



Adaptive schematic from the 2015 World Development Report

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). It 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.

This is the first in a three-part series on adaptive aid programming. [Part two](#) will look at adaptive monitoring and evaluation, and [part three](#) at the role of research and learning. A pdf of all three posts can be found [here](#).

About the author/s

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