



Report

Putting learning at the centre

Adaptive development programming in practice

Craig Valters, Clare Cummings and Hamish Nixon

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Overseas Development Institute

203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
E-mail: info@odi.org.uk

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Acronyms

DFID	Department for International Development	PDIA	Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation
ICAI	Independent Commission for Aid Impact	PEA	Political Economy Analysis
ICT	Information and Communication Technology	RAPID	Research and Policy in Development
INGO	International NGO	ROMA	Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation	SAVI	State Accountability and Voice Initiative
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning	UK	United Kingdom
NAO	National Audit Office	US	United States
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation	USAID	US Agency for International Development
ODI	Overseas Development Institute		

1. Introduction

‘Adaptive programming’¹ responds to several key understandings about development: that development actors may not be able to fully grasp the circumstances on the ground until engaged; that these circumstances often change in rapid, complex and unpredictable ways; and finally that the complexity of development processes means actors rarely know at the outset how to achieve a given development outcome – even if there is agreement on the outcome of interest. Adaptive programming suggests, at a minimum, that development actors react and respond to changes in the political and socio-economic operating environment. More substantially, a programme may recognise from the outset that change is inevitable, and build in ways to draw on new learning to support adaptations. For some development problems, an adaptive approach will involve experimentation, in particular where the overall objective is clear but how to achieve it in a given context is unknown or uncertain.² Being prepared to react to change may seem like common sense – and indeed it is. However much development thinking and practice remains stuck in a linear planning model which discourages learning and adaptation, in part because projects are seen as ‘closed, controllable and unchanging systems’ (Mosse, 1998: 5)

There are currently numerous agendas seeking to challenge this status quo, particularly among Western donors and audiences, which are converging somewhat. One overarching banner has been the call ‘do development differently’.³ Proponents for reform often argue that development programmes need to demonstrate a range of qualities: being problem-driven, locally led, flexible and adaptive; and politically smart (Andrews, 2013; Andrews et al., 2015; Booth, 2015; Booth and Unsworth, 2014; Fritz et al., 2014; Pritchett et al., 2013; Rocha Menocal,

2014; Wild et al. 2015). While these terms carry some of the burden of jargon, they do also indicate a range of approaches, emphases and nuances in analyses of what is going wrong and approaches to doing better.⁴ In short, they aim to support more effective development practice.

In this paper, we make clear **why and how learning needs to be at the centre of adaptive development programming**. It is clear that growing calls for development programmes to be ‘adaptive’ demand a focus on how information and knowledge can inform changes in programming. Learning and adaptation are two sides of the same coin. We argue that a focus on learning and adaptation demands a focus on development *relationships*; that is, how learning for adaptation can take place *within and across development programmes*.⁵ This is particularly challenging for diverse reasons, including the multiplicity of actors, interests and therefore power dynamics involved. Institutional incentives across the board tend to mean good news is prioritised over bad news (Morton, 2009). As such, new information that challenges programme direction, or indeed reporting on such information, is rare. This is not a failure in the methodological tools available for analysis and monitoring and evaluation (M&E), but is systematically embedded in aid relationships. Finding ways for meaningful reporting, premised on greater openness and trust in aid relationships, is critical.

Overall, this paper argues that learning for adaptation within and across development programmes requires:

- Understanding the different forms of learning required and how to generate them.
- Questioning who learns, when, and for what purpose;
- Building, and then revisiting, strong ‘analytical foundations’: the political economy analysis (PEA),

1 This paper uses the phrase ‘adaptive programming’ and ‘flexible and adaptive programming’ interchangeably. There can be a distinction between ‘flexible’ (responding to changes in circumstances) and ‘adaptive’ (responding to new information about the efficacy of the programme), but ‘adaptive programming’ should be read here to encompass both these senses.

2 This definition draws on ongoing internal work by Overseas Development Institute and DFID.

3 See the ‘Doing Development Differently Manifesto’ (<http://buildingstatecapability.com/the-ddd-manifesto/>) for a statement of principles and signatories.

4 For example, different terminology is used to emphasise the complexity of development processes, lack of engagement with politics, bureaucratic rigidity and lack of innovation and myriad other sources of failure (Andrews, 2013; Ramalingam, 2013).

5 This means we do not delve into broader analysis of other forms of development interventions, such as how learning could take place within coalitions or social movements in developing contexts. The paper is, however, inspired by the notion that critical analysis of one’s reality is central to growing and improving progressive social change initiatives (Freire, 1970).

problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA) and theories of change that help shape the kinds of changes actors hope to bring about.

- A greater focus on learning through doing, including intervention designs that involve multiple ‘bets’ and parallel and/or sequential experiential learning strategies.
- Management practices and decision-making structures that allow the learning they generate to shape programme activities.
- Incorporating what matters into monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) – including accountability for learning, strategic accountability and methods focused on participation, sensible output indicators and wider impact.
- Breaking down previously held boundaries between design, implementation, accountability and learning.

This paper is underpinned by the plentiful past work on learning and adaptation in development practice (Carlsson and Wohlgemuth, 1999; Korten, 1980; Rondinelli, 1983; Roper et al., 2003). There are of course major differences between the aid industry of the 1980s and 1990s and

that of today, not least because of the ever-growing and more complicated set of relationships (and contested ideas and incentives) between different development actors. Nevertheless, we are arguably at a point where we have more and better examples of how the aid industry can learn, be more adaptive and in turn effective (Booth, 2015). The time is therefore ripe to revisit ways to better build learning for adaptation into development programming.

This paper begins by clarifying why and what kind of learning matters for adaptive programming. This involves briefly analysing the key concepts of adaptation, complexity and learning and suggesting that a greater focus is required on the relationships between development actors than we have seen to date. It then turns its focus on how strategies and approaches applied throughout a programme’s conception, design, management and M&E can enable it to continually learn and adapt. This paper synthesises relevant thinking about learning in a potentially diverse universe of adaptive programming and draws out some implications for practice. This is a working paper, which we hope will be of use for practitioners and others looking for structure, specificity and some practical entry points from the renewed ‘learning agenda’.⁶

⁶ An increasing focus on learning is in part a reaction to the negative effects of the ‘results agenda’. For a critique of these effects, see <https://www.devex.com/news/3-big-problems-with-how-we-think-about-results-and-development-86419>

2. Learning for adaptation

2.1 Why learn?

There are a range of possible learning purposes in development programmes, including being financially accountable, improving operations, readjusting strategy, strengthening capacity, understanding the context, deepening understanding (research), building and sustaining trust, lobbying and advocacy and sensitising for action (Guijt, 2010; Young et al., 2015). Our interest lies primarily in how development programmes can continuously improve their contextual knowledge and find ways to improve their operations and adjust strategies accordingly – in order to improve their effectiveness. These types of learning are tied to the complexity of development. Complexity in this respect may be seen as displaying two, interlinked, dimensions: contextual and causal complexity.⁷

Contextual complexity describes the state of knowledge about the environment in which the development programme works, and may have both static and dynamic senses: a context may be both very complex and also very changeable.

Causal complexity speaks to the difficulty of understanding the mechanisms (in the sense of processes that are not visible) that may connect activities to desired changes in behaviour or institutions. In the domain of the complex, ‘change follows an unpredictable trajectory...Cause and effect is only coherent retrospectively and cannot be repeated’ (Guijt, 2010: 287). A full understanding of complexity is not just about unpredictability but also about diversity. Even where a set of villages have similar common traits, these may obscure significant social differences that could bear on programme performance and suitability.

In reality, the two dimensions of contextual and causal complexity blend into each other because of the unbounded nature of systems in complex or adaptive development processes, but nevertheless form distinct starting points (Bowman et al., 2015: 6; Westhorp, 2014: 4).

Both of these factors have static and dynamic aspects over time, and therefore require learning that is on-going and that enables adjustments at practical and strategic levels in both the short and the longer term. An adaptive programme learns, has opportunities to use that learning to adjust and actually adjusts. This requires us to expand upon the kinds of things we learn about: we need to develop knowledge around the capacity of organisations and programmes to deliver change in these complex contexts, the management structures that allow this, and how to work with the different incentives of various actors across programmes. It also requires a clear process of sorting information by quality and relevance, determining who is the appropriate actor to do so, and more - each of which we address in the next section.

We do not argue that everything is complex. That, ironically, is a common simplification. Drawing on complexity theory, we acknowledge there can be ‘simple’ and ‘complicated’ elements to broadly complex contexts and interventions. It will therefore be easier to learn about some things than others. However, some contexts may be so ‘chaotic’ that in fact the relationship between cause and effects is not discernible (Roche and Kelly, 2012). This is rarely remarked on in international development, given the often rather rigid demand for evidence of ‘What works?’ – which often fails to acknowledge that what works here cannot necessarily work there (Cartwright, 2012).

2.2 What kind of learning?

What kind of learning strategies do we need for development programmes to be adaptive? To answer this question, it is useful to connect development thinking with models for learning in general. Adaptive development programmes require ‘learning agility’, which refers to the ability to learn from experience and use those lessons constructively even if the learning content is not determined in advance (DeRue et al. 2012: 259). Here, the focus is on creating ‘knowledge for action’, not knowledge for the sake of knowing (Argyris, 1993). Three

⁷ This distinction was discussed at a workshop organised by the US Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) Innovation Lab, the Institute of Development Studies, MStar and FHI 36, and held at Nesta London in October 2015 (‘Learning to Adapt: Exploring Knowledge, Information and Data for Adaptive Programmes and Policies’).

forms of learning are particularly pertinent to agility and therefore adaptation: experiential learning; double-loop learning; and feedback learning. These are not mutually exclusive, they may reinforce each other and they suggest programmes should have certain features that enable them to happen.

Experiential learning

Experiential learning enables participants in the learning process (programme stakeholders) to shape the lessons that emerge through their own activities. The importance of connecting learning to the process of tackling concrete problems is a key feature of adult learning theory (Knowles, cited in Polk and Knox, 2015). This type of learning combines the way a subject matter is taught with how it is experienced, aiming to put principles into practice by means of reflection and experiential approaches (Star-Glass, 2013). This aligns closely with PDIA, with its recommendations for ‘purposive muddling’ (Andrews, 2013). There have been a number of other – more or less poetic – formulations such as ‘structured experiential learning’ and ‘crossing the river by feeling each stone’ (Blattman, 2014; Pritchett et al., 2013). Essentially, this form of learning implies learning by doing rather than front-loading analysis in the design and inception phases. While this does not need to be a binary choice, adaptive programming demands a much stronger emphasis on learning by doing than is common in many development programmes.

Feedback learning

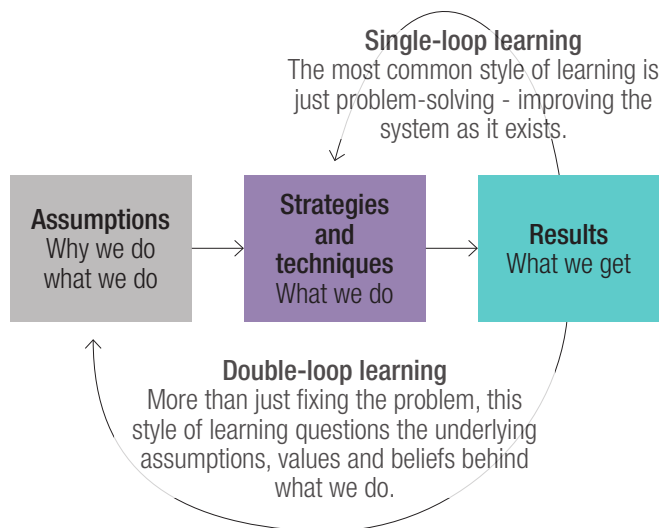
In learning theory, effective learners seek feedback and employ deliberate practice (DeRue et al., 2012). ‘Deliberate practice’ entails regular, repetitive, goal-focused and feedback-supported actions that break down bigger chunks of learning into small increments (Ericsson, 2006). This demands a focus on incremental steps on specific goals rather than falling into learning paralysis brought on by attempting to tackle a complex subject matter as a whole (DeRue and Wellman, 2009). If feedback is to influence decision-making then it will need to be quick enough to inform management processes and granular enough to be actionable. Feedback in international development programmes can come from a number of different sources, including internal management, local partners, beneficiaries or on-going research. Feedback learning in particular raises the question of how ‘real-time’ data may be able to influence learning and adaptation (Greeley et al., 2013),

and relates to the concept of rapid cycle analytics discussed later in this paper.

Double-loop learning

Single-loop learning focuses on learning from attempts to resolve a particular problem, within a static set of assumptions or ‘governing variables’. Double-loop learning requires reflection on one’s own assumptions and conceptualisation of the problem itself, including one’s own role in it (Argyris and Schoen, 1978).⁸ Inherent in double-loop learning are reflective practices, including considering what would be likely to happen if no interventions were made (Johnson and Scott, 2012). One danger in development programmes is they may become overly focused on the micro-level assumptions and decisions in relation to project activities, at the cost of overarching strategic reflection on their role in the broader context – or on underlying issues of behaviour, values and agency (Bloch and Borges, 2003). In this respect, one can learn to do the wrong things better.⁹ A focus on double-loop learning may be particularly important since it forces us to step outside the prevailing logic. A theory of change approach, when used well, provides regular opportunities to reflect on assumptions embedded in both the programme logic and the worldviews of those implementing it – that is, it allows for a focus on both single- and double-loop learning (Valters, 2015).

Figure 1: Double-loop learning



Source: Dias et al. (2016).

8 Some distinguish three ‘loops’, in which single loop learning considers if ‘we are doing things well’, double whether ‘we are doing the right things’ and triple ‘how we know what is right to do’ (Guijt, 2010: 280–1). Making matters more confusing, some management theory refers to single-loop learning as ‘adaptive’ (as opposed to ‘generative’) in the sense of entailing a rigid stimulus response within fixed constraints (see McGill et al., 1992).

9 Indeed, it is also possible to learn for more nefarious ends, such as how to successfully siphon off aid funds to a personal account. We are interested in learning for broadly positive change.

2.3 What kinds of information?

Information quality

It is crucial to recognise that, underlying any discussion of learning, there is a question about information quality. What we learn can only be as good as the information we are learning from. This may be raw data (derived from monitoring) on how a programme is performing or a context is changing, it could be programme staff's tacit knowledge or it might be research findings from journals, evaluations or other grey literature. Different programmes will find different information sources more or less useful depending on what they need to learn about. However, what is important to all programmes is critically assessing the quality of the information they are gathering.

Different kinds of evidence

Attention to 'evidence' has become prominent in the development community in recent years, with increasing interest in randomised control trials and systematic literature reviews (Cartwright and Hardie, 2012). There is a sense that development programmes need to be based on more rigorous data, with the greatest value often placed on quantitative data. Other forms of data, such as practitioners' own tacit knowledge, may be treated as less reliable because it is more 'subjective' – even though it can provide important insights into how a programme has evolved. Without delving into a discussion of epistemology, it is worth highlighting that, whatever forms of information learning is based on, those designing the learning strategy must assess the quality of the sources they draw on and whether they are robust enough to inform programmes. This means working out what kind of information is most relevant for what kind of decision-making.

Old and new information

Learning requires a balance of taking in new information and retention of old information (March, 1991).¹⁰ The current focus on adaptation implies an iterative process of experiential learning, as outlined above, but it is important to note we are often selective in terms of the information we build on and how we use our existing knowledge (World Bank, 2015). Individual beliefs play a major part in this, including those underpinning assumptions we hold about how the world works, which will influence which information we prioritise (Eyben et al., 2008). Old information may also include knowledge of past attempts to tackle whichever development problem is

at hand, or even of a country's basic political, social and economic history. These are often neglected – and could end up being neglected further in more extreme understandings of adaptive programming. Maintaining and using old knowledge in the development industry is particularly challenging given high staff turnover, changing donor priorities and worldviews and short programme timeframes.

2.4 Who learns?

Before examining how learning fits into a programme's components, we need to ask more fundamental questions about who within the programme needs to gather and use this information. Box 1 offers a series of questions to ask when developing an overall learning strategy.

Box 1: Who learns?

- What are the programme's learning needs? (*Who decides this?*)
- Who needs to know what? (*Who decides what is important?*)
- How can information be gathered? (*By whom and for whom?*)
- Who will it be shared with? (*Why?*)
- How can/will information be used for decision-making? (*Who can act on the information? How and why?*)

These questions are underpinned by the idea that effective development programmes are often locally led. This implies learning and subsequent adaptation need to be embedded within local government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and citizen partner organisations. International NGOs (INGOs) and major contractors are often better placed to be knowledge brokers, mediating information between the stakeholders in development programmes, whereas donors can support effective learning and adaptation by contributing to the global evidence base.

Being explicit about who within a programme has a specific role in generating learning is not a practical design consideration but is critical to how learning is perceived. For an individual or organisation to feel motivated to learn and use learning, the information gathered must be

⁹ Indeed, it is also possible to learn for more nefarious ends, such as how to successfully siphon off aid funds to a personal account. We are interested in learning for broadly positive change.

¹⁰ The authors thank Rick Davies for alerting them to this point.

relevant to their work. The way learning responsibilities are divided should ensure the learning tasks are relevant to those who undertake them and their benefits are direct and clear.

Individuals

Learning is ultimately about the individuals who make up the different organisations and programmes. This recognition is crucial. No matter how much knowledge management is in place, ultimately people need to be able to understand, articulate and act on their own learning in organisational or programme settings. Insights from adult learning work suggest some basic principles (in line with the kinds of learning outlined above): experience (including failure) provides a basis for learning; adults are more likely to be interested in learning that has direct relevance to their day-to-day life; and adults prefer a focus on problems rather than content (Knowles, 1970).

Individuals in development programmes need to recognise what they, as opposed to others, need to learn about, and how best to share this to improve organisational and programme learning as whole. A frontline implementer may wish to learn how better to collaborate with other local-level NGOs and government bureaucrats to increase buy-in and impact. An INGO country manager may be more concerned with overall programme impact, particularly on specific groups. Part of the role of programme managers is to ensure these divisions of labour for learning are clear without creating siloes between different forms of information and knowledge.

Organisations

There is considerable theory on how individuals within an organisation collectively share new knowledge and respond to it as a unit (Argyris, 1993; Easterby-Smith, 1997; Senge, 1990). Drawing on Shrivastava (1983: 7–8), some of the features of organisational learning most relevant to adaptation include that it:

- is a process that involves sharing of knowledge, beliefs or assumptions among individuals.
- involves fundamental changes in the theories in use or frames of reference within which decision-making proceeds.
- is institutionalised in the form of learning systems that include informal and formal mechanisms of management information-sharing, planning and control.

The barriers to organisational learning are significant – and take on a character of their own in the development

industry (Edgren, 1999). Institutionalising knowledge-sharing and the questioning of assumptions needs to be central to organisational learning strategies. However, how information is gathered and used comes down to more than just knowledge management. It is shaped by programme relationships, personal and organisational dynamics and the use of different forms of data and knowledge (Valters, 2016 forthcoming). Learning strategies often focus on the last of these, but individuals, organisations and whole programmes need incentives for learning. These can emerge in criteria for career progression, through procurement and contracting and by means of programme leadership. Section 3 discusses further how to embed these different forms of incentives in programme management and learning design.

Programmes

Learning becomes increasingly challenging when more people and organisations are involved. Development programmes are not single organisations but are in fact embodied in relationships and roles spanning a number of interacting organisations – somewhat akin to how organs work together in a larger biological system. While the individual organs need to function effectively, the organism will not be able to acquire information and act on it unless the system learns effectively.¹¹ So there is a primary challenge of ensuring organisations can learn and an added challenge of ensuring this learning informs how the programme as a whole adapts.

Through unpacking the basic layers of donors, programmers, implementers and beneficiaries that make up programmes, we can seek to understand where adaptive learning can realistically take place – and how it can contribute to the programme as a whole. This implies understanding how organisations within a programme share learning and how they can respond collectively to this shared knowledge.

This capacity depends on various aspects of the formal and informal relationships between programme partners. Formally, these relationships are shaped by terms of reference and workplans, contracts, financial mechanisms and reporting and accounting systems. More informally, they are shaped by shared or divergent assumptions and understandings about the context or intervention, expectations and goals and ways of working. A programme is usually made up of very different organisations (in terms of size, purpose, capacity, structure, experience, culture, objectives, etc.), and they are likely to learn in different ways. A small implementing organisation may have informal ways of learning about the impact of their work – for example through conversation between staff

¹¹ In line with systems thinking, a development programme describes both a set of organisations working together and the relevant qualities of the relationships among them. Systems thinking also implies the limits of such a model. This is not the same as suggesting development programmes are networks, since there is always a degree of hierarchy across the system (Hearn and Mendizabal, 2011).

and beneficiaries. In contrast, a large bilateral donor that is accountable to a government and its electorate is likely to have a detailed system for planning, monitoring and reporting. The bureaucratic tendency towards order and control (Gibb, 1997) is likely to prioritise learning in a more formalised and systematic manner.

This diversity may lead to advantages if the differences are complementary. However, it may also create difficulties in communicating and sharing information. Smaller and southern-based partners may prefer oral communication or find written reporting onerous or superficial. Research on grant-maker–grantee relationships reported that grantees felt donors asked the wrong questions, used formal structures that did not allow for discussion and were not interested in the issues delivery partners wanted to raise (Peace Direct, 2012). Approaches to learning designed solely by donors and imposed on grantees are likely to learn about ‘how’ a programme is performing but not ‘why’, and therefore may not generate learning suited to meaningful responses – in other words adaptation.

Donors, implementers and indeed researchers each have their own interests and obligations that may discourage learning or sharing. For example, implementers may try to mask information that suggests a programme is failing rather than sharing it so the programme can be improved. Donors may emphasise reporting on indicators required to account to parliament for how resources are being spent but that are less useful for understanding how well

a programme is working. Clearly, personal relationships between individuals in different organisations can be influential in how well organisations can collaborate, and opportunities for individuals to get to know one another can contribute to partner organisations being willing to share knowledge and respond collaboratively.

None of these issues are limited to the stylised ‘big northern donor–small southern partner’ relationship. Many development programmes now combine resources and management input from large multilateral development banks with those of bilateral donors both large and small: the growing ‘trust fund’ phenomenon. Within these partnerships, differences of style and systems can easily emerge and multiply. Multiple layers of contracting see large management firms working with research organisations, universities, local NGOs and community-based organisations, multiplying the loss of feedback signal at the levels of implementation and key decision-making nodes higher up. Contractual and commercial incentives work against frank assessments, and acknowledgement and therefore learning from failure in particular.

The essential structural challenge, then, for an adaptive programme is to enable learning and change both within and between organizations. To do this means overcoming barriers both to activities in organisations and in the relationships between them. The remainder of this paper discusses how such relations encourage or inhibit learning and subsequent decision-making.

3. Putting learning at the centre of adaptive programming

The following section outlines some strategies and structures for putting learning at the centre of adaptive development programmes. It is organised around four levels that help describe the qualities of a given development programme:

1. analytical foundations
2. intervention design
3. management and
4. monitoring, evaluation and learning

Learning throughout a programme also implies overcoming the limitations of a typical programme cycle and functional siloes that can emerge related to tasks in the cycle, such as contracting or M&E. These levels therefore do not seek to imply a chronological programme cycle, nor that they are distinct from each other. For example, there is a clear overlap between analytical foundations and M&E.

3.1 Analytical foundations

The ‘analytical foundations’ comprise of three broad elements: how development problems are understood, how context(s) are understood, and the various assumptions that underpin these and subsequent programme decisions. By its very definition, an adaptive programme does not implement predetermined solutions – the so-called ‘supply-driven approach’. Rather, it builds on a problem definition that is adapted to the circumstances and stakeholders’ contextual understanding and a clear articulation of underlying assumptions and propositions. This enables continued reflection and change, and thus learning begins with the very premises on which the decision to initiate and design a programme is based.

We use problem identification, PEA and theories of change here as examples. These are not the only

or necessarily the best ways of setting up programme foundations; plenty of tools and approaches exist and it is important to map them to organisational capabilities. Indeed, the choice of specific tools and approaches can reflect specific ideologies – something worth reflecting on as these choices are made.¹²

Problem identification

The starting point for a development programme is identifying the problem it aims to address. Focusing on problems (rather than starting with solutions) tends to result in more feasible and appropriate responses rather than transplanted best practices (Andrews, 2013: 129; Polk and Knox, 2015: 7). As one review of 44 health programmes shows, both problem focus and flexibility (comprising both openness to change and actual change) contributes to better performance, even in the absence of substantial ex-ante analysis (Andrews, 2013: 134–9). “Good problems matter to change agents, can be broken down into smaller elements and allow real, sequenced and strategic responses” (Andrews et al., 2015: 5).

A focus on problems provides a foundation that ‘provokes reflection, mobilizes attention, and promotes targeted and context-sensitive engagement.. It provides a foundation that ‘provokes reflection, mobilizes attention, and promotes targeted and context-sensitive engagement’ (Andrews et al., 2015: 6). “Problem-driven learning views context not just as a constraint but also as a subject of change” (Andrews, 2013: 148). In this respect, problem identification is the first step in an adaptive learning approach.

One important caveat in using problem-driven approaches relates to who defines the problem. Clearly, being ‘locally led’ is desirable, but this offers little guidance on the crucial challenge of keeping ‘a critical perspective on how views are weighted and implications

¹² For example, a political economy analysis tends to privilege elite-driven incentives, structures and actors. Power analysis tends to be more concerned with the ideas and actions of marginalised groups.

for how power relations are either reinforced or altered by the direction of travel that is adopted' (Denney and Domingo, 2015). Double-loop learning can be helpful in this respect and needs to be encouraged and supported through management strategies and structures. Problem identification can often be steered into being elite-led or siloed; it requires a concerted effort to both broaden and deepen stakeholder participation (Carlsson and Wohlgemuth, 1999; Cheng, 1998; Groves, 2015). This must move beyond generic participatory exercises to ensure problems are identified in ways that engage diverse stakeholders who can contest the value of focusing on different problems at hand.

Political economy analysis

PEA involves examining the distribution of power and resources in a given situation and identifying the formal and informal interests, incentives and norms that maintain or threaten to challenge the status quo (DFID, 2009: 1). Such information is essential to understanding the forces that shape a programme's environment and its performance. It has been widely promoted as part of an important (albeit obvious) and growing acknowledgement of the role of politics in development programming (Carothers and Gramont, 2013). However, this has not always translated into programmes being able to navigate their political environments effectively – leading some to remark on this being an 'almost revolution' (ibid.). Critiques of common uses of PEA within donor agencies have found it can generate static contextual analysis that fails to provide actionable entry points for aid programmes, ending up being a 'dismal science of constraints' (Beuran et al., 2011; Duncan and Williams, 2012). Suggestions for improving the use of PEA to support more learning in adaptive programmes are to make it more problem-focused and to use it in an on-going way (Box 2).

Using PEA in a more 'problem-focused' way – using a specific problem area as an entry point for analysis – can help highlight feasible openings for reform while enabling an understanding of the implications of particular power relations and incentives (Fritz et al., 2014). Using it more flexibly and continuously has conceptual, operational and organisational aspects (Hudson and Marquette, 2015). First, recognise the power of ideas and don't become overly bounded by the institutional focus of the tool. Second, acknowledge the value of an upfront investment in analysis, but then encourage the use of PEA in an iterated way – at a minimum during regular strategic reviews. Third, look for ways to bring political analysis into everyday work. This can be as simple as organising regular briefings from experienced team members or encouraging reporting on political constraints as they emerge. Bringing analysis within the team, rather than relying on external consultants, is more likely to encourage critical reflection. However, we also need to consider how to make PEA

more participatory: the State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) in Nigeria engaged state teams in PEA and supported them with national experts, calling not for stale academic analysis but good analysts who are also 'willing to simplify and de-mystify their work, share their knowledge and skills, and mentor others' (SAVI, 2015: 5).

It is important to note that PEA is just one (albeit popular) way of analysing development problems. The

Box 2: ODI's experience with political economy analysis

ODI's engagement with PEA began in 2009 with commissioned one-off studies. One such study was a PEA of reform of the roads sector in Uganda. In 2015, a follow-up study of this reform found that the PEA had contributed to the successes of the reform programme (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2015).

However, far more important than a well-timed study is a programme's capacity for on-going critical reflection and political analysis. ODI has conducted training with over 800 advisors on PEA, but on reflection has found that, when detached from critical consideration of specific programming options, training in PEA has limited potential.

This has led ODI to focus on ways of working rather than promoting formal and one-off analysis. Criticism of analytical tools can miss the point that the system within which tools are used also makes the difference.

As such, ODI's journey with PEA reflects a broader point about the foundations of development programming: while it's important to start in the right direction, on-going navigation is the key to more effective programming.

Source: Booth et al. (2016).

points made here may be equally relevant to the effective use of conflict, gender or other forms of analytic work to inform adaptive programmes.

Theories of change

Theories of change, based on ideas from both evaluation and informed social practice, have relatively rapidly come to take a central place in the development lexicon (Vogel, 2012). At its most basic, a theory of change approach involves making explicit how one assumes a process of change will occur. In development, this is typically a way of explaining how a programme expects its activities to generate a particular change. There is little doubt that, for many, theories of change will become no more than a tick-box exercise in the design of a programme. This is not least because they are being requested by donors without clear guidance on what is expected, resulting in simplistic 'if x then y' formulations or diagrams of change processes

that are essentially log frames turned clockwise 90 degrees. There is also the tendency to put development programmes at the centre of social change, pushing ‘context’ to the margins; this is despite the fact that most development programmes are in fact marginal to broader contextual change.

However, theories of change can be appropriate guides to strategic thinking and action (van Es et al., 2015) and thus important for learning. They can do so first by opening the black box of assumptions between inputs, outputs and outcomes to critical scrutiny and second by using this to acknowledge the complexity and unpredictability of social change (James, 2011; Vogel, 2012; Valters, 2015).

What does this look like in practice? First, it means developing evidence-based theories of change as part of design phases, drawing on useful analytical approaches (systems thinking, power analysis, PEA). It is here they can support problem identification – but, perhaps most crucially, they can force development programmes to identify learning needs and gaps around different pathways to change (i.e. to identify what is known and what is not known in advance about how change might happen). Second, it involves revisiting these theories and taking a ‘stepwise approach’ (van Es et al., 2015).

Theories of change can be useful at different levels and for different purposes, and clarifying how they will function at the start of the programme is essential. From our perspective, they are best used at the programme and project level as a ‘compass not map’. We may start off with a general understanding of how change happens in a given context but end by detailing a range of hypotheses of change to be evaluated and revised over time (Valters, 2015). Feeding more participatory monitoring, evaluation and learning practices into the generation and use of theories of change is essential, to ensure they are grounded in (a version of) reality rather than development discourses (Valters, 2014).

Research

Social science research can be important to understanding social change and our role in it. While there is certainly a role for fundamental research in evidencing foundations of programme design such as problem identification and initial theories of change, one finding of Valters (2016 forthcoming) is that research is most effective in influencing programming when it is explicitly part of the programme cycle, either in the design phase or as part of action research to support programme adjustments. For example, through a genuine iteration between research and practice, knowledge around conflict mitigation in the Philippines by The Asia Foundation has grown – and interventions have become more targeted and context-specific. Research that is more academic and theoretical is less likely to have a direct impact on programme decision-making. This suggests that investing in on-going research

as part of an on-going monitoring, evaluation and learning strategy can support more evidence-based and reflective programming.

This approach highlights the role of ‘action research’ (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). While there are no specific methods associated with this, it tends to put a higher value on experiential knowledge of those involved in the programme, rather than just academic knowledge (Roche and Kelly, 2012). In line with the current call for more adaptive programming, it encourages reflection and reaction to new sources of information discovered by working through concrete problems. The role of external researchers, in this respect, is to learn from practitioners themselves while also providing a critical voice to provoke new reflections and changes to programme strategies. Research on programmes and their influence can also be seen as a public good, which in the future can be part of the ‘old’ information that ‘new’ programmes build on.

Using these approaches together

Robust problem definition, PEA, and theories of change can provide analytical starting points for whether to initiate a development programme. This analysis should be revisited in order to support on-going learning (Ladner, 2015: 7–8; Valters, 2015). Tembo (2012) demonstrates how citizens’ voice and accountability projects have combined principles from PEA and outcome mapping to continually develop and update their theories of change. Good programme-oriented research can support this. However, none of this will ensure that or adaptation will take place. Other aspects of the programme such as intervention design and management need to be structured to enable learning and adaptation to occur. The following sections discuss these.

Practical pointers: Foundations

- There are numerous guides available, but these are some of the clearest and most practical available for problem identification, PEA and theories of change.
- PEA is one way of addressing certain elements of the ‘context’; practitioners may also benefit from using conflict analysis, power analysis and/or outcome mapping in building programme foundations.
- These approaches will be unlikely to influence programme learning (that leads to adaptation) unless they are used in a continuous manner. Failing to build in reflection points may well make these foundations rather shaky.

3.2 Intervention design

Learning should not be a parallel or standalone activity: it should be encouraged through the adoption of combinations of activities or interventions consciously constructed to generate systematic information on context and causality. Adaptive approaches involve some combination of relatively rapid learning across time – responding to new information about the context and results of activities – and in space – comparing the results of different activities that may be implemented in parallel. Which strategy we select depends on our confidence in our knowledge of the context and in our possible intervention outcomes. In short, we can trial one approach and adapt it over time (sequential learning) or we can try lots of things at once and see which works best (parallel learning). Naturally, we can – and often should – do some of both. However, what is clear is the complexity of social change requires some diversity of programme approaches on the ground. If there is not, we can safely assume there is limited adaptation to local needs.

Sequential learning

Sequential (or longitudinal) learning involves implementing activities and using frequent feedback mechanisms to understand how they are functioning. It also requires space for that feedback to lead to changes of course, terminations or expansion of activities. Rather than a single programme cycle, it may be useful to think in terms a progressive programme ‘spiral’ in which learning and ‘doing’ proceed together, with frequent crossing points.¹³ The hallmark of this approach is flexibility over time, and this has implications for design, procurement, reporting and monitoring. In particular, there must be provision for a continuing series of relatively short-cycle activities, frequent reflection points, and some lack of certainty over subsequent activities.

Clearly, the timely and accurate availability of information on performance is crucial to effective sequential learning: ‘all individuals, teams, organizations and even groups of organizations learn but the pace and depth at which they do that is heavily related to their success. And this is particularly true for rapid and turbulent environments’ (Škerlavaj and Dimovski, 2007: 54). Rapid cycle evaluation is one way of monitoring the short-term impact that an intervention generates as it is implemented (Cody and Asher, 2014). It is clear this area of learning implies important potential roles for ‘real-time’ data and information technologies (Box 3).

Box 3: Principles for using technology in adaptive programmes

Reflecting on a variety of experiences using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to generate real-time development data, Merrick Schaefer of the US Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) Innovation Lab highlights these principles:

- “Design your project in a way that builds data.”
- “Design your project in a way that lets it respond to data.”
- “Don’t collect data just for M&E; build feedback loops.”
- “Technology is not an intervention, it is an information source.”
- “Make sure ICT is anchored in the programme and costs are clear upfront.”

Source: IDS and USAID (2015).

Parallel learning

A second type of learning that can be built into programme design might be called spatial or parallel learning – that is, in which different ‘bets’ or activities are conducted at the same time. This is most useful when there is limited evidence on how a programme can achieve its goal and there are a number of possible routes. There need to be mechanisms for reflecting on activities, comparing and linking them and subsequently making decisions based on the information generated. In this sense, parallel programme learning will segue into more sequential forms as time passes. One key consideration is that parallel learning may become more and more necessary as programmes grow in size (both geographically and in population terms) because needs are likely to become more and more diverse. There is a need to learn from variation and then carefully and selectively build on more successful variants of design.¹⁴ This is particularly challenging when thinking through how to conduct adaptive programming across a country portfolio for donors.

A specific form of parallel programme learning is ‘structured experiential learning’ (Pritchett et al., 2013). This approach entails consciously setting up interventions designed to test a set of competing counterfactuals about programme design and theory of change, also called ‘crawling the design space’ (Pritchett et al., 2013). By monitoring these interventions closely, the programme can

¹³ For a visualisation see IDS and USAID (2015: 16).

¹⁴ Correspondence with authors, February 2016.

combine some principles of rigorous impact evaluation with on-going monitoring to rapidly test assumptions and improve performance. More common, and prosaic, approaches to parallel learning might be built on various ‘challenge’- or ‘innovation fund’-type models.

Using these approaches together

So how does one decide between these different approaches? Sequential learning strategies prioritise sensitivity to changing information in a rapid and on-going fashion, and as such may be suited to contextually complex situations – that is, where the base level of knowledge on context is low or the context is rapidly changeable. Conversely, parallel learning strategies could be a useful way of learning more about mechanisms of causality influencing a development programme. Again, this distinction is one of emphasis, as the idea of development programmes as open systems suggests contextual and causal complexity will bleed into each other at their margins. Nevertheless, these distinctions can provide some guidance on the integration of learning through implementation with programme design, as the figure in Annex 1 illustrates.

Practical pointers: Intervention design

- In order to decide on whether to have sequential or parallel activities and learning strategies, conduct analysis that allows for a full understanding of context, such as political economy, power or conflict analysis as detailed above.
- For sequential learning, it is important to view the theory of change as a compass, not a map. For parallel learning, multiple nested theories of change are needed.

3.3 Programme management

Having better information and knowledge in itself is not enough to constitute learning in an adaptive development programme: it must be acted on. The relationship between learning and management decision-making is therefore crucial. Management structures and processes set the rules and incentives for how knowledge is generated and shared, the kinds of decisions that get made and by whom and how new information is able to change the programme as a whole.

Adaptive management practices

The concept of adaptive management, originally a term borrowed from computer science to denote systems that ‘change their inner workings in response to new information’ (McGill et al., 1992: 5) is useful for thinking how management of development programmes can support learning and adaptation. Adaptive management can be defined as ‘a structured, iterative process of robust

decision making in the face of uncertainty, with an aim to reducing uncertainty over time via system monitoring’ (Mercy Corps, 2016).

Table 1: Traditional vs. adaptive management

Traditional management	Adaptive management
Standardisation and control	Interaction and change
Change efforts are driven top down	Change is emergent and contextual
Relies on management planning and execution of repeatable tasks	Relies on organisations having capacities and processes to generate novelty in day-to-day performance

Source: Ramalingam (2015)

There is a close relationship between capacities for adaptive management and organisational learning. The way organisations process their experience determines their learning outcomes: ‘[t]he ability of an organization/manager to learn is not measured by what the organization or manager knows (that is, the product of learning), but rather by how the organization/manager learns’ (McGill et al., 1992:10). In the case of development programming, this is complicated by the need for learning and adaptation to occur across the relationships that bind partners together. Equal attention needs to be given to these inter-organisation relationships as to the relationships within a single organisation involved in a programme. Examining management practices that encourage learning and adaptation across development partners, Mercy Corps (2016) has developed a framework for adaptive management based on its own experiences. The four requirements – each with a number of components – for such an approach are:

1. organisational culture (leadership, teamwork, physical cues, formal reinforcement).
2. people and skills (team composition, recruitment, skills, accountability).
3. tools and systems (planning, monitoring, regular analysis, space for reflection, pilots).
4. enabling environment (design, implementation, evidence and advocacy).

These four requirements merit much deeper exploration than we can offer here. In particular, attention to ‘people and skills’ needs to be developed, as organisations are realising they need people with different skills to be able to deliver adaptive programmes. Participants in a workshop on learning for adaptation felt that criteria for recruitment and procurement should reflect the skills needed to learn and use learning for adaptation, and that human resource policies, job descriptions, performance management

systems and other structures could incentivise or hinder staff in learning and adaptation.

Adaptive management can be labour-intensive for all involved. Having flexible budgetary arrangements and logframes that can be amended and updated can enable a programme to change tack in response to learning, but this can also complicate reporting and accountability. Participants noted that placing learning at the heart of management structures required all programme partners to value learning. Revisiting analytical foundations, creating mechanisms for different forms of information-gathering, reflecting regularly on learning and using it to change activities are time-intensive tasks that ultimately have a cost. Donors need to be able to allocate funds to learning and adaptation, and time for this may need to be explicit in any workplan and budget. Otherwise, daily programme delivery pressures are likely to push learning to the side.

Some practitioners in the workshop emphasised the value of personal relationships between individuals in partner organisations for creating trust and honest information-sharing. Yet the general push towards ‘new managerialism’ has militated against building the kind of in-depth and trusting relationships that are conducive for good programme learning – and in turn impact (Eyben, 2005; Shutt, 2015). Such relationships inevitably take time to establish and may be more difficult for larger organisations and programmes. To provide initial security to all partners, formal structures guiding management can set parameters for how information will be gathered, shared and used in decision-making while longer-term informal relationships develop.

Contracting for learning and adaptation

Some forms of contracting are already in use, setting out requirements for learning and adaptation while still allowing space for a programme to define the specifics as it evolves. Assessing the suitability of contracts and management arrangements for learning and adaptation means paying serious attention to the often unequal power dynamics in aid relationships. Contracting can reinforce these, demanding accountability to donor nations but little to host governments and citizens. Eyben (2005: 103) suggests one way out of this position by donors ‘developing long-term and consistent relations with recipient organisations, including governments, which are pursuing a social change agenda that is compatible with the donor’s own values and mission.’

A form of contracting of particular interest for adaptive programming is payment by results. This approach to contracting aims to create a financial incentive for a contractor to focus on achieving a set of results by making a large proportion of the payment contingent on this. In theory, payment by results could be appropriate for adaptive programming because it allows a contractor relative freedom to experiment with the way it achieves the specified results (Clist and Dercon, 2014). However, the

effectiveness of this mechanism is unclear since this greatly depends on which results are chosen as the programme focus, how they are measured and to what extent they are flexible.

A review of UK government payment by results programmes warns that this is a time-consuming form of contracting that is difficult to get right without pilots and reliable data on which to model probable costs and outcomes (NAO, 2015). The review also notes that large providers are more likely to be able to take on the extra risks involved in a payment by results contract, which may exclude smaller and nimbler national and local actors who may have skills and knowledge which large international contractors may lack. Payment by results may also be inappropriate in certain complex or chaotic contexts in which the exact results of development programmes simply cannot be ascertained in advance. Adaptive programming emphasises the need for flexibility, but if the emphasis of the contract is on a set of results predicted in the design stage, this may limit how much the programme can adapt to on-going learning. It may make more sense to consider ‘payment by learning’, or at least find ways to incentivise contractors to prioritise genuine adaptation through flexible and non-punitive and non-onerous contractual means to adjust milestones.

Other forms of contracting include challenge and innovation funds (with appropriate cross-learning processes) and distributed sub-project models such as community-driven development. The extent to which these hinder or promote adaptiveness remains to be seen. Given the importance of formal structures such as contracts to the nature of partner relationships and to the freedom and incentives for sub-contractors to be adaptive (and pursue agendas relevant to them), further exploration of how procurement, contracting and financial mechanisms can support adaptive programming will be critical in moving this agenda forward. Part of the difficulty is operationalising effective approaches in the context of a rather suffocating political focus on ‘results’ rather than impact (ICAI, 2015).

Decision-making

During implementation, consideration needs to be given to how learning outcomes are regularly included in on-going decision-making processes at various levels. This likely requires:

- multilateral steering bodies that include learning partners, rather than parallel and siloed structures for learning.
- programme governance to be viewed in network or flattened hierarchical terms rather than vertical relationships.
- a degree of decentralisation of decision-making, to incentivise learning and adaptation at implementer/partner level (Jones, 2011).

It is only with decision-making structures distributed in programme relationships that we can expect learning across the whole programme rather than siloed in certain organisations (or parts of organisations). Programmes need to find regular ways of reflecting on new information and using it to make cross-programme decisions. The Asia Foundation trialled a monitoring mechanism called ‘strategy testing’ that later turned into a way of managing flexible and adaptive programmes (Box 4). For strategy testing to be effective, a wider selection of light-touch tools or even daily practices can be employed, as detailed in Section 3.4 on M&E.

The integration of learning with decision-making raises important questions in relation to frequency, evidence and participation.

First, how much strategic change is too much, or indeed not enough? The degrees of complexity and pace of change within the context and programme will be key here. If change is unpredictable, what is the appropriate balance

Box 4: Strategy testing

The Asia Foundation’s strategy testing approach entails taking a structured time-out every three months to critically reflect on programme direction, involving programme staff but normally some external input too. This is structured around the use of theories of change, which are expected to be adapted during these sessions on the basis of changes in context and new knowledge of implementation. This is recorded and used to demonstrate the thinking behind programme shifts. This is part of a broader agreement with the funder, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, that these programmes will operate in a politically informed, flexible and adaptive way. While this started as a way of monitoring change, it became more akin to a programme management tool. This approach has shown that, with good understanding between donor and implementer and a simple mechanism for critical thinking, programmes can begin to operate in a more adaptive way (Ladner, 2015). On the face of it, this looks like a good way to begin putting PEA and PDIA into practice – built around a robust theory of change.

between structured review and more ad hoc processes? We suggest there is a value in having agreed decision-making points, for example every three to six months, but that programme change is not precluded at other times.

Second, on what basis are strategic changes taking place? While encouraging regular critical reflection is key, it is necessary to devise ways to feed different sorts of information and knowledge into the process, so changes

are adaptive but still systematic. Finding ways to draw on rapid cycle learning from current events demands a level of immersion from practitioners that is very rare. Tools such as outcome mapping and approaches such as developmental evaluation can help provide structured ways of informing strategic change.

Third, who is involved in strategic decisions? As a minimum, strong lines of communication between the funding organisation and implementing partners are required. The diversity of the organisations involved can mean these relationships are at times difficult and may obstruct how organisations approach learning, communicate new knowledge to each other and respond to it. For example, Valters (2016 forthcoming) demonstrates how, in community mediation programmes across Asia, the nature of relations between state and INGO, INGO and partners and partners and beneficiary organisations heavily influences how decisions are made across whole programmes. Participatory approaches (see next section) can support better integration of end-user views in decision-making.

It is difficult for a donor to assess how well a programme is using learning to inform decisions about when or how to adapt. Some programmes require partners to demonstrate evidence of learning, through sharing case studies or analysis documents. However, this may miss the point of learning. Instead, a donor could assess how a programme is making decisions by looking at when decisions are made, what information informs them – and of course their impact. As Rutter and Gold (2015) underline, examining the transparency of decision-making rather than the decision itself could be a useful way of assessing the basis on which a programme is using information and learning to inform its on-going activities.

The many ways management and contracting shape learning and adaptation have not been comprehensively covered here. Work to develop an initial framework to guide how learning and adaptation will be managed during a programme’s lifecycle could be a useful starting point. The design phase of a programme should not focus on activities but set out principles and structures that indicate how often strategic decisions will be made and on what basis. Finding a balance between structure and space to adapt is difficult but necessary so all programme partners can begin with clarity about how far a programme can adapt and what kind of information can be used to justify any adaptations. Ultimately, the programme will need to be evaluated on the impact of those decisions, but unpacking the process that informs them is central to that evaluation.

Practical pointers: Programme management

- **Adaptive management:** Strong examples of are available from [MercyCorps](#) and [The Asia Foundation](#) across a range of programmes. An increasing number of development actors are outlining what this is and how it might be done, including [ODI](#), [USAID](#) and [Oxfam](#). Examples of programmes that emphasise relationships based on trust include [Peace Direct](#) and the [Department for International Development \(DFID\)-funded SAVI programme](#).
- **Complexity thinking:** There are [practical guides](#) available on how to deal with complexity, which include numerous points on how to encourage adaptive programming, manage and contract and think through decision-making points.
- **Look outside the development industry:** The need for adaptive or ‘agile’ working practices has been established across a range of areas, including [military strategy](#), [software development](#), [business](#) and [entrepreneurship](#). These can be valuable sources of evidence and inspiration for change.

3.4 Monitoring, evaluation and learning

In theory, M&E can be a useful way ‘to determine whether interventions are working in concert to influence the system in the chosen direction’ (Ramalingam, 2014: 15). However, as it stands, M&E is often focused on upward accountability and misses the opportunity to use monitoring data to directly influence programme success or contribute to learning for adaptation (Guijt, 2010). Learning, where linked to M&E, often remains somehow separate from it. While some organisations do seek to bring monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) together, this remains at the margins of development practice. Lots of principled and effective guidance for M&E and MEL already exists and we don’t intend to create our own here (Batiwala, 2011). Rather, we outline how accountability might be rethought to the benefit of programme learning, discuss what this implies about placing the learning function among a programme’s various relationships and conclude by looking at some useful methods.

Rethinking accountability

Concerns over how, where and when aid money is spent dominate the day-to-day reporting practices in development programmes. What is often called ‘accountability’ between development partners tends to be more focused on ‘accountancy’, and leaves little room for learning. An underlying issue here is that contracts,

reporting requirements and the logframes on which they are based often – implicitly or explicitly – embody the presumption that the need to change a programme reflects failure and penalises the need to change either with sanctions or onerous bureaucracy. This creates incentives to actually cover up necessary changes to activities, since deviations are punished rather than rewarded (Ramalingam, 2014). An alternative framework for accountability would start from the position that learning, including acknowledging failure and changing course, is not an add-on but is essential to producing development results. It must also recognise that accountability in the development industry is multi-layered; it is not just for donors but also host governments, local partners and people. In this type of approach, accountability for results is consistent with reporting that includes learning and change. Such a framework must extend accountability in two main ways – to recognise learning and to acknowledge change.

First, programmatic accountability needs to extend to accountability for learning, to include ways of recording learning as well as learning about learning processes (how to do it better). If we take a pragmatic approach, then traditional monitoring tools such as logframes or indicator lists can be modified to emphasise learning objectives. For example, a logframe for a programme to improve reading skills might be modified to replace typical fixed output indicators such as ‘students completing a reading summer camp’ with a number of diverse trials, each exploring a different approach to improving reading and with a set time for rapid critical evaluation. Annex 3 presents a comparison of a non-adaptive and adaptive logframe along these lines.¹⁵ Each trial would naturally have its own more concrete theories of change and indicators, but these are framed experimentally (as in the parallel and sequential intervention designs described earlier) rather than as fixed programme elements. Logframes can be modified to reflect learning objectives by combining them with techniques such as outcome mapping (Guijt, 2010: 289). These approaches should allow for a degree of upward accountability to the funder but rebalance accountability towards programme end-users, in part through supporting on-going learning.

Second, accountability for change can be understood as ‘strategic accountability’. Strategic accountability – or ‘internal accountability to mission’ – is about ‘[u]nderstanding what you’ve done, being able to respond to questions about the basis of strategic decisions, the underlying theory of change, and of course, how money was spent’ (Guijt, 2010: 283). A fundamental requirement is therefore genuine decentralisation of decision-making from donors to implementers so the latter have the

¹⁵ These were developed by David Booth (ODI).

freedom to apply their learning to their work while still being accountable for using the resources in the way they do. This is something that has proven difficult as donors seek evidence, results and accountability in forms that are easily presentable to their own ‘donors’ – the treasuries, parliaments and publics of funding nations. Yet it is important to emphasise that these approaches do not negate financial accountability: once the flexibility of more strategic forms of accountability is created, there is space to report on financial aspects of accountability within the broader contextualisation which the strategic framework provides.

Placing the learning function

Existing literature and practice are divided as to whether it is better for learning to be a standalone pillar in a programme or whether (and how) it should be integrated with other elements. Practically speaking, this questions whether learning is the responsibility of the few or the many.

If research and learning is a standalone deliverable, procured and contracted separately from implementation and M&E, this may help to allocate adequate resources and appropriate skills to learning activities. However, this also entails some cost in terms of duplication of information-gathering and reporting burdens. Most importantly, though, this approach risks furthering what should fundamentally be an *artificial* distinction between monitoring, evaluation and learning in adaptive programming.

Despite this, we doubt there is a ‘right’ answer to this question. Different configurations of a learning pillar may work if there is a degree of successful integration with certain programme structures too. Ultimately, there needs to be a conscious examination of the demands and requirements of learning in the programme to guide the chosen configuration. If procured separately, it is crucial that the learning function be introduced and designed alongside the other parts of the programme, for example through joint inception activities.

This issue gets more complicated when we consider the need to learn across a programme. A basic recommendation, drawing on the observations on learning in the previous section, is that the processes of reporting, monitoring and other forms of knowledge-sharing be co-designed by the various partners and include diverse channels that capture the varied ways each organisation gathers, processes and communicates information. These processes need to be characterised by trust and safety, regular open communication and participation by all levels, all of which come with costs in terms of time and money and thus need to be prioritised (Denney and Domingo, 2015).

Alternative forms of communicating information need to be trialled to gather and share different forms of knowledge. These may include greater use of participatory

research methods, face-to-face meetings and Skype calls or shorter and more informal types of written reflections such as blogs, decision journals or process diaries, storytelling and other documentation of otherwise tacit knowledge. As highlighted previously, good relationships built on mutual trust are at the core of this because they allow partners to feel able to discuss challenges and failures without the fear that their funder would withdraw (Causemann and Gohl, 2015). Establishing a trusting relationship over geographical and cultural divides is time-consuming and difficult but necessary for an honest discussion (Ross, 2015).

Methods

There is no one set of tools that will ‘deliver’ adaptive monitoring and evaluation. We have outlined above how problem-definition, political economy analysis, theories of change and management techniques like strategy testing throughout a programme may support learning for adaptation. Here we discuss a few more typical evaluation approaches which may be helpful for bending M&E to the requirements of learning for adaptation: these include outcome mapping, realist impact evaluation, developmental evaluation and participatory methods. Each of these take account of complexity to different degrees and support better learning for adaptation. It should be noted, however, that ‘...no single M&E framework can capture all aspects of the change, impact, or results...’ (Batiwala 2010: 2). What is required is a mixed methods approach that is carefully tailored to the kind of context and programme intervention.

Outcome mapping aims to help plan, monitor and evaluate social change interventions. This approach is underpinned by a number of principles: Actor-centred development and behaviour change; continuous learning and flexibility; participation and accountability; non-linearity and contribution, not attribution and control (Jones and Hearn 2009). It is particularly relevant for tackling complex problems. It brings with it a host of tools and frameworks which can support practitioners seeking to tackle complex problems. It has the benefit of having been used repeatedly and successfully for over 15 years (Earl et al. 2001). Of particular note is the work that ODI’s RAPID team have done in relation to using outcome mapping for policy impact (ROMA 2015).

Realist Impact Evaluation is related to theory-based evaluation and emphasises explicit examination of programme theory, and assumes the same complexity as adaptive programming: a key principle of ‘realism’ as applied here is that nothing works everywhere (Westthorp 2014). As such, it uses hypotheses incorporating ideas about context, mechanism and outcome (Westthorp, 2014: 6). Mechanisms in this sense are processes that are not immediately accessible but can be investigated systematically. Rather than focusing on ‘what works’ the approach is ‘to distinguish such predictions from

“anticipation”, which does not look at outcomes of the past, but at the processes that led to certain outcomes and identifying what was constructive or destructive about these processes’ (Pezzulo, 2009: 4).

Developmental evaluation is ‘an evaluation approach that can assist social innovators develop social change initiatives in complex or uncertain environments’ (Patton, 2010). Development evaluation moves away from traditional evaluation models, where there are summative findings at the end, and integrates the evaluator into programme teams to help them reflect on evaluative questions as the initiative progresses (Gamble, 2008). This does not mean the evaluation is focused only on process, but it does take into account the emergent nature of social change and development impact. Like other evaluations, this can involve regular quantitative and qualitative research methods but the difference is that developmental evaluation is embedded in the programme from the beginning so the questions the evaluator poses and the emerging findings can inform how the programme progresses (ibid.: 30).

The prominence of participatory methods tends to wax and wane in development thinking and practice (Carlsson and Wohlgemuth, 1999; Chambers, 1974, 1997; Groves, 2015; Oakley, 1991). They are often viewed in either ethical or pragmatic terms, although of course it is possible to justify them on both counts. At its most basic, a participatory approach can help in ‘validating and revising the theory of change with programme participants and implementers, and basing the intervention on an up-to-date and robust understanding’ (Guijt, 2014: 4). Participatory evaluation does not just mean obtaining qualitative data on programme participants; it can also involve community members playing an active role in quantitative design and analysis (Guijt, 2014). This means participatory methods can help support adaptive approaches that start from the end-user back, rather than becoming an overly managerial and top-down endeavour.¹⁶ Being locally led does not just mean a development intervention requires buy-in from

local stakeholders, but rather that end-users are repeatedly engaged in how problems and ‘solutions’ are understood as adaptive programmes change. Participatory methods are an important yet often neglected way of ensuring programmes are adapted to local diversity and needs.

The effective practice of monitoring, evaluation and learning is often built upon smaller-scale informal practices that individuals and offices develop (sometimes intuitively) over time. These include programme/problem diaries, which can involve responding to four or five questions about the programme and its effects.¹⁷ There are also timelines, informal ‘brown bag’ meetings, regular staff meetings and external expert contributions to strategic reviews. These are the kinds of things that are low effort but potentially high impact in terms of creating an organisational culture of critical reflection.

Practical pointers: Monitoring, evaluation and learning

- **Monitoring, evaluation and learning:** There are numerous [guides](#) for integrating this into programme thinking and practice, including in [fragile states](#) and on [gender](#) issues.
- **Better evaluation:** This website is a valuable resource containing clear information on a range of evaluation theory and practice, including [realist impact evaluation](#), [developmental evaluation](#), [outcome mapping](#) and [participatory methods](#).
- **Rapid outcome mapping approach (ROMA):** At ODI, the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) team has developed ROMA, which is a clear and simple guide that contains a range of tools and approaches to support sustainable policy change.
- The logframe is often criticised for being a barrier to adaptive programming. We provide an example of an ‘adaptive logframe’ in Annex 3.

16 The term ‘end-user back’ comes from Ben Ramalingam’s blog: <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/what-do-6000-people-on-the-receiving-end-of-aid-think-of-the-system-important-new-book/>

17 These could include: Have there been any notable political changes? Have there been any relationship changes between the programme staff and key actors? What feedback came from the field this week? Are there any concerns about programme direction?

4. Conclusion

We have sought to outline **why and how learning needs to be at the centre of adaptive development programming.**

This requires an understanding of the purpose and types of learning, as well as the kinds of information that can inform on-going decisions about how a programme evolves. In this paper, we have focused on the need for development programmes to develop learning around both the context they are working in and the effectiveness of their intervention – as well as the interaction between the two over time. This requires programmes to learn by doing, develop strong feedback mechanisms and question their own assumptions and worldviews. This is particularly challenging when we acknowledge that many involve various donors, contractors, implementers, local partners and researchers. Each of these have their own incentives to learn and share that learning (or indeed not). Learning within these each of these organisations is important, but it is critical that this learning travels across programme relationships so the programme as a whole can learn and adapt.

We have outlined ways to enable learning across a programme’s analytical foundations, intervention design, management and monitoring, evaluation and learning. While this follows a somewhat typical programme development process, it does not suggest strict, linear programme cycles are conducive to learning and adaptation. Importantly, we have emphasised the need to question who learns, when and for what purpose throughout development programmes. Too often – and perhaps this paper is guilty of privileging this too – undue emphasis is given to the main large contractor when knowledge predominantly resides, and change predominantly happens, at ‘local’ levels.

The **analytical foundations** of a programme underpin its ability and intention to learn and adapt: they can support appropriate and specific problem identification, better contextual understanding and a clear articulation of underlying assumptions of how change may come about in a particular context and web of relationships. Whatever tools and approaches are selected, they need to provide opportunities to continuously reflect, gain feedback and change pathways based on emerging information and evidence. The important thing is that they provide a structured way to critically reflect and learn over time. Equally, we need to avoid falling into the trap of believing any given tool is the answer; in the absence of a serious challenge to the broader barriers to learning, they may even be unhelpful.

How an intervention is designed provides potential opportunities to learn about how contexts and an intervention interact. As outlined above, a programme can trial one approach and adapt it over time or try lots of things at once and see which works best. Deciding between these will depend in part on the degree of knowledge about the context and about the causal relationship between activities and outcomes. The analytical foundations of a programme can also be used differently according to the intervention’s strategy. For example, theories of change for specific sequential interventions can be developed that are iteratively adapted over time to reflect new learning. Yet there can also be comparative or ‘nested’ theories of change, set up to mirror the small bets being taken as part of parallel interventions. This provides a structured way of understanding what might work best on a specific issue in a given context.

Management structures, processes, resources and culture shape the extent to which learning occurs – and crucially whether learning can be shared and acted upon. Literature on adaptive management suggests having programme managers’ buy-in for learning processes is essential. This intuitively also requires generating a permissive culture for questioning decision-making and the programme’s aims and assumptions. Contracting is a critical – perhaps the most important – element in whether learning is incentivised across a programme. Procurement and contracting could emphasise accountability for learning, strategic accountability and freedom of action within agreed overall objectives. Writing freedom for adaptiveness and flexibility into contracts requires building strong and trusting relationships with implementers. It may also mean considering thinking through ‘payment by learning’ rather than payment by results. Practically speaking, those making decisions on programme strategy need to consider three questions: How much strategic change is enough? On what basis are strategic changes taking place? Who is involved in strategic decisions?

MEL could provide a steady stream of information that is used to understand the context and programme performance, but it often does not. We suggest a closer focus on accountability for learning, and greater accountability to beneficiaries rather than numbers for donors’ taxpayers. Whether learning should be integrated through a programme or is the responsibility of a set group of people is unclear, but the dilemmas associated with this need to be considered in each programme context. There are various tools and approaches to good monitoring and

learning, which we outline above. Each of them aims to take into account the complexity of development problems, the challenge of gathering and learning from different types of information and the need to avoid monitoring frameworks that predefine a programme's activities. We argue that participatory methods can support genuine adaptation to local diversity and needs.

As ever, there is a need to avoid the myopia that can set in as a bandwagon gathers pace. There are many dangers inherent in a push for adaptive programming that this paper has not addressed in depth. These may include encouraging ignorance of history, or thinking in short-term and overly reactive ways. This could lead to too much adaptation, or adaptation based on weak or selective evidence. Regardless, we know that more and better information does not necessarily lead to improved decision-making, indicating a need to stay focused on the incentives and conditions that drive learning and adaptation rather than the tools that support it. The challenge is not therefore a lack of tools; it is to ensure the incentives and environment within development practice lead in this direction.

Following the emphasis we have placed on development programmes as collections of organisations working together, we would argue that the conversation can now benefit from broadening in three key senses.

First, we need to bring more types of actors in the development system into the discussion. If we are interested in relationships across the development programmes, this cannot be an isolated conversation among donors, researchers and big implementing organisations. Keeping a careful eye on the real prize here – that is, better impact for the lives of beneficiaries – demands drawing on the perspectives of local partners and those they work with (Peace Direct, 2012). This doesn't mean flooding small organisations with unrealistic M&E expectations, but understanding how their day-to-day practice could benefit from this agenda. However, this is not about just

being locally led but also understanding what parts of a programme are best able to learn about what – and how this can be systematised in future development programmes.

Second, therefore, we would argue for a more explicit consideration of the informal and formal relationships across development programmes. There is room for more grounded exploration of specific mechanisms such as design documents, terms of reference, procurement processes and contracts and reporting systems. Some specific areas for further development include the following: models of divisions of labour for learning and decision-making in different types of programming; budget construction and design for 'adaptable accountancy'; more consideration of staff skills and team make-up; and models for participatory and informed decision-making that take into account behavioural factors.

Third, there is space for more critical assessment of aid relationships and their impact on incentives for learning. Learning takes place within the dominant systems and ideologies that pervade the development industry. These systems are skewed towards the interests and ideas of those with the power of the purse, driving development programmes to be top-down, bureaucratic forces that may impose visions of change. Whether a programme can learn, reflect critically on learning and change course is therefore in part a question of how far the donor relinquishes control of the programme to local partners and steps outside of the dominant development narratives. As is frequently observed, these ideas are not new, and, if we are to understand and address why they often fail to take root, the lens of learning cannot just be applied to development contexts and problems 'over there': it needs to be turned on ourselves 'over here'. That includes research institutions, including ODI, which need to remain critically reflective on their role in the wider system.

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Annex 1: Context and causality

Confidence of causality: How well we understand the problem and the effectiveness of the response	High	Flexible We understand the problem but not the context, or what changes may occur. Rapid sequential learning strategies emphasised.	Keep going We understand the context and what works. Traditional approaches to management and performance monitoring may suffice.
	Low	Complex Emergencies Low understanding of the problem, how to respond and the context. Requires multiple approaches to learning.	Experimental We understand the context (and have some ability to influence it) but evidence of causality is weak. Parallel learning strategies may be useful.
		Low	High
Confidence in context: How much we understand the political and operational context and are able to influence it			

Source: Adapted from IDS and USAID (2015) as well as subsequent work by DFID and ODI on guidance for adaptive programming.

Annex 2: Reflections from the workshop

The workshop brought together researchers, practitioners and donors to discuss the difficulties, experiences and possible strategies for placing learning and adaptation at the centre of development planning. The discussion component of the workshop focused on the four areas of development programming outlined in this paper; analytical foundations, intervention strategies, programme management and monitoring, learning and evaluation. The following notes capture the key issues raised under each of these programme areas.

Analytical foundations

Constraints to using different tools and forms of analysis in an on-going way:

1. Break standard practices. Often programme teams already know what activities they will undertake, which limits the relevance of on-going analysis. It can be uncomfortable to challenge assumptions and managers (or other leaders) often do not ask for tools and analysis to be revisited regularly.
2. Time. There is often not enough time built into programmes to regularly revisit analysis and some programmes are not long in term enough to make regularly revisiting analysis valuable. Overly focusing on the future can miss how much we need to learn from the past. There may have been multiple attempts to achieve whatever the programme is aiming for and there needs to be time to learn from past experiences as well as the present.
3. Capacities. There is a lack of capacity and competencies across programme staff, team leaders, local organisations and government counterparts. Pairing up county teams with national political economy experts and using PEA as a form of mentoring may be a useful approach.
4. Money. Development programmes rarely place monetary incentives on this kind of reflection and it is not always valued by donors, especially when there can be pressure to start spending budgets quickly.

Strategies for using analytical foundations for learning and adaptation:

- Focus on addressing everyday problems in the programme, not on delivering for donors.
- Local teams (country/district) need to be invested in their analysis. Analysis must be relevant to those undertaking it and the application and benefits should be clear.

- Turn methods to practical use and inform engagement with issues at hand.
- Create dedicated time: Time has to be built into the budget for regular analysis.
- Thinking through the role of human resources and staffing: Regular learning will not come naturally (or even with training) to everyone. It is more important to find ways to encourage learning so that creativity and independent learning can happen.
- Informal practices: Various informal day to day practices can encourage learning, such as daily meetings, problem diaries, etc.

Intervention design

The design of the activities – their nature, number, and sequencing – can be an important source of learning. However, the learning content or weight attached to the actual design of the interventions varies along a spectrum. Some programmes are built entirely around an evaluation design; others unfortunately may be underway before learning strategies are developed. Most are in the middle, with a mixture of strategies, bigger or smaller bets and hypotheses about what will work. Wherever a programme falls, conscious consideration of how many of these there are and how they might be reflected in design is important. However, some constraints and some strategies to doing this were discussed:

Constraints to learning through intervention design:

- Timing of theory of change development. The fundamental tool to guide intervention design is the development of a theory or theories of change that reflect possible pathways, hypotheses and knowledge gaps. However, these are typically first developed during the least inclusive part of the process – business case development – by the actor – the donor – who is also farthest up a cascade of evidence loss.
- Translation into practical learning challenges at lower levels. Often the language and framing of theories of change is aimed to serve the upward accountability and business needs of higher levels of the programme structure, and needs to be able to be translated or used effectively to guide very practical applications of learning requirements at intervention and implementation level.
- Inception and on-going implementation opportunities to revisit intervention design not sufficient. Often a longer inception phase is thought to allow more linkage between learning requirements or flexible approaches and implementation design. However, the length of time

is not as important as the existence of genuine space for reflection, linked to the management processes described below.

Strategies to enable intervention design to support learning:

The discussions on intervention design centred on how to use theories of change regularly over time, as well as how to build flexibility into results frameworks.

1. Ensure real opportunities to refine, focus and revisit theories of change are supported and consider not only time but also who participates, how the space can be a safe one for reflection and how it then can link to management.
2. Plan and resource intermediating activities that allow higher-level theories of change to be examined, discussed and refined in terms that relate to wider groups of participants – ground-level implementers, beneficiaries and partners.
3. Use different ways to build flexibility into results frameworks. For example, results frameworks that specify two layers of flexibility (X% of these results will be Y% achieved, but without saying which ones) or menus of results are in use in some projects.

Programme management

Constraints to effective monitoring, evaluation and learning:

Management structures and processes should enable learning but also, more importantly, decision-making on if and how a programme should adapt. This raises two questions:

1. What channels of information are used in decision-making?
2. What procedures are used to structure decision-making?

Personal relationships are important for encouraging learning and adaptation without close oversight but can this work at scale?

- This is staff-intensive and can be eroded by staff turnover.
- There is still a need for more formal written contracts.
- Relationships take time, what about more urgent, rapid response interventions?
- Strong relationships may make it difficult for donors to change who they contract, established personal relationships may not be good for flexibility and creativity.

- Budget variance can be difficult. This may be managed across a programme or a portfolio of programmes but the requirement to keep spend relatively even over all creates an emphasis on scaling up one component only if another is scaled down.

Strategies for using monitoring, evaluation and learning to promote adaptation;

Recruiting and procuring organisations and people with the skills to learn and adapt is important:

- Useful if CVs of local partners are not required and softer skills can be valued more.
- Skills and proof of the ability to learn and apply learning could be part of the competency framework used in procurement.
- The intermediary organisation needs to act as a broker: having personal relationship with local partners, collaboratively getting information from them and repackaging it for the donor.

The design phase should outline how the programme will learn and make decisions:

- Who is involved in the design phase? There should be continuity across design, management and implementation.
- Design should set principles for who and how often decisions will be made – like strategy testing by The Asia Foundation.
- Design should state what kind of information will be used for decision-making and on what basis projects will be scaled up or down.
- Creating a menu of results can allow flexibility to focus on different results while ambition remains constant.

A programme should not be assessed on whether it is learning but on how it is making decisions and the transparency of decision-making. Tools are needed for tracking and documenting decision-making, for example process diaries.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

Constraints to programme management enabling learning and adaptation:

- Local capacity: Ability of local programme teams to do this well.
- Data quality: Capacity of local programmes to generate high quality data that would be suitable to influence decision-making.
- Local ownership and a lack of a ‘culture of data use’ among programme teams. This is linked to the

psychology of failure and the perceived dis-incentives associated with reporting failure.

- Adequate budget to design robust and effective M&E systems on programmes to achieve this.
- M&E function is often put in a silo in programme teams and removed from design and implementation functions.
- M&E is often seen as an accountability/reporting function and not as a learning function within programmes.

Strategies for using programme management to promote learning and adaptation:

1. Framing the data to be used for learning and improvement. This is about fostering internal curiosity within programme teams, including all members of a programme (not just M&E staff). From the outset, a mindset needs to be encouraged within programme teams to be thinking critically about why they are doing what they are doing. This shift in thinking to being more 'question-driven' than 'solution-driven' programme is challenging.
2. Data-gathering and generation. The people who collect the data should be the ones who use the data; this shouldn't be relegated fully to M&E staff. Each programme team member has a 'reflective responsibility' to translate the data they gather into action. In some cases, the M&E team will need to be brought in to lead data-gathering and generation based on the level of sophistication. A third-party M&E and learning function could play a role supporting these activities for collection of smaller organisations. This may also help foster honesty in data analysis by anonymising failure among the different organisations.

3. Data analysis and interpretation. Critical to data analysis and interpretation is providing spaces for participative discussion and self-reflection. This requires building trusting relationships between team members to have the open space to be honest about what's working and not working. This can take time and should not be rushed. Quarterly group meetings, strategy testing sessions or similar mechanisms could be used for this.
4. Data use for learning and improvement. Devolving and decentralising decisions to programme teams with less oversight from contractors or donors means that data gathered at the frontline can inform frontline decisions. Teams need to foster a 'culture of data use'. This includes promoting openness and culture of debate within the programme.

Some recurring themes from the day:

- Prioritising learning and decision-making within development programming has a cost and has to be valued by all programme partners. It has to be in budget and be incentivised and time needs to be allocated to it.
- Learning has to be purposeful and relevant to learners. Reflecting on learning and using it to inform decision-making can be uncomfortable and time-consuming and may reveal problems or failure, so the benefits of learning and using learning have to be direct and clear.
- Structures are important as guiding principles and to create organisational change. The challenge is to find a balance between structure and space to adapt.
- Programmes need to decide if and how to adapt. Decision-making is the focus and learning should be informing this but there may need to be more attention to other factors influencing decision-making.

Annex 3: Examples of adaptive and non-adaptive logical frameworks

Logical framework example 1: Conventional programme¹⁸

(Based on reasonably realistic assumptions, solutions are known in advance)

	Project summary	Indicators	Means of verification	Risks/assumptions
Goal	10% increase in the number of Grades 5-6 primary students continuing on to high school within 3 years.	Percentage of Grades 5-6 primary students continuing on to high school.	Comparison of primary and high school enrolment records.	N/A
Outcome or purpose	Improve reading proficiency among children in Grades 5-6 by 20% within 3 years.	Reading proficiency among children in Grades 5-6.	6-monthly reading proficiency tests using the national assessment tool.	Improved reading proficiency provides self-confidence required to stay in school.
Outputs	1. 500 Grade 5-6 students with low reading proficiency complete a reading summer camp.	Number of students completing a reading summer camp.	Summer camp attendance records.	Children apply what they learnt in the summer camp.
	2. 500 parents of children in Grade 5-6 with low reading proficiency help their children read at home.	Number of parents helping their children to read at home.	Survey of parents conducted at the end of each summer camp.	Children are interested in reading with their parents.
Activities	1. Run 5 reading summer camps, each with 100 Grades 5-6 students who have low reading proficiency.	Number of summer camps run.	Summer camp records.	Parents of children with low reading proficiency are interested in them attending the camps.
	2. Distribute 500 'Reading at Home' kits to parents of children attending summer camps.	Number of kits distributed.	Kit distribution records.	Parents are interested and able to use the kits at home.

¹⁸ Based on www.tools4dev.org

Logical framework example 2: Adaptive programme

(Because of complex interactions, solutions are unknowable in advance)

	Project summary	Indicators	Means of verification	Risks/assumptions
Goal	10% increase in the number of Grades 5-6 primary students continuing on to high school within 3 years.	Percentage of Grades 5-6 primary students continuing on to high school.	Comparison of primary and high school enrolment records.	N/A
Outcome or purpose	Improve reading proficiency among children in Grades 5-6 by 20% within 3 years.	Reading proficiency among children in Grades 5-6.	6-monthly reading proficiency tests using the national assessment tool.	Improved reading proficiency provides self-confidence required to stay in school.
Outputs	There is one Output, consisting of the trialling, in sequence or in parallel, of each of the several (say, half-dozen) possible entry points, combinations of actions or intervention strategies that might benefit the reading capacity of Grade 5-6 students, including teacher incentives, more frequent inspections, improved materials, prizes, summer camps and different combinations of the above.	A time limit (say, 9 months) and an 'actionable metric' (Ries) is set in advance for each trial, to provide fast feedback and robust information on the question 'Is it likely to work?' Timely adjustments to the approach are then made, to permit a similar trial of the 'next best guess' (Faustino) about what may work, until a sufficiently promising formula is discovered.	The learning and adjustment cycle or 'strategy testing' process (Ladner) is monitored by a critical friend, coach or mentor, who may be part of the programme but not involved in implementation, or alternatively a separately contracted M&E person, also responsible for annual reviews.	In spite of the complexity of the problem, the process of 'failing fast' and adapting promptly to knowledge gained leads eventually to the identification of an effective solution and achievement of the outcome.
Activities	A workplan is prepared for each of the strategies to be trialled.	Indicators provided in each workplan, for activity monitoring only.	Means of verification provided in each workplan.	Activities are pursued with sufficient vigour that useful feedback can be obtained on the strategy being tested.



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Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
Tel +44 (0)20 7922 0300
Fax +44 (0)20 7922 0399

odi.org



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