

# Learning Note 3: Engaging government to secure fiscal governance change

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## 1. Introduction

Our Strengthening Public Accountability for Results and Knowledge (SPARK) program works with grassroots civic movements who represent people directly affected by service delivery failures. We support them in uncovering the fiscal governance causes of - and solutions to - those problems. In a three-part learning series, we explore how SPARK has built the capabilities of grassroots groups to collectively engage with fiscal governance systems - the politics, institutions, policies, and processes that govern the use of public funds and how they are utilized and implemented accountably to provide services.

The SPARK program is aimed at learning how the implied collective political agency of groups of poor, marginalized people, can be leveraged to give them an effective voice in decisions (and oversight), and shift budgets and services in their favor. The central hypotheses of SPARK are that: Poor, marginalized groups have little formal or informal influence over public resource decisions, and this is significantly why budgets and services do not reflect their needs and priorities. Mobilizing the potential political power of large grassroots groups behind budget work will gain them influence over government responses, leading to better budgets and better services for these groups.

The active participation of marginalized groups in collective budget action, is more easily achieved when it is about a specific service about which members of the group care enough to take action. The SPARK programs therefore use collective agency to push for inclusive processes and better budget decisions for grassroots groups along the chain of allocating and managing public resources for specific services. SPARK supports programs in seven countries to learn about leveraging collective agency to improve service and access for large, marginalized groups. Typically, country programs would comprise the IBP (with in-country staff), agency groups (various forms of organizations that had some history of mobilizing large groups of marginalized people around services), and in most countries, budget partners. Budget partners were to ensure sufficient in-country capabilities for the budgetary aspects of SPARK.

### 1.1. Purpose, focus and methodology

This learning note examines why public actors are motivated to respond, what prevents them from responding, and how SPARK programs have found the right entry points to leverage or create incentives to respond. The objective is to provide pragmatic guidance to practitioners on how SPARK engages with government actors and to help frame the next iteration of the SPARK program.

This note draws on documentation produced by the Learning with SPARK component of the program and our routine monitoring process. These are supported by internal IBP discussion and reflection, and individual and group discussions with country managers. The process has not involved direct engagement with SPARK country partners, government counterparts, or members of grassroots groups except insofar as these views are captured in country learning reports.

The process was aimed at producing key learning propositions, based on cross-country qualitative analysis, on how the programs worked (or did not) and why. It was not intended as an assessment of whether SPARK programs were successful. This note therefore uses illustrative examples of the typical dynamics observed. Readers should not assume that the country examples provided are the only cases.

## 2. Lessons on engaging government to secure fiscal governance change

### Lesson 1: Leveraging political incentives and power

It is obvious that both elected officials and bureaucrats are influenced by political incentives, even if elected officials are more overtly so, and that understanding how to leverage the political power of individual decision-makers and institutions are important in advocacy campaigns. In SPARK the mobilization of the implied political power of large agency groups was envisaged as an important factor in influencing government responses. It was for this reason that some SPARK programs - including Indonesia, Nigeria, and Ghana - elected to work with agency groups on policy issues that had political currency (fisher rights and agriculture). Undertaking political economy analyses has also been a common starting point for the programs. This section discusses the experience of SPARK programs in leveraging the political incentives that government decision-makers – both elected officials and bureaucrats – face.

There are few cases where the SPARK partners found value in targeting political actors directly, despite the inherent political incentives associated with the large membership-based agency groups active in many entry points. In Indonesia and Nigeria, the SPARK partners targeted specific, key political actors (the governors of regions) to support technical changes on how fuel subsidies are administered (Indonesia) and access to agricultural subsidies and equipment (Nigeria). This targeting may be via public action, but often direct communication is needed, for example the Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana (PFLAG) reaching out directly to the Office of the President on why farmers' needs were not addressed during COVID. This was done alongside targeting officials with evidence on why the current system does not work. Programs have also reported that technical actors in government may say that they cannot act without authorization, in which case their political superiors need to be brought on board.

The political incentives at stake are not necessarily about elections and parties staying in power, they can also be about individuals' political careers. SPARK groups have acted in savvy ways to target individual politicians at opportune times when alignment with a large agency group would help advance their progress in the political landscape. In Indonesia, for example, the program aimed its advocacy at a governor at a time when he is expected to run for President. The significance of the agency group in the political landscape mattered in that instance.

There are, however, cases where the programs have relied heavily on ballot box incentives to leverage the power of elected officials. For example, in Nigeria, when the agriculture budget was at risk of being cut drastically in the 2020 COVID adjustment budget, the SPARK partners targeted members of parliament (MPs) from the states in which the program worked. The strategy was to leverage the importance of women farmer support for MPs' re-election prospects to gain their support and use the national legislature's budget amendment powers to reverse the cut proposed by the federal executive government. The strategy worked and a significant proportion of the cut was reversed.

Generally, however, SPARK programs are wary of targeting politicians directly for their support even when politicians may have powerful incentives to respond. This is because the SPARK partners believe the risks may outweigh the rewards. Almost all programs articulated that there is a risk that support is likely to be shallow and short-lived. Shallow because promises would be made, but not kept. And short-lived in the sense that access to the political actor and support may

disappear as soon as the political gain for the actor had been realized, or is no longer important. A second concern is that groups run the risk of their claims being dismissed as partisan when they become associated with specific politicians, or any advances made would be overturned when political power changed hands as an initiative of the exiting office holder. A third risk is that bureaucrats may not necessarily have respect for politicians. Relying on politicians for access and influence could be met with stonewalling by bureaucrats. Being seen as engaging too much with politicians might have a negative effect on engagement with bureaucrats.

Whether to target bureaucrats or elected officials is, however, not generalizable: there are significant differences between countries depending on the political economy. These differences also apply within countries. Bureaucrats can equally act purely out of self-interest. Furthermore, in some contexts, directly interacting with bureaucrats, especially when decisions are not driven by technical consideration, can be counter-productive. In India, the SPARK program has found that media advocacy and targeting legislators in their oversight role has been more successful.

The programs often rely on the power of political institutions, such as the offices of mayors, political heads of relevant sector institutions, or legislature committees to influence government responses. In Senegal, the SPARK program has found that mayors are good allies. While decision-making on urban sanitation infrastructure is national, the impacts are felt locally. Having mayors' support to engage the national ministries has been important. Also in Senegal, engagement with parliament has been an effective avenue to bring evidence into the governments' policy debates. The South Africa program has found that when bureaucrats are not responding to evidence presented, even when it is in the public domain, ensuring that the political incentives for politicians are triggered 'to open the door' can be an effective strategy. In Ghana, the PFAG group targeted the confirmation process of the agriculture minister to raise issues via MPs.

SPARK programs also work with inter- and intra-institutional politics. In Indonesia, for example, the Anti-Corruption Commission issued instructions on COVID-19 relief packages. The evidence from the Indonesian Traditional Fishermen's Union (KTNI), the agency group for fisherfolk, contributed to switching from in-kind food parcels to cash relief to address corruption. KTNI then advocated to the President's Office to put pressure on the ministries that were slow to respond, to implement the instructions.

Seldomly targeting politicians directly, however, does not mean that the inherent political weight of the explicit or implied ability to mobilize large groups of grassroots constituents is not important. This is more relevant in contested political contexts (nationally or in specific localities) where the SPARK programs understand that there are windows of opportunity where they could push harder for change because governments (national or sub-national) are more likely to care about being seen to respond. In South Africa, the partisan nature of local government politics has been exploited to target the power of political actors in government. Care, however, has been taken to do so in nuanced ways, for example by making visible the service delivery failures affecting informal urban settlement residents through social media. Overall, the programs have experienced that elections do matter, and they adapt their campaigns to target specific issues or strategies of engagement more during elections times. This may include, for example, securing commitments from politicians on specific issues and policies in the run-up to elections.

Understanding the micro political economy around the sector or service of interest, and where power sits and whose power to leverage, is important. An obvious aspect of this is understanding which level of government makes decisions about the target service, to target the right actors in the first place, but also to be aware of the opportunities that exist to seek state allies at other levels. In

Ghana it was important to target the national government on the budget allocations for subsidized fertilizer, but also local government actors including agricultural extension officers to ensure that the inputs reached farmers equitably. The support of mayors was important to influence the water and sanitation ministry in Senegal. In Indonesia, KTNI won over a powerful regional governor to put pressure on the national government ministry that had the mandate to adjust regulations for fuel subsidies.

Sector political economies can also be very specific and change as people in power change. In Nigeria, SPARK political economy analysis around health services at the subnational level initially indicated that the state health minister is an important decision-maker. In practice, however, it transpired that the advisor to the minister was the critical actor to influence. In the same program, the agency groups identified that the interest of the key agency responsible for primary health care was aligned to agency group's interests, and that it was marginalized in the budget system. The groups therefore advocated with the agency to change the system and release funding for primary health care clinics.

## **Lesson 2: Leveraging technical incentives with evidence and informed engagement**

Technical incentives for government actors to respond relate to the rationality and validity of the claims about service delivery access, the quality of evidence on systemic causes of poor services, and the way in which evidence is presented and by whom. The SPARK programs aim to get purchase through the technical reasons why governments would respond, with the presentation of evidence central in their strategies.

SPARK brought representation and numbers that enabled government actors to hear the evidence. Public budgets are about competing claims on scarce resources. Politicians and bureaucrats therefore have an easy fallback, genuinely or as a diversion technique, not to respond when presented with specific groups' claims to services. They often simply say that the existing outcomes of due process to distribute resources are right and that they have to abide by these outcomes. This is because budgetary due process includes - or formally claims to include even when the reality is very different - all claims being presented on an equal footing; and the following of procedural rules for a fair decision process. Ministry of Finance officials, particularly, are wary of being seen to favor one interest group in public processes.

The SPARK program has worked because it cuts across this response with its ability to demonstrate that the problems that are experienced with regards to a service, are experienced by a representative group of the population, and therefore the technical issues highlighted should be addressed. This is because SPARK targets specific services aimed at their agency group, and is then able to say that their agency group is representative of the population receiving these services. There are both positive and negative examples that illustrate this dynamic in SPARK. For example, the Senegalese Federation of Associations of People with Disabilities (FSAPH) is able to claim that it represents all people accessing disability cards that would give access to services. In South Africa, where the Asivikelane campaign works with NGO intermediaries who link to informal settlement residents, the social audit data on service delivery was questioned by some city governments, because initially only some communities were linked into the system. As noted in the learning note on collective agency, good geographic coverage for some SPARK programs was a proxy for being able to claim large or representative numbers of people.

SPARK grassroots partners often credibly represent broader constituency groups, beyond a particular geography (community or district) or affiliation, with legitimate needs that government has often already committed to addressing.

SPARK brought credible, representative and/or authentic (new) evidence that government institutions did not have, and could use. SPARK has brought new and credible evidence to the table for government actors on the quantity, coverage, and quality of service delivery. The SPARK campaigns endeavored to collect evidence that agency group constituents were not accessing services. This was often done through social audits or member surveys, enabling the agency group to demonstrate credible information on how significant the service delivery failure was, and bringing persuasive data to decision makers that they did not have.

The programs made the plight of agency group members visible, either by having the members themselves presenting the evidence, or by sharing photos through the press and social media. Authentic testimony triggered responses for a number of reasons. It demonstrated and re-humanized the plight of the poor and marginalized for decision-makers, who often were far removed from the ground, and compelled a response; it brought unique knowledge to the policy table about services and what the needs, priorities, and circumstances of service delivery for grassroots groups were; and in some cases, may have triggered incentives when communicated publicly because the testimonies were perceived or feared to influence the views of people in the government institution or actor. In addition, if the evidence was presented by agency group constituents themselves, it avoided government actors being able to sidestep issues by saying its origin is in expatriate NGOs or agencies of foreign governments.

SPARK has also garnered government responses, because of the credibility of its diagnostic work on why grassroots groups are not able to accessing services. SPARK partners have been able to provide precise evidence about the bottlenecks in how specific services are delivered have led to shortfalls in people receiving the services - whether it is that registration criteria for services is too burdensome, the money allocated for a service does not reach the agency that is charged with delivering, etc. SPARK has brought new insights to actors in different parts of the service delivery chain on why their policies are not working. But evidence must be robust to be accepted. Government officials were quick to pick on any weakness in the data to dismiss the claims being made.

Governments are persuaded to respond to SPARK, because it combines representation with quality evidence and persuasive presentation, tailored to different state actors. SPARK program managers argue strongly that it is the combination of political leverage brought by large numbers, the visibility of citizens directly affected, and the technical evidence of why the situation has come about, together with specific technical asks, that make it more difficult for government actors to dismiss the campaign than when one of these aspects is missing.

Evidence of poor service delivery (e.g., through social audits) without diagnostic work, has been found to often trigger more political or short-term responses to address the specific case(s) presented. On the other hand, diagnostic evidence goes unheard without the evidence of the extent of poor delivery.

Bringing evidence into advocacy can help shift the credibility of agency groups as budget actors. Including evidence in advocacy has been powerful because traditionally governments did not readily expect or accept civil society organizations asking questions about budgets and technical PFM and service delivery issues. Especially when marginalized groups met with government

representatives, it was to ask for better services, a specific concession or a favor. In Senegal the program experienced that bringing in women from the urban groups that Urbasen works with made government uncomfortable. It was only when the women started speaking and presented clear, technical evidence that the conversation shifted.

Programs have, however, strategically selected which partner should present evidence to whom: in some cases, the technical budget partners were more likely to have access or be more convincing. In other cases, the agency groups and their members were better placed. In Indonesia, the Jakarta government was willing to listen to the technical budget partner on evidence, but less willing to engage the agency group itself. SPARK also leverages the technical credibility of IBP and sometimes of budget partners when it triggers responses. The reputation of IBP and of budget partners means that the reliability of the evidence is accepted.

Programs have used benchmarking well to make technical as well as political arguments. They have presented comparisons between locations, and benchmarking against policy norms to demonstrate how bad the problem really is. Examples are the use of traffic lights in reporting on the state of shared sanitation facilities in different cities in South Africa, or photographic evidence that compared actual food packages against what they should be, in the case of Indonesia.

### **Lesson 3: The importance of public policy priorities and reputational benefits and risks**

Government actors did not respond to SPARK campaigns without fail, even when groups demonstrated representation and brought credible evidence. They were motivated to do so because the evidence and technical data had value for them.

Government actors respond when they already perceive the service as important for their personal or their institution's performance and reputation, or for government's performance on its priorities. The SPARK programs have seen responses because the evidence they presented on the lack of grassroots access and the budgetary reasons why this occurred, resonated with and was welcomed by government actors for whom the service was an important aspect of their personal or government's performance. For example, when SPARK received responses when it presented credible evidence and representative data that would help sanitation offices (Urbasen and Asivikelane) - whose day-to-day tasks, performance, and reputation are linked to maintaining or improving sanitation services.

This effect becomes diluted the further up the fiscal governance chain the problems occur, but not when services are perceived to be politically important. In Ghana, for example, the government has an incentive for the farmer subsidy programs to be perceived as successful: farmers going public with evidence of the program not working could be damaging politically.

The incentive is also about the cost to individuals (personal and to their career) when their personal or their institution's reputation is affected by poor delivery (and the benefits when delivery improves). This may quite literally be because of their personal relationships. The Senegal program noted that at local levels government officials have an incentive to be seen to be delivering/responding, because they live in local communities and have to answer questions personally when services are not delivered.

Incentives for government actors are both positive and negative: actors may seek to avoid bad publicity and therefore respond, but they also respond because it will bring good publicity. Most

SPARK programs have used publicity of their findings on service delivery both as carrots and sticks. They have found that they are as likely to get more positive responses when they publish evidence of services being fixed or improved as when they publish evidence of service delivery shortfalls.

SPARK programs often use reasons why services should be delivered to incentivize responses that are not directly about the needs and interests of the agency groups. SPARK's advocacy campaigns are often about getting governments to deliver services that they have no interest in delivering. SPARK programs then look for a policy hook that interests the incumbent government. The perception that delivering the service is important does not necessarily need to be linked to the importance of grassroots constituents accessing the service, but can be linked to another public good or interest. For example, maintaining the agriculture budget and input subsidies was presented as important for food security during COVID-19 by SWOFON in Nigeria. And maintaining water supply systems will address water loss and this provided a hook for Asivikelane in South Africa to get water and sanitation units to respond to water supply maintenance problems in one drought-stricken South African city.

Even when working with like-minded officials, mobilization of agency groups should not be neglected. Creating incentive alignment through mass mobilization or media campaigns, or seeking out like-minded officials to work with are alternative strategies the programs use to garner impact when government as a whole has not demonstrated interest. Programs argued strongly that there is always a balance between citizen mobilization and engagement in the campaign, and working with aligned officials. Even when issues are on the agenda, they may not be prioritized. Furthermore, alignment with like-minded officials is not always sustainable and may decline over time: the benefit of SPARK that combines mobilization of citizens with technical engagement is precisely that it balances two sets of incentives for government actors.

When there are clear policies in place that entitle grassroots constituents to services, officials are both more obliged and freer to respond. This is partly a positive incentive about performance and accountability, linked to officials' perception that they are obliged to respond or will be held accountable if they do not. But it is also about the administrative/regulatory backing that policies give officials to utilize public resources for a response. The more specific the grassroots constituents' entitlement, the stronger the incentives. Specificity relates both to whether the groups are explicitly targeted and what the quality of services are that should be delivered. When specific policies are linked to specific budget allocations to providing the target service to grassroots constituents, and these are public, SPARK campaigns have an ever-strong lever to push officials for delivery. Clear policies and transparent budget lines also open up the incentives around accountability processes that can be triggered via accountability actors, such as parliaments, ombudsman, anti-corruption commissions, and supreme audit institutions.

The reverse is also true: the difficulty in getting officials to respond in the absence of clear policy and budgetary commitments has, for example, focused the FSAPH campaign in Senegal, upstream of budget allocations, on getting explicit policy commitments that grassroots constituents should be entitled to a service, and on getting specific allocations into budget structures first.

Explicit and implicit societal norms about the agency group constituents are also key in triggering government responses. Even when the service is seen as important for government performance, delivering to the grassroots constituents may not be a priority. Formal and informal norms about whether the needs and priorities of grassroots marginalized groups should be prioritized in delivering the service encourage or prevent government actors from responding. When present, (i) at the very least government actors want to appear to be concerned about grassroots constituents



accessing the services, and (ii) fear the reputational or accountability consequences (nationally or locally) if, in practice, they do not follow through.

SPARK programs are more likely to run public campaigns when agency groups are perceived as important for government performance or in society at large. This could move politicians to respond and shift incentives for bureaucrats to respond to the technical asks of campaigns. This can be a complex dynamic within government: for example, subsidies can be a contested policy area and not all policymakers would see it as a budget priority in agriculture, but the fact that large farmer (or fisher) groups are politically important to government, provides a powerful incentive to keep and increase subsidies.

On the other hand, in the absence of norms recognizing the rights of agency groups, SPARK campaigns have struggled more to get traction for their agency groups, unless they can leverage another policy reason for why services should be delivered (food security, water savings, wider public health during COVID). The India program reported difficulty in getting traction on addressing the needs of manual scavengers, one of its agency groups that has no leverage in the prevailing political climate even though official policies exist that should support the group. It is only in states where there is alignment with the objectives of the SPARK program that progress is likely.

Officials also respond because their personal value systems are compatible with ensuring that grassroots constituents access services. Such officials are important allies for SPARK programs and if they are in powerful positions that can influence decisions across services, they are often the first port of call for SPARK partners.

Government actors are also motivated by financial incentives, alongside concerns about reputation, performance, and accountability. In principle, this may be about personal financial gain should the target service be linked to performance bonuses, but this has not occurred in any of the SPARK programs. The financial incentives in SPARK programs are about politicians and officials potentially growing (or losing) the budgets they control.

#### **Lesson 4: Selecting advocacy strategies and government entry points**

Governments are not homogenous, and SPARK partners look to find the right institution, person, advocacy approach, and windows to engage. It is obvious that different government actors respond at different times to different kinds of incentives. Not all government actors are motivated by the same reasons, and the same actors may not be motivated by the same reasons all the time. In SPARK it is not about leveraging the incentives government actors face in the abstract or in broad strokes, but about knowing individual government actors, the web of institutions within which they operate, their reasons to act (and how these may change over time), and their reach on the levers of change.

SPARK campaigns generally target many entry points and approaches at the same time. All the SPARK program managers emphasized that they rarely rely on only one entry point to government, or rarely use only direct advocacy to bureaucrats, or only advocacy in the public domain. It is important to have multiple irons in the fire, because of the risk of a singly pathway failing and because they are mutually reinforcing. SPARK campaigns usually combine direct engagement of government actors with putting their advocacy messages in the public domain to bolster incentives for government actors and support aligned actors.

SPARK programs take care in sequencing public versus direct advocacy, and balancing confrontational versus collaborative approaches. This may be about strategic patience and not jumping the gun by going public with information or becoming more confrontational because direct presentation has not delivered a fast response. This may damage the chance of getting responses. In Ghana, for example, the program has understood that putting evidence in the public domain without first sharing it with government actors can be counterproductive even if it garners a lot of attention. At the same time, the 'threat' of the evidence of program problems being released can help incentivize government responses, enabling more collaborative approaches. Negotiating this terrain is therefore an important part of strategy.

Programs also noted that agency groups may prefer collaborative approaches, because of the risk to their leaders/members if approaches are more in the public domain or confrontational. In India, women champions tried to put out public information on the persistence of manual scavenging despite it being illegal to employ them. The result was that they were threatened by the police to withdraw their campaign. What has worked is making the issue visible to legislators and providing information to the media more strategically. This has had some results at district and state levels.

SPARK programs often invest in building 'insider' relationships with specific government actors. Because it tries to leverage political collective agency to achieve sometimes very 'removed' technical change in fiscal governance systems, SPARK cannot merely rely on relative blunt and public mass advocacy. This may work when it seeks big, high-level changes in the fiscal governance system, or for budget shifts. But SPARK often also needs to get technical messages on technical systems to specific persons (that can influence technical and political decisionmakers to make the change). These messages can be difficult to communicate or efficiently communicate through mass-based action.

For these types of advocacy engagements with government actors, SPARK partners have to access the inner offices of bureaucracies armed with good knowledge of who sits there, what motivates them, and what powers they have; and what relationships and political factors SPARK might exploit to get the technical changes it seeks.

This means that SPARK is very much driven by individual knowledge basis and relationships. The combined relationships of the SPARK partners and how far they reach into the advocacy targets (at various levels of government relative to the service) are therefore important factors in engaging governments.

Government contexts are not static, and SPARK programs have to adapt strategies and entry points continuously. The existing relationships and political/institutional knowledge of SPARK actors is critical in identifying the right person/institution, the right approach, and the right moment for engagement. Spark has often seen success, because the country partners have recognized windows of opportunity where government actors' likely incentives coincided with SPARK's own aims, and tailored their advocacy messages to align. On the other hand, entry points that have worked well in the past may cease when key interlocutors move on, are replaced, or their environments change so that they are no longer able to respond.

Insider strategies usually combine seeking access to informal and formal spaces. Some of the risk may be mitigated when SPARK actors have institutionalized seats on the inside, e.g., on budgeting forums or review structures. In Nigeria, the primary health agency groups have secured a space on the State's budget forum, which has institutionalized its access to some degree. In one South African city, the agency group had gained access to the city government's structures monitoring the

effective delivery of resources to address COVID. In both cases, this access occurred because of the data/evidence the groups had presented to government. The representation however remains at the discretion of government, and programs have noted the risk of falling out of favor.

### 3. Conclusion

Our findings show that governments are persuaded to respond because our programs combine representation with quality evidence and persuasive presentation tailored to different actors. As explored in the first learning brief on collective agency, mobilizing large, representative grassroots constituencies is the starting point to create incentives for governments to respond. The political leverage brought by large numbers, the visibility of communities directly affected, and the technical evidence of why the situation has come about, together with specific technical proposals, make it more difficult for government actors to dismiss these campaigns.

Engaging governments successfully is highly context driven. What will work to trigger a response differs across countries, levels of government, services and time. We continuously scan the environment for opportunities to engage. This requires knowing individual government actors, the web of institutions in which they operate, their reasons to act (and how these change over time), and their reach on the levers of change. SPARK campaigns rarely rely on one entry point to government, or rarely use only direct advocacy to officials, or only public advocacy. We and our coalition partners have found that we must work with multiple government partners at the same time and can use power dynamics between institutions to get the responses we seek.

We have also found government actors respond more easily when the service is relevant to their personal, institutional or government performance in the prevailing political context. Our programs have faced hurdles when neither the service in question, nor the grassroots group, has political currency. In these instances, leveraging media advocacy, and seeking out powerful allies (as discussed in our second learning brief on coalitions) are critical to improve services or at least deter backsliding.