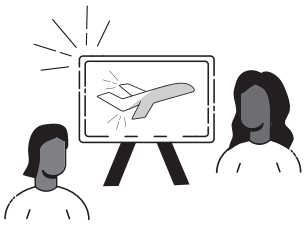
Pathways and bottlenecks to designing governance innovations in resource-constrained settings



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Comments are welcome

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Learning Series: Designing Governance Innovations in Resource-Constrained Settings

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The Governance Innovation Learnings Cases:

Learning Cases at the MIT Governance Lab (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.

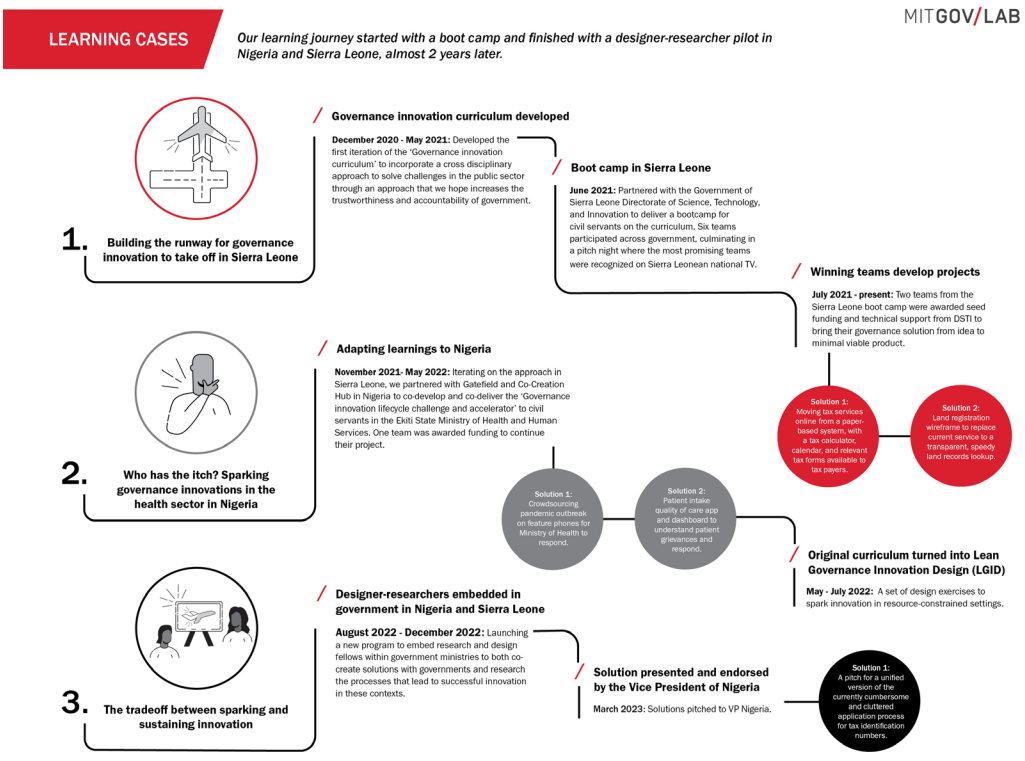
The learning series "Designing Governance Innovations in Resource-Constrained Settings" includes:

- **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 an 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.

Partners: We'd like to thank the organizations and government teams that embarked on this learning journey with us: Sierra Leone's Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation (DSTI); Gatefield; Co-Creation Hub (CcHub); Ekiti State's Ministry of Health in Nigeria; the Presidential Enabling Business Environment Council (PEBEC) in Abuja, Nigeria; and the Freetown City Council (FCC) in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Project support provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.



Exploring a question while designing: What sparks and sustains governance innovation in resource-constrained settings?

When MIT GOV/LAB embarked on this research journey, we were asking ourselves questions about how different actors innovate to improve the relationship between citizens, civil society, and public institutions. We wanted to know how to create innovations in governance, particularly in resource-constrained settings. We quickly realized there was a dearth of literature on the topic, which encouraged us to take an exploratory approach to researching governance innovation, as opposed to attempting to address a research hypothesis. We also set up a framework that allowed us to listen and see **what happens when civil servants[1] attempt to disrupt the status quo. We were at times co-designing and at times observing, but at all times we were co-learning with our partners.**

Research question: We landed on one overarching question that helped us explore governance innovation: How is governance innovation sparked and sustained in resource-constrained settings?

Innovation beyond ideation: By exploring if and how governance innovation can be sparked, we think we'll learn what the bottlenecks to innovation are, even at the outset of co-identifying a challenge. Likewise, by focusing our observations on how our partners build the components that sustain innovation, we hope to see how they complete the cycle of innovation, from implementation to institutionalization. **The importance of understanding innovation not just as a disruption, but as an institutionalization[2] of an idea, is key. Without implementation, innovation is just an idea,** and ideas in the public sector ultimately don't have an impact on society.

A summary of observations

The best way to understand the learnings of these cases is to see sparking and sustaining innovation as a process. A spark is lit and continues to burn as actors collaborate with unconventional partners, have a place with all the elements necessary for liftoff, and have a network that is able to monitor, support, and maintain the project through its journey to implementation.

The first learning that was clear from the start was that **working with unorthodox partners leads to a disruption in the day-to-day life of bureaucracies.** It wasn't just MIT GOV/LAB's work with the government that caused disruptions. The Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) engagement with reform organizations proved disruptive as well. Examples of disruptive relationships include the PEBEC Secretariat in Nigeria's work with the tax authority and DSTI's work with the land registration office and the tax authority. A fresh, outside look at the challenges that MDAs face is probably the most disruptive tool that we or our design partners, like CcHub or Gatefield, brought to the table. In an OECD report by the Observatory of Public Service Innovation, the authors found that working with such unorthodox partners was one of the factors leading to more public sector innovation[3].

Likewise, once the day-to-day is disrupted, **innovation thrives only if these disruptive partners are able to work hand-in-hand with an MDA with an itch** — a challenge they desperately need to scratch by attempting to solve it.

Once the MDA identifies an itch and unorthodox partners are actively and jointly disrupting the MDA with the challenge, **there needs to be an expectation that the prototype that comes out of this process will have room to fail. This will help partners to learn as quickly as possible with as few resources (money, time) spent as possible.** After all, funding and time are probably the scarcest resources in the public sector. To enable the mental space to innovate, leadership should be intentional about dedicating time and resources to trying versions of a solution so as to bring the best possible solution to citizens.

Innovation in the public sector, especially in resource-constrained settings, can run out of fuel quickly. **Setting up success benchmarks and a support network within the bureaucracy can help fuel the innovation spark.** For example, a committee of stakeholders that are key to the success of the thing you're building is key when things aren't going well. These may be times when the solution is running out of political momentum during a change in administrations, or when internal procedures like procurement or administrative processes block the runway, much like debris would prevent a plane from taking off.

But before all of this happens, consider how to integrate these opportunities for disruption within the annual plans of the government MDA you are working with. Otherwise, you risk losing momentum, regardless of how good or necessary that innovation is. Civil servants already have a hard time prioritizing projects within a continuous competition for attention to challenges in resource-constrained environments. **To ensure that civil servants continue to be engaged in the innovation process, it needs to be enshrined in the budget and the expectations of the MDA's leadership.**

And although we have many more learnings that you can read about in these cases, we want to focus on implementation as the last one. An innovation is not just an idea — it needs to change something. This is particularly important in resource-constrained settings where it's imperative to consider whether something should be built at all. Will it reach as many people as possible? Will it improve citizens' lives? These are some of the ethical questions civil servants should ask themselves when innovating with limited resources. **Experimentation is useful only if it's aimed at implementation. Without it, there is no impact, and without impact, citizens end up empty handed.**

How we did it:

The lab knew that it wanted to attempt to spark and sustain innovation with a limited budget and time, but we wanted experimentation to be front and center of everything we did. We also wanted our partners to learn with us. We designed the following framework to observe and start to answer our research question.

The engagement models we designed (boot camp, accelerator, designer-researcher) were selected with two characteristic requirements:

- The method needed to allow us to observe innovation.
- It needed to be practical enough for resource-constrained settings, with limited time and resource requirements.

Pandemic pivot: The lab had co-designed the very first iteration of this work with the Chief Innovation Officer of Sierra Leone to be collaborative from the start, working closely with the government, with regular in-person interactions to allow for insightful, up-close research. But the Covid-19 pandemic upended that plan.

At the same time, the pandemic presented us with a unique opportunity: Could we re-design the project to work without travel and in-country fieldwork and with minimal input in the project's implementation phase? This meant that we would no longer actively focus on shifting towards a more innovative work culture; rather, we would collaboratively seed innovation and then take an observational role to study where the challenges and opportunities lay. To do this, we needed a tool that would kickstart our innovation process.

A curriculum as a catalyst: MIT GOV/LAB designers developed a curriculum for the Sierra Leone boot camp that helped us and the partners rethink the causes of the governance challenges they were tackling. This tool evolved into what is now Lean Governance Innovation Design (LGID), which was adapted from the original curriculum to allow civil servants more time to do rather than consume knowledge.

The tool has undergone three iterations, each one building on the challenges of the last one and adding the pieces that we thought would catalyze or enable innovation within resource-constrained environments. Through these iterations, we were able to learn from our government partners about the hurdles of sparking and sustaining governance innovations.

Below are the three iterations of the governance innovation approach co-created with partners and aimed at sparking innovation and exploring our research questions. (To learn more about our research methods, see Appendix 1):

- **A two-week boot camp:** Government teams were exposed to our design and social science tools to spark the definition of a real problem and a potential solution. This was done with DSTI in Sierra Leone, at the national government level. After the boot camp, the National Revenue Authority (NRA), and the Office of the Administrator and Registrar General (OARG) continued their work towards a minimum viable product.
- **A 12-week bootcamp with months of accelerator support:** We worked with a local design and incubator firm to expose two government teams to our tools to help each of them identify a challenge and design a solution. The solution from the Ministry of Health, in Ekiti State, continued to receive technical support from a local design firm.
- **A 12-week designer-researcher approach:** that embedded professional designers with experience in Global south Bureaucracies in a government office for three months. One worked in the Mayor's office in Freetown, Sierra Leone, for the Freetown City Council (FCC). The other designer worked in the office of the Vice President of Nigeria in a reform-oriented body, the Presidential Enabling Business Environment Council (PEBEC).

Iterating on the previous approach: We used what we learned from the previous approach to design the next one. We learned the following three things after working on each iteration:

- Increasing the dedicated support time increased the chances of better insights and potentially increased the likelihood of the process of design bearing fruit.
- The proximity of research increased with each iteration. While the boot camp had no up-close researchers, the designer-researcher program had researchers working with civil servants almost every day for 12 weeks.
- We started with a two-week Bootcamp and finished with two 12-week models (the Accelerator and the designer-researcher program). This aligns with our research showing that a good timeline for developing an MVP in the public sector should not be longer than three months. This is explained in the Don't Build it Guide (p.29).

APPENDIX 1

Research Methods

Sierra Leone boot camp:

- **Observation:** We assigned a researcher to each team and asked her to complete an observation guide at the end of every day.
- **Surveys:** The participants completed a survey before and after the bootcamp.
- **Interviews:** Before, during and after the boot camp we conducted in-depth interviews with some of the participants, the facilitators, and the researchers.
- **Video Diaries:** The participants were tasked with recording a video diary with their reflections every day of the boot camp.

Ekiti State, Nigeria Accelerator

- **A pre-boot camp survey:** The survey helped us understand where we needed to reinforce the content of the boot camp, allowing us to tweak sessions for the following day.
- **Debrief sessions:** We had these with the two teams of the Ministry of Health, the Commissioner of Health in Ekiti state and partner representatives, after every design session. It allowed the partners to debrief on what they had observed during the session.
- **Middle and end of project reviews:** Both partners wrote reports that summarized the findings and observations of the process leading up to the development of the minimum viable product.

The designer-researcher program: The program was the result of a clear need to have eyes and ears on the ground to report on the nuances of what sparks and sustains innovation. This was a departure from the previous two iterations in the quantity and the granularity of the research over an extended period of three months.

- **One-on-one Interviews:** Designer-researchers conducted a total of 50 interviews with civil servants.
- **Daily observational journal entries for 12 weeks:** Entries focused on quick reflections on the challenges and opportunities that civil servants were facing when trying to be innovative.
- **Weekly reflection:** While the daily entries provided a glimpse at what was happening in the teams, weekly reflections allowed designer-researchers to pose questions and reconsider why some civil servants exhibited certain behaviors or motivations.

After the designer-researchers returned to MIT, we focused on reviewing the LGID tools to understand what civil servants found useful and what they would have changed.

- **A research synthesis sprint** allowed us to understand the salient themes that the designer-researchers identified in the journals and weekly reflections for the 12 weeks they were embedded with civil servants.
- **Program review sprint** with designer-researchers helped us to understand what they'd change, keep, and eliminate from the designer-researcher pilot.
- **Design sprints** with designer-researchers aimed to redesign LGID based on their facilitator perspectives.
- **Understanding of LGID and the designer-researcher experience** from the perspective of participants: We conducted 13 interviews with senior leaders and mid-level managers from both FCC and PEBEC.

References

1. The decision to focus on civil servants was based on the large role played by the government in public service innovation in developing economies, in particular in resource-constrained environments like Sierra Leone where the innovation ecosystem is heavily challenged and needs the state to take the lead. In the future, we hope to study civil society's role in governance innovation as well.
2. MIT's Disciplined Entrepreneurship approach (Aulet, B., 2013) ends innovation at a 24th step called "Develop a product plan." It's unlikely that any resource-constrained public sector office would support an innovation that merely ends at a product plan. Implementation is key to generate public support and withstand political cycles.
3. See more about Insurgency in public sector innovation. OECD, OPSI Core Skills for Public Sector Innovation, 2017. P.20 "Innovation can also be the by-product of working with unusual or unexpected partners, developing new synergies that can lead to the identification of approaches that may not have been discovered."