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Practice note
Adaptive programme management in fragile and complex settings

1. Introducing Adaptive Programme Management

<u>What is adaptive management?</u>
Adaptive programme management (APM) is an evidence-based approach to programme-design and -implementation increasingly used in international development programming. Central to APM is a built-in strategy to continuously learn, iterate and adapt to enhance programme relevance and effectiveness *throughout the programme cycle* (Desai et al., 2018). At the heart of this approach lies the continuous and systematic use of relevant knowledge to inform decision-making about changes to an ongoing programme or project. This is especially important in the face of contextual change or when programming in uncertain conditions. APM represents an evolution in management approaches; moving from learning and programme flexibility as a way to manage risk towards learning and adaptation as the core programming strategy. APM thus goes beyond the 'design → implement → evaluate'-logic. It integrates continuous feedback loops that facilitate ongoing learning and interim programme adjustments based on emerging insights and changing circum-stances (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2018).

> **APM for resilience in fragile settings**
> The USAID funded Promoting Resilience through Ongoing Participatory Engagement and Learning (PROPEL) programme in South Sudan puts learning and adaptation at the centre of its resilience initiative. One Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL) team was formed that focused on M&E, research, learning and cross-cutting technical areas. The MERL team functioned as service provider to field programme teams, helping to connect learning to problem-solving; to adapt programming to rapidly changing fragile environment; and to co-design monitoring, target-setting and feedback mechanisms for learning and knowledge sharing. The learning design of PROPEL allowed for its continued operation despite conflict-related challenges and was crucial in enabling flexible responses to emerging situations such as an outbreak of cholera and a large influx of internally displaced persons.

<u>Why adopt an APM approach?</u>
Adopting an adaptive strategy has two main advantages: a) It allows implementing organizations to take advantage of opportunities that arise in a changing context so as to maximize their impact; and b) it provides a tool or method for organisations to take adequate action in the face of uncertainty and change in a systematic and structured way (Desai et al., 2018; Cooke, 2017; Green, 2018).

<u>When to use adaptive management strategies?</u>
In uncertain, complex and volatile settings pathways to positive change are unpredictable (Ladner, 2015). Therefore, if they are to be *and remain* relevant and efficient, interventions in these contexts must be flexible and adaptable, making adaptive approaches particularly suitable (Ramalingam, 2015). Programming would benefit from APM approaches in settings which are characterized, among others, by:
- changes in policy priorities;
- irregular changes in individuals (e.g. ministers etc.)
- changes in institutions' and structures, such as decentralization;
- ongoing or continuous threat of conflict in the region;
- increasing extreme weather events within the region; and
- social and financial changes, including uncertain access to international finance mechanisms (Cooke, 2017).

2. Elements of APM

The above paragraph makes clear that ongoing, systematic learning and adaptation are at the heart of adaptive programming. Yet, there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for this process in practice. Throughout the programme cycle various practices (referred to as 'adaptive elements') can be adopted to facilitate continuous learning and programme adjustments. Table 1 outlines a number of these adaptive elements that have been implemented in adaptive programmes. The table is based on the 2018 Oxfam report *Managing to adapt* (Desai et al., 2016) and adjusted and complemented with other source material. Note that the overview is not exhaustive, but rather serves to provide a broad understanding of the type of measures and approaches that can facilitate adaptive strategies.

Table 1. Elements of APM. Adapted from *Desai et al., 2016*

Adaptive elements	Description	Example
Planning		
Evolutionary approaches	The programme takes shape through an evolutionary approach by testing different types of interventions, scaling up successes while dropping less effective interventions (Desai et al., 2016).	The Chakua Hatua programme, implemented by Oxfam, ran simultaneous pilot projects for nine months, after which the most successful pilots were selected for upscaling.
Adaptive logframes	Adaptive logframes move away from linear processes and fixed indicators. Instead, they integrate learning and flexibility into programme design and, as such, allow for unanticipated interventions to be adopted as they emerge on the political agenda (Cooke, 2017).	The Action on Climate Today programme, implemented by Oxford Policy Management, used a combined approach where 'change areas' were chosen in its traditional logframe that could be adapted. Other adaptive logframes include 'search frames' and 'strategy testing'.
Flexible financial frameworks	Flexible financial frameworks match the changes and evolving activities inherent to adaptive programming. These include evolving and varying spending rates and built-in possibilities for budget re-allocation (Allana, 2014; AfP, 2018). Additionally M&E and learning budgets should be raised to support this process - as Pasanen suggests from a traditional 10% to a minimum of 25% (Pasanen, 2017)	The DFID-funded LASER programme operates under a hybrid contract with ⅔ of the funding tied to achievement of milestones, and ⅓ paid on an input basis. Payments are made on a six-monthly basis, allowing for flexibility and adaptability of milestones. This framework enables DFID to hold LASER accountable for delivering results, while LASER can maintain ambition and be responsive to emerging needs and contextual change (Derbyshire and Donovan, 2016).
Monitoring & Evaluation		
Real-time data	Collecting and using real-time data is necessary to gain and maintain up-to-date insight in ongoing operational performance and systemic issues. It allows for timely interim shifts and re-alignments in strategy, rather than at the end of a project cycle, which is especially important in crisis settings (Oxfam, 2013; AfP, 2018).	The multi-donor funded programme for rapid relief in Diffa, Niger, implemented by the IRC, built an informant network of committees providing real time information on local needs and population move-ments. Dedicated staff and funding for rapid response allowed flexible provision of humanitarian aid to displaced people as violence emerged or escalated in North-east Nigeria (IRC and Mercy Corps, 2016).

Bottom-up inclusion	Including local communities and staff in both data-collection and decision-making enhances flexibility of programmes whilst increasing sustainable and locally owned impact (Cooke, 2017). Bottom-up data collection allows for better insights into local dynamics and appropriate programme adaptations (Desai et al., 2016). Local communities and staff have first-hand understanding of context and are well placed to suggest novel and fitting approaches (Proud et al., 2016).	The DFID-funded programme SAVI in Nigeria supports more responsive, inclusive and accountable state governments. Decision-making is decentralised to state teams that draw on their own local political analysis to decide on which partners to support and how. Their decisions and amendments are shaped by processes of 'learning by doing'. Local staff are encouraged to start their ambitions and activities small and go to scale gradually (Derbyshire and Donovan, 2016).
Learning		
Multi-level integrated learning	Well-designed learning events and practices on different levels are necessary to ensure programmes as a whole can learn how to function effectively and adapt to changing environments (Valters et al., 2016). Enabling such system-wide learning requires effective communication and management structures (Cooke, 2017).	In Kenya and Tanzania, peer-to-peer exchanges were integrated in the Chukua Hatua programme, bringing together staff, partners from both countries, and Tanzanian community-level animators and their Kenyan counterparts. The multi-level learning events were useful for both country teams and resulted in adaptations in Kenya as well as Tanzania based on their shared lessons (Desai et al., 2016).
Structured learning loops	Learning loops envision different ways to reflect on programme logic. Single loops focus on the effectiveness of strategies and technical issues, while double loops also question the assumptions underlying programming strategies. This approach to learning works well with Theory of Change formulation, where assumptions and theory is made explicit and reflected upon periodically to translate new insights into (new) programme practices and management (Valters et al., 2016). Frequency, evidence and participation are determined at programme inception.	The Asia Foundation's method of Strategy Testing (ST) is a learning system developed specifically to track and adapt programmes addressing complex development problems. It entails taking a structured time-out every three months to critically reflect on programme direction and theories of change, involving both programme staff and external actors (Valters et al., 2016).
Action research	'Action Research' implies that data collection and analysis are an ongoing part of programmes. Any intervention or action is of value not only for its impact, but also for its contribution to the reflection on and further refinement of the programme. Experiences of those involved in the programme are appreciated and used as key source of knowledge (Roche and Kelly, 2012).	Central to the now closed AusAID funded Pacific Leadership Program (PLP) was an action-research process. The entire implementation team and management came together every six months to share experiences from practice and reflect on outcomes and learning from the past six months. At the end of the meeting a new plan of action for the next six months of the programme was developed (Roche and Kelly, 2012).

3. Lessons and recommendations

The elements presented in table 1 testify to the multiple ways in which adaptive programmes can be organised. No matter what measures are adopted however, key to true adaptive programming is the *structural* integration of learning, iteration and knowledge-based adaptation throughout the programme cycle. This final section includes recommendations on how to successfully integrate the above described adaptive elements. Its main purpose is to provide guidance on creating the necessary conditions - throughout the project cycle and across the organisation - for adaptive approaches to thrive and be effective. The recommendations are based on lessons from practice, with special emphasis on interventions operating amidst fragility.

Recommendations for promoting an enabling environment

A conducive organisational culture and enabling environment are vital for the successful implementation of APM (Cooke, 2017; Proud & Maclay, 2015). To promote such favourable conditions, several recommendations can be made:

- **Get all staff on board:** For adaptive approaches to be most effective, all staff involved in the programme cycle – including donors, senior management and programming-, operations-, and M&E-staff – should be on board. To that end efforts should be made to 1) raise awareness about the need for and purpose of APM and 2) actively include staff at all levels in the adaptation process (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2018; Wild, Booth & Valters, 2017).
- **Address possible tensions and obstacles:** In practice, the need for learning and adaptation in APM may run counter to the drive to meet standard performance targets. To prevent conflict or problems during programme implementation, be transparent about likely tensions and communicate clearly about the inherent differences between APM and traditional approaches (Desai et al., 2016; Green, 2018; Cooke, 2017).
- **Prioritize appropriate management and staff capacity building:** Effective integration of the adaptive elements described in table 1 is a tall order. It demands experienced and sophisticated management, fitting recruitment, and continuous staff development (Desai et al., 2016; Green, 2018). To build this capacity, reserve ample time and resources and schedule regular (at least quarterly) reflection periods with key staff (Springer and O'Mahony, 2017).
- **Promote a transparent learning culture:** A transparent learning culture implies room for experimentation and error as well as openness about successes and failures (Cooke, 2017; Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2018). Tying learning goals to each stage of project implementation will help preserve a focus on learning (Skelton and Maclay, 2016).

Recommendations for planning and design of adaptive programmes

The key challenge of adaptive programming is reconciling the need for strong accountability for donor funds on the one hand, with the need to respond to complex and changing contexts on the other (Derbyshire and Donovan, 2016). This balancing act demands innovative programme planning and designs.

- **Take time**: Longer term projects (over five years) are better suited for adaptive programmes as their success and impacts depends on the room to learn and improve. Promote longer project cycles to avoid undermining programmes by pressure for quick results (Skelton and Maclay, 2016).
- **Allocate funds, capacity and space:** Given the central focus of learning and adaptation in APM, sufficient funds, capacity and space should be allocated to enable continuous reflection and learning from the very beginning. This requires planning specific moments or periods for reflection and adaptation; formulating ambitions for impact, whilst avoiding setting pre-fixed targets (Derbyshire and Donovan, 2016); creating space for decentralized decision making (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2018); and reserving flexible funds to finance selected adaptive elements.
- **Adopt pilot cycles of adaptive elements:** APM implies learning from experience and improving along the way. To facilitate such growth, programme designs should incorporate testing of selected adaptive approaches; e.g. through a staged approach to implementation (Springer and O'Mahony, 2017) or the rolling out of small-scale activities that work toward the same goal at different times, allowing for lessons from one activity to be applied to another (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2018).
- **Incorporate adaptive reflection and learning methods:** Recognizing the critical role of M&E for learning, some methods are particularly well suited for adaptive programming. These include: After-Action Reviews (AARs), peer assists, communities of practice, learning networks, and simply effective meetings (Salib, 2016; Allana, 2014). These methods support, among others, the adaptive elements of 'real-time data', 'bottom-up inclusion' and 'action research' as presented in table 1.

> **Key resources**
> For this practice note 3 resources have proven particularly informative:
> - How to set up and manage an adaptive programme (Cooke, 2017): Provides lessons for operating adaptively within a complex political environment. With practical examples from Action on Climate Today (ACT).
> - Managing to adapt. Analysing adaptive management for planning, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (Desai et al. 2016): Oxfam research report that outlines key elements of APM, including practical recommendations and case studies.
> - Putting learning at the centre. Adaptive development programming in practice (Valters et al., 2016): ODI report explaining why and how learning needs to be at the centre of adaptive development programming.

This practice note was written by Rojan Bolling, Kim van Wijk and Yannicke Goris from The Broker and commissioned by the Food & Business Knowledge Platform (F&BKP).