



Making the Case for Thinking and Working Politically: Lessons from Nigeria's PERL Programme

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This blog highlights key insights and lessons from a longer think piece that Cathy is writing for the TWP CoP on Making the Case for Thinking and Working Politically: Lessons from Nigeria's PERL Programme, which will be published in the Autumn 2025. The think piece draws primarily from unpublished sources. These include Hughes, C. et al (2024) "PERL's Thinking and Working Politically Approach: Lessons for the UK Government's engagement in Nigeria", a study undertaken by FCDO Nigeria's independent PMEL (Portfolio Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning programme) function, as well as internal value for money analysis supported by the author that informed PERL's Programme Completion Review.

In today's climate of [shrinking aid budgets and rising demands for demonstrable results](#) at home as well as in recipient countries, development actors are under increasing pressure to show clear value for money (VFM). Yet, traditional performance frameworks often [fail to capture the messy, complex nature of governance reform and development progress](#). Against this backdrop, the UK funded [Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn \(PERL\)](#) in Nigeria offers powerful evidence that a [Thinking and Working Politically \(TWP\)](#) approach—locally-led, adaptive, and collaborative—can [deliver sustainable, cost effective, governance and service delivery outcomes](#).

Why TWP now?

Globally, aid spending is under scrutiny, with public and political support for overseas development assistance waning in multiple donor countries, [including the UK](#). At the same time, practitioners continue to grapple with the challenge of how to support transformational change in fragile and politically charged environments. Against this backdrop, arguments for TWP approaches have [gained traction](#) for their ability to navigate complexity, build local ownership, and create the political space for reforms to take root.

However, TWP faces a paradox. A politically smart approach to promoting change that is rooted in contextual realities can often help to achieve significant, lasting impacts. Yet some of its key characteristics – including the complexity of the issues it seeks to understand and address, its intention to operate in more subtle ways, often under the radar, as well as its adaptive nature – can make those achievements harder to communicate. As a result, the benefits of approaches anchored in TWP principles often remain confined within practitioner networks, limiting their potential to inform broader investment decisions.

The PERL programme, which ran from 2016 to 2024, helps bridge this gap by offering both qualitative and quantitative evidence of how TWP can enhance effectiveness, efficiency, and equity in service delivery and governance.

What made PERL different?

Building on two decades of UK Government investment in Nigeria and emerging lessons [PERL](#) was an innovative programme that sought to bring together governments and citizen groups [to work collectively to address governance challenges](#) associated with the delivery of basic services, at the Federal, State, and District levels. The Programme worked through three integrated pillars:

1. Accountable, Responsive and Capable Government (ARC): Supporting government institutions.
2. Engaged Citizens Pillar (ECP): Enabling citizens, media, and civil society to demand accountability.
3. Learning, Evidence and Advocacy Partnership (LEAP): Facilitating reflection, adaptation, and learning.

What made PERL distinct was its intention to consistently apply TWP principles throughout the programmatic cycle: problem-driven engagement, locally-led design, the use of political economy analysis (PEA) to understand contextual realities and tailor interventions accordingly, learning, adaptive management, and strong partnerships that adopted collaborative, multi stakeholder ways of working. This approach was not only embedded in how PERL worked—it was explicitly reflected in the business case value for money arguments that informed the UK Government's investment decision.

Beyond cost effectiveness: PERL's TWP value proposition

The standard **economic case** for PERL used [classic Value for Money \(VFM\) concepts](#)—economy, efficiency, equity, effectiveness, and cost-effectiveness—to argue that a TWP approach would help overcome governance blockages and deliver public value equal to or greater than the UK's £100 million investment.

The [cost-effectiveness](#) rationale was potentially attractive for Nigerian government stakeholders as well as citizens. It outlined how PERL could enable the government of Nigeria to increase tax revenues, improve public spending efficiency, and deliver better development outcomes—particularly for marginalised citizens—by reducing corruption and waste.

At the same time, the business case held appeal for both the British Government and UK taxpayers. Arguing that a TWP approach would result in more [efficient](#) use of [FCDO's investment](#), it outlined a clear value proposition.

The TWP approach offers a distinct value proposition that goes beyond narrow cost effectiveness arguments. The rationale at the heart of PERL was that its problem-driven, politically smart, adaptive, locally led, and collaborative approach, explicitly bringing together government actors and citizens to address collective challenges, would yield better and more sustainable results for each pound spent

than more traditional or conventional programmes that tackled “supply” or “demand” problems in isolation and from a technical perspective that did not take political realities sufficiently into account. While PERL would not be cheap or easy to implement, its up-front investment in PEA, continuous learning and flexible management was expected to steer efforts toward issues with genuine local traction and thereby achieve higher impact.

By tracking political dynamics and programme progress in real time, PERL staff were expected to avoid dead-ends, mitigate risks and seize windows of opportunity, raising the ratio of sustainable results to every pound spent.

Efficiency gains were also to come from evidence-based course corrections: managers could drop unviable tactics, redirect resources to promising ones and scale successes through national and state learning platforms.

Real outcomes, tangible value

Evidence from unpublished summative reviews of PERL confirms that the UK Government’s bet on a TWP approach paid off.

Despite significant budget cuts and a turbulent political and economic environment, both domestic and international, PERL achieved [measurable improvements](#). Conservative VFM analysis undertaken by PERL suggested that contributions to reforms supported by PERL were valued at over [£100 million](#) in benefits. Notable accomplishments that PERL helped to bring about include:

- **Education:** In Kaduna State, school enrolment rose (particularly for girls), with completion rates for girls jumping from 23% in 2017 to 58% in 2022, an outcome that PERL helped secure through fostering dialogue, collaboration and engagement between government authorities and civil society organisations.
- **[Health and Education Financing](#):** PERL worked closely with state leaders in their lobbying efforts to increase allocations from the central government and improve spending efficiency.
- **Tax and Revenue Systems:** in part because of their engagement with PERL, political elites in Kaduna and Kano became more supportive of reforms, recognising that increases in revenues improved public services would build political capital.
- **Constitutional Reform:** Working closely with partners on the ground and facilitating spaces for dialogue across a variety of actors, PERL contributed to an amendment granting financial autonomy to state legislatures, strengthening oversight and accountability.

Also compelling is the evidence of PERL’s **local ownership and sustainability**. Internal VFM analysis suggested Nigerian stakeholders committed over £12 million in local funding to ensure PERL-

supported initiatives can continue beyond the programme's lifetime—a true marker of relevance and value.

Realising the TWP value proposition.

As established in the 2024 PMEL study on which this blog draws, PERL was able to achieve real value because of the way it worked on the ground, following TWP principles:

- **Problem-driven approach:** PERL enabled the development and implementation of more responsive budgets and policies by engaging state and non-state actors in joint problem-solving. In the state of Jigawa, for example, this led to reforms in teacher recruitment and increased funding for girls' education.
- **Local ownership through co-created platforms:** PERL supported platforms like [KADBEAM](#) in Kaduna, which helped to drive budget efficiencies. PERL's contributions have been valued at over £8m.
- **Adaptive programming using PEA:** PERL's use of PEA informed strategic decisions, and this helped to improve effectiveness. The Programme was also flexible, which made it possible to pause or adjust activities, including for instance reallocating consultancy funds post-election when political traction was low.
- **Learning and adaptation:** Insights from poor uptake of Kaduna's health scheme led to advocacy for flexible payments. In Kano, replicating PERL's engagement in Jigawa with religious leaders mobilised £24K for girls' transport to school.
- **Scaling and replication:** PERL helped 26 states join the [Open Government Partnership](#) (OGP), enabling 27 to qualify for £30m in World Bank grants through improved planning and budgeting systems.
- **Effective collaboration:** In three states in Nigeria – Kaduna, Kano and Jigawa – PERL built partnerships that improved budget transparency and citizen oversight, leading to better outcomes, especially for girls' education.

What enabled the realisation of the TWP value proposition?

A few design and implementation features proved crucial:

- **Building on past achievements:** PERL drew on relationships and systems developed through previous UK aid supported programmes.

- **Complementarity with sector programmes:** the use of PEA helped inform other FCDO-funded initiatives on health and education, thereby enabling coordination and faster progress.
- **Prioritising equity:** A purposeful focus in programming enabled PERL to bring about positive change for women and other excluded groups;
- **Investment in local talent:** PERL worked closely with and brought on board high-calibre Nigerian consultants who understood political dynamics well and were instrumental in building trust.
- **Decentralised decision-making:** Within PERL, state-level teams with contextual insight had the ability and power to make timely and effective adjustments to PERL initiatives and activities in response to realities and shifts on the ground.
- **Supporting strategic, vertical linkages.** The Programme's support to Nigeria's engagement with OGP at the national level helped catalyse governance reforms in most Nigerian states. Linking OGP reforms to World Bank grants incentivised uptake, demonstrating how politically smart programming can align with economic incentives to drive change.

Barriers to realising TWP's full potential

While PERL's TWP approach was demonstrably effective, it faced several institutional challenges. Some of the most prominent included the following:

- **[Incompatible performance management systems:](#)** Payment-by-results frameworks pushed for pre-defined deliverables, and quick, more easily quantifiable results, which generated incentives that limited PERL's desire to test and experiment and the Programme's ability to adapt to evolving political realities.
- **Narrow definitions of VFM:** The UK government's focus on economic metrics of cost effectiveness proved challenging while ignoring some social outcomes and citizen perspectives on what they valued about the programme.
- **Tensions between PERL delivery and broader bilateral engagement:** PERL's need to respond to broader UK government and country office priorities did not always favour a conducive environment for politically smart and adaptive programming on the ground and strained the resources of programme teams.
- **Budget volatility:** Through its lifespan, PERL experienced several funding cuts, which were often sudden and deep. This limited the programme's visibility and ability to operate strategically with a long term horizon, undermined trust with local partners, and forced premature termination of promising initiatives.

These constraints help to reinforce a crucial lesson that has consistently emerged in efforts to think and work in more politically informed ways: TWP requires not only the right implementation approach, but also [enabling funding and management systems](#). Without flexibility and support from donor institutions, even the best-designed TWP programmes will struggle to realise their full value.

What can practitioners and donors learn?

The PERL experience offers several takeaways for practitioners advocating for TWP:

1. **Make the case with evidence:** PERL shows it is possible to track and demonstrate the value of TWP using mixed methods—combining quantitative estimates with rich, qualitative narratives.
2. **Embed TWP in business cases:** Framing TWP explicitly in economic terms that highlight its value proposition helps justify investment to donors and host governments alike.
3. **Support adaptive delivery mechanisms:** Funding instruments and results frameworks must allow flexibility to adjust tactics based on political realities.
4. **Invest in local leadership:** Local actors are best placed to identify problems and opportunities. Hiring and trusting local talent is vital.
5. **Promote learning and scaling:** Successful TWP initiatives should be documented, shared, and replicated. Learning platforms can catalyse national uptake.

Final reflections

In an era of dwindling resources for international development, PERL makes a compelling case for **better, not just more, investing**. TWP approaches are smarter: they can stretch aid funding further by responding to what matters locally, avoiding costly missteps, and supporting lasting reform efforts that are led and driven by citizens and governments on the ground.

In this new, evolving global geopolitical context, TWP is not a niche or luxury—it is absolutely essential for meaningful, sustainable development. The PERL experience offers a compelling example of the kinds of transformations that might be possible through approaches that are anchored in TWP principles, practices, and potential. TWP's value add can be exponential, especially when compared with more traditional ways of working – and the investment could not be more worthwhile.

About the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice

The Thinking and working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) is a global network of practitioners, researchers and policymakers in development and global affairs committed to promoting more effective policy and practice. The TWP CoP works to foster more politically aware approaches to understand how change happens and why, translate findings and implications emerging from political economy analysis into operationally relevant guidance, encourage more flexible and adaptable ways of working, and provide evidence-based insights that can stimulate innovation, sharing and learning in international development and global affairs.

The TWP CoP is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and hosted by the International Development Department at University of Birmingham.

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