

Produced as part of:



The Case for an Adaptive Approach to Empowerment and Accountability Programming in Fragile Settings

Synthesis report

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Date: **21 June 2019**



Action for Empowerment and Accountability Research Programme (A4EA)

In a world shaped by rapid change, the Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) Research programme focuses on fragile, conflict and violence affected settings to ask how social and political action for empowerment and accountability emerges in these contexts, what pathways it takes, and what impacts it has.

A4EA is implemented by a consortium consisting of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the Accountability Research Center (ARC), the Collective for Social Science Research (CSSR), the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives (IDEAS), Itad, Oxfam GB, and the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR). Research focuses primarily on five countries: Egypt, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan (although in the case of this research we have included Tanzania). A4EA is funded by UK aid from the UK government. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official policies of our funder.

Acknowledgements

In addition to those already acknowledged in the three case studies on which this paper is based, the authors would like to thank David Booth, Claire Hutchings, Brian Levy, Ben Powis, Matthew Sheader and Graham Teskey. Mel Punton and Richard Burge (both Itad), Irene Guijt (Oxfam) and John Gaventa (at IDS) all provided comments or insights during the drafting of the report. Efi Alamanos and Katherine Gibney (both Itad) supported the formatting and editing. Any errors are, of course, our own.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

A4EA	Action for Empowerment and Accountability research programme
CSO	Civil society organisation
DFID	Department for International Development
E&A	Empowerment & Accountability
EITI	Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
EU	European Union
FCVAS	Fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings
I4ID	Immunotherapies for Infectious Diseases
IBA	Issue Based Approach
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
OGP	Open Government Partnership
PDIA	Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation
PEA	Political economy analysis
PERL	Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn programme
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency

Executive Summary

“There are those who can work with ambiguity and those who are frozen by it. Some people need the route map, and others want to throw away the map and say ‘let’s go and see where the sea takes us.’” PERL staffer, Nigeria

Introduction

Fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings (FCVAS) are messy and ambiguous contexts in which to plan and implement development initiatives. To work there, external actors are increasingly adopting an adaptive approach to empowerment and accountability (E&A) programming, whatever the setting. This means using a compass rather than map, where real-time political economy analysis (PEA) in relation to context and programme monitoring and evidence-informed learning in relation to intervention are used in combination and in shorter-than-usual planning cycles to maintain and adapt strategic direction. This paper brings together three case studies of large Department for International Development (DFID) governance projects in Myanmar, Nigeria and Tanzania. It forms part of a larger research programme¹ on social and political action towards empowerment and accountability in FCVAS.

Context

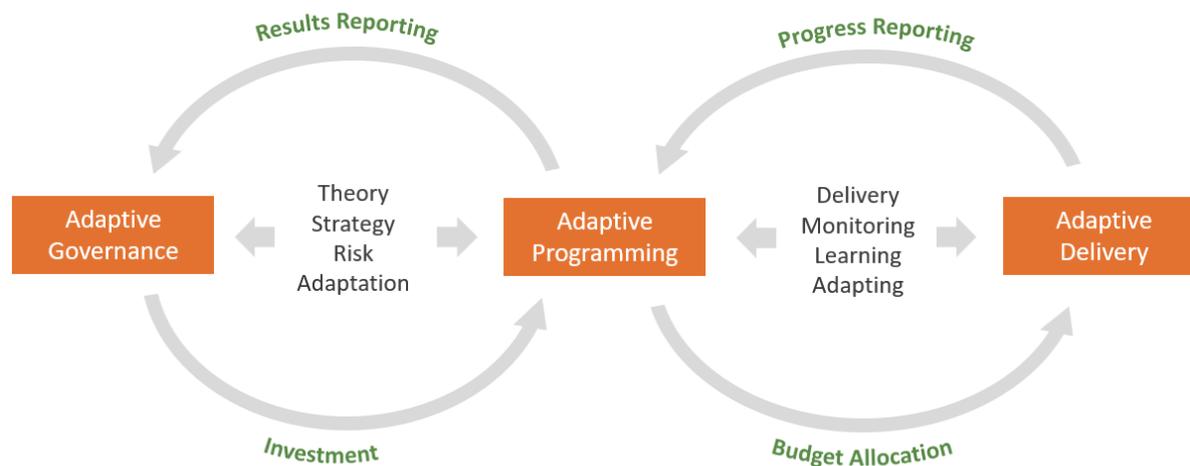
If ‘context is everything’, the context in FCVAS is often very messy indeed: all three case study countries are characterised by unpredictable economic, political and social events and processes and a growing crackdown on the activities and freedoms of civil society organisations. As a consequence, the politics of uncertainty and risk in FCVAS raise profound challenges to traditional donor approaches to partnership, which revolve around the ‘holy trinity’ of state, private sector and civil society organisations. To differing degrees, all three of these and the links between them may be weak or absent in FCVAS. This partial vacuum highlights other forms of ‘public authority’ (traditional chiefs, armed organisations, faith groups), with whom donors are much less accustomed to working, but who have always formed part of the socio-political landscape in FCVAS.

¹ Action for Empowerment and Accountability, <https://www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/action-for-empowerment-and-accountability-a4ea/>

Mechanisms

Perhaps the most important finding from the three case studies has been the emerging picture of the constituent elements of an adaptive approach, and how they interact.

Figure 1: The Adaptive Management Life Cycle - The interplay between adaptive governance, adaptive programming and adaptive delivery



Adaptive Delivery is the daily, on-the-ground work undertaken by a delivery team, with their fingers on the social, political and economic pulse of the world in which they operate. Instead of implementing 'The Technical Plan,' they think politically, opportunistically and on-their-feet, continuously navigating through a fog of ever-changing conditions, many moving parts and players, ambiguity and uncertainty and towards political ends (shifts in power imbalances).

Adaptive Programming is a slower and more structured process, usually in the hands of the senior team within the programme office and informed by frontline staff and the patterns and players that they are spotting or that are emerging from delivery, as well as the pressures from donors to deliver results.

Adaptive Governance normally resides with the officer(s) in the donor agency responsible for funding the programme and following its progress. They must both manage upwards, coping with the pressures for results, reporting and shifting strategic priorities, and manage downwards, ensuring that the programme accounts for how it is spending donor money, but also retains the freedom of strategic manoeuvre that lies at the heart of adaptive approaches.

The relationship between adaptive delivery, programming and governance is constantly evolving, and can sometimes be fraught. The basic currency of adaptive approaches is trust between the various players and tiers involved and confidence that the plan will remain realistic even as it changes. Equilibrium can be disrupted by any number of factors – a political or other exogenous shock; a change of leadership or policy; or a significant failure. Any of these events heightens the perception of risk and can trigger a reversion to more command and control approaches, which rapidly shrinks the space for innovation, improvisation and 'dancing with the system'.

Outcomes

Across the case studies, it is difficult to demonstrate the results of adaptive approaches, in part because the actual workings of adaptive approaches barely register within formal results frameworks. To make convincing claims that adaptive approaches are more effective than non-adaptive programmes, it is necessary to show more than that they can achieve good results. It is important to understand how being adaptive makes these results better than they would have otherwise been; to be able to demonstrate that making programming shifts at critical junctures augments, amplifies or accelerates achievement. Being able to do this requires both monitoring the response to context (staying relevant) and monitoring the results of interventions (staying effective) - thereby being able to explain how learning and adapting in response to this information has affected contribution. Meeting this challenge credibly without becoming lost in complexity is the task in hand for donors and practitioners experimenting with an adaptive approach.

Conclusions: Is adaptation a useful approach for donors working in FCVAS?

The first response to that question should be – ‘compared to what?’ If the answer is ‘compared to programme approaches based on predicted and predictable results and results-pathways’, then there is widespread agreement that such aid programmes have struggled in FCVAS. Has adaptive management produced results in Myanmar, Nigeria and Tanzania? Overall, our conclusion is a conditional ‘yes’. Adaptive approaches have produced tangible and important wins in Myanmar and Nigeria and enabled the Tanzania programme to respond and adapt to a major political shock, when more rigid programmes might have foundered.

So, what makes ‘doing development differently’ possible, particularly in FCVAS?

Responding to the political context and the technical intervention in tandem: The requirement to be adaptive is born of uncertainty of context as well as uncertainty of intervention. Retaining the responsiveness of the intervention to context without losing strategic direction lies at the heart of adaptation and is vital where contexts are unpredictable and can be volatile. For this reason, programmes should be judged not by their effectiveness alone but by their relevance to the bigger picture and the extent to which they collectively augment fragile but strategic stakeholder relationships.

Get the People Right: Adaptive programmes need people who have the right attitude and soft skills to facilitate, influence, motivate and manage relationships with stakeholders; people who are emotionally intelligent and show humility, but also have the entrepreneurial, risk-taking appetite and drive to seize opportunities and try out new ideas. We are sceptical that staff steeped in blueprint or linear thinking and compliance mentalities can be transformed into risk-taking, politically savvy entrepreneurs through a few workshops or a tweak in incentives. Much more attention (and perhaps more research) is needed on how to recruit, incentivise and retain entrepreneurial spirits of the kind we saw in the three programmes.

Using money as a catalyst for latent development opportunities: Small, agile pots of funding can kick-start a relationship, or respond swiftly to a request or an event. The contrast with the normal big, slow procedures of aid allows adaptive programmes both to build trust and to seize windows of opportunity.

Building and maintaining relationships: Building, maintaining and repairing trust between all the different people in the jigsaw is an exhausting and never-ending process of constant communication, especially important in fragile settings where tensions can run high. Communications are also about stamina, being prepared to start from scratch with every new arrival (particularly the case with donors, which often have a much higher level of staff turnover than programmes, especially frontline staff).

Future Fixes

Some areas need to be addressed if adaptive approaches are to prosper in future, including:

Fully recognising the value of local knowledge: Paradoxically, in an approach that emphasises the importance of local context and knowledge, all three programmes were initially designed by international experts, and there is some suggestion that adaptive approaches are becoming more (not less) the province of outsiders as the practice matures. Finding ways to better 'indigenize' the work will be crucial.

Being wary of isomorphism: As soon as any new aid 'fad' takes hold, its language spreads much faster than its practice. Adaptive approaches are no exception, with programme reports liberally sprinkled with its lexicon. The lesson for donors: Caveat emptor (buyer beware).

Avoiding the toolkit temptation: The aid sector spreads ideas via tools and guidelines. But codifying an approach based on emotional intelligence, relationships and trust carries a high risk of ending up with a tick box /checklist approach that surrenders its essence in the interest of replicability.

Working With/Against the Grain: Adaptive approaches emphasise the importance of 'working with the grain' of existing institutions rather than attempting to transplant ideas and institutions from elsewhere. But that approach requires treading a tightrope between engagement with local structures, and the programme's commitment to transformational change. When government and citizen groups have competing priorities, how can a programme identify whose grain to work with? When is the existing grain so damaging to the interests of poor communities that 'working against the grain' should be the preferred response? This dilemma was particularly evident on issues of gender equity and inclusion. Conversely, when does working against stretch the political elastic to snapping point, precipitating a deal-breaking confrontation?

Evolution not revolution: The case studies suggest that there is still considerable uncertainty over how to deliver programmes successfully in an adaptive way and if and how this new approach yields better development results. This is not a surprising finding. Evolution takes time and only a commitment to further trial and the space for further error will tell us whether adaptive approaches offer a way to do development not only differently, but better - in settings where fragility, conflict and violence have challenged other more traditional approaches.

1 Background

Fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings (FCVAS) are messy and ambiguous contexts in which to plan and implement development initiatives. Power relations are often fluid; space for civil society in all its forms may be restricted or threatened; the institutions of government and democracy may be unreliable, predatory or disconnected from society. In such settings, pathways of change that can be supported by external actors are hard to identify and their navigation is often constrained by unpredictable, sometimes insurmountable barriers. This is particularly true when external interventions are intended to stimulate or support citizen empowerment and government accountability – since there is, even in more stable settings, considerable uncertainty over which E&A interventions work, where and why.²

In response, external actors are increasingly adopting an *adaptive* approach to E&A programming, whatever the setting. Put colloquially, this means using a *compass rather than map*, in which real-time political economy analysis, programme monitoring and evidence-informed learning, are used in shorter-than-usual planning cycles to maintain and adapt strategic direction. Arguably, this both reduces risk and maximises opportunity.

This paper brings together the findings of case studies of three large DFID governance projects (Pyoe Pin in Myanmar; The Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (PERL) in Nigeria and Institutions for Inclusive Development (I4ID) in Tanzania).³ Although each has used an adaptive approach, the three differ widely, for example in the number of years they have been underway, their scale and coverage, and their objectives (see table 1). Together, the case studies form part of a research project that examines some of the assertions around the adaptive approach and explores if and how such approaches, including rapid learning and planning responses, are particularly relevant and useful in FCVAS.

This research study forms part of a larger research programme⁴ on social and political action towards empowerment and accountability in FCVAS, within which parallel projects have been established to look at how external actors and particularly donors engage in such contexts.

Table 1: Three flagships compared

	Pyoe Pin, Myanmar ⁵	PERL, Nigeria	I4ID, Tanzania
Launch Date and duration	2007 – 2020	2016-2021, but builds on 15 years of other DFID governance initiatives	2016 - 2021
Budget	Pyoe Pin –£6,721,370 (DFID) PP2 – £16.7m (50/50 DFID/SIDA) PP3 / Sone Sie – £4m (DFID)	£100m over 5 years	£11.6m (£10m from DFID, £1.6m from IrishAid) over 5 years
Objective	To promote social and political change by bringing together	To promote better service delivery in Nigeria, through bringing together government and citizens	To deliver transformative development outcomes

² Itad, 2016, Macro Evaluation of DFID’s Policy Frame for Empowerment and Accountability. Empowerment and Accountability Annual Technical Report: What Works for Social Accountability. Final version, 2016.

³ Adaptive programming in fragile, conflict and violence affected settings: what works and under what conditions? Christie and Green, The Case of Pyoe Pin, Myanmar. January 2019); Punton and Burge, The Case if PERL, Nigeria. (2018); Green and Guijt, The Case of Institutions for Inclusive Development, 2019).

⁴ Action for Empowerment and Accountability, <https://www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/action-for-empowerment-and-accountability-a4ea/>

⁵ Pyoe Pin was comprehensively reviewed and re-strategised in 2018, leading to a successor project entitled ‘Sone Sie’

	coalitions of groups and individuals ⁶ to address particular issues of social, political, economic or environmental concern.	groups to collectively address governance challenges.	through systems approaches (that combine policy entrepreneurialism with market and business innovations and citizen engagement), that are sustained through institutional change.
Management Structure	Programme managed by British Council – No consortium partners	Delivered through two separate pillars working on the ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ side, managed by separate consortia (DAI and Palladium led) under separate contracts but united by a joint working policy	Consortium, managed by Palladium
Geographical coverage	Does some national work, but is focussed on projects implemented in specific locations, mostly in ethnic post-conflict States	Works at the federal level; in the focal States of Kano, Kaduna, and Jigawa; and through regional learning and reform hubs in the South-West, South-East and North East	National - with an emphasis on people and place, and scaling through policy, replication or demonstration.
Examples of major wins	<p>Fisheries reforms, including a new Freshwater Fisheries Law.</p> <p>Played key role in ensuring success of EITI candidacy, including high level of civil society participation.</p> <p>Instrumental in establishing the Sex Workers in Myanmar network</p>	<p>In 2018, financial autonomy for State Parliaments (Houses of Assembly) was signed into law as a result of them voting in support of their independence from the Government Executive - a step change in Nigerian democracy.</p> <p>In Kaduna State, citizens’ priorities set out in recently-introduced Community Development Charters account for over half of the Local Government planned capital spend in 2019, and community groups are tracking implementation.</p> <p>In Jigawa State, in 2018, the Government started a system in which selected infrastructure projects have to be signed off for completion and quality by a local community-based organization before contractor fees are fully released.</p>	<p>Changes in national exam formats, teacher training curriculum and sign language of instruction, for children with disability, resulting in increased secondary school graduation.</p> <p>Menstrual health products granted VAT exemption, reducing costs across the country by 18 per cent.</p> <p>Agreement to scale geo-databasing of addresses for urban taxes & services, from a pilot across capital city Dodoma.</p> <p>Import tariffs changed to support investment in sunflower oil farmers and processors.</p>

⁶ The term ‘coalition’ refers to different interest and stakeholders – it does not necessarily consist of like-minded groups, except in the sense of a commitment to engage together to resolve a particular problem.

Each case study was shaped by the following questions:

- How do **contextual factors** suggest the need for, enable or constrain adaptive approaches?
- What are the **mechanisms and strategies** employed for adaptive approaches – what do they add and how do they work? How far has programme design enabled front-line workers to engage in regular analysis of power and political dynamics surrounding the programme and what kinds of learning, adaptation, issues and solutions do they lead to in practice?
- What is different about the **type and nature of outcomes** achieved by adaptive approaches vs non-adaptive? Do adaptive approaches enable external actors to achieve better E&A outcomes? What is the nature of the flexibility and adaptiveness that is needed in FCVAS and how far do donor practices support this?

Answers to the questions were gathered through a process of document review and stakeholder interviews. The synthesis was produced by undertaking a comparative analysis of findings using the overall research questions above as the framing device for collation and comparison.

Study Limitations

The study is based on a limited body of evidence – three case studies of DfID funded projects. These case studies are based on documentation and observations made during short visits plus subsequent discussion on early drafts, and should not be considered as evaluations. Further, while Myanmar and Nigeria have a high level of conflict, the programmes we studied are mainly operating in non-conflict-affected areas. Attempts to visit Pakistan and study a programme in a conflict zone foundered due to deadlines and visa requirements. Thus, while we could see the indirect effects of conflict on the programmes (e.g. in changing donor priorities and risk appetite), we were unable to see directly examples of how adaptive management approaches can deal (or not) with heightened levels of violence.

2 Introduction to Adaptive Approaches

‘What is the right level of constraint? You can’t just say ‘go and do stuff’, but nor can you say ‘just follow the logframe’. DFID official, Myanmar

Following a sustained critique of previous approaches to aid that were characterized as over-prescriptive and linear,⁷ a series of networks and initiatives have in recent years explored ways of ‘doing development differently’. Most discussion and experimentation have taken place in the field of governance and institutional reform, but discussions have spilled over into other sectors such as health, inclusive economic growth and education.

While there are nuances and differences, the multiple threads, with names like ‘Adaptive Management’, ‘Thinking and Working Politically’, ‘Doing Development Differently’ and ‘Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation’ (PDIA) exhibit enough common ground for one practitioner to describe them as a ‘second orthodoxy’⁸. This contrasts with a ‘first orthodoxy’ that tends to lock in inputs, outputs and outcomes from the start in a rigid design and charts a linear course towards a given ‘solution’. By contrast, common features of the second orthodoxy are:

⁷ See for example Easterly, *White Man’s Burden* (Oxford, OUP, 2007), Andrews, *Limits to Institutional Reform in Development* (Cambridge, CUP, 2013) or Levy, *Working with the Grain*, (Oxford, OUP, 2014)

⁸ <https://abtassocgovernancesoapbox.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/abt-associates-working-paper-series-issue-no-1-final-010617.pdf>

- **Context is everything:** Political Economy Analysis (PEA) is central, and not just at the planning stage.
- **Best fit, not best practice:** aid programmes need to ‘work with the grain’ of local institutions. Working with the grain entails understanding and engaging with the complex networks of local traditions and cultures that characterise any context, rather than importing ‘best practice’ blueprint solutions from elsewhere.
- **From blueprint to flexible, responsive, adaptive programming:** Rather than conduct all analysis and design ex ante, aid programmes should accept that their initial design can only ever be a best guess and build in the capability to learn continuously from experience and adapt accordingly.
- **Real-time learning:** this requires regular feedback loops that allow programmes to learn and adapt as they go, rather than simply evaluate at the end of the programme cycle.
- **Long-term commitment:** this kind of ‘learning by doing’ is ill suited to short programme cycles. Most success stories take a decade or more to show significant impact at scale.

The purpose of this research is to explore how the second orthodoxy fares in relation to empowerment and accountability in FCVAS, albeit based on only three flagship programmes funded by DfID. As part of the first phase of a wider research programme, it is also intended that this study should generate research questions which will help inform and shape the second phase of study.

3 Context

‘Civil society was split by the military. Trust was broken. Everyone was suspicious of each other.’ Pyoe Pin staffer

If ‘context is everything’ in the second orthodoxy, then context in FCVAS is often very messy indeed: a chaotic mix of many competing sources of power, high levels of volatility, conflict and violence.

The Consequences of Volatility

Volatility is the consequence of and the trigger for tensions that squeeze and distort voice, change attitudes and create opportunities for and barriers to action. In Myanmar, Tanzania and Nigeria, opportunity and risk are amplified by political volatility (rather like a game of “snakes and ladders”), making the ability of Pyoe Pin, I4ID and PERL respectively to be flexible and adaptive vital. In all three countries, unpredictable and uneven economic, political and social events and processes continually fluctuate over time and space. This has required flexibility to respond, a recognition that risk and opportunity often go hand in hand and an ability to learn quickly from intervention experiments. In Nigeria, PERL’s context-specific workplans are underpinned and fashioned by different types of PEA, which attempt to stay on top of these complex contextual dynamics, and understand where power lies and how decisions are made. This allows PERL to patiently seek meaningful ways to add value in difficult contexts like conflict-affected Borno, with its huge institutional capacity gaps and plethora of donors and competing coordination mechanisms. As one PERL staffer said, *“You find entry points, they aren’t working, so you have to adapt and find other entry points.”*

In Myanmar, Pyoe Pin has been ready to take advantage of unexpected opportunities, such as the case in mid-2011 when the Myanmar government unexpectedly announced a wish to sign up to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). Pyoe Pin rapidly mobilised resources to enable civil society to take part in EITI’s shared decision-making platform, alongside government and the private sector. This unexpected tripartite relationship provided a foundation upon which trust could be built, based on the benefits to be generated by improvements in resource governance. Initially, civil society

bodies were not willing to participate since there was a lack of trust in government, but through a process of facilitation, civil society confidence grew. Over time, Pyoe Pin has been able to reduce its support and the World Bank and other donors now provide funds for the formal EITI process. Myanmar became an EITI candidate country in 2014 and produced its first EITI report in January 2016.

Political Shocks and Closing Space

All three countries have seen programmes grappling with political shocks and a growing crackdown on the activities and freedoms of civil society organisations, although this is more the case in Tanzania and Myanmar than in Nigeria, where constraints vary significantly between states. Unlike the other two countries, Tanzania was relatively stable when the I4ID programme was introduced. However, politics intervened soon after I4ID was conceived, overturning DFID's assumption that Tanzania was a relatively predictable environment in which to experiment with adaptive management. In October 2015, a month before the programme was put out to tender, John Magufuli won the presidential elections. While the initial reaction was widespread excitement over his promises to crack down on corruption, a strong authoritarian streak in the new government soon became clear. It was not a single moment, like a military coup, but a gradual, and seemingly inexorable, tightening of political and civic space, enshrined both in presidential pronouncements and accompanying policy making and legislation.

Over the following months, a crackdown on traditional and social media followed, along with harassment of opponents; a ban on public rallies and the end of public broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings; temporary bans on newspapers; arrests, court proceedings and tax investigations into prominent political and business leaders; and suspicious and unexplained disappearances, shootings and killings.⁹ Tellingly, in June 2017, the Tanzanian government pulled out of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), which promotes more inclusive, responsive and accountable governments.

For I4ID, the timing could hardly have been worse. A fledgling organisation, with international experts in DFID and Palladium largely in the driving seat, was knocked sideways before it was even up and running. But an adaptive programme design proved better able to respond than a more rigid approach, which might have folded altogether. Following a review, direct work on I4ID's efforts to promote inclusive *Democratic Governance* was scaled back in favour of a core focus on development issue-based programmes, consisting mainly of engaging different institutions in informal change coalitions around less contentious development topics such as solid waste, menstrual health and disability education. Attempts at working on democratic governance are now kept well below the radar and embedded in more general ways of working.

Box 1: Tanzania: Adaptive Management meets Menstrual Products¹⁰

In Tanzania, I4ID has been working to improve access to menstrual products

Only a small fraction of Tanzanian women uses improved menstrual products like sanitary pads. The key figure for I4ID is Mwanahamisi Singano (Mishy). Before joining I4ID, she'd been active in the [Tanzania Gender Networking Programme](#) (TGNP – Tanzania's largest women's/feminist movement).

Mishy and TGNP had allies in government (feminists, old school friends etc) who wanted to move forward. They needed a quick win to gain some momentum and profile, and found it in VAT – Tanzania's equivalent of the tampon tax. Exemption would reduce the wholesale price by 18% at a

⁹ The shooting of MP Tundu Lissu is still without successful investigation or explanation.

¹⁰ Adaptive Management meets Menstrual Hygiene, 15 August 2018, <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/adaptive-management-meets-menstrual-hygiene/>

stroke, paving the way for increased demand. Mishy worked with TGNP to coordinate the lobbying – they got the support of women MPs and the Ministries of Health and Education, who agreed to take it to the real decision maker – the Ministry of Finance. The MoF checked how much it would cost, found it to be fairly small (due to the low levels of demand) and signed off. Voila – quick win!

They had some momentum, what next? I4ID reckoned the big gap was sorting out the market. Could they pull together the various manufacturers and distributors to work together to boost access and lobby for policy change?

Which is how we ended up sitting in on a meeting of 8 manufacturers at the I4ID office. ‘Human Cherish’, ‘Relief Pad’, ‘Glory Pads’, ‘Elea Pads’ and ‘Lunette Menstrual Cups’, among others, were more accustomed to being in competition with each other, but Mishy had brought them together essentially to try and persuade them to set up a business association.

Mishy winds up the meeting, and in the last 15 minutes goes around the table, getting the companies to sign up to a joint marketing effort. She says I4ID could find and pay a consultant to design a joint marketing plan, and the reps jump at the idea – research and technical assistance are I4ID’s second main tool, along with convening/brokering.

An observation we make here is that programme teams working in contexts where they feel the pressure to demonstrate alignment with an increasingly authoritarian host government face tensions between showing too much flexibility on one hand (with the risk of losing sight of the programme’s original objectives) and sufficient adaptability on the other (to reach those objectives by different means). This can be summarised as a dilemma over when to work with the grain of an increasingly authoritarian system, and when to work against it. We look at the mechanisms adopted by the three programmes in the next section in order to explore how this challenge plays out in practice.

Building Genuine Partnerships

“We have many fault lines in Nigeria...religious, ethnic...they divide people. If you bring solutions to them, the solutions will not bed down. You have to work together in finding those solutions, for them to sustain.” PERL staffer, Nigeria

‘Pyoe Pin is ready to take a risk, they move fast. Other donors are much more rigid in their country strategies.’ Civil Society Leader, Myanmar

FCVAS raise profound challenges to traditional donor approaches to partnership, which revolve around the ‘holy trinity’ of state, private sector and civil society organisations. To differing degrees, all three of these may be weak or absent in FCVAS. This partial vacuum allows light to be thrown on other forms of ‘public authority’¹¹ (traditional chiefs, armed organisations, faith groups), whether individually or in coalitions, who have always been part of the political and social landscape but with whom donors are much less accustomed to working, with high degrees of local variation¹².

This has at least four implications for adaptive approaches:

¹¹ For more on the concept of public authority, see <http://www.lse.ac.uk/africa/centre-for-public-authority-and-international-development>

¹² See <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/how-does-dfid-work-with-non-state-power-holders-armed-groups-faith-organizations-traditional-chiefs-in-messy-places-interview-with-wilf-mwamba/>

1. Foreign aid implementers need to broaden their frame of reference to include a wider range of potential actors in the search for improvements and solutions, with different constellations likely to be relevant on different topics or in different settings.
2. Projects need to develop skills in ‘convening and brokering’ this wider range of players, in a process where building trust may be as (or more) important than the search for technical solutions to given problems.
3. Partnerships are necessarily more fluid in FCVAS. In responding to a highly volatile context, coalitions may be best kept informal and partnership may be more fluid (*“someone could be a partner for one day, it’s that fluid”*, Nigeria), or hidden (kept under the radar).
4. In contexts of hostility or low levels of trust, it may be impossible to bring all potential players together in a room – shuttle diplomacy between different stakeholders may be required instead.

Overall, we found that a deep and nuanced understanding of the social and political context was necessary for adaptive approaches to work well. Much of this is born of confidence in relationships and shared decision making, with trust emerging as the central success factor. Building trust, trying to prevent its loss, and rebuilding it should that effort fail, is the daily currency of adaptive approaches. One key element of that trust is the degree to which power and decision-making are devolved to local staff and partners. Over-reliance on expatriates can make it harder to see, let alone work with, the grain of local conditions.

While all programmes were issue-based, stakeholders to varying degrees across the three programmes expressed the view that the adaptive approach was dependent on a ‘stakeholder first, issue second’ focus on building relationships. This presents its own challenges, since a volatile political context can expose programme teams and external actors to risk by association if they are caught up in and damaged by, domestic politics and disputes.

Box 2: Nigeria: Finding an entry point to support conflict recovery in Borno

In Nigeria, PERL has found effective ways to contribute to an emergency response, according to its local manager

The humanitarian crisis in the North East of Nigeria has deepened for the eighth year in a row, resulting in the continuing displacement of millions of people, and millions more facing critical food insecurity. Borno state is at the epicentre of the Boko Haram conflict, and its ability to respond effectively is hampered by huge challenges in the capacity and functionality of state government institutions. The story of PERL’s work in Borno highlights both the challenges of promoting governance reform in conflict affected areas, and the value an adaptive approach can bring.

“When the programme started in 2016, the priority for DFID was to support coordination around recovery. But the coordination environment in Borno is extremely complex and not fully functional. There are multiple layers, a lot of overlaps, the more donors you have the more coordination mechanisms you have, and then it increases the complexity and decreases the effectiveness. It wasn’t easy to find an entry point – we tried for a while to support coordination mechanisms but had to shift away from this because we weren’t best placed to improve the situation.”

Ongoing political economy analysis tracks the constantly shifting coordination landscape in Borno, to identify opportunities. At the end of 2017, PERL was asked to support the drafting of a State Development Plan, something that PERL has facilitated in other states. However, PERL’s PEA suggested that *“due to the upcoming election period and given the amount of work and commitment required from the State government to draft such a plan, in 2018 any attempt in this direction is likely to fail.”*

Instead, a decision was made to focus on strengthening coordination capacities at Ministry, Department and Agency (MDA) level.

“This was based on the thinking that if we support health or education with, for example, a sector plan, or other support they might need around planning, public sector management or budgeting, then they will be better equipped to coordinate with donors, INGOs, etc. Coordination is difficult to achieve when key government institutions lack basic governance systems and processes such as clear mandates, human capacities, plans and budgets.”

PERL then supported the development of a water sector plan, to help the Ministry of Water Resources coordinate more effectively with other MDAs, citizens and humanitarian and development partners in the water sector.

The plan was verified in 2018, and through this PERL has been able to expand its capacity strengthening work to health and education agencies, through *“using the experience of the water sector to encourage other sectors. We used their words, their testimony, their examples, their advice in a workshop to share knowledge and recommendations with other actors from the health and education sectors.”*

Overall, the message from PERL’s work in Borno is: *“you find entry points, they aren’t working, so you have to adapt and find other entry points.”*

Mechanisms

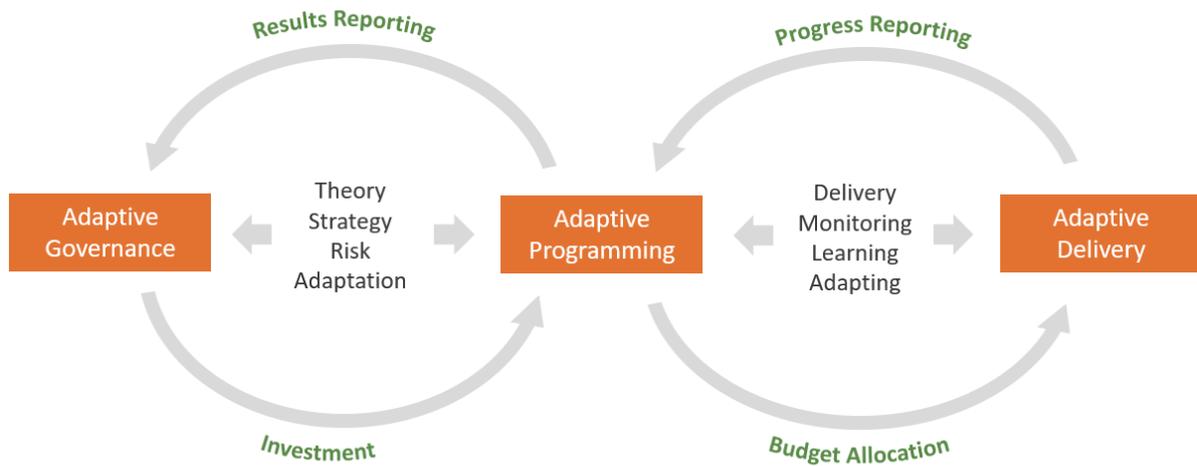
“We work on the political economy of DFID, as much as on the political economy of Nigeria. That’s how we’ve survived.” PERL staffer, Nigeria

‘One of the downsides of [AM’s success within the aid sector] is that people now think it is easy to do, so funders then layer on tough processes.’ Harry Jones, Palladium (one of the designers of I4ID, Tanzania)

Perhaps the most important finding from the three case studies has been the emerging picture of the constituent elements of an adaptive approach, and how they interact. Although this might well evolve further in future, our current understanding is that an adaptive approach involves a dynamic interaction between three processes: delivery, programming and governance¹³ (Figure 1). These are important distinctions in fragile settings where delivery is shaped by knowledge of context, where project-based results are difficult to predict and where donors are under greater pressure to balance the risk/results equation. People are at the heart of this model: at each level, people with subtly different skillsets are required to navigate the complexities of an adaptive programme.

¹³ In the context of this report, governance refers to programme design, commissioning and oversight.

Figure 1: The Adaptive Management Life Cycle - The interplay between adaptive governance, adaptive programming and adaptive delivery



Adaptive Delivery is the daily, on-the-ground work undertaken by a delivery team, with their fingers on the social, political and economic pulse of the world in which they operate. In each case study, these frontline staff see the project as facilitating political change through a combination of advocacy and influencing, targeted small grant-making and tailored technical support. As a result, instead of implementing ‘*The Technical Plan*,’ they think politically and on-their-feet, continuously navigating through a fog of ever-changing conditions, many moving parts and players, ambiguity and uncertainty and towards political ends (shifts in power imbalances).

When it works well, delivery teams do this using curiosity, evidence, emotional intelligence and instinct (noticing the frown on the face of the minister and changing tack in mid-conversation) in a powerful blend of on-the-spot learning, thinking and decision-making set against a backdrop of a deep understanding of cultural and social norms. In this way, frontline workers come up with best guesses on what to do next, then test and correct in a continuous engagement and learning process. Personal networks are crucial. In PERL, for example, getting the right staff is often essential to getting the right partners, within government and civil society. This means it is vital to find the right people at the start of a project to avoid setting teams up to fail – challenging within the often tight timeframes agreed with donors.

All three projects were founded on the assumption that power can shift when new opportunities for collective choices are created. Each project focuses on opening decision-making space around issues – with these issues being the means to achieve political change and not ends in themselves. Opportunities to create space may emerge with little warning (for example in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, which ultimately allowed space for civic engagement in fisheries legislation – a good example of how shocks can produce opportunity in fragile settings).

Box 3: Myanmar: Transforming the Lives of Small Fishing communities

In Myanmar, Pyoe Pin made major contributions to a reform that changed the way fishing licenses were allocated.

The signs of progress are tangible as we enter Danuphyu village, in Ayeyarwaddy. The new road, and access to electricity are indirect spin-offs from the fisheries reform: a newly organized and self-

confident community was able to use its newfound relationship with its MP to access his constituency fund. In the village hall, we meet with fishers, their leaders (U San Min, U San Oo, and U Soe Win), elected at regional level), their MP and two young women from the Department of Fisheries (DoF). The leaders do most of the talking:

'Initially we thought if we presented a tender application to the DoF, we would get it. We didn't. We had to find different ways, build a network to earn credibility and trust with the DoF. The major value of NAG and Pyoe Pin was bringing us together, coming up with collective proposals, and money for mobilization. Plus, technical support on plans for co-management and support for our contacts with DoF.

At the first meeting in 2012, they got very annoyed and said, 'why have you come here?' The two big challenges were convincing the DoF and getting the villagers to believe they could change things, which went against all their previous experience.

To build trust we had to show the DoF that we were honest – we showed them our fishing nets, said 'these are what we will use'. From that moment, the DoF started to respond differently. We had to know how many nets, collect the data, show we could really do it. The (big) tender owners brought money; we brought information and inspiration.

We only won one tender, enough for 6 villages, but it got people starting to believe. It's a huge change: now we have to manage the ponds; we have money and fish for our families but also for the association, which pays out to members for 'happy occasions' and 'sad occasions'. We feel more secure and have fewer problems with the old tender owners.

The recognition of our role as fishers really matters to us. At the top level of the DoF, they used to think of a fisher as someone with 30 boats – we were just seen as labourers. In the first workshop, they started to see we were fishing for ourselves; we existed. Now the DoF has small scale fishers embedded into its plans. There are still anti's of course – people in the DoF who did well from bribes, but we also have allies there now.

What did we need from outside? Help to come together – even collaboration between villages was new; lessons from elsewhere [Pyoe Pin organized exposure trips to study fisheries reforms in Thailand and Cambodia]; building the relationship with DoF and MPs. If we'd been on our own, ideas would not have come, we'd still be labourers, at the whim of the bosses. A lot of areas would be fished out by now. We'd never have realized we needed to engage in law reform.

Big fishers used to kill small scale fishers – that would still be happening. The greatest success of all is the end of conflict.'

In each case study, we saw how adaptive delivery initially involves looking for common interests across coalitions of individuals or groups, who may not initially (or indeed ever) share incentives and who may never be formally organised (or even meet in the same physical space).

Adaptive delivery is often highly collegial: accompanying and checking with others, convening, brokering and mentoring, making sure the programme is not off-piste or getting it totally wrong. It happens in weekly meetings, in chats with colleagues, sharing insights, advice, media summaries and other intel. Adaptive deliverers build successful relationships of trust, through an appropriate level of devolved authority to frontline staff and partners to make decisions, including taking risks. To kick-

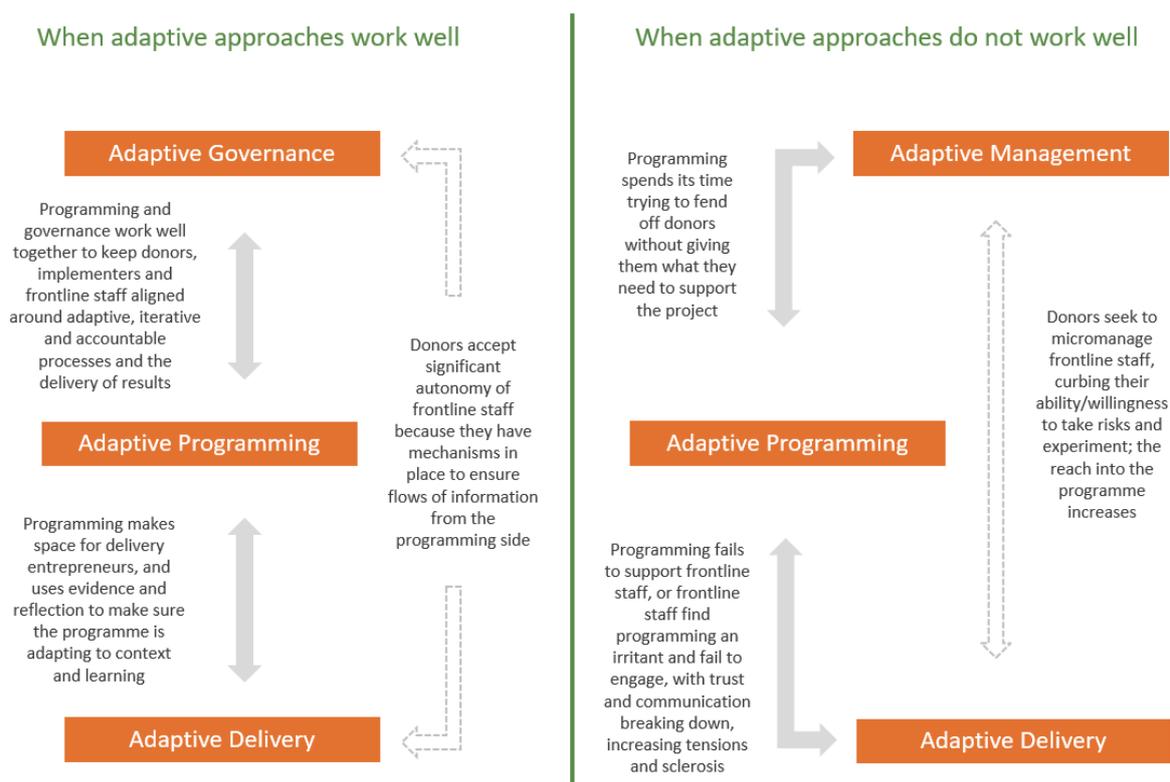
start effective delivery, both Pyoe Pin and I4ID found it particularly helpful to be able to fund small initiatives, quickly, both to get things moving and to build trust. These included small grants for fledgling organisations and rapid pieces of technical assistance, when partners asked for it. Staff in both Pyoe Pin and I4ID also stressed the importance of exchange visits and other contacts with similar initiatives in neighbouring countries, a 'see for yourself' approach rather than simply promoting externally sourced and generic 'good practice'.

Adaptive Programming is a slower and more structured process, usually in the hands of the senior team within the programme office and informed by frontline staff and the patterns and players that they are spotting or that are emerging from delivery. PERL staff told us that programmers need a 'balcony view', so they can understand and respond to both the incentives of the funders, and the delivery teams' decisions in the context in which they are operating, within an organisational culture of humility, patience and trust.

Adaptive programming involves less frequent cycles of reflection on in-situ strategy than adaptive delivery, focusing instead on how the broader programme is faring, and the context is evolving. Adaptive programming is often informed by commissioning expert analysis and bringing in critical friends to help question and challenge in order to identify new directions and opportunities. This is sometimes needed to counter the inertia that can build up in adaptive delivery processes – the result of staff making extensive investments in building knowledge and networks that can easily create a desire to 'stay in the game', even if the context has moved on - a temptation that can only be overcome if strong adaptive programming shapes the nature of adaptive delivery. All projects organise strategic reflection days to bring together learning as well as injecting new ideas and scrutinising the assumptions and direction of travel.

Adaptive Governance normally resides with the donor, particularly the officer(s) in the donor agency responsible for funding the programme and following its progress. They must both manage upwards, coping with the inevitable pressures for results, reporting and shifting priorities that swirl around any donor agency (nationally and in HQ), and manage downwards, ensuring that the programme accounts for how it is spending donor money, but also retains the freedom of strategic manoeuvre that lies at the heart of adaptive approaches. In Nigeria, PERL was championed by a DFID officer (Wilf Mwamba) who "*instinctively and immediately*" understood the value of an adaptive approach, and had the confidence, experience and charisma to take a risk on PERL and navigate DFID systems to carve a space for a huge adaptive programme in a risky setting.

Figure 2: Distinctions between an adaptive approach that works and one that doesn't



The relationship between adaptive delivery, programming and governance is constantly evolving, and can sometimes be fraught (Figure 2). The basic currency of adaptive approaches is trust between the various players and tiers involved, largely because of the shift to a less tightly defined understanding of accountability (away from specified performance targets). Players in all three roles are under pressure and face in two directions at once: delivery means both being accountable and sensitive to partners and communities on the ground, and responsive to programming bosses in the office; programming means managing donor demands and shielding staff so they can get on with their work without excessive oversight or interference from donors; governance requires keeping the various tiers of the donor agency hierarchy onside, while also doing some shielding – of the programme from the exigencies of donor processes.

Managing the competing demands of an adaptive approach is seldom easy or comfortable: equilibrium can be disrupted by any number of factors – a political or other exogenous shock; a change of leadership or policy; or a significant failure. Any of these can trigger a reversion to more command and control approaches, which rapidly shrinks the space open for innovation, improvisation and ‘dancing with the system’. But that is quite a static picture, a snapshot of the nature of an adaptive approach at any point in time. What the case studies also suggest was a plausible life cycle for adaptive projects – and at the risk of over-reading our observations since this is based on only three cases, we suggest that adaptive programmes are likely to pass through some or all of the following stages, in an iterative rather than a wholly linear way:

1. **Emergence:** Some projects are designed as adaptive, while others become adaptive over time. If the former, donor staff and consultants draw up a design and an approach, which then goes out to tender; both the design and the implementation often involve organisations and individuals who have either a track record of working in the country or with this type of programming. In other cases (e.g. PERL’s predecessors), a programme begins to draw more explicitly on adaptive ways of thinking and working as it evolves, seeking to carve out more and more space to try, learn, fail and adapt.

2. **A rocky but fertile start:** Learning by doing typically involves high levels of initial failure and hiccups, providing an early test of the levels of trust between the various participants, but it also generates a high level of experimentation and innovation – green shoots (the meaning of Pyoe Pin in Burmese). The critical contribution of local staff becomes clear, confidence builds and they start to take over some of the leadership positions from the initial group of largely international experts.

3. **Stability:** If the programme is lucky (e.g. Nigeria), it has several years of relative stability (i.e. no major project-threatening shocks) in which to get through the rocky start and develop both its own capacities and a way of working attuned to the local context. If it is unlucky (e.g. Tanzania), a large shock comes along that compounds any initial teething problems.

4. **Productive Maturity:** an established team, a high degree of trust between the players, and good luck allow the project to deliver some early/medium term results, and its reputation and learning start to spread within the aid sector.

5. **The Plateau:** There are various risks at this stage. The project's early investments in building knowledge, experience and relationships may start to generate inertia and unwillingness to pivot towards new opportunities, or a feeling among programme staff that now they have demonstrated their value, donors should leave them alone to get on with the job. Constantly shifting donor priorities, policies, demands and (high turnover of) personnel may also increasingly undermine understanding and trust, throwing up barriers to innovation and adaptation.

6. **Return on investment.** As both time and money spent accumulate, and especially if initial success leads to a big budget increase, donor staff start to demand more tangible results commensurate with the investment made, to communicate to the public, to ministers and to critics. Earlier recorded achievements devalue rapidly with time – the request shifts to evidence of success at scale.

7. **Diminishing returns:** The programme is increasingly reluctant to innovate; staff and ministerial churn in the donor organisation remove its initial champions and it is hard for their replacements to catch up and commit. The incomers are less convinced about the value of the programme, perhaps because of 'not invented here' syndrome, or because it now needs to invest differently to keep the donor engaged – and this may not happen immediately or at all.

8. **Legacy?** At some point, someone closes the programme or declares that enough has been achieved and moves on. What legacy remains after the project closes? Does it bequeath a change in thinking or behaviours at the level of donors or local organisations? Do people now 'do development differently'?

4 Demonstrating that Adaptive Approaches lead to Improved Outcomes

'Adaptive programming does not mean a blank sheet. We know what we want to achieve, know the results we want to show, but can't tell you how we want to get those results' DFID official, on the design of PERL in Nigeria

Across the case studies, it is difficult to demonstrate the results of adaptive approaches, in part because the actual workings of adaptive approaches barely register within formal results frameworks. Moreover, the nature of adaptive approaches makes it hard to prove attribution of – or even contribution towards – results to the programme's actions. Inevitably – and to an extent by design – these case studies have generated a number of where-next questions for researchers and practitioners:

How do we know if adaptive management is ‘better’ than traditional ways of working?

Programmes are typically designed around predicted results, and their value assessed by how well they achieve their targets. These targets are set to assess performance not only against the predicted end state (outcomes and impact) but also the predicted means to that end (outputs). However, although arguing that the route to results cannot be predicted, adaptive managers still want to demonstrate ‘how’ success was achieved to report the critical junctures and moments that lead to change and to communicate the inspiration and improvisation that made such success possible. Achieving this may require approaches to activity monitoring (for example process tracing), which generate results which do not match results framework targets where reporting does not meet donor requirements, as happened for Pyoe Pin, the consequences of a loss of donor confidence can be severe.

In Nigeria, PERL is built on 15 years of DFID governance programming so is perhaps best positioned to demonstrate the value of adaptive approaches. PERL’s M&E system is sophisticated, using outcome harvesting to compile narrative stories of change that explore how the programme made a difference. The bureaucratic burden is significant but appears to be worth it, since the 2018 annual review of the programme highlighted evidence that the programme is making a significant contribution to improvements in core governance and service delivery processes at both federal level and in the states. However, a big question still remains: how do we know that these successes are down to PERL being adaptive? PERL staff are convinced, pointing to their own experience of locally-led partnerships building ownership and leading to Nigerian partners being willing to put their own money on the table to solve problems; and the fact that PERL work doesn’t stop or grind to a halt when there are blockages or failures, because delivery teams can move nimbly when priorities shift or doors close.

This evidence is currently anecdotal, but PERL could potentially demonstrate the added value of adaptive ways of working through its M&E system, through comparing the results of interventions and delivery teams that have been more and less faithful to the adaptive approach. Staff told us that more adaptive teams can demonstrate greater longevity, momentum and sustainability, and are achieving longer term outcomes not just quick wins. This evidence has not been showcased by PERL but would potentially be of great interest to the wider development community.

To make convincing claims that adaptive approaches are more effective than non-adaptive programmes, it is not enough just to show that they can achieve good results. We need to open the black box of adaptive approaches and demonstrate *how* being adaptive makes these results better than they would have otherwise been.

Is there a downside to doing development differently?

To varying degrees each of the programmes argue that by supporting issue-based reform processes, more people will be enabled to have a voice and stake in decisions that affect their lives. However, the focus on getting the right people in the room can mean identifying the powerful players within a previously excluded group, which can risk overlooking marginalised people within such groups. For example, in the Pyoe Pin fisheries case, we hardly spoke to any women even at the local level. Of course, it is not ever possible to include all voices but there is a danger that a win-win perspective involves *working with the grain* to such an extent that entrenched and excluding norms of behaviour cannot be challenged and can even be inadvertently reinforced.

And what about scale and long-term legacy?

Is ending small as attractive as starting small? What is the process for scale and spread and does its absence matter? Even if good adaptive processes lead to enhanced stakeholder relationships and shared local solutions that translate into empowerment and accountability outcomes in the short term

and at the local level, there remain questions across the cases about how these translate into enduring change at scale. For example, how will the local improvements in waste management facilitated in Tanzania 'go to scale'? Even where change begins at the level of institutional change, how will this translate into benefits for citizens on the ground? And there are management challenges too: one of the designers of I4ID argues that the perceived success of adaptive approaches has led to a push from donors for shorter periods of below-the-radar experimentation and unrealistic expectations for rapid scale-up.

Is adaptation a useful approach for donors working in FCVAS?

The first response to that question should be – 'compared to what?' If the answer is 'compared to programme approaches based on predicted and predictable results and results-pathways', then there is widespread agreement that such aid programmes have struggled in FCVAS, where traditional partners such as states, private sector or civil society organisations (CSOs) are weak, absent or predatory, and politics is usually volatile and occasionally violent.

But is this new approach compatible with the incentives and mechanisms of the aid sector? For example, even if a solidarity approach of core-funding popular organisations, with no questions asked, contributed to development in FCVAS, it is hard to imagine how it would ever be acceptable to donors, given their need for transparency, risk management and accountability. Adaptive approaches appear to be something of a compromise, stretching the boundaries of the acceptable by responding to past failures and seeking to demonstrate that 'doing development differently' can produce better results. Has it produced such results in Myanmar, Nigeria and Tanzania? Overall, our conclusion is a conditional 'yes'. The adaptive approach has produced tangible and important wins in Myanmar and Nigeria and enabled the Tanzania programme to respond and adapt to a major political shock, when more rigid programmes might have floundered.

5 Conclusions

'If we had had to stick to the original plan, we would have shut by now', I4ID's Democratic Governance & Strategic Partnerships Manager, Tanzania

Our three case studies highlight the way adaptive approaches rely on a fragile chain of relationships and trust, involving donors, managers and frontline staff, which must be built, maintained and (when damaged) repaired to allow those results to flow. Maintaining this equilibrium starts with an approach to people and relationships that stands in stark contrast to a more orthodox vision of development programming as a 'principal-agent problem', where systems are designed to try to enable donors to drive and control the actions of recipients.

So, what makes doing development differently possible, particularly in FCVAS?

Get the People Right

"There are those who can work with ambiguity and those who are frozen by it. Some people need the route map, and others want to throw away the map and say 'let's go and see where the sea takes us.'" PERL staffer, Nigeria

The case studies highlight the importance of certain types of people at governance, programming and delivery level. Adaptive delivery requires recruiting, training and retaining people who have the right

attitude and soft skills to facilitate, influence, motivate and manage relationships with partners that are not solely built on money, who are emotionally intelligent and show humility, but also have the entrepreneurial, risk-taking appetite to seize opportunities and try out new ideas. In addition to project management skills, adaptive programmers need to understand the thinking of delivery teams, and be able to support them within an organisational culture of modesty, patience and trust. But they also need the drive to push forward through ambiguous, messy, often high-risk situations where certainty is a luxury and programme paralysis always a possibility. This combination of sensitivity and drive is, to put it mildly, rare and precious. In PERL, it took many years and multiple programmes to establish teams who really 'got' the adaptive approach.

On the donor side, adaptive governance requires dedicated programme managers who can juggle the competing demands of upwards accountability and creating an enabling environment for experimentation and risk-taking. That means keeping their own bosses and peers onside, managing and shielding the programme from the inevitable pressures stemming from shifting donor priorities and policies, and high turnover rates of staff and politicians.

This has profound implications for human resources management. We are sceptical that staff steeped in blueprint, linear thinking and compliance mentalities can be transformed into risk-taking, politically savvy entrepreneurs through a few workshops or a tweak in incentives. Good dancers are born, not made. Much more attention (and perhaps more research) is needed on how to recruit, incentivise and retain entrepreneurial spirits of the kind we saw in the three programmes – born networkers and entrepreneurs, combining an appetite for experimentation and risk with a deep understanding of power (both of the external environment and their own organisational contexts) and grasp of the shifting landscape of opportunities and threats, and the patience and stamina required to get results.

Use money as a catalyst to trigger latent development opportunities

'She came to me in a conference tea break and was very keen, but also crying. We started with a small grant, helped them write the proposal, otherwise no-one was going to help.' Pyoe Pin staffer on a future sex workers' leader. Myanmar

In both Myanmar and Tanzania, we saw the value of small, agile money that can kick-start a relationship, or respond swiftly to a request or an event. The contrast with the normal big, slow procedures of aid allows adaptive programmes both to build trust and to seize windows of opportunity. Big money, by contrast, can be a problem (although more resources also, of course, allow more activity). Very big money in Nigeria (in terms of the project as a whole, rather than the cost of activities) has brought greater donor attention from HQ, and with it the kinds of enhanced reporting requirements that can undermine adaptive approaches. Donor risk appetite falls when more is at stake.

Build and maintain relationships

Building, maintaining and repairing trust between all the different people in the jigsaw is an exhausting and never-ending process of constant communication, especially important in fragile settings where tensions can run high. Adaptive approaches require strong people skills for delivery – but these aren't necessarily accompanied by reporting skills. In Myanmar, we saw that operating 'below the radar' may be good for facilitating change, but it makes reporting harder. The substance of adaptive programme outcomes in FCVAS often emerges from relationships that have already been built in advance of the opening of windows of opportunity for change. However, the value of the waiting game is hard to demonstrate *before* such opportunity knocks and adaptive programmes need to find ways to deliver while they wait for *step-change* moments. This presents everyone with difficulties, since a requirement to deliver outputs that generate outcome-level change along a predicted pathway may

pressurise adaptive programme teams to think in terms of spin rather than substance or become less entrepreneurial/agile. Communications are also about stamina, being prepared to start from scratch with every new arrival (particularly the case with donors, which often have a much higher level of staff turnover than programmes, especially frontline staff). If that stamina becomes exhausted, trust can easily evaporate, as happened in Myanmar.

Accept that doing development differently carries risk

‘At some point, we have to move beyond white people coming and telling us how to do things we’ve been doing for 15 years.’ (Tanzanian MP, reported comment)

Any relatively new approach is likely to suffer from teething troubles and unintended consequences, and adaptive approaches are no exception. Over the three case studies, we observed areas that need to be addressed if adaptive approaches are to prosper in future.

- **The value of local knowledge:** Paradoxically, in an approach that emphasises the importance of local context and knowledge, all three programmes were initially designed by international experts, although some have since become more indigenous. All sides accept that foreigners are unlikely to have the granular knowledge required to dance with the system, and the intention is always to ‘indigenize’ the work by finding and promoting local leaders. But this can become a source of fragility, especially when (as in Tanzania) an exogenous shock strikes when the programme is still in its infancy. Do adaptive programmes have to be cooked outside the context in which they are to be delivered, or could some other approach be found, for example identifying existing local organisations that are working along similar lines, and helping them build their work?
- **The risks of isomorphism:** As soon as any new aid ‘fad’ takes hold, its language spreads much faster than its practice. Adaptive approaches are no exception, with programme reports liberally sprinkled with its lexicon. This presents a genuine challenge to managers seeking to distinguish good practice from good spin¹⁴.
- **The toolkit temptation:** The aid sector spreads ideas via tools and guidelines. But codifying an approach based on emotional intelligence, relationships and trust carries a high risk of ending up with a tick box /checklist approach that surrenders its essence in the interest of easy replicability.¹⁵
- **Working With/Against the Grain:** Adaptive Management emphasises the importance of ‘working with the grain’ of existing institutions rather than attempting to transplant ideas and institutions from elsewhere. But that approach requires treading a tightrope between engagement with local structures, and the programme’s commitment to transformational change. When government and citizen groups have competing priorities, how can a programme identify whose grain to go with? When is the existing grain so damaging to the interests of poor communities that ‘working against the grain’ should be the preferred response? Conversely, when does working against stretch the political elastic to snapping point, precipitating a deal-breaking confrontation? Adaptive approaches require a more compelling narrative to explain how a compass-led approach decides between going with or against the grain in different circumstances.
- **Inadvertent Exclusion:** Working with the grain often means that an adaptive programme seeks to bring together local stakeholders in search of new solutions to existing problems. This can be an effective method, but it carries a risk. In Myanmar, Pyoe Pin’s focus on working with the grain meant that those already excluded from participating in the groups being convened failed to be included in the process. This is a particular risk when it comes to gender equity, as many

¹⁴ See <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/old-wine-in-new-bottles-6-ways-to-tell-if-a-programme-is-really-doing-development-differently/> for a reflection on this point by a number of aid practitioners, including one of the present authors

¹⁵ For more on this point, see <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/working-with-against-the-grain-the-case-for-toolkits-and-the-future-of-thinking-and-working-politically/>

organisations, both state and non-state, are dominated by men. PEA begins at home. Interestingly, Pyoe Pin appears to find it easier to work with excluded groups when it makes them the central focus of a project, rather than trying to 'mainstream' it elsewhere in the programme. For example, on HIV, Pyoe Pin has set up networks for highly marginalised groups – the Sex Worker in Myanmar network - to good effect.

Don't forget the bigger picture

Do our observations suggest that adaptive approaches translate into enhanced and enduring social and political action that can help shift power relations towards empowerment or accountability? The jury is still out - a perhaps not surprising conclusion.

The case studies suggest that the argument requires more convincing evidence of if and how 'good process in theory' translates into better development outcomes in practice. Although our overall observations are broadly positive, robustly establishing whether these new approaches work will take time. From a practitioner perspective, we should be thinking evolution not revolution: since only a commitment to further trial and the space for further error will tell us whether adaptive approaches offer a way to do development not only differently, but better - in settings where fragility, conflict and violence have challenged other more traditional approaches.