

Adaptive management in the time of COVID-19: learnings from Indonesia



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by Daniel Harris

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There is no doubt we will be untangling the diverse impacts of COVID-19 for years to come. Emerging evidence within and across countries is helping us understand the uneven burden of the pandemic, but it is clear that few have escaped its effects entirely.

Taking stock roughly a year after the emergence of the virus, we have identified numerous impacts on our work with the Knowledge Sector Initiative (KSI) in Indonesia, many of which have no doubt been experienced in other development programs and workplaces around the world. In summary, three broad types of observed impact include:

- **Internal impacts:** These include immediate impacts on the wellbeing of staff and changes in KSI's day-to-day ways of working (e.g. office closures and relocation of staff). Communication practices are a central theme here, with changes to the form and frequency of team interaction and greater reliance on tools like Zoom and WhatsApp. Patience is necessary when connections fail, but at least in our case there has been **sufficient investment in IT infrastructure** to allow implementation to proceed and to facilitate periodic reflection and adaptation.
- **Impacts on working with external stakeholders:** The program's vision of itself as a catalyst includes a focus on better connecting knowledge producers and policymakers, either directly or through intermediaries. The pandemic has changed the way the program seeks to initiate and develop these relationships. While it necessitated the **postponement of the 2020 Indonesia Development Forum**, it also presented an opportunity to move knowledge exchange events online, reaching a larger audience and increasing partner government participation. Limits on face-to-face interaction internally and between reform stakeholders can be challenging, but have seemed most manageable where KSI has been able to draw on pre-existing personal relationships it has nurtured over the years, **echoing emerging findings on the importance of relationships and trust in remote work**.

- **Broader external impacts:** COVID-19 has had significant effects on legislative and budget priorities in Indonesia. It has shifted the interests and incentives of policymakers (and donors), leading to some important opportunities for the program, including greater space for reform narratives that link science and policy, recognition of the need to invest in research, and new cross-ministerial attention to the ecosystem that supports knowledge and innovation. At the same time, challenges include a greater focus on epidemiology and hard sciences than on other forms of knowledge that contribute to a multidisciplinary understanding of the pandemic (and development more broadly).

In trying to parse lessons regarding adaptation from such changes, I find myself reflecting on the way in which we think about objectives. In our experience, adaptation works best where there is shared clarity regarding ultimate outcomes. As Pasanen and Barnett (2019) [describe](#), these outcomes then remain a consistent compass ‘while assumptions, strategies and pathways to the outcomes are updated when the context changes or when more understanding or new information emerges.’

COVID-19 can certainly prompt this type of adaptation. This was the case in KSI’s work on use of evidence at the subnational level. With COVID-19 occupying policymakers and shifting everything else to the back burner, KSI partners in South Sulawesi encountered a lack of responsiveness despite having undertaken an extensive consultation process in 2019 to build consensus around a research agenda that could inform local government action on its policy priorities. Reframing the work as a way to inform the post-COVID economic recovery rebuilt interest, but required the team to understand how the changing context had shifted the interests and incentives of local counterparts. KSI’s objectives with regard to learning how to improve evidence-informed policymaking had not changed, but COVID-19 changed the way the team needed to engage to find traction.

Program systems can be set up to support this type of adaptation. This includes formal systems like KSI’s internal learning sessions and corresponding Progress Reviews with donor and government counterparts. However, with formal systems not necessarily timed to respond to emerging impacts of the pandemic, adaptation has often depended upon the day-to-day interactions of team members, reinforcing our belief that a program’s working culture is a crucial determinant of the capacity to adapt effectively. KSI has been working on this through the language and tools of ‘critical friend’ approaches. Initially developed to [help teachers provide peer feedback](#), these approaches help normalise the giving and receiving of constructive feedback across levels of seniority and areas of expertise. That candor is critical to effective learning and adaptation.

Yet even as programs adapt in pursuit of their intended outcomes, many are also facing shifts in policy and requests from donors and partner governments for new areas of work. There may well be a case for ‘pivoting’ or the development of new objectives. The pandemic is a serious challenge with the potential to set back various forms of development progress significantly. However, while such changes may be possible given the flexibility we’ve built into our systems to facilitate adaptation, Booth et al. (2018) are right to note that they are not the same as adaptation in the sense of ‘purposeful experimentation and course correction that is required because of complexity.’

How do we balance these two types of change? Too much insistence on the former and we may find ourselves irrelevant in a changed world or even simply *seen* as less relevant, which carries its own risks as COVID-19 impacts the **size** and **allocation** of aid budgets. Too much of the latter and we may abandon learning gained in pursuit of objectives that remain important or dilute our efforts through a proliferation of objectives.

In the best-case scenario, we do not need to choose as there is alignment between the immediate needs generated by the pandemic and longer-term goals of developmental institutional change. Politically astute teams will be on the lookout for such opportunities (as in the South Sulawesi example above), but we know even from pre-pandemic experience that this is not always the case. Maintaining coherence and focus has always been a challenge in flexible programs and facilities. They have needed to learn to say ‘no’ if requests extend beyond their focus or resources, or at least to be clear how additional requests will ultimately help reach their desired outcomes.

For KSI, this has involved using criteria established at the outset of the program to help determine whether new workstreams would be added or old ones ended. It has required asking not only about technical and political feasibility, relevance, and program expertise, but also practical questions like:

- What are the resource implications of adding new objectives?
 - Are additional financial resources required? If so, are they available or would they be reallocated from elsewhere?
 - Is the available mix of skills, expertise and relationships transferable?
- What are the potential impacts on existing longer-term objectives of devoting scarce resources to new requests?
 - Do we risk discarding or deprioritising objectives that have

guided work (and adaptation)?

- Are we prepared to adjust our expectations for existing outcomes if necessary?

Answers to these questions (at least, as best as they can be answered with available information) help inform the inevitably political prioritisation discussions among donors, implementers and government partners. COVID-19 has once again brought these issues to the fore and while these practicalities may not be as flashy as our real-time political economy analysis, our strategic reflection sessions, or our regularly revised theories of change, they are no less important to our success.

Disclosures:

ODI is part of and provides support to the Australian DFAT-funded Knowledge Sector Initiative via an action research role that aims to learn from and provide feedback on the program's approach to adaptive management. The contents of this blog are based on the author's observations in that role, and while the program provided support for the blog, the views are the author's own.

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