Walking the adaptive talk by Lisa Denney

Aid programs are increasingly called on to be flexible, adaptive and to 'think and work politically.' In DFAT, barely a program is approved without this terminology being peppered through the design document. But what do these ideas mean in practice? How can implementers, tasked with bringing designs to life, deliver on their promise meaningfully? And how do donors need to manage adaptive programs differently to conventional ones?

In a series of three blogs over the coming weeks, the Institute for Human Security and Social Change will set out some ideas about what it take to program adaptively. These are drawn from our experience of working alongside primarily DFAT and DFID funded programs in the Pacific, Africa and Southeast Asia that have sought to integrate adaptive ways of working. Most recently, this includes working with the PNG-Australia Governance Partnership and the Solomon Islands Resource Facility, but also extends to domestic work with organisations like the Central and Northern Land Councils.

Each blog will deal with a different component of the challenge – first adaptive implementation; then adaptive monitoring and evaluation; and finally the role of research and learning.

A lot has been written already on what examples of adaptive programming look like (see here, here and here, for instance). In requires hiring the right staff, putting in place regular sessions to reflect and redesign, increased risk appetites, and so on. But when the rubber hits the road, programs that seek to be adaptive run into several areas of confusion, which we try to clarify here.

1. **Adapt theories of change, not (just) activities**

There is often confusion about the level at which adaptation is to occur. Often, programs point to changes in their activities as demonstrating adaptation. For instance, participant feedback indicates that some aspect of a training was not well understood and so the program adapts the curriculum. This is good practice but is really just problem solving. Hopefully programs were doing this anyway!

Adaptation is not about tweaking activities but about instilling a learning approach at the heart of programming. This means being open to the idea that your entire theory of change might need to adapt, not just the activities being rolled out in support of it (this is also referred to as double loop learning). Rather than focusing on activities, adaptive programming focuses on understanding how change happens, and adapting theories of change to reflect learning about this. An adaptive program is one that can shift from supporting one approach to change, to another. What changes is not simply program activities, but the underlying logic of how to make change happen.

2. **Don't rely on results alone to trigger adaptation**

This raises the question of how you know when to adapt and when to stay the course. There are dangers of constantly changing course and not sticking with strategies for long enough to see results. However, most programs tend to be reticent to change existing strategies because of sunk costs and risk aversion, among other things. A key problem is that programs rely on results as the trigger for adaptation. Intuitively, this makes sense, given that adaptive programming came about to deliver better results from aid spending. The problem is that results can be slow to emerge. If we wait for an evaluation to tell us whether strategies are working, adaptation will happen very slowly.

What is needed is a series of other, softer markers of progress along the way that can help determine if we're on the right path. For instance, have we been able to secure meetings with the necessary counterparts to get traction? Where social media is an important political forum, are the coalitions we support building a following or gaining profile? These kinds of markers are not enough to determine success or otherwise, but they can help programs make decisions about whether the weight of evidence is on the side of staying the course, or changing strategy.

Other prompts for adaptation can be the team's evolving knowledge (of people/groups and their interests, incentives and power), emerging opportunities or roadblocks. To be adaptive, programs need to find ways of routinely capturing these kinds of triggers for change.

3. **Make sure your staffing and workplace culture are fit for purpose**

The reliance on the team's evolving knowledge and networks has implications for staffing and program culture. While programs usually hire staff for their technical skills and experience in meeting the donor demands, adaptive programming calls for valuing other skills and attributes. You need staff with political nous, local knowledge, networks and connections. The technical is not unimportant but is also not sufficient. Adaptive programs recognise that the key constraint to developmental change is rarely a lack of technical knowledge or capacity but the constellation of political incentives. You need staff, then, who can navigate this.

What's more, you need a work environment in which those staff are routinely encouraged to critically reflect, question and speak up. This can be institutionalised in moments of reflection and redesign (be they strategy testing, reflection and refocus, etc.) but should also be reflected in the wider organisational culture. Otherwise reflection sessions will fall flat, or only capture dominant voices. Your staff – particularly local staff – need to know that they, their knowledge and networks, are valued and relevant in navigating the path to change. They are not simply there to deliver on implementation plans. This can be done through management practices, but also through HR policies – do pay, conditions, security policies and the like demonstrate that local and international staff are equally valued in their contribution to supporting change?

4. **Donors: let go of the reigns but stay engaged**

Adaptive programming does not only require implementers to change their ways of working. Donors, equally, need to recognise that adaptive programs require different management to conventional programs. Implementing partners – be they NGOs or private contractors – are just that: partners. They are on your team. You are navigating the path to developmental change together. As a result, they require a reasonable degree of trust and room for manoeuvre. If the political economy within your own donor organisation militates against this, then you need to think and work politically within your own organisation. As much as possible, slow the pressures coming from your own political economy to create space for change in the country you're working in. Change happens in that environment – not through cables or reporting to donor headquarters.

None of this means donor staff need to be disengaged. Donor staff possess important information, ideas and relationships that can be brought to bear on development programming. In an ideal world, the donor-implementer relationship would be such that donor staff would participate in reflection and redesign sessions – not for accountability purposes, but to contribute to the melding of minds required to figure out how to support change.

5. **Be realistic about the tools you have available**

Donors and implementers need to be realistic about the scope of adaptation that is possible given the tools available (there are also a whole host of political realities that play a constraining role that we won't get into here). If your program is a technical assistance facility, for instance, you face the challenge of having already decided on the tool before you know what the problem is that needs to be fixed. This means the room to adapt is restricted – you likely can't all of a sudden become a community grants program, for instance. But you can still be creative within the space available. While technical assistance, in its worst forms, substitutes rather than builds capacity, there are a range of potential roles that technical assistants can play in different contexts – from advising, to convening, to building coalitions, to joining the dots between different reforms.

Similarly, if you are operating a community grants facility, you can encourage adaptive ways of working amongst local partners, and/or use grants strategically to support multiple approaches to change, investing in learning about what works and why. Working adaptively will therefore look different and face different constraints depending on the nature of the program. Being upfront and realistic about the scope of adaptation that is possible will moderate expectations, and help others understand what adaptiveness means in practice for your program.

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Monitoring and evaluation for adaptive programming by Chris Roche and Linda Kelly

Six years ago we wrote a paper called *'The evaluation of politics and the politics of evaluation'*, which argued that programs seeking to work in a politically smart manner faced particular challenges in monitoring and evaluating their performance. This included the need to take into account the long-term, non-linear nature of these initiatives, as well as the recognition of the complex, dynamic nature of the contexts in which they were working. These are many of the same challenges faced by programs seeking to work adaptively.

We argued that there were a number of evaluation and research methods which, when judiciously combined, were better able to answer the kinds of evaluative questions these programs asked. Yet the inherently political nature of evaluation and the 'results agenda' tended to favour certain methods – those that captured and quantified short-term tangible outputs, and downplayed those that potentially are better able to assess long-term, subtle changes in relationships, power and social norms (something others, such as Eyben, Natsios, Vogel, Honig, Yanguas and Mueller have also suggested).

Since we wrote that piece, and a follow up paper on what some programs were doing at the time, a lot more programs have sought to work adaptively and in politically smarter ways. Lisa Denney's first blog in this three-part series captures some of the lessons this has generated. In this blog we set out six take-aways focused on what is being tried and learnt in setting up monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks for adaptive programs, including about working in ways that recognise the political nature of evidence and evaluation.

1. **Be clear about the purposes of M&E**

Designing these processes depends on what you want to do. Too often M&E frameworks are designed by technical specialists in ways that either exclude key stakeholders and decision makers, and/or which result in technically robust products that are too complex, expensive or time consuming to be implemented. Furthermore they can also conflate monitoring, evaluation and learning in unhelpful ways. All of which often results in lots of data being collected but rarely used. There is a growing call for 'right-fit' systems which are clear about the different purposes of monitoring, evaluation and learning, and more strategic about the collection and use of data to meet these different purposes.

2. **More complex programs require different but accessible M&E**

For programs seeking to address complex and political environments, the various stakeholders, interactions and unplanned elements mean that traditional M&E – based essentially on tracking cause and effect – does not work. Practitioners who persist in applying traditional approaches end up either with long lists of indicators and questions (trying desperately to cover the whole story) or very high-level or generic measures, which provide no basis for informed decisions about why and how to adapt.

Programs seeking to work adaptively should utilise multiple data collection and analysis methods to illuminate the different aspects of the work. The aim is to provide useful information about how a program is operating, what contributions are being made to change, and the impact and relevance of this contribution. Often that means different systems for assessing program activities and program contributions to change and additional assessment about context – how that might also be changing, and the implications for the program.

This more comprehensive approach is not fully captured by a logframe or performance framework, nor can it be contained to the M&E team alone. It should be part of the fabric of the program itself. It requires thought and considerable engagement with the program implementers and others who can identify the critical factors to be tracked. The M&E therefore has to be comprehensible and accessible. As was clear at a recent Asia Foundation workshop in Manila involving M&E staff from several adaptive programs, simplifying processes, language and data collection was a common strategy. This included using telephone apps or Facebook to collect real time data from front line staff, and avoiding the often alienating language of M&E, instead using local or plain English language.

3. **Focus on processes and relationships as much as outputs and outcomes**

It is recognised that human systems function on the basis of relationships, and it is these interactions that lie at the heart of social change. Furthermore, it is changes in relational practice, i.e. how people, organisations and states relate to each other, that can lead to new 'rules of the game', or institutions. However what those institutions will look like is not predictable. This raises challenges for M&E in adaptive programs about how and when to measure changes in relationships and what this leads to.

Adaptive programs are adopting a range of ways to try to address this challenge, including:

- partnering with researchers to undertake ongoing action research with a particular focus on assessing, for example, changes in power relations;
- using social network analysis, changes in social norms and outcome harvesting to assess the evolution of relationships over time and the ongoing collection of data to be able to tell a more complete story of change;
- building in social accountability processes or feedback loops to provide more real time data, particularly from those that programs are seeking to benefit; and
- more use of realist evaluation and qualitative comparative analysis methodologies to be clearer about the underlying generative mechanisms of change in particular contexts, including through using participatory methods.

4. **Resource the M&E and L**

M&E to support dynamic programming does not start and finish with a framework and set of systems. It involves ongoing data collection and analysis processes, ideally engaging multiple stakeholders. This requires resources, planning and management attention. M&E has to be part of the work plans for program implementation. It requires scheduling and planning. Significantly, M&E for adaptive programs requires the whole team to take some responsibility for the analysis and review of the data collected and what it means for ongoing work.

5. **Be politically smart**

Once it is recognised that monitoring, and particularly evaluation, is as political as anything else, and often needs to adapt to shifting demands, then many of the tools of adaptive programming and everyday political analysis become equally applicable. These might include:

- using everyday political economy analysis to better understand the interests, incentives and power relations of the stakeholders involved in an evaluation;
- being clearer about the multi-level theory of change and need for stakeholder engagement, which makes it more likely that M&E processes actually lead to better learning and adaptation;
- exploring whether there are coalitions, allies or networks which can combine their experience, skills and data to provide a more powerful and complete picture of change, as well as allowing multiple voices to be heard; and
- exploring framing and narratives which help communicate evidence but are also politically savvy. As many have argued, populism is not going to be beaten with spreadsheets.

6. **And finally**

M&E for adaptive programs ought to also adapt and improve. There are few examples of a perfect M&E system for politically informed adaptive programs. The M&E has to build in its own processes of review, analysis and improvement in order to both grow with the program and stay relevant to its inquiry and assessment needs.

The role of research and learning in adaptive programming by Andrea Babon and Lisa Denney

This final blog in the three-part series on adaptive programming focuses on research and learning (see our earlier instalments on what it takes to work adaptively in implementation and how to monitor and evaluate adaptive programs).

The increased emphasis on adaptive programming approaches has seen learning or knowledge partners become an increasingly common feature of aid programs. These partners are intended to promote learning and facilitate the integration of knowledge and 'evidence' into program implementation. But how these learning partners operate and feed into programs is not straightforward and often not agreed for all involved. It is not always clear who is learning, about what, or for what purpose.

The Institute for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University has acted as a learning partner and conducted action research alongside a range of DFAT-funded development programs in the Pacific, most recently the PNG-Australia Governance Partnership. This means we spend a lot of our time thinking about the role of research, knowledge and learning in development (indeed – we will be hosting the Research for Development Impact conference at our Melbourne campus next year – stay tuned!). Here, we set out some initial ideas for how learning partnerships can deliver real impact.

Development practitioners or front-line staff are often operating in information-poor spaces and want their practice to be informed by knowledge and evidence. But knowing clearly what information might be relevant and useful, and how to acquire it, is less clear, particularly in adaptive programs where information needs are likely to change.

At the same time, practitioners are working to time-bound deadlines and often specific deliverables that they would like research to inform. This makes quick and concise research appealing, and a range of helpdesks and knowledge banks have been set up to respond to such research requests. This type of 'rapid research' can deliver quick summaries of existing international evidence, experience or information and provide useful inputs in a timely manner. They can be a great jumping off point for deeper inquiry. But they should not be seen as the only or default way to do research or access knowledge. This type of research tends to favour generalist expertise operating at a high level of abstraction. Moreover, the increasingly-used language of 'knowledge products' can imply that knowledge is a product or commodity that exists 'out there', to be plucked and delivered to and consumed by programs.

The Institute sees learning partnerships as able to offer a brokering role – mediating between researchers, academics, aid practitioners and policy makers. There are at least four aspects to this. First, learning partners can play a role in accessing and filtering international evidence, as per the helpdesk model above. This can ensure that each new aid program does not reinvent the wheel and builds on learning from elsewhere that is contextually relevant.

Second, learning partners can bring in local voices and perspectives. Any learning from international experience must be contextualised and refracted through a local lens for it to be relevant to a given context. This can best be done by local researchers, program staff or citizens who have knowledge about existing or past practices or policies that have worked (or not). This can throw up novel solutions that are likely to be socially, culturally and politically appropriate, and hence more likely to succeed.

Third, learning partners can play a convening role, creating 'safe' spaces for different voices and knowledge to be brought to the fore. This can extend to marginalised groups within a community (such as young people or women), or the 'quiet achievers' within programs, who may hold considerable knowledge but may not feel comfortable challenging dominant narratives or people. As Einstein said, we cannot solve problems with the same thinking we used when we created them. Bringing in voices and perspectives from often overlooked groups holds enormous potential for solving the intractable or 'wicked' problems with which many aid programs are grappling. Indeed, often there are useful existing practices already happening in a given context that international actors could learn from – what are sometimes known as examples of positive deviance.

Fourth, learning partners play an important role in connecting the research and learning from an aid program to wider debates in the aid industry. This is crucial to ensuring that, as a community of practice, the aid industry is continually learning from each program.

One helpful way to think about these roles is as a 'learning journey.' This is the way the Institute for Development Studies refers to one aspect of the knowledge and research services provided to DFID. These are a cluster of related activities and outputs designed to support learning and dialogue and share the latest thinking and research. Importantly, they are *journeys* that may include short research summaries, learning events, deeper research pieces, and so on. The journey approach recognises that learning happens through interactions, thinking and sharing diverse ideas in different formats, not by consuming 'knowledge products.'

Research and learning partners have the potential to support development programming and policy to be more effective, adaptive and informed by the best possible knowledge and evidence. But having a narrow focus on knowledge 'products' or 'quick and dirty' summaries of international literature overlooks the more central and strategic role that learning and knowledge plays in adaptive programming. Balancing immediate program needs for information with longer-term research activities to develop new knowledge offers the best potential for development programs, and the sector, to get the most out of learning partners.