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Influencing Government: five top tips



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All blogs

Many of us working on market systems interventions have at some point struggled to influence government. At ENABLE2, a business environment reform programme in Nigeria, we've often felt that frustration. We've also learned, over seven years, some valuable lessons.

In this blog we share our best five top tips on how you can influence government.

1. Connect your objectives to the government's political priorities

- › Understand the objectives of the government body you're trying to influence
- › Look for ways that your objectives contribute to theirs
- › Make these shared objectives part of your communication with government

For example in Nigeria in 2014 and 2015 regional governments received less central government funding than in previous years. Short of money, regional governments were anxious to raise more tax revenue.

In Kaduna, a region in northern Nigeria, ENABLE2's partners in the business community helped to persuade government that by simplifying the tax system they could achieve their objective (higher tax revenue) while also helping businesses.

In 2016, Kaduna's state government reduced the number of regional and local taxes from around 200 to 19. The following year, Kaduna's tax revenue rose from around ₦11.5 billion (£24 million) to ₦17 billion (£35 million)*.

When you partner with a ministry or other public sector body, also check if their priorities align with government's overall priorities. If they do, civil servants are more likely to feel pressure to deliver the reform beyond the next political reshuffle. This works quite well where you can find a "champion" within the top political leadership to exert this pressure.

*Other development actors also contributed to this reform, and to the partnership with Nigeria's National Assembly mentioned later in the blog post. Notably, the programme Growth and Employment in States 3 (GEMS3). ENABLE2 and GEMS3 are both funded by the UK's Department for International Development. Revenue figures from 'Kaduna generates N17bn in 2016, targets N50.2bn in 2017', Vanguard online, 15th January 2017.

2. Assess how government budgeting could affect the timing of reform

Reforms which do not require government spending often happen quicker. If the reform you want requires government spending, advocate for it before government sets its next year's budget.

The timing of advocacy can make a great difference. One ENABLE2 partner had waited eight years for public funding to complete an irrigation network. The breakthrough came from a single advocacy visit, one month before government agencies drafted their next year's budget. Public officials remembered and honoured the partner's request to include its irrigation scheme in their budget.

3. Understand government officials' personal interests and motivations

Public officials are often influenced by more than just the goals of their organisation. In Nigeria, personal recognition and prestige are often important sources of motivation. By understanding this, you can tailor how you present your support, appealing more to decision-makers.

ENABLE2's partnership with Nigeria's National Assembly provides an example. The Senate President has been a driving force behind the partnership, which is improving and accelerating legislation to help small businesses. The Senate President talks openly about one of the factors motivating him: he wants to secure a legacy, being personally recognised as someone who boosted Nigeria's economic growth.

Simple background research can help you to find out what motivates a politician or civil servant. ENABLE2 often finds that government officials who previously worked in the private sector are more receptive to businesses' concerns.

One reason why it's important to understand individuals' motivations is that these motivations can vary greatly, even between people in similar positions.

ENABLE2 has also found that government officials' willingness to try new things varies greatly. Often, fixed budgets and weak incentives for performance make Nigerian civil servants risk-averse. Yet some officials – particularly elected officials – are keen to be seen as innovators and embrace new ideas.

4. Find stakeholders who can apply pressure or spur healthy competition

Government officials are often highly sensitive to negative press, and will act to avoid it. If you face resistance or inertia from government counterparts, consider persuading and supporting the media to investigate the costs of inaction.

> [Read our blog on top tips on how to influence the media](#)

As well as the media, you may find that certain high-powered individuals elsewhere in government, or outside, can persuade the relevant public officials to listen. ENABLE2 and its civil society partners use stakeholder mapping here, to identify and engage influential individuals.

Healthy competition between regional governments, and between ministries, can also help to bring about change. Like anyone, the government officials we've worked with are often influenced by their peers.

ENABLE2 has seen this in Katsina and Kano, two regions in northern Nigeria. In 2016 their neighbouring region, Jigawa, started to standardise the size of bowls used in marketplaces to measure grain purchases. Spurred on by their neighbour's efforts, Katsina and Kano's governments have since started to plan their own similar schemes.

5. Clarify what is (not) on offer

ENABLE2 mainly offers technical assistance; the programme does not give grants to government bodies. By clarifying that grants are not on offer ENABLE2 avoids partnering with officials whose main motivation is to access donor money (and who may only pretend to share the programme's objectives in order to get that money).

Nonetheless, some of our government counterparts have been undermined by colleagues who wrongly suspect that they have received grants. We therefore

encourage our government partners to tell their colleagues what type of support they are (not) getting. Where our government counterparts need certain colleagues' buy-in, we encourage our counterparts to include these colleagues in ENABLE2 training sessions.

We hope you find these tips useful; we look forward to reading what has worked for you in the comments section.

For more information about ENABLE2 please visit our website: www.enable-nigeria.com

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