

Sparking & sustaining governance innovation with reform-minded teams



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Comments are welcome

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Learning Series: Designing Governance Innovations in Resource-Constrained Settings

Introduction

In August 2022, MIT GOV/LAB trained two designers using the Lean Governance Innovation Design (LGID) tools we considered relevant for their contexts. The designer-researchers, who had previously worked on public sector innovation in Latin America, were embedded in government offices in Nigeria and Sierra Leone from September to December 2022. Federico Vaz was embedded with the Presidential Enabling Business Environment Council (PEBEC) Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria, while Andre Arruda was embedded with Freetown City Council in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Before the designer-researchers embedded with the teams, we had only briefly engaged with them through a couple of consultations that highlighted some of the challenges and interesting ways in which they were already innovating.

Through the designer-researchers, we aimed to observe the challenges civil servants faced while attempting to innovate. This would offer us the opportunity to discern more closely what sparked and sustained innovation from the perspective of behaviors and motivations, something we had little access to in the bootcamp and accelerator models preceding this one.

We were fortunate to be working with strong, reform-minded leadership from both the Sierra Leone and Nigerian teams though. From the beginning, things did not feel like the status quo. That made our learnings all the more interesting — even in reform-minded teams, innovation is challenging, as the government entities are part of a larger resource-constrained ecosystem.

In this project we had three goals:

- / To conduct exploratory research on each bureaucracy's innovation culture by immersing in each government team: The designer-researchers documented patterns with the hopes of informing future development of hypotheses on how innovations are sparked and sustained within Global South governments.
- / To co-design a governance solution with each government team: As the design facilitators, the designer-researchers guided the government teams

in identifying a problem, developing a prototype, and experimenting with the Lean Governance Innovation Design (LGID) approach to address governance challenges.

- / To evaluate, iterate, and refine the LGID approach with each team: This required periodic reflections with the government teams. A third LGID researcher at MIT supplemented research efforts by conducting interviews and design sprints on the LGID experience, with the goal of producing an updated curriculum that addresses the capacity gaps among public sector innovators in the Global South.

Collaborators: This project was undertaken with the PEBC Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria, and the FCC in Freetown, Sierra Leone.



Community members participate in consultation. Photo via Andre Arruda.

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The Governance Innovation Learnings Cases:

Learning Cases at MIT GOV/LAB: The aim of the learning case series is to bring in voices from the field and the academy that we can listen to and learn from to improve our approach to practitioner-academic research collaborations and ultimately contribute to theory-building and change on the ground.

In international development, there is often pressure to report positive results and change. Yet there is no single pathway or easy fix for improving governance and, particularly, advancing tenets of transparency, accountability, and participation. Improved governance outcomes depend on us building robust evidence and learning from failures and false starts as well as successes.

Governance Innovation Learning Cases: At the MIT GOV/LAB Governance Innovation Initiative, our engagement with partners is driven by the need to learn together. We document every step of the governance innovation design process to understand the opportunities for and challenges

and pathways to innovation in bureaucracies in the Global South. To do so, we work with reform-minded leadership who are interested in understanding the intricacies of governance innovation in their contexts.

We define **governance innovation** as a new solution to a complex problem in public services, products, or processes leading to a more accountable, responsive, and transparent relationship between citizens, government, and civil society.

The learning series “Designing Governance Innovations in Resource-Constrained Settings” includes:

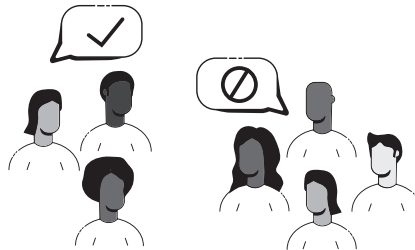
- / **Executive Summary:** A compilation of the learning case series findings
- / **Case 1:** Building the runway for governance innovation to take off in Sierra Leone
- / **Case 2:** Who has the itch? Sparking governance innovations in the health sector in Nigeria
- / **Case 3:** The tradeoff between sparking and sustaining innovation
- / **Brief:** Building a minimum viable product with Lean Governance Innovation Design

We acknowledge that every context is different (city versus national government, innovation lab versus tax authority, etc.), and yet within those differences we found commonalities in the challenges of designing governance innovation.

Takeaways Summary

When co-designing with reformers, better to co-design within the team that has the itch

Designing with a reform-minded team like the PEBEC Secretariat was critical to sparking innovation inside teams that may have tunnel vision considering their challenges. However, designing with a reform team like the PEBEC Secretariat alone was not enough to accelerate innovation. When the tax authority, which is the office with the itch, joined the co-design sessions,



every design session felt more necessary, because the teams were laser-focused on scratching the itch. Having an itch is an aphorism often used in entrepreneurship to refer to a problem that is so pressing that whoever is experiencing it will want to address it, or scratch it. In the public sector, given the competing demands, low resources, and high stakes, having an itch seems necessary to achieve implementation.

A design toolbox rather than a rigid linear approach is more helpful when facing challenges already being addressed: Find the entry point

We learned that design is not helpful as a linear approach to public sector challenges where civil servants go from challenge identification to implementation. In this case, the team had already landed on a challenge before the designer-researcher arrived. By the time they had outlined the requirements of the solution, instead of ideating from scratch, they were able to find existing solutions that could be applied to the project. **In a nutshell, it's more useful to diagnose the current situation and understand which parts of design are more likely to fit the context.** The participating staff did not need to attend a design session or curriculum module session, they needed new approaches to help them remove the bottlenecks in the project.

For example, for the FCC project, staff hoped to learn a formal approach for conducting community consultations for planning urban infrastructural projects. That was the entry point to insert design practices to help develop either a solution or the requirements for a solution.



PEBEC Secretariat team at PEBEC offices. Photo via: PEBEC Secretariat

Expert-learner power dynamics are unavoidable when international academics and civil servants collaborate.

Partners perceived the roles of both designer-researchers in similar ways. The presence of international designers introduced a consultant-client dynamic into the design process. These pre-existing norms of interaction presented a challenge for both designer-researchers. Because consultants had previously focused on delivering outputs, partners expected the same focus from the designer-researchers. This expectation limited opportunities for the teams to critically compare their existing innovation methodologies to the designer-researchers' innovation approach, as the working relationship veered into the designer reviewing partners' work rather than co-designing.

Background

THE PROCESS

MIT GOV/LAB met with the leadership of both the PEBEC Secretariat and the FCC to co-identify challenges that the designer-researchers could address in three months while also learning from the teams' working culture. The designer-researchers would then narrow down these challenges in September and bring on the relevant government team members to tackle these challenges.

Both the Sierra Leone team and the Nigeria teams followed the Lean Governance Innovation Design (LGID) approach to structure the phases of their collaboration with their respective government teams, adapting the curriculum to each institutional and country context. LGID is an experimental approach, consisting mostly of practitioner-oriented exercises and built on the learnings from the original Governance Innovation Bootcamp curriculum we first piloted in Sierra Leone in mid-2021 and later in Ekiti state, Nigeria (part of this series of Learning Cases). It's built on four pillars (**Image 1**) and it's divided into five **LGID Modules**.

The four pillars of Lean Governance Innovation Design (**image 1**):



We should build it (It's ethical)

We want it: We all want the solution for a problem we all have

We have the appropriate tech: to access more people

We can sustain it: politically and financially

Lean Governance Innovation Design modules:

M0. Building Your Team And Research: Build the local team and deploy the research tools to start documenting governance innovation.

M1. Identifying A Real Problem: Find the cause of the problem.

M2. Getting And Sustaining Support: Use power as an enabler instead of an obstacle. Design the network you need to sustain the innovation.

M3. Finding Ideas Worth Testing: Understand which ideas are appropriate and are likely to thrive in the local context.

M4. Testing Ideas, Pretotyping: Before prototyping, there's pretotyping. Test the ideas wherever you are, with as little time as possible, and at no cost.

M5. Getting To Pilot, From V 0.1 To V 1.0: Tell the story of the governance innovation you're proposing and develop your pilot plan.

Innovation Research & LGID Evaluation

In addition to using the LGID framework to co-design for a governance challenge, each designer-researcher conducted observations and interviews to understand how each institution innovates. Research was documented through daily and weekly journals that tracked the specific behaviors, motivations, and pathways associated with innovating bureaucrats. Mariama N'Diaye, a design fellow at MIT GOV/LAB, conducted 13 interviews with senior leaders and mid-level managers from both government teams. Based on this feedback, the research team tinkered with the LGID framework, throwing out exercises that weren't appropriate and designing new ones. N'Diaye also ran five in-person design sprints with the designer-researchers upon their return to MIT to understand what worked and what didn't during our first iteration of the approach.



PEBEC Secretariat team members participate in a problem definition exercise. Photo via: Federico Vaz

SIERRA LEONE

Partnership

The Freetown City Council (FCC) is the municipal government that houses the mayor and manages all affairs within Sierra Leone's capital. The Mayor Delivery Unit (MDU) is a newly structured team within the FCC that pilots and implements solutions for the Transform Freetown Program — a four-year mayoral initiative that outlines 11 sectors to transform through data-based, inclusive, and innovative approaches. The designer-researcher was based within MDU's two-person Urban Planning team. Members of MDU's Disaster Management Team also assisted in co-identifying and co-designing a solution for a governance challenge.

Need

The FCC invited the designer-researcher to work on the Moyiba project, one of three long-term urban planning projects that had been in the works for two years. Moyiba is a hillside community whose population has expanded by an estimated 25 percent since 2016. This growth, and specifically the building of improvised infrastructure, has come at the expense of the landscape, eroding soil, which increases the risk of natural disasters like flooding and landslides. Likewise, community services have not caught up to the rapid expansion. The Urban Planning team had been looking for a scalable community consultation model that could then inform the city's response to urban communities' changing infrastructural needs.

Team

The designer-researcher worked with each staff member to introduce relevant LGID tools or exercises to each day's work (as opposed to imposing a curriculum-style set of sessions). The participants invited the Disaster Management Team (DMT) to the community engagement phase, where they aligned on needs. As part of the LGID process, the urban planning team also conducted a series of unstructured interviews and collaborative workshops, both within the Moyiba community and the MDU team, to identify a challenge and develop an Action Plan. In total, the team conducted 33 interviews, as well as additional surveys collected through the KoboTool, with families in different areas of the Moyiba community.

The interviews revealed that a pressing need was a solution to the community's difficulty in communicating with the government during natural disasters, usually during the rainy season. The current model of communication with the DMT is not as efficient as it used to be with the growing population in Moyiba.

The problem statement was refined:

“How can we create an accessible process for improving community responsiveness and communication with the government, particularly in times of emergency?”

Solution(s)

The urban planning team contributed key content for Moyiba's Area Action Plan, a first document of its kind in the Mayor's Office. It addresses the detailed use of land within a specific area for the purpose of informing long-term infrastructural and other urban development.

The designer-researcher conducted community workshops that outlined key development priorities, specifically focusing on the communication channels used and challenges faced by community members when interacting with the Mayor Delivery Unit's Disaster Team during emergencies. The designer-researcher understood that the challenge did not call for a particularly new solution. Instead, the designer-researcher identified existing solutions that the MDU could adopt during emergencies. The Action Plan was incorporated into the implementation phase within three-to-four months after the departure of the designer-researcher.

These solutions were:

- / **Mapeco:** an open digital tool that aims to facilitate the mapping and recording of different types of geolocated information. This solution was developed by Digital Democracy and



*Participants of the Moyiba community project discuss based on the topographic map of the community.
Photo via: Andre Arruda*

had already been used by Indigenous peoples in Ecuador and Peru to map the delimitation of Indigenous lands, collect information, and improve decision-making. <https://www.digital-democracy.org/mapeo/>

- / **Petabencana:** a free and transparent platform for emergency response and disaster management in megacities in South and Southeast Asia. PetaBencana.id leverages the use of social media during emergency events to collect, classify, and display confirmed hazard information in real time. <https://petabencana.id/>
- / **Colab:** a free digital platform downloadable on mobile devices. People can request urban services, make suggestions, and evaluate the performance of municipal management in cities in Brazil through messages, photos, and georeferenced videos. It aims to be a platform for social participation and promote improvements for more efficient and innovative management in public administration. <https://www.colab.re/> feasibility of a phone-based platform for engaging users.



Moyiba community consultations with the designer-researcher. Photo via: Andre Arruda

NIGERIA

Partnership

The Presidential Enabling Business Environment Council (PEBEC) sits under the Vice President and is tasked with eliminating bureaucratic constraints to doing business in Nigeria and making the country a progressively easier place to start and grow a business, primarily through legislative, judicial, and regulatory reforms. The designer-researcher and a six-person team of reform leaders from the PEBEC Secretariat worked together to address a governance challenge. The Digital and Innovation Support Group from the Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS) also joined as a collaborating government team to co-identify and co-design a solution to the governance challenge.

Need

The Nigeria team met formally for three weekly working sessions, with asynchronous design assignments between each session, to work through the LGID curriculum. After two months, the team transitioned fully to remote collaboration, as a result of the designer-researcher's early

departure following a security alert issued for the international community and federal government buildings. To keep themselves motivated during the fully remote period, the Nigeria team decided to have two teams tackle the same problem. Two members from the FIRS's Digital Innovation Team joined midway through the project to inform and accelerate the innovation process.

The challenge then focused on one overarching problem statement:

“How might we improve entrepreneurs’ experience with the Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS)?”

This problem was further specified in two separate problem statements by two teams composed of both PEBEC and FIRS staff:

- / **Team Tri-Innovate** focused on simplifying the tax registration process for businesses to widen the tax net and generate revenue for Nigeria.
- / **Team NeoKaizen** focused on incentivizing greater tax payments by Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) by improving access to tax-related rights and duties.

Solution

Each team developed a wireframe and a value proposition for a prototype, including recommended strategies for roll-out, implementation, communication, evaluation, and budgeting. Each pitched these solutions in three iterative rounds to MIT GOV/LAB and MIT SOLVE members, the Special Advisor to the President on Ease of Doing Business, the Executive Chairman and management teams of FIRS, and the Vice President of Nigeria.

- / **Team Tri-Innovate** pitched an online system that unifies the application process for tax identification numbers.
- / **Team NeoKaizen** pitched an app that would educate MSMEs on their federal tax rights and duties and provide real-time tax payment support.

Team Tri-Innovate was selected to further refine their solution according to FIRS's needs and to explore avenues for developing a working prototype. While the winning solution has yet to be integrated into FIRS's medium to long-term plans, the PEBEC team continues to own the project and liaise with the FIRS team to improve the tax system. The team continued to refine the solution leading up to the pitch to the Vice President of Nigeria, who endorsed the solution.

Key Takeaways

When co-designing with reformers, better to co-design with the team that has the itch

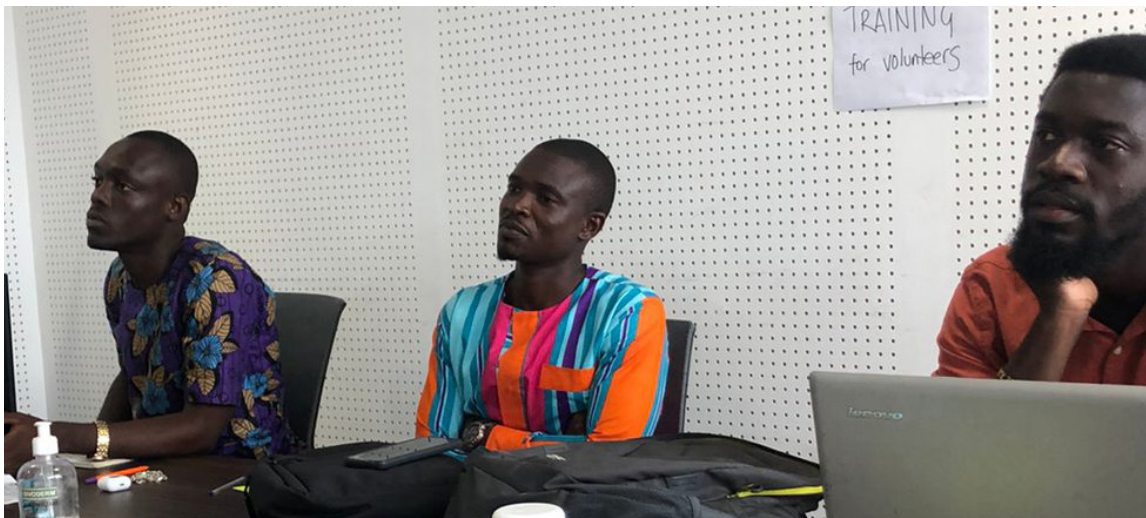
Because the PEBEC Secretariat serves as a reform council that aims to reform MDAs so as to improve the ease of doing business at the national level, it operates separately from the other MDAs (hence why we don't refer to PEBEC as an MDA throughout this case). But it has a similar purview as public innovation labs that sit under the Executive. These forms of organization are able to spark innovation by highlighting the challenges that MDAs can't identify because they don't have perspective. But identifying challenges is not enough to spark and sustain innovation.

As described in the Ekiti state learning case that is part of this series, “having an itch” is an aphorism often used in entrepreneurship to refer to a problem that is so pressing that whoever is experiencing it will want to address it, or scratch it. In the public sector, given the competing demands, low resources and high stakes, having an itch seems necessary to achieve implementation. Designing with a reform-minded team like the PEBEC Secretariat was crucial in sparking innovation in MDAs that may have tunnel vision when considering their challenges. That focus was not enough to sustain innovation. **When the MDA with the itch joins the co-design sessions, the process moves faster and every design session feels necessary, because the teams are laser-focused on scratching the itch.**

The FIRS team had clearly defined staff roles, a team-wide framework for change management, and a specific innovation function tailored to FIRS’s needs. Staff were also more conversant in identifying and influencing informal authorizers across the governments’ various stakeholders. We learned that when working with teams that are one step removed from the MDA where the challenge is, like the PEBEC Secretariat, we should do so within the team with the problem, and that we should do it from day one.

As soon as the FIRS team joined, the teams were able to focus on designing rather than researching. They possessed the energy of a team that needed to solve the problem, which brought an urgency we hadn’t experienced before. Although having the team with itch in the room from the start may sound like common sense, what we see in other countries is counter-productive; most public sector national innovation labs attempt to innovate from outside the MDA they are trying to support. But the magic happens inside. If we were to design a governance design intervention again, we’d plan it at the heart of the MDA.

A design toolbox rather than a rigid linear approach is more helpful when facing challenges already being addressed: Find the entry point



FCC sessions with the designer-researcher Photo via: Andre Arruda

When approaching public sector innovation, it's important to note that public offices like the FCC already come with a mandate built on campaign commitments. Candidates propose to address specific issues during their term, the electorate decides whose proposals meet their needs, and the selected party has a limited number of years to address those issues. In Freetown, the Moyiba project had already been planned before the designer-researcher arrived. It would be difficult and counter-productive for a designer to restart the problem definition since the team was already conducting user research to understand the Moyiba community needs. Nonetheless, design can help reframe challenges to dig deeper into their causes. That's what the team was able to do in Moyiba that was helpful. We learned that design is not helpful as a linear approach to public sector challenges. It's more useful to diagnose the current situation and understand which parts of design are more likely to fit the context. The participating staff did not need to attend a design session or curriculum module session; they needed new approaches to help them remove the bottlenecks in the project. For Moyiba's case, **staff hoped to learn a formal approach for conducting community consultations for planning urban infrastructural projects. That was the entry point to insert design practices leading up to either a solution or the requirements for a solution.** The designer did not have to necessarily ideate; instead, there were already existing solutions that solved the issue of lack of communication between government and residents of Moyiba during natural disaster.



Moyiba community sessions. Photo via: FCC

Since then, FCC's Urban Planner, Alusine Sesay, has not only re-applied the community consultation steps that the team developed together after engaging communities through LGID. He has also continued to use both general human-centered design methods and digital tools in his next urban planning project with coastal communities along Freetown.

In Nigeria, we also learned that, given all the competing priorities the team had, applying the LGID approach in a linear format was not helpful. Design sessions felt more like a class they had to attend rather than a process leading to a resolution. Perhaps a more modular approach, where we diagnose what the team needs to resolve a challenge, would spark innovation more than a curriculum or a linear approach would.

Expert-learner power dynamics are unavoidable when international academics and civil servants collaborate.

Something that was common for both designer-researchers was how their role was perceived. The presence of international designers introduced a consultant-client dynamic into the design process. This is because both FCC and PEBEC are funded by international

groups and frequented by short-term consultants who are expected to address strategic challenges and hand off recommendations to the government counterparts. International funders or groups, such as the IMF, WB, and Accenture, have also played outsized roles in driving digital transformation, restructuring governments, and encouraging the release of federal funds as a race to meet global indicators.

These pre-existing norms of interaction between international and local counterparts represented a challenge for both designer-researchers. As the expectations of their roles focused on them delivering an output, as previous international consultants did in the past, it limited opportunities for the teams to critically compare their existing innovation methodologies to the designer-researchers' innovation approach, as the working relationship veered into the designer reviewing work rather than co-designing.

This is in contrast to MIT GOV/LAB's previous accelerator model, where we partnered with a local design and innovation hub to explore a governance challenge. MIT GOV/LAB is therefore continuing to explore how to facilitate collaborative design between international designers and local government teams, including considerations around intentional and frequent communication, re-framing, and team reflection on the purposes and co-ownership of the innovation process.

Reflections for practitioners and their partners

When approaching this third iteration of our governance innovation research, we wanted to develop a model through which we could have eyes and ears on the ground to better understand and represent the behaviors and motivations that are part of sparking and sustaining innovation in resource-constrained settings like Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

However, since we also wanted it to be a valuable experience beyond the research observations, we integrated researchers who were also expert designers with a background in public-sector innovation. We thought they could help address a specific challenge in both teams.

We learned that in a context that has a history of international consultants delivering outputs with little to no co-design and research outputs, a designer-researcher may not be perceived as someone who is coming to co-design. That prompted us to rethink how we could continue our research while remaining helpful in a context like Sierra Leone's FCC, where the team already had a set of challenges they were tackling. That dynamic of international consultants coming in to deliver a report led us to learn the value of design as a modular approach rather than a linear one, where we can co-diagnose the design needs of a team and build a design path. This is how a team would operate if they had the design tools at their disposal from the start. In essence, we had a design toolbox — but instead of using all the tools, in a specific linear sequence, the designer-researcher took a step back and tried to understand which tools made more sense to the local team and when.

Finally, as we had noted in a previous Learning Case on Ekiti State, working with the team with the itch and urgency to solve that itch is key. In Nigeria, if we were to run this exercise

again, we would start working inside the FIRS office to co-design a solution, and then bring in the PEBEC Secretariat team to lock in the reform. That would maximize the skillset and mandate of the PEBEC Secretariat team while leveraging FIRS's previously-diagnosed needs to start addressing the challenge they had an itch to resolve.

The designer-researcher approach allowed us to learn a lot more about the working dynamics of teams in the bureaucracy in both Nigeria and Sierra Leone. It provided us with the eyes and ears to capture the nuances of struggling to innovate in resource-constrained settings that we didn't have in the previous two cases in these series. We were able to understand some of the motivations and behaviors of civil servants to innovate, and, critically, we provided a spark to innovate that we hope continues throughout the teams' upcoming challenges.

References

1. Module 0 is an internal designer-researcher module that local teams are not a part of
2. Savoia, A. *The Right It: Why so many ideas fail and how to make sure yours succeeds* (2019) At <https://www.albertosavoia.com/therightit.html>
3. The other projects were a project in the draft economic development zone and a third on urban mobility.
4. According to the Moyiba Action Plan draft, 2022.