

The role of research and learning in adaptive programming

by Andrea Babon and Lisa Denney

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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.

This is the third in a three-part series on adaptive aid programming. [Part one](#) looked at adaptive implementation, and [part two](#) at adaptive monitoring and evaluation. A pdf of all three posts can be found [here](#).

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