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National Dialogue on Independent Monitoring of Nigeria's National Social Investment Program

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Cover photo: Rebecca Padonu and other participants on the second day of the dialogue

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Summary

Nigeria's large and growing population has strained economic opportunities and overstretched social infrastructure, deepening widespread poverty. In response, the Federal Government launched the National Social Investment Program (NSIP, 2016-23) to alleviate poverty and promote social inclusion.

The scale and complexity of the NSIP required reliable data to inform policy decisions, improve program delivery, and ensure accountability. In light of this, the government introduced independent monitoring (IM) as a mechanism to provide real-time feedback from the field, track implementation, and strengthen transparency. The IM program brought in large number of citizens to monitor and report on the implementation of the NSIP.

The National Dialogue on Independent Monitoring of the NSIP was convened in November 2024 as part of a study that aimed to document the large-scale monitoring of the social investment program. This learning exchange was convened to provide a platform for front-line duty bearers—including independent monitors and program coordinators—to share their experiences, analyze implementation barriers, and explore mechanisms for more effective monitoring.

The Learning Exchange Workshop was as a timely and reflective convening. With both the NSIP and the IM program indefinitely suspended, the exchange provided a crucial opportunity to look back, assess the program's legacy, and harvest lessons for the design of future social accountability mechanisms. One of the most distinctive features of this exchange was the active participation of state IM coordinators, whose frontline experiences offered deep insights into how the program functioned in practice. These coordinators operated at the intersection of national oversight and grassroots implementation, making their voices essential for understanding the real-world effectiveness, risks, and impacts of the IM model. Their stories and reflections provided a balanced view of the program's strengths and weaknesses, beyond what national-level reporting could offer.

Independent monitors who were especially active in the program highlighted positive outcomes, including:

- strengthened monitoring capacity at local and state levels
- real-time data collection and reporting
- space for citizen voice and participation in evaluating NSIP delivery.

However, the learning exchange workshop also brought to light several weaknesses which included:

- recruitment of monitors based on political affiliation rather than competence or interest in the job's mission
- infrastructural and logistical constraints that limited the quality, reliability, and coverage of the data
- operational delays, especially due to late disbursement of payments to field monitors
- inconsistent communication between the national and state levels.

Overall, the exchange highlighted the enduring relevance of independent monitoring for governance and accountability in Nigeria's social programs. It also underscored the importance of grounding future designs in the lived experiences of coordinators and field actors who directly engaged with communities. As conversations around the future of social investment programming in Nigeria continue, this retrospective analysis offers a foundation for bringing the experience of independent monitors to bear on building resilient and responsive monitoring frameworks in the future.

Introduction

Poverty is a pervasive global challenge. It leaves many individuals and communities without access to basic necessities such as food, education, and healthcare. International conventions, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), prioritize poverty eradication as a fundamental objective for achieving global equity and development. In response, many developing countries have implemented various strategies to address this pressing issue, including social safety nets, economic empowerment initiatives, and direct financial assistance programs. However, these efforts are often plagued by challenges such as inaccurate targeting of beneficiaries.

Social investment programs have emerged as a particularly important strategy for addressing socio-economic asymmetries. By providing targeted support to marginalized and vulnerable groups, these programs aim to create opportunities, improve livelihoods, and foster equitable development through resource allocation and strategic interventions. However, one persistent challenge that characterizes the implementation of social investment programs is ineffective monitoring.

In Nigeria, these challenges are particularly pronounced due to the country's complex socio-economic dynamics and governance structures. As Africa's most populous country, Nigeria is characterized by a diverse ethno-religious composition, with over 250 ethnic groups and multiple religious affiliations influencing societal dynamics. This diversity often creates different expectations and priorities among regions, necessitating localized adaptations of federal intervention programs.

The federal system of government in Nigeria further complicates the implementation of social investment programs and their monitoring components. In some instances when federal government launches nationwide programs, states have significant autonomy to adapt the initiatives to align with their laws, policies, and local peculiarities. For instance, the National Social Investment Program (NSIP, 2016-2023)—the subject of this report—faced varying implementation dynamics across states, with some states integrating the program seamlessly into existing structures while others struggled.

Box 1. The National Social Investment Program and Independent Monitors

The National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), launched by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 2016, was designed to reduce poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion nationwide.

The NSIP comprised four core components: the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme, a micro-lending initiative; the N-Power Programme, focused on job creation and skills development; the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme, to provide free school meals sourced from local smallholder farmers for poor children; and the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme, a targeted safety net for the poorest and most vulnerable households.

In order to establish the authenticity and credibility of the NSIP, independent monitors were recruited to observe, collect real-time data, and report on program delivery. The monitors were expected to operate independently of state governments, aggregators, vendors, and duty bearers, ensuring that their reports captured objective findings.

A notable issue is the struggle to unify such interventions under a cohesive framework. Disparities in governance styles, resource availability, and political will often create gaps in program delivery. For instance, when the political party at the federal level differs from that of a state government, collaboration can become strained, potentially impacting the equitable distribution of resources or alignment of program objectives. Similarly, monitoring in social investment programs faces significant challenges that undermine its effectiveness. Unclear objectives and poorly defined indicators make it difficult to assess progress and measure impact accurately. Resource constraints, such as insufficient funding, limited personnel, and lack of access to essential tools further complicate the process. Additionally, overly complex mechanisms create inefficiencies and gaps in data collection and reporting. The selection of unqualified monitors, due to the absence of a merit-based recruitment process, reduces the reliability of data. Limited engagement with local communities adds to the disconnect between program design and on-the-ground realities. Bureaucratic bottlenecks, poor synergy between state and federal levels, unethical practices, and the absence of accountability mechanisms together lead to ineffective monitoring, delayed responses to problems, and a decline in accountability and trust in the program.

The need to understand variations in the implementation of independent monitoring of social investment programs, alongside the desire for exchange of ideas, experiences, and learning accumulated throughout the implementation of independent monitoring of social investment programs in Nigeria, provided the impetus for the National Dialogue on Independent Monitoring of the NSIP, held on 19-20 November 2024. The dialogue was the first gathering of its kind, bringing together a wide array of stakeholders, including independent monitoring coordinators from all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, program managers, national and zonal monitoring and evaluation (M&E) consultants, frontline practitioners, policymakers, civil society representatives, and development partners. It marked a rare occasion for the voices of state-level independent monitoring coordinators and frontline practitioners to have prominence in national discussions.

The dialogue featured keynote lectures, panel discussions, breakout sessions, and technical presentations, providing a collaborative platform for sharing insights, fostering discussions, and strengthening the exchange of ideas and experiences. It leveraged the diverse perspectives of participants to explore persistent challenges in program implementation and prioritize practical, context-specific solutions drawn from the experiences of those directly involved in executing and monitoring the NSIP. The dialogue was particularly important given that the independent monitoring program had been halted on 31 May 2022, and most components of the NSIP on 12 January 2024.¹ The dialogue provided an opportunity for stakeholders to reconnect and reflect.

Dr Kole Shettima, Regional Director of the MacArthur Foundation, welcomed participants by emphasizing the critical role of accountability in governance. Dr Shettima highlighted the Foundation's ongoing commitment to supporting accountability systems in Nigeria, and reaffirmed its goal of holding the government accountable to the people.



Dr Kole Shettima, Regional Director of the MacArthur Foundation, welcomes participants to the dialogue.

Credit: Research Enterprise Systems

¹ The Conditional Cash Transfer element of the NSIP was reinstated a few months later.

Mr Badamasi Lawal, National Coordinator of the National Social Investment Programme Agency (NSIPA), represented by Mr Okon Nsikak (former National Coordinator, N-Power), underscored the importance of collaboration between government bodies, civil society organizations, and local communities to ensure the success of these initiatives.

Professor Rachel Sullivan Robinson, Senior Associate Dean, School of International Service at American University, Washington DC spotlighted the technical framework underpinning NSIP monitoring, noting that effective monitoring ensures that services reach the intended beneficiaries. She encouraged participants to take away practical lessons applicable to similar programs worldwide.

Professor Fatai Aremu, Executive Director of Research Enterprise Systems, outlined the objectives of the dialogue: reflecting on independent monitoring achievements, sharing experiences, and developing robust strategies for replication in other contexts.

1. Institutional Frameworks for Sustainable Social Investment in Nigeria

(Keynote Lecture, Dr Bindir Umar, former NSIP National Coordinator)

Dr Umar discussed the complexities of poverty, emphasizing that it is a multi-layered issue. He explained how initiatives under the NSIP were designed to address institutional poverty, offering critical support to the most vulnerable members of society. These programs, including the National Home-Grown School Feeding Program (NHGSFP), Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), and N-Power, took an integrated approach to poverty alleviation. They focused on local solutions, such as using indigenous food supplies to provide nutritious school meals, which help boost both food security and local economies.

Dr Umar underscored the importance of data-driven decision-making in ensuring the efficient allocation of resources. He pointed to the GEEP dashboard as an essential tool for tracking state-level poverty indices, ensuring that interventions were tailored to the specific needs of each region. However, he also noted a significant challenge: the lack of continuity during government transitions. This issue often led to fragmented program implementation, undermining the effectiveness of long-term poverty alleviation strategies. Dr Umar advocated for better handover mechanisms to ensure the seamless continuation of such programs, regardless of political changes.

Discussing challenges faced by independent monitors, Dr Umar described several motivational strategies that had aimed at fostering loyalty and reducing corruption. One such strategy was providing field incentives (such as transportation allowances, airtime stipends, and periodic performance bonuses) which would encourage independent monitors to remain committed to their roles and maintain high standards of integrity. He emphasized that data collection and capacity building are fundamental for effective monitoring, and that leadership must prioritize people-centered policies to ensure accountability and sustainability in these initiatives.

2. The Myth and Reality of Monitoring Social Investment Programs

(Keynote lecture, Dr Fatiya Askederin, former NSIP National M&E Coordinator)

Dr Askederin provided valuable insights into the practical aspects of monitoring the NSIP. She emphasized the importance of establishing a comprehensive M&E framework right from the inception of such programs to ensure their success and sustainability. The NSIP had a three-tier monitoring structure implemented at federal, state, and local levels, with data management officers supporting the process. This approach ensured that data was accurately collected and processed at all levels of the program. She also noted that the number of independent monitors had increased from 5,000 to 7,500, and that there had been plans to expand this number to 20,000 to enhance the program's coverage and effectiveness.

Dr Askederin acknowledged some challenges in monitoring, particularly access to regular internet connectivity in isolated regions, which hindered the efficient transmission of data via the Social Investment Management Information System (SIMIS) digital application. Nonetheless, she emphasized that increasing the number of independent monitors had been essential for improving beneficiary reach and ensuring greater accountability. She advocated for localized solutions, such as employing indigenous independent monitors, to ensure cultural relevance and a stronger commitment to the goals of such programs.

Box 2. The Political and Economic Underpinnings of Independent Monitoring

Panel discussion (Prof. Aremu (moderator), Dr Askederin, Mr Okon Nsikak (former National Coordinator, N-Power), and Mr Idris Shehu (former NSIP M&E Officer))

The panel delved into the political and economic factors that had influenced the monitoring of NSIP. Panelists explored the ways that collaboration with state focal persons could enhance the efficiency of M&E efforts. The panelists agreed that a centralized selection process for independent monitors could help reduce political influence, ensuring the selection of monitors that are impartial and focused on the program's objectives. They also discussed the importance of on-site registers in promoting accountability and preventing issues like ghost workers, which can undermine program integrity.

3. Reflections on NSIP Monitoring

(Key points from Day 1 breakout discussions)

In the breakout sessions, participants observed that independent monitors were seen as grassroots representatives of the government. Challenges such as extortion and corruption by large-scale food suppliers had been reported by independent monitors and were resolved through formal complaint channels, highlighting the importance of accountability mechanisms. Innovative communication strategies, like WhatsApp groups, were used effectively to manage the large numbers of independent monitors, ensuring good coordination and streamlined communication across regions.

Regarding access to monitoring reports, participants were asked if they had been able to access state-level independent monitoring reports and whether they had noticed any patterns. The discussion revealed that access had been limited. Some independent monitors confirmed they had been able to access state dashboards for tracking indicators, while others were restricted to federal-level M&E reports, indicating a centralized reporting system that impeded local-level transparency. *“Some of us could track indicators on state dashboards, but others couldn’t. It felt like we were working with one hand tied behind our backs when local transparency depended on this access,”* said Aisha Bello, Independent Monitoring Coordinator, Kaduna State.



Day 1 contributors Lukman Bello, Rachel Robinson, Bindir Umar, Fatai Aremu, and Fatiya Askederin.

Credit: Research Enterprise Systems

The SIMIS app, primarily used for submitting weekly or monthly reports, was highlighted as a valuable tool, although participants faced challenges with its functionality. Issues like delays in data uploads due to network problems and app malfunctions hindered the efficiency of reporting. *"I appreciated the SIMIS app for its convenience in reporting, but technical issues, like app crashes and slow uploads, limited its potential and our ability to meet deadlines,"* said Nwachukwu Chidinma, Independent Monitoring Coordinator, Enugu State. Despite these setbacks, the app was regarded as a useful tool for data entry and communication, with participants suggesting that upgrading the app's infrastructure could significantly improve its effectiveness and reliability. *"For the SIMIS app to truly support our work, the recurring network problems and app malfunctions would need to be addressed. These issues disrupted our workflow and reporting efficiency,"* said Huzaifa Dalhatu, Independent Monitoring Coordinator, Taraba State.

When discussing monitoring challenges across NSIP programs, participants noted that these varied depending on regional differences, operational inefficiencies, and app-related issues. Some programs faced participants' compliance issues (e.g. N-Power beneficiaries not reporting for duties regularly), access barriers (e.g. CCT disbursement venues not being disclosed to independent monitors), and regional clustering (e.g. concentration of monitoring sites in hard-to-reach areas), making monitoring more complex. The ease or difficulty of monitoring programs such as the CCT, N-Power, and the NHGSFP depended on the attitudes and approaches of duty bearers in different states rather than the inherent nature of the programs themselves.

For instance, while the CCT program was easier to monitor in some states, due to bi-monthly schedules and digital tracking systems, political interference in other states created significant challenges. In these areas, vested interests disrupted transparency, making it difficult to verify payments and beneficiary numbers. On the other hand, in states where transparency and accountability were prioritized, monitoring was more manageable. The N-Power program was generally easier to monitor in states where beneficiaries adhered to their postings, but absenteeism, influenced by local agreements or NGO arrangements, made it difficult in other areas. Similarly, while the NHGSFP was easier to track due to tangible evidence of service delivery, logistical and communication gaps in certain states hindered effective monitoring.

"In my state, monitoring the CCT program was challenging due to the vested interests of political leaders. They used the program to boost their popularity and gain political favor by claiming they influenced its implementation. As a result, the distribution was frequently taken to areas we were unaware of, making it difficult to monitor. In contrast, the N-Power program had no such political interference. The main issue with N-Power was non-compliance by beneficiaries, but at least we had access to the schools, and we could observe when beneficiaries were absent. We were able to document and report these issues. With CCT, however, we had no knowledge of when the money was being distributed, and it was nearly impossible to monitor if payments were actually made or how many beneficiaries received their payments," said Sani Abubakar, Independent Monitoring Coordinator, Zamfara State.

To improve the effectiveness of independent monitoring, participants offered several recommendations for redesigning the NSIP's framework. These included upgrading monitoring tools with technology such as digital profiles, facial recognition, and GPS tracking for beneficiaries, which were intended to improve data collection and reporting efficiency. Decentralizing the monitoring system and involving local government officials, traditional rulers, and community leaders was also recommended to enhance security, funding, and accessibility, while establishing localized communication structures would help address regional challenges more effectively.

Participants also suggested more transparent recruitment processes, advocating for the selection of capable and willing individuals for monitoring roles. *"I've seen firsthand how some monitors lacked the necessary qualifications or experience, which affected the quality of our work. Recruitment should prioritize capable and willing individuals, not just political connections,"* said Gbogboade Akande, Independent Monitoring Coordinator, Osun State. They recommended engaging National Youth Service Corps members as independent monitors due to their accessibility and accountability. Improved funding and payment systems were crucial, with a call for increased stipends to reflect the operational costs of monitoring and a streamlined payment process to eliminate delays.



Participants Austin Kanwei, Ikegbunam Peter, Madu Abdullahi, Amiekumo Ebietitei, Okike Philip, and Halimatu Mohammed in a breakout discussion group on the first day of the dialogue.

Credit: Research Enterprise Systems

Further recommendations included grassroots sensitization campaigns to align stakeholders with NSIP's objectives, as well as specialized training for monitors to ensure competency in their roles. The establishment of robust databases at state and local levels for real-time data collection, along with data-driven decision-making, was proposed to enhance program efficiency. Accountability measures, such as introducing disciplinary actions for non-compliance or misuse of the program, were also emphasized as potential ways to maintain integrity.

Participants called for an increased number of independent monitors to match the scope of NSIP programs, alongside adequate budgets for M&E, recommending the allocation of 5–15% of project budgets to M&E, in line with international best practices. A community-centric approach, using local mobilizers and communication channels for grassroots outreach, was also advocated, along with engaging NGOs and community orientation officers to build trust and improve program delivery. *"Increasing the number of independent monitors and ensuring sufficient budgets for M&E is crucial. This would not only improve program monitoring but also ensure we could address issues like coverage gaps,"* said Aisha Bello, Independent Monitoring Coordinator, Kaduna State.

Finally, enhancing communication through real-time feedback mechanisms between monitors and central teams for issue resolution, as well as using local media platforms like radio and television to disseminate updates and program activities, were seen as critical steps towards improving transparency and monitoring effectiveness.

4. Navigating Political and Economic Obstacles

(Keynote lecture, Hajiya Aisha Digil, former Manager, NHGSFP)

Hajiya Aisha Digil emphasized that the NHGSFP was a collaborative initiative between Federal and State governments. The Federal government provided the necessary resources, while the State governments were responsible for organizing the distribution process. This partnership emphasized the importance of shared responsibilities in achieving the program's goals. Social investment programs require a high level of commitment from all levels of government. Each program serves a distinct purpose but ultimately contributes to the broader objective of improving the lives of citizens. For instance, the N-Power program benefited one million unemployed graduates, while the CCT program reached over two million households, and the NHGSFP supported between 9.7 and 9.8 million school students, providing essential nutrition.

Despite these positive impacts, there were challenges in maintaining focus on the primary goals of these programs. Monitors, for instance, sometimes lost sight of their main objectives, becoming distracted by political maneuvering and roles, which undermined the effectiveness of the monitoring process. However, the use of technology was instrumental in ensuring the accuracy of data collection and reporting, making it easier to track progress and identified areas for improvement.

Independent monitors were often members of the communities they served. This connection to their local areas meant they had a vested interest in the progress of their communities, making them more committed to ensuring the success of the programs. Increased community engagement was crucial for the programs' success, as it helped build trust and fostered a sense of ownership within the communities.



Hajiya Aisha Digil delivers her keynote lecture on the political and economic obstacles to monitoring on the second day of the dialogue.

Credit: Research Enterprise Systems

Capacity building is an important aspect of social investment programs. The capacity of independent monitors was significantly enhanced, allowing them to double as data collectors. This development led to cost savings, as the need for additional personnel was minimized. The primary focus of the NSIP was to support vulnerable groups, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds. The programs were people-oriented, and ensuring that the right individuals were included was essential for achieving the intended impact.

Impact tracking is a crucial part of M&E. Both the M&E and accountability teams must focus on measuring the real effects of the programs on the ground. Leadership plays a significant role in this process. Leaders who focus on the welfare of the people, rather than political considerations, can drive successful independent monitoring. Conversely, when political dynamics dominate leadership priorities, accountability is often compromised, and monitoring efforts may be overshadowed by political interests.

There were three main takeaways from Hajiya Aisha Digil's observations on the independent monitoring process. First, when indigenous members of local communities serve as independent monitors, they are more likely to approach their roles with passion, aiming to improve the welfare of their communities. It is difficult to undermine their integrity, and the likelihood of receiving honest reports is high. Second, the capacity building of independent monitors in Nigeria has resulted in them becoming dual-role data collectors and aggregators. The NSIP not only increased the efficiency of data collection but also saved the government personnel costs by reducing the need for additional staff. Finally, the focus of leadership was crucial in enabling or hindering independent monitoring efforts. When leadership prioritizes the welfare of the people, independent monitoring is more effective, and accountability is upheld. However, when the focus is driven by political motivations, the integrity of the monitoring process is often compromised, and the intended impact of the programs may not be fully realized.

5. Sub-National Dynamics of NSIP Implementation and Monitoring

(Keynote lecture, Alhaji Lukman Abimbola Bello, former NSIP State Focal Person, Osun State)

Alhaji Lukman highlighted lessons learned from NSIP implementation in various states. His presentation focused on the importance of effective program delivery, especially as the NSIP set a new benchmark for social investment programs in Nigeria, as well as a significant shift in how such interventions are structured. He explained that while there were social programs before 2016, none had the same structure, scope, or reach as the NSIP programs, which were designed with a comprehensive approach to tackle issues of poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity.

One of the major challenges Alhaji Lukman identified was the shortage of independent monitors. He noted that the inadequacy of independent monitors led to gaps in monitoring, which ultimately reduced accountability in the implementation of these programs. In some instances, unethical practices, such as falsifying reports or neglecting monitoring duties, compounded these challenges. He also shared notable successes from Osun State, which he cited as a model for effective NSIP implementation. He highlighted several innovative initiatives in the state, such as the Osun State Elementary School Feeding Program (O-MEAL), which leveraged land banks to empower farmers and improve food security. The Osun Broilers Out-Growers Production Scheme (OBOPS) which provided farmers with broilers, feeds, and guaranteed markets, also ensured predictable profits, contributing to economic stability. Additionally, Osun's School Feeding Program played a crucial role in increasing school enrollment and improving the nutritional status of children. The N-Power Program in Osun, although initially plagued by absenteeism, saw improvements after the state's focal person used radio broadcasts to publicly address defaulters, which helped increase accountability.

When asked about the most challenging experiences in Osun, Alhaji Lukman pointed to the hands-on approach taken in the early stages of the program's implementation. This proactive monitoring helped Osun navigate challenges and aligned the programs with their goals. He also attributed the state's ability to maintain continuity to low political interference in the program's management. By focusing on human resource management and taking a people-entered approach, the state ensured that programs remained effective, even when there were changes in administration.

In his recommendations, Alhaji Lukman stressed the need for better remuneration for independent monitors. He suggested that independent monitors should have earned more than the NSIP beneficiaries they were overseeing to incentivize them to perform their duties more diligently. He also highlighted the need for good communication between the federal and state governments to address bottlenecks that slow down implementation. For continuity across administrations, Alhaji Lukman emphasized the importance of the government in power building upon the successes of previous administrations, to ensure that programs are not disrupted by political changes.

Another important recommendation was the need to appoint non-political individuals with the right skills as focal persons for social investment programs. He argued that political appointees, due to their busy schedules and political commitments, are often unable to give a program the attention it requires. By appointing competent private citizens, the programs would be more likely to benefit from better management and oversight. Other recommendations from his keynote address were clear: independent monitors must be adequately remunerated to ensure their dedication to the program; political appointees should no longer serve as focal persons to avoid disruptions; and that passionate state coordinators and independent monitors, who prioritize the welfare of the less privileged, can drive success even when resources are limited. Alhaji Lukman concluded by emphasizing the ultimate responsibility of the governor in determining the success of social investment programs. He noted that while focal persons are crucial, the governor's support and prioritization of the programs directly influences their success.

Box 3. Enabling Environment for Independent Monitoring of Social Investment Programs at Sub-National Levels

Panel discussion (Prof. Sullivan Robinson (moderator), Aisha Bello (former Independent Monitoring Coordinator, Kaduna State), Gbogboade Babayomi Akande (former Independent Monitoring Coordinator, Osun State), Epiphany Osita Kalibeh (former Program Manager, NHGSFP, Delta State), Ihie Adanna Oke (former Program Manager, CCT, Abia State), Rebecca Maulom Padonu (former Program Manager, N-Power, Kaduna State).

The panel discussion shared insights, challenges, and recommendations for effective monitoring of NSIPs. Aisha Bello emphasized leveraging the Open Government Partnership framework to enhance government-CSO collaboration in Kaduna. She highlighted the “Eyes and Ears” digital platform, which allowed citizens to report on NSIPs, promoting greater participation and oversight. Gbogboade B. Akande stressed the importance of citizen engagement, which fosters accountability and program ownership. He noted that ICT tools improved reporting efficiency but emphasized the need for continuous training for independent monitors to enhance their capacity to use such tools. Kalibeh E. Osita underscored the need for inclusivity in monitoring efforts, emphasizing that public perception and commitment from independent monitors were crucial for program success. He advocated for insurance coverage for independent monitors due to job-related risks, and stronger collaboration between grievance redress and M&E officers, particularly on sensitive issues like gender abuse. Rebecca M. Padonu shared insights on CCT programs, highlighting the role of in-house monitors and cash transfer officers. She noted that low independent monitor remuneration had affected motivation but encouraged independent monitors to focus on community impact. She also stressed the need for better logistical and security support for independent monitors. The panelists agreed on key takeaways: citizen engagement is vital for effective monitoring; governments should instill program ownership through outreach; inclusivity in independent monitor appointments enhances accountability; and improved collaboration between State Coordinators, focal persons, and independent monitors fosters program success. They also noted that independent monitors had functioned more as grassroots monitors due to a lack of enabling environments for full independence.

6. Reflections on Effectiveness of Local Entities in Social Protection Programs

(Key points from Day 2 breakout sessions)

The purpose of the Day 2 breakout sessions was to explore the effectiveness of local entities such as independent monitors and local government actors in social protection programs. The moderator emphasized the importance of transparency, accountability, and engagement at multiple levels—local, state, and national. The session was aimed at addressing the challenges and opportunities in engaging local actors, ensuring they meet expectations, and enabling feedback from local communities to inform policy decisions.

The conversation turned to the empowerment and independence of monitors. A participant highlighted the delicate balance monitors must strike between autonomy and the constraints imposed by state-level authorities. Although they were tasked with monitoring the programs, monitors encountered bureaucratic hurdles that limited their activities. The participant noted that monitors must be empowered to make independent decisions while still aligning with the broader framework of the state-level program.

Another speaker emphasized the critical role monitors play in meeting public expectations. Communities rely on local government bodies to deliver tangible and effective monitoring. Their performance at the local level is vital, as they serve as a bridge between state policies and community needs. If they fail, the overall effectiveness of programs is compromised.

The complexity of communication between local and state governments was highlighted by another participant. Without meaningful engagement, directives from the state may not translate to effective action at the local level. Clear communication channels and early involvement of local actors are essential for identifying challenges and implementing solutions.



Breakout sessions during the second day of the dialogue.

Credit: Research Enterprise Systems

The discussion continued and touched on the role of monitoring at the local and state levels. One participant offered an insight into the experience of being an independent monitor: *“As an independent monitor, I see myself as the government’s eyes and ears at the local level. My role is crucial in offering valuable insights into the effectiveness of social protection programs, as I am deeply embedded within the community. By being on the ground, I can identify and highlight issues such as corruption, inefficiencies, or any discrepancies between the program’s goals and its actual outcomes. These insights help ensure that the programs are not only implemented effectively but also that they align with the needs of the community, ensuring that resources are reaching those who need them the most,”* said Mubarak Ahmed Limanci, Independent Monitoring Coordinator, Bauchi State.

Talking about the role of civil society organizations and the media in monitoring, a participant noted that these external actors provided an objective view of program implementation, ensured transparency, and advocated for community concerns. He said that citizen involvement, particularly of mothers and community-based groups, contributed to successful monitoring processes by bringing authenticity to feedback, ensuring deeper accountability, and making monitoring processes more inclusive.

The conversation then addressed feedback mechanisms and engagement strategies. Rebecca Maulome Padonu, N-Power Program Manager for Kaduna State, emphasized the transformative impact of digital innovation, saying, *“with tools like the ‘Snap Send’ app, we were not just collecting feedback; we were creating a real-time bridge between citizens and authorities. This immediacy in response fostered accountability and deepened trust in our social protection programs.”* Another speaker mentioned Abuja’s Situation Room, where beneficiaries were randomly contacted for feedback. This system ensured a more representative view of program performance by avoiding self-selected respondents.

The involvement of international bodies, such as the United Nations, was also discussed. These organizations brought expertise and global standards to align local monitoring efforts with broader objectives.

Questions about the recruitment process for independent monitors sparked significant discussion. Khalid Salim, Independent Monitoring Coordinator, Kano State explained that National Assembly members had often been

tasked with nominating candidates due to their familiarity with their constituencies. He said *“while this approach promotes political accountability, it can lead to challenges such as favoritism and the appointment of underqualified individuals.”* Another speaker, Akanbi Hauwa Bukola, Independent Monitoring Coordinator, Kwara State critiqued the recruitment process, stressing the need for merit-based recruitment to ensure monitors are selected for their skills, experience, and commitment to serving their communities. *“It is essential that processes for recruiting independent monitors are merit-based, ensuring that monitors are chosen for their skills, experience, and genuine commitment to serving their communities,”* she emphasized. This, she argued, would enhance the quality and integrity of monitoring. It was suggested that online platforms could be used for recruitment, to minimize political interference and ensure equal opportunity. Acknowledging the operational challenges in transitioning to such systems, one participant suggested gradual improvements to achieve a more transparent and efficient recruitment process over time.

Concerns were raised about the quality of equipment, particularly tablets, that had been provided to monitors, which directly impacted their ability to perform effectively. Some independent monitors had reported issues with device specifications, configurations, and battery life, all of which hindered their efficiency in carrying out monitoring tasks. It was noted that ensuring monitors received proper training and had access to functional tools was crucial to improving the accuracy and efficiency of data collection and reporting.

The SIMIS application was also discussed. It was designed as a web-based platform for program monitoring and contained pre-formulated questions tailored for field assessments across different programs. Independent monitors used this application to guide their inquiries and report their findings according to designated timelines. SIMIS had a back-end where data collected was analyzed to inform decision-making, but it did not store pictures. To complement the monitoring process, a WhatsApp platform was created where images were shared to provide visual evidence. This platform facilitated quick responses to queries, enhancing real-time communication and verification. Additionally, the WhatsApp platform served as a supplementary tool for uploading picture evidence, strengthening the overall monitoring process.

The session also highlighted the role of data collection and its growing importance in monitoring social protection programs. One participant discussed how independent monitors provided actionable insights, including critical feedback on issues like food quality. The conversation also touched on the integration and use of data. A participant explained how data from mobile apps, such as school lists and beneficiary information, had been integrated into a single platform. By using reference numbers to link data, systems ensure consistency and traceability across reports. Another participant described the process of pre-analyzing raw feedback into actionable insights, which helped decision-makers identify issues and improve program delivery. A specific example was shared of how interference during a previous monitoring phase was identified and corrected using data-driven evidence.

As the session drew to a close, the moderator summarized key action points. These included improving communication between state and local actors, building trust with political leaders and senior citizens, overhauling the recruitment process to ensure fairness and merit-based selection, enhancing training for independent monitors, and strengthening feedback mechanisms to identify challenges and improve program delivery. Final remarks emphasized the critical role of evidence-based decision-making in addressing issues and achieving better program outcomes.

The breakout session successfully explored the challenges and solutions related to local monitoring of social protection programs. Key themes of transparency, accountability, and effective feedback mechanisms underscored the discussions, with participants agreed on the importance of continuous collaboration to refine processes and drive meaningful improvements.

Conclusion

The National Dialogue provided a platform to evaluate and refine the independent monitoring of social investment programs in Nigeria. The collaborative efforts of stakeholders underscored the need for data-driven approaches, capacity building, and leadership accountability to ensure sustainable impact. Participants left with actionable insights to enhance monitoring frameworks, foster collaboration, and promote transparency in social investment programs.



Some of the diverse stakeholders who contributed their insights to improving future efforts to build independent monitoring of social investment programs.

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