE support. In Kogi State, a new youth cluster using the SACE model emerged, and this cluster, which includes CSOs that previously worked with SACE, has been able to push successfully for the passage of the Youth Development Fund Bill in October 2018. Another new cluster, led by Youth Alive Foundation, a former SACE cluster anchor, successfully garnered a £2 million grant from the U.K. Department for International Development. These simple and practical tools are easily adaptable and transferrable and have taken on a life of their own, fostering sustainability of the SACE approach and outcomes by the Nigerian civil society sector. With context-appropriate adaptations, they should be transferable to civil society programs in other countries.