DT Global

GUIDANCE NOTE: PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION TO ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Contents

What does this guidance note cover?

This note aims to support DT Global staff and partners to: understand DT Global's adaptive management framework; assess if and what level of adaptive management is required for a program; the difference between adaptive management and good program management; and initial steps to apply adaptive management principles and practice.

What is adaptive management?

Adaptive management is a response to rising critiques since the early 2000s to traditional pre-determined development programming, arguing that too often simple solutions have been applied unsuccessfully to complex problems.[1] Whilst there is no industry-agreed definition of Adaptive Management, there are common characteristics and features broadly agreed by donors and development practitioners. DT Global's definition is:

> 'Adaptive management aims to address program and policy environments in complex settings, recognising that clarity may exist in the overall program goal, but the evolving and uncertain context and a lack of evidence on what works make it difficult to plan a pathway to achieving it. Rather than a predetermined 'program map', adaptive management argues for a 'program compass' – a process that charts an evolving course through a structured, iterative process of monitoring, feedback, learning and decision making. This allows programs to regularly reconsider priorities, make course corrections and revise approaches, activities and budget allocations, in response to learning and changes in the world around them.'[2]

DT Global's adaptive management framework

DT Global considers adaptive management in practice as four essential elements operating together: flexibility, responsiveness, purposive learning and an empowering culture.[3]

Flexibility is our capacity to adjust (for example strategies, plans and resources) in response to contextual change and learning plus the absence of constraints that force programs to stick to predetermined plans. Generally this approach requires support from our client and delegated authority to manage adaptively.

Responsiveness is about engaging deeply with context consistently throughout the program, proposing and testing what we think could work and ensuring that our plans reflect and are shaped by our understanding of local politics and power.

Purposive learning is about review and reflection, including testing and updating the program rationale and assumptions, which leads to strategy and programming decisions and adjustments as our understanding and influencing position evolves.

Culture is about having a team that feels confident and empowered to work with these approaches, which includes having supportive ways of working in place with the client and trust across key relationships.
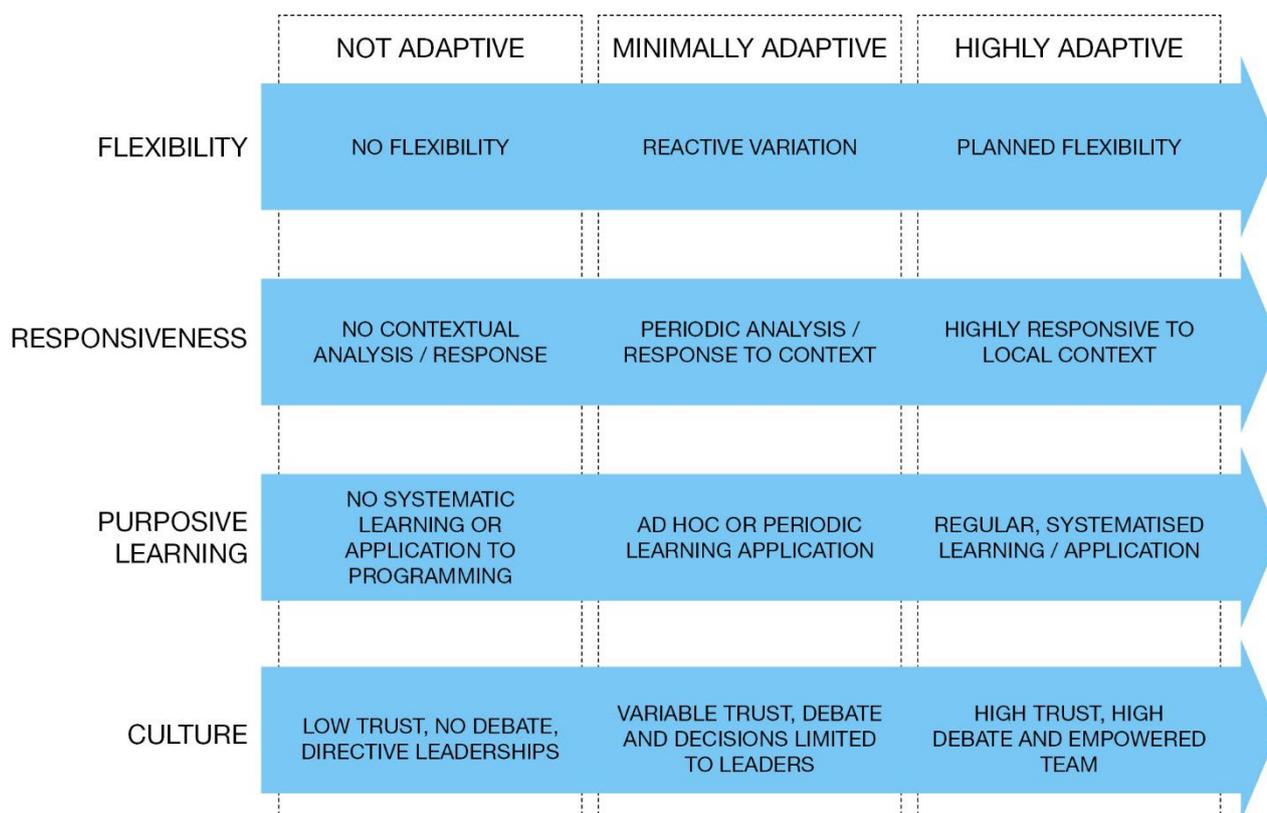
Responsiveness and purposive learning are the dimensions in which program delivery and adaptation sit, whilst flexibility and culture provide the management enabling environment for delivery to thrive. These four elements must all be operating to a high degree for a program (or program component of a large program) to be considered highly adaptive. The following diagram depicts the framework as a spectrum:

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1 Other responses to this aid critique include results-based programming and evidence-based programming, which can partially overlap with adaptive management in practice. Adaptive Management has many parallels with the movements for Doing Development Differently and Thinking and Working Politically.
2 Adapted from Lonsdale, Green & Robertson, CGG Final Reflections, October 2021, Cardno (unpublished)
3 Allen + Clarke, Cardno and ODI, 'Towards More Adaptive Approaches to Managing the New Zealand Aid programme- phase 2 report, September 2021. Adapted by Lonsdale, Green & Robertson to include Culture component in 'CGG Final Reflections', October 2021, Cardno.

	NOT ADAPTIVE	MINIMALLY ADAPTIVE	HIGHLY ADAPTIVE
FLEXIBILITY	NO FLEXIBILITY	REACTIVE VARIATION	PLANNED FLEXIBILITY
RESPONSIVENESS	NO CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS / RESPONSE	PERIODIC ANALYSIS / RESPONSE TO CONTEXT	HIGHLY RESPONSIVE TO LOCAL CONTEXT
PURPOSIVE LEARNING	NO SYSTEMATIC LEARNING OR APPLICATION TO PROGRAMMING	AD HOC OR PERIODIC LEARNING APPLICATION	REGULAR, SYSTEMATISED LEARNING / APPLICATION
CULTURE	LOW TRUST, NO DEBATE, DIRECTIVE LEADERSHIPS	VARIABLE TRUST, DEBATE AND DECISIONS LIMITED TO LEADERS	HIGH TRUST, HIGH DEBATE AND EMPOWERED TEAM

It is important to note that this framework is not intended to be normative (i.e. adaptive programs are good, non-adaptive programs are bad). We see adaptive programming as an effective approach in certain circumstances, but it is not appropriate or necessary in every circumstance. This paper gives some guidance on when adaptive management should be considered, and to what extent. It is also worth highlighting that even the most successful adaptive programs go through a journey to become highly adaptive, with the first year or more usually about exploring the technical aspects and refining the systems and resources.

1. Flexibility

Definition   The capacity to adjust if needed, plus the absence of constraints that force teams to stick to predetermined plans.

Why is this important?

Development programs are often operating in increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous contexts. To be responsive to problems and opportunities as they arise, program teams need flexibility in the policies, contracting mechanisms and systems that support them. A five-year highly detailed logframe, work plan and budget provide very little space for an adaptive team to flourish. On the other hand, an operations team and client who understand that adaptive management is different and work to constantly create flexibility can have an enormous impact on the success of an adaptive program. It is important to distinguish proactively planning for maximum flexibility (consistent with adaptive practice) with reacting with flexibility when a situation is critical (consistent with good management practice). For example, good program management was needed by all programs to react to COVID-19 as a major disruption but responding to one event does not make a program adaptive. It is also important to note that high flexibility alone is not adaptive management; for example flexible funding facilities may or may not be managing adaptively—that is, responding systematically to context and learning. Programs that are adaptive plan and budget flexibly to enable them to constantly respond to changes in context, such as politics or other factors.

What does it look like in practice?

At a minimum, elements that should be adjustable include budgets, activities, partners, outputs and work plans (timelines, reporting and indicators). In highly adaptive programs, this can go as far as flexibility to rewrite the entire strategy including end of program outcomes and results, with only the goal and mission fixed.

Budgeting: Budget flexibility is key and is achievable through means such as: lump sum budgeting at result / outcome or component level; use of a flexible, drawdown pot of program funding with client approval, alongside a more fixed operations budget, or as a minimum the ability to easily move allocations between activity and operations and between components; and sub-contracting / sub-granting incrementally.

Planning: Adaptive management uses an experimental, step-by-step approach, potentially implementing multiple pilots or approaches concurrently to test what does and does not influence a given problem. Work plans are often short-term and rolling, updated at program level following quarterly or six-monthly learning and decision-making points, and updated daily or weekly as tactics and therefore activities emerge. Adaptive management is not an excuse for poor planning; when done well, there are established systems for frequent planning / re-planning. Risk management needs to be particularly strong in adaptive management, not least because of the complex and dynamic nature of contexts and issues that lend themselves to adaptive management. Live risk management is ideal – frequent light touch revisits of risks per pilot / activity rather than heavy static compliance documentation.

Operations: Operational systems need to be discussed up-front and adapted for the flexibility required. This, like the program itself, can involve testing, deciding what works and incremental changes to modify for a specific program. While learning and tools from other programs can shortcut the establishment process, it is important to acknowledge that a fixed, pre-determined toolkit is not desirable—each adaptive management program should have systems refined to suit its own context and approach.

Accountability: Up-front agreement on reporting and accountability arrangements is important; a program requires regular data for day-to-day activity level decision-making, whereas client reporting is better focused at outcome / results level for program accountability and portfolio-level decision making. Investing time in agreeing ways of working promotes openness, minimises confusion and therefore supports efficiency. This need for clarity is true for any program. However, in an adaptive program with so many decision points, a desire to work politically and therefore a need to respond quickly, it becomes even more critical to success. Investing time on agreeing ways of working with the client is essential for creating the right enabling environment (refer Culture section for further explanation).

Getting started questions

- Can we create enough budget flexibility to experiment / test new ideas?
- Do we have the capacity to manage multiple pilots / approaches at the same time?
- Can our sub-contracts or grants be focused at the outcome level with flexibility at activity level?
- Can we shift to a short-term rolling work plan?
- Are our ways of working with the client clear, desirable and documented?

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2. Responsiveness

Definition   Engaging deeply with context consistently throughout the program, proposing and testing what we think could work and ensuring that our plans reflect and are shaped by our understanding of local politics and power.

Why is this important?

Responsiveness is about working with a broad understanding of politics moving far beyond the formal power of government and political parties, to working with other forms of power such as social norms, invisible power, traditional authorities and puppet masters. It has significant crossover with the development concept

of 'thinking and working politically'[4], thinking and working with all forms of power that affect a particular program issue. Adaptive management programs should be closely working with the formal and informal politics and power that shape their chosen reform issues, be that reform of policy, systems, practice or norms, with teams of highly skilled and well-connected national staff who are empowered to lead the work. This assumes that change is rarely linear and particularly so when working on controversial issues, in complex fast moving contexts, with challenging stakeholder dynamics or all three (see model on deciding the level of adaptive management). When working with complexity, understanding and working with (or sometimes against) the political grain of a given context becomes essential to achieving impact.

What does it look like in practice?

Problem based approach: There are multiple ways to work with politics and power. Adaptive programs often take a problem driven approach[5], seeking to catalyse transformative change by nudging difficult problems in a wider system rather than implementing directly large-scale or system-wide solutions to address a problem. This can involve selecting and drilling down into several problems to identify the best chance of influencing wider systemic change in the program's sector / mandate. The best entry points for reform are then selected on a chosen issue, considering where there is any space for change, political traction (formal or informal) and/or reform champions.

Working through what tactics will maximise the project's influence requires high-level skills in day-to-day political economy and power analysis, assessing space for change and decision making. This involves working with ideas, institutions and individual interests to experiment and continually scan for what will scale up or scale out.

Opportunity based: Working with multiple system problems is not the only approach to adaptive management; if there is one clear problem or mandate from the start, it is possible to work with a more opportunity-based approach and test multiple approaches to this then, as above, start to weave together the successful approaches over time. For example, an opportunity-based approach could take one issue such as 'more active citizenship is needed to hold a government to account' and experiment with what community level initiatives exist that could be built on, or new ideas that could be trialled, comparing different actors as entry points to see what has most reform impact, and what approaches naturally appeal to individuals and will scale out across actors or locations. Models to draw on when developing an opportunity-based approach could include Positive Deviance[6], Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)[7] and Human-Centred Design[8] (often used in ICT programming).

Pace and intuition: In practice, pace and intuition are key to being able to work responsively. Accepting that change is neither linear nor constant, patience and judgement are essential skills for the team. Judgements on when to push on a reform issue, when to hold back with strategic patience, and when it is time to exit an opportunity are live debates.

Portfolio approaches: Adopting a mixed approach that invests in likely quick wins balanced by low-cost, important, long-term bets allows a program to manage the realities of different paces of reform. For example, when working on a reform process a program could support the development of local level regulation / Standard Operating Procedures / policy whilst also working on a longer-term reform project to change legislation at the national level. A portfolio approach can also be helpful for balancing client expectations of shorter-term results while also investing in longer-term systems change.

Decision-making: Adaptive management requires significant and frequent decision-making at a strategic level around what pilots or approaches to develop and test, and assessment and decisions on whether they are working, which links directly to Purposive Learning. With a highly adaptive approach it can be challenging to keep track of exactly what the program strategy is at any given time, and therefore what new ideas and concepts to invest in (as well as how to articulate the program story). It can be helpful to condense

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4   See Thinking and Working Politically Community for origins, definition and access to resources Home – TWP (twpcommunity.org)
5   For example see Harvard PDIA toolkit for detailed guidance PDIA Toolkit | Building State Capability (harvard.edu)
6   https://positivedeviance.org/
7   https://www.nurturedevelopment.org/about-abcd/
8   https://www.designkit.org/human-centered-design

the program strategy down to a set of 'Rules of Thumb'[9] for program teams to understand and remember what they are working towards and why, and to support decision-making on new concepts.

Gender Equality Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI): Adaptive management programs that focus on formal political structures (i.e. governments and political parties) may most naturally 'work with the grain'[10] where there is already some reform space. However, 'working with the grain' on GEDSI issues can be challenging in many contexts. The grain is male dominated, as are the spaces in which to influence policy. In this context, a 'trojan horse' strategy can be effective: engaging with key decision-makers on priority policy topics, establishing relationships and trust, and then gradually moving into an influencing space on inclusion issues. Adaptive management approaches can provide space to experiment with what has transformative potential to shift deep seated power and social norms. Consistently talking through as a team what change is possible within the existing system and what is possible in changing the system itself is essential. Modelling inclusive approaches such as networks and coalition building can also complement an adaptive GEDSI strategy.

Pilot then weave: Pilots or multiple small projects addressing the same issue in different ways are a common approach to testing what works to nudge change around entry points for reform. Adaptive management projects can then consolidate around the issues and approaches that are gaining traction, invest more resources into these, and adapt on and around them. Over time, there can be a shift from a series of pilots to a combination of interconnected approaches that together are expected to affect the system underpinning the problem/s the program is addressing. For example, if a program is supporting different government departments through different reforms, when there is traction and trust there could be a point at which it is feasible to propose the most successful approaches and mechanisms are brought together for a more co-ordinated system that hopefully better serves communities, accepting that there will be power trade-offs to be negotiated. Similarly, a number of successful approaches that support women in decision-making could then be tested at a combined level to track the positive and negative impacts that different combinations have on power and social norms.

Note that responsiveness and working with politics and power is often already happening to variable degrees in the work of local staff, but this may be below the radar if there isn't a permissive environment, for example on political thinking, discussion, experimentation and failure. A first step may be to ensure local colleagues have space, recognition and supportive processes for this type of thinking and delivery, rather than assuming that responsive approaches require entirely new skills or mindsets. This is directly linked to Culture.

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9   https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/rules-of-thumb-good-idea-or-double-edged-sword/
10 Levy B, Working with the Grain: Integrating Governance and Growth in Development Strategies, 2014, Oxford University Press

> ▪ Is the program investing in a mix of likely short-term wins and long-term important issues?

3. Purposive Learning

Definition Review and reflection, including testing and updating of the program rationale and assumptions, leads to strategy and programming decisions and adjustments as our understanding and influencing position evolves.

Why is this important?

Learning in adaptive management needs to be planned, frequent, in real-time and lead to concrete program and/or pilot changes. This is a significantly different approach to annual or periodic learning events. It is about very regularly testing assumptions or hypotheses, deciding as a team what is and isn't having traction, making decisions and quickly acting on those to adjust the program. Learning and evaluation are usually done within the team, rather than contracting objective outsiders to assess program progress. This ensures that the team is constantly learning and developing ideas and models rather than periodically minimally altering or demonstrating the success of a pre-given evidence-based model.

What does it look like in practice?

Theory of change: For an adaptive program, the theory of change may take longer to fully emerge. During a typical exploratory phase, problems are dissected, ideas tested, and the team works out where the program is headed. Nested or mini theories of change may be required for each component, pilot and/or activity, which enables the leadership team to be clear about what is being tested, what success looks like and over what timeframe, and therefore able to make good decisions.

Continually applied Political Economy Analysis: Significant analysis and decision-making is needed in-between the planned reflection and decision-making moments, to plan tactics for each pilot or activity, and to maintain the overall program's strategic direction (see Annex 1). A weekly informal politics and tactics meeting where open debate and questioning assumptions can take place or policy positions worked up, is a great way to bring thinking and working politically into a purposive learning approach.

Reflection and action: Purposive learning, supported by relevant monitoring data, is a critical part of strategic decision-making. In practice this looks like quarterly or six-monthly reflection and decision-making processes, which are built into program management and Monitoring Evaluation Reflection and Learning (MERL) processes and staff position descriptions, with dedicated program time before, during and afterwards. M&E data should be available going into the reviews to enable trends and patterns to be analysed by the team, to determine what is working and what is most relevant in the context.

The intention is to interrogate for each pilot / activity:

- Whether assumptions – 'if we do this, then we expect that to happen' – are holding true and if so to what extent.
- What assumptions need updating now the program knows more or the context has changed.
- Whether the activities are having an influence – on who, why, how.
- Whether the activity is likely to have an influence soon or is worth continuing regardless as a long-term important bet.

For the overall program the discussion is more around:

- What do we have that's working and that we can build on? Why do we think it's working?
- What is not working? Why do we think it's not working?
- Across the portfolio what approaches and activities need to be dropped, adapted, kept or improved (DAKI)? (See annex 2).
- What new opportunities to influence are out there that need building of relationships and design of new pilots / activities?
- What are we missing in our portfolio? Do we have sufficient emphasis on GEDSI for example?

- How well is risk management working? Do we have a good balance of higher risk and lower risk activities and potential impact?
- What next? Do we integrate what is working and/or diversify and test in new directions?
- How can we integrate the approaches and activities that will continue?

Programs can adapt their own regular reflection and decision-making reviews to be highly focused on testing assumptions and making and documenting decisions. One well-known process for this is Strategy Testing, developed by The Asia Foundation.[11]

Incremental change data: Monitoring systems need to provide an ongoing sense of whether pilots are achieving traction. A very light version of outcome mapping[12] is well suited to provide data on signs of transformative change. The key is to find simple ways for program staff to spot and document important incremental changes, which taken together can both tell a story and support decision making. See Annex 3 for an example of using strategy testing and outcome mapping together. Most significant change[13] methodologies that delve into program successes can draw out how and why specific activities contributed to change, particularly when then rated for relative significance. Timelines of events covering context changes, outcomes of influencing meetings and project activity successes or failures add depth of information that enables the program to look back on how change has happened as new strategy development takes place. 'Process tracing'[14] methodology can provide a more rigorous approach to discussing levels of plausible contribution, suitable for evaluation. Whichever methodologies are selected, they can then be adapted and combined to suit the needs of a program.

Getting started questions

- Do learning / reflection reviews lead to specific decisions and project changes? How often are they held? Who talks, and are local staff well heard?
- Are we sure what short, medium and long-term success looks like for each major activity or component, and how they are intended to contribute to the overall program? Would mini theories of change support this?
- Are learning reviews focused on examining assumptions and adjusting approaches?

4. Culture

Definition A team that feels confident and empowered to work with these approaches, which includes having supportive ways of working in place with the client and trust across key relationships.

Why is this important?

Creating the right culture for adaptive management is key to success. In essence this is about individuals, empowerment and trust. It is critical that leaders model adaptive practice and create agency for team members to develop and apply the skills and confidence to work adaptively. This includes giving space to a politically minded team and avoiding too many tools and processes, which can stifle adaptation. Trust between client and implementer involves openness and learning together, predicated on the client's commitment to either working adaptively in partnership with the program or providing autonomy, space and time for the program to deliver adaptively. Similarly, trust and openness between an implementer and partner sub-grantees or sub-contractors is required, predicated on mutual commitment to adaptive management.

What does it look like in practice?

Characteristics: The composition and behaviours of a team can make or break the culture required for adaptive management. Each program will have its own specific culture, primarily based on the culture of the

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11 Strategy Testing: An Innovative Approach to Monitoring Highly Flexible Aid Programs (asiafoundation.org)
12 Outcome Mapping Learning community www.outcomemapping.ca
13 Davies & Dart 2005 The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique: A Guide to Its Use - GSDRC
14 See Process-tracing.pdf (intrac.org)

country (or countries) in which it operates. Positions should be localised wherever possible and is particularly important for positions engaging with powerholders. Based on experience of what works for adaptive management, the following characteristics are worth considering at individual and team culture levels:

Responsiveness   Able to work quickly, strong technical skills, individuals with sector credibility

Confidence   Questioning yet assured, humble, unorthodox, calculated risk takers

Judgement   Strong intuition and depth of processing information

Patience   Foresight, persistence, positivity

Charisma   Deep and wide relations, communicators that can work formally and informally, visionaries within the team

Diligence   Commitment to MEL and adaptive management systems, documenting decisions and key engagement results

Identifying teams: Recruiting specifically for adaptive management involves HR, compliance and potentially the client, being on board with the program needs. Measures to ensure the right people are secured and valued include:

- Explicitly target the characteristics listed above through position descriptions, applications, interviews and references.
- Use proactive recruitment techniques to actively seek experts with proven capability to work adaptively.
- Encourage cognitive diversity, potentially drawing in experts from outside the development sector.
- Design practical questions to test problem solving skills and ability to think about power and politics.
- Include a selection panel member with understanding of adaptive management.

Strength in numbers: Working adaptively sometimes involves working against the grain of standard client and implementer systems, decision-making processes, and learned or engrained ways of thinking and working. It is important to have a sufficient collective of people who can act together, feel empowered to think differently and can come up with workaround solutions.

A minimally hierarchal culture or flatter organisation structure, combined with progressive localisation of resourcing and decision-making, allows freedom to bring new ideas, question assumptions and activities, and be honest about what is not gaining traction. This is good management for any program, but fundamental to adaptive management.

Ways of working: Agreeing the ways of working within the team, with the client and with partners, is critical to success. The speed of working in adaptive management requires a good blend of professional responsiveness and the personal relationships to be able to work informally. The design of relations between the implementer and the client should not be left to chance or be reliant on individual relationships that can change. A process of workshops followed by documentation to agree ways of working at a very pragmatic level can be used to spell out respective responsibilities around issues such as decision-making, engagement with host governments, and partnership behaviours that are required for the program to succeed. A similar process between implementer and sub-contracted partners can also be very useful. Such processes can provide clarity and space to encourage constructive contesting of ideas, so that team members operating at different points of governance and implementation can more comfortably hold each other to account.

> **Getting started questions**
>
> - Has the leadership team bought into (and understood) adaptive management principles?
> - How inclusive is leadership in the team? Where and how do decisions get made?
> - Do we have the right team?
> - What more can we do to share power within the team?
> - Analysing trust: Ask your team members to anonymously rate levels of trust with each other on a scale of 1 to 5: 1 = little trust, 5 = safe to ask for help, admit failure and raise challenges. Discuss the

findings. What can you as a team start and stop doing to get closer to 5? This could also be used with partners to assess trust in the implementer.

- Do you have detailed ways of working agreed with the client and with partners that include responsibilities, decision-making, behaviours and accountability?
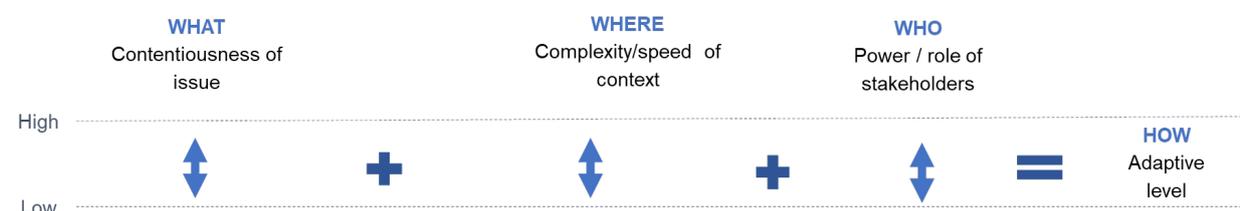
Bringing it together

The four dimensions of adaptive management described above are dependent on each other. If there are major gaps in one area this will significantly impede delivery in others. For example, without flexibility and availability of budget, and therefore investment in emerging opportunities or emerging evidence of what is working, responsiveness and therefore adaptation is not possible. Speed and flexibility of operations is also key to responsiveness, without which influencing and credibility would be quickly lost. A virtuous cycle of responsiveness and learning by the program can create a culture of trust and therefore space to deliver. Conversely if trust is lost, this can lead to micromanagement by the leadership and/or client, which then reduces space for delivery staff to thinking and work politically and make time sensitive decisions.[15]

When to use adaptive management and to what extent?

Adaptive management is not applicable in all programs and should not be undertaken lightly. It requires significant strategic and day-to-day management and therefore can be resource intensive. The diagram below may be helpful when making decisions on whether to use adaptive management, working through key questions around how contentious the program issue is; how complex and dynamic the context is; and the power, role, and acceptance of project stakeholders, particularly host government / s.[16] Working on social norms or inequalities in a complex, fast moving context and where authorities or stakeholders are potentially not supportive of change would indicate a need to work highly adaptively.

Model for deciding on degree of adaptive management

WHAT	WHERE	WHO	HOW
Contentiousness of issue	Complexity/speed of context	Power / role of stakeholders	Adaptive level

High ↔ Low

Questions to inform where on spectrum

1. Is the program issue sensitive?
2. Does it involve changing social norms, power dynamics or political status quo?
3. Is the solution generally still seen as experimental?
4. Are vested interests diverse on the issue?
5. Are inequalities and therefore power being addressed?
6. Is the issue interconnected with other complex issues?

7. Is the political/social/economic/ environmental situation messy?
8. Is there ongoing conflict?
9. Are there multiple authorities or service delivery duty bearers?
10. Are there ongoing human rights violations or systemic structural violence?
11. Does change usually happen quickly and unpredictably?
12. Is there transparency on the issue?

13. Is significant direct involvement needed with authorities?
14. Do state authorities approve of the lead organisation and project partners?
15. Do powerful stakeholders want to support or marginalize the target communities on the issue?

Lonsdale & Barnes 2021

Adaptive management has mainly been used as a whole program approach, with varying success, often on medium sized programs up to around AUD$25m. However, it could be feasible to apply adaptive management to one or more component of a large-scale program if a complex, contentious and/or political component requires it, and the program leadership can create sufficient autonomy and flexibility of systems. A desire for full program highly adaptive management is usually a decision at the design point of a program,

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15 Lonsdale, Green and Robertson, 'CGG Final Reflections' October 2021 (unpublished)
16 Lonsdale & Barnes 2021, Celebrating adaptive delivery: a view from the frontline in Myanmar, IDS

which then needs to be followed through during the contract negotiation stage to ensure that program's technical team works closely with the corporate team to negotiate the flexibility and autonomy required to then deliver the design.

Steps towards adaptability can be helpful to program effectiveness even when a fully adaptive approach isn't appropriate. The intent is to support programs to be clear about their desired adaptive level, and able to articulate and move towards that. Programs can begin by assessing how far adaptive management is needed and then working through what steps are required to achieve this, in agreement with the client.

Many prominent adaptive management examples come from the governance field, which inevitably work with complex political problems. Gender, education, water and waste management programs have all succeeded in managing adaptively. Good examples within DT Global include the Centre for Good Governance in Myanmar[17] (concluded 2021), Vanuatu Health Program[18], ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking program[19] and Balance of Power in the Pacific.[20] For some examples from outside DT Global, see Annex 4 Further Reading.

So what is different when managing adaptively?

To sum up, the following table captures some of the key differences between programs that are not adaptive, minimally adaptive and highly adaptive, drawing on DT Global's framework. This is not a definitive list nor an exclusive distinction; some of the tools or approaches used in adaptive management may also be found in more standard development programs. It is intended to support programs to understand in practice some key differences in adaptive management approaches, and how programs might move towards more adaptive practice where that is assessed as important.

	Not Adaptive	Minimally Adaptive	Highly Adaptive
Flexibility			
Budget	Fixed with % variance / reallocations.	Flexibility to re-allocate expenditure within agreed budget envelope, including for new or adjusted activities. Existence of unallocated funds for piloting / innovation / responsiveness to emerging opportunities.	Budget agreed as a lump sum tied to outcome / results, with significant flexibility around what activities / inputs are funded from that lump sum. Budget is not sub-contracted / sub-granted in full up front, proportion retained with the implementer to respond (and grant / contract) to emerging opportunities and evidence of what works during program lifetime.
Partners	Contracted for project period, usually stable plus minor additions.	Contracted for project period with review / break points.	Either: majority of partners contracted per pilot / activity, meaning partner portfolio may change multiple times. Or: using longer-term program partners that understand and are committed to significant regular adaptations with the contractual flexibility to enable this.
Permission space	Detailed outputs and results, and strict controls.	Results and outputs are detailed with some flexibility to change outputs.	Client supports an evolving theory of change and shifts in program logic (and therefore results / EOPOs and outputs) below goal level.
Planning	Technical solution may be determined by client during program design or determined during inception. Assumes proven approach / solution.	Scope of contract known at the start with some development of strategy / approaches mainly at inception phase. Annual planning based.	Collaborative and problem based. Based on 'best guess' strategy, trialling and testing that strategy, observing what works, and updating the strategy (and potentially the underlying theory of change).

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17 CGG largely unpublished due to Myanmar security situation; example blog: How adaptive are 'Adaptive Management' programs in a crisis like COVID? (May 2020)
18 Health security in Vanuatu | Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (dfat.gov.au)
19 Home – ASEAN–Australia Counter Trafficking (aseanact.org)
20 Balance-of-Power_Brochure.pdf (pacificwomen.org)

	Not Adaptive	Minimally Adaptive	Highly Adaptive
	Work plan detailed for contract period, minor amendments possible.		Work plans may be detailed for just 3-6 months, rolling as new activities or adjustments emerge, while others are dropped.

Responsiveness

	Not Adaptive	Minimally Adaptive	Highly Adaptive
Program analysis	Upfront PEA, then often risk based.	Conduct static PEA once or twice a year, and keep client updated on day-to-day changes.	Upfront PEA to identify problems, ongoing PEA of reform opportunities. PEA systematically feeds into new opportunities and DAKI decisions.
Response to context changes	Risk management primarily.	Risk management + sufficiently flexible to react to significant contextual change including political.	Risk management + opportunity assessment for new reform entry points, able to respond fast. Potential for major strategy pivots. Assumption is change isn't linear, major unknown context changes expected. Risk assessment at portfolio level to ensure balance of higher and lower risk activities.
Program assumptions	Defined upfront and rarely revisited.	Defined upfront, some space to refine and update.	Developed and continually questioned over time. Willingness to question assumptions, tactics and personal views is key.
Agency	Direct service delivery or infrastructure support plus solutions focused technical assistance account for the vast majority of budget.	Significant degree of service delivery, direct support, technical assistance with some policy influence and/or social norms change approaches.	Thinking and working politically. Policy and/or norm influence, relationship building and coalition / network development form key approaches and outcomes. Technical assistance when offered is facilitative and process based above solutions or capacity training based.

Purposive learning

	Not Adaptive	Minimally Adaptive	Highly Adaptive
Theory of change	Prescribed through the design process and expected to be fixed throughout the program.	Developed during the design process, usually only updated at the approach level during periodic reviews.	Developed over time, becoming more grounded and sophisticated; assumptions and hypotheses updated systematically during learning reviews. Nested mini TOCs for each component / pilot / activity.
Learning approach	Annual or less frequent learning reviews; may be little consequence on approach / activities. Primarily proving success. Led by externally contracted, objective, outside reviewers.	Conduct multi-stakeholder learning events once or twice a year and adjust work plans based on this. May be externally or internally led and facilitated.	Sophisticated 3 or 6 monthly reviews of project TOC, nested TOCs and decisions on what to Drop, Adapt, Keep, Improve (DAKI). Emphasis on experimentation, learning as we go, requiring acceptance of pilot / activity failure. Internally led.
Monitoring	Guided by reporting on results-based MEL framework / against original design.	Guided by reporting on results-based MEL framework with intentional space to capture deviations.	Guided by need to make frequent DAKI decisions. Measures incremental change. Measuring multiple pilot / pathway changes simultaneously.
Evaluation	Guided by logframe outcomes and indicators to demonstrate attribution / contribution. External evaluation, generally only at mid-point and end.	Guided by program logic with some space to reflect on deviations.	Identifies system level outcomes and focuses on contribution analysis.

	Not Adaptive	Minimally Adaptive	Highly Adaptive
Culture			
Project leadership	Focused on tasking / delivery / performance management against clear work plan. Little requirement for questioning or discussion of approaches or activities.	Staff / structures / mechanisms encourage some degree of openness of discussion, sharing and delegated decision-making.	Minimal-hierarchy, dependent on strong national staff, culture of openness, questioning and flat structure for decision-making.
Technical / program staff profile	Strong technical skills and subject knowledge, project management skills.	Strong technical skills and one or two staff are skilled at political analysis and well connected.	Team of well networked, deep relationships with power holders, well regarded political analysers, technical credibility, humility.
Ways of working	Traditional client-implementer relationship focused on results delivery. Traditional implementer-partner relationships focus on accountability and delivery.	Some degree of partnership and challenge possible with the client. Some degree of technical relationship and support with partners.	Deep partnership with the client, intellectual challenge within the team and between implementer and client encouraged at all levels. Deep working partnership with client, with agreed support areas, mutual learning and open discussions on adapting approaches.

Further Information

This guidance note has been written by Jane Lonsdale, DT Global Asia Pacific's Adaptive Management Lead, with input from Mark Pruden, DT Global Asia Pacific's Knowledge Lead and Regional Senior Principal. With thanks to Duncan Green, Lucia Pietropaoli and Paul Buckley for review.

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Annex 1: Political Economy Analysis: practical tips

Inception PEA

- Takes place in first 3-6 months of program
- Local staff members to lead + local consultants if needed
- Training / facilitation by PEA expert
- Value from the process above the report
- Led by a specific question: issue-based PEA
- Gendered throughout and conflict sensitive
- Focuses on applied PEA – entry points analysis based on reform opportunities plus program added value
- Short plain English and/or local language version with visuals

Daily applied PEA

Spaces – keep talking

- Dedicated policy meeting space, non-hierarchal open space for new debate and reflection
- Chat-based PEA: ask policy or M&E staff to keep an eye on chat groups and bring useful info into overall analysis
- Keep documents live, easy to add to – visual over prose

Easy tools – draw as you talk

- Problem definition tool: problem tree or fishbone diagram
- Social network analysis: spider diagrams, who is aligned with who, who listens to who
- Map decision makers, gatekeepers to decision makers, influencers, reform champions
- Process mapping: flow chart the difference between how things work in policy / law and how they really happen
- Stakeholder and power analysis: matrices based and focused on program's chosen reform issues
- Go for specific, map individuals over institutions

Annex 2: Basic methodology for Drop Adapt Keep Improve (DAKI)

DT Global has developed a simple and effective methodology: Drop, Adapt, Keep, Improve, known as DAKI, to support and record decision-making, and explicitly link learning to decision-making and accountability.

This can easily be used with learning and reflection processes, as well as more regular conversations, to provide an overall record of decisions made.

The template table below can be used as an ongoing log to periodically review activities and decide what to run with and where there are gaps.

Activity	Progress summary	Significant context changes and/or learning	Likely trajectory	DAKI recommendation

DAKI options:

Annex 3: Basic methodology for applying outcome mapping and strategy testing at Centre for Good Governance (CGG), Myanmar

The following pointers set out the basic methodology that CGG used for linking M&E to learning and decision making, drawing on outcome mapping and strategy testing methodologies.

- For every pilot, major activity, research or policy paper, mini concept notes were developed with theories of change that clearly set out three levels of change / success, providing: 1) outputs, 2) medium-term outcomes (transformation beginning) and 3) long-term outcomes providing a line of sight for what change in the system the activity was testing.
- A light version of outcome mapping set out incremental changes that program and partner staff reported on based on observation, in advance of the strategy testing workshop.
- Quarterly strategy testing workshops were held online over a week, where each pilot or research lead presented their mini TOC, shared openly how it was going and the team debated: 1) whether it had traction and should continue in some form or not, and if continuing, 2) agreed approach and activity changes.
- The program level theory of change was debated, using staff knowledge and insights on context changes, questioning and updating assumptions and approaches.
- All changes and additions at both pilot and program level were tracked in a different colour per quarter, providing a detailed timeline of adaptation.
- Decisions were quickly translated to the rolling work plan.

Annex 4: Further Reading

D. Booth, K. Balfe, R.Gallagher, G. Kilcullen, S. O'Boyle and A. Tiernan, 'Learning to make a difference: Christian Aid Ireland's adaptive programme management in governance, gender, peace building and human rights', ODI Research Report, 2018.

A. Christie and D. Green, 'The Case for an Adaptive Approach to Empowerment and Accountability Programming in Fragile Settings', Synthesis Report, Itad and Oxfam in association with IDS, 2019.

S. Gray and A. Carl, The difference learning makes: factors that enable or inhibit adaptive programming for Christian Aid Ireland and partner organisations, Christian Aid, 2022

D. Green, 'Theories of Change for Promoting Empowerment and Accountability in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings', IDS Working Paper 499, 2017.

D. Honig, Navigation by judgment: why and when top-down management of foreign aid doesn't work, Oxford University Press, 2018

D. Hudson, H. Marquette and S. Waldock, 'Everyday Political Analysis, Developmental Leadership Program (DLP), Birmingham: University of Birmingham', 2016.

E. Laws and H. Marquette, Thinking and working politically: reviewing the evidence on the integration of politics into development practice over the past decade TWP Community of Practice, 2018

L-H. Piron, C. Cummings, G. Williams, H. Derbyshire, and S. Hadley, Twenty years of UK governance programmes in Nigeria: achievements, challenges, lessons and implications for future support, ODI, 2021

J.T. Sidel and J. Faustino, 'Thinking and Working Politically in Development: Coalitions for Change in the Philippines', The Asia Foundation, 2019.

G. Teskey and L. Tyrrel, 'Implementing adaptive management: A frontline effort Is there an emerging practice?' The Governance & Development Practice Working Paper Series, 2021.

G. Teskey, 'Thinking and Working Politically - are we seeing the emergence of a second orthodoxy?', Abt Associates, 2017.

H. Tilley and S. Hadley, Governance for growth in Vanuatu: review of a decade of thinking and working politically, ODI, 2017

Weblinks summarising key adaptive management papers including specific program examples:

https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/remaking-the-case-for-adaptive-management-part-2-what-to-read-what-is-evidence-where-are-the-gaps/

https://twpcommunity.org/our-archive

ODI's Adaptive Development Zotero features 112 documents on Adaptive Management published between 2006 and 2022: https://www.zotero.org/groups/1265281/adaptive_development/collections/DM65EV5V.