institute of development studies

Working Paper
Volume 2023 Number 586

Celebrating Adaptive Delivery: A View from the Frontline in Myanmar

Katrina Barnes and Jane Lonsdale

February 2023

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First published by the Institute of Development Studies in February 2023
ISSN: 2040-0209 ISBN: 978-1-80470-089-1
DOI: **10.19088/IDS.2023.009**

Suggested citation: Barnes, K. and Lonsdale, J. (2023) *Celebrating Adaptive Delivery: A View from the Frontline in Myanmar*, IDS Working Paper 586, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: **10.19088/IDS.2023.009**

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

This paper is funded with UK aid from the UK government (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office – FCDO, formerly DFID). The opinions are the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or the UK government.

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Charity Registration Number 306371
Charitable Company Number 877338

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Summary

The conversation on adaptive management has grown fast amongst development actors. These conversations often focus on designing, commissioning, and managing large-scale development programmes. Exactly how this impacts the frontline, the implementers, and day-to-day project delivery is still being debated. Yet, perspectives drawn directly from practice are often largely missing within these debates. This paper is written by two development practitioners.

Through this paper, we reflect on the difference between adaptive management and adaptive delivery, and how this interacts with risk and aid accountability, particularly in contexts of fragility. Drawing on examples of Oxfam in Myanmar work and our personal insights in relation to delivering programming across humanitarian, peace-building, and development, we suggest that in complex, conflict-affected, and highly political environments adaptive delivery already happens far more regularly than is currently recognised, as a necessity to get activities delivered. However, it happens despite the system, not because of it, and is therefore often hidden and carried out ‘under the radar’ rather than celebrated as a success in difficult environments.

This paper was written in 2019, before the military seized control of Myanmar in February 2021. Whilst it draws on examples from pre-2021 Myanmar to illustrate real life cases, it is a contribution to a broader global debate on adaptive management in practice, specifically in fragile contexts. This is not specifically aimed at practitioners working in Myanmar at present, who are now working in a protracted crisis.

This paper makes tangible recommendations on steps that donors, international non-governmental organisations, local staff, and partners could take to promote a system of encouraging and celebrating adaptability in programme delivery in fragile contexts.

Keywords

Adaptive programming; adaptive management; adaptive delivery; donors; risk; fragile, conflict, and violence-affected states; Myanmar.

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Jane Lonsdale is a specialist in adaptive management, governance, and civil society, with 23 years' development experience, including 12 years designing and leading adaptive and politically informed programmes. She holds an MA in International Development and Wellbeing in Public Policy from the University of Bath. Jane worked for Oxfam from 2007 to 2019 in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Tanzania, and Myanmar. She currently works independently as DT Global's Adaptive Management Lead and their Technical Director for the Building Community Engagement in Papua New Guinea programme, and as an Associate for Kivu International supporting thinktanks in Myanmar.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Jo Rowlands, John Gaventa, Duncan Green, and Colin Anderson for their discussions and edits during the preparation of this paper. Most importantly, we would like to thank the dedicated Oxfam in Myanmar team and the many local organisations that we have worked with, who patiently taught us so much during our time with Oxfam in Myanmar.

Acronyms

CSO	civil society organisation
DDD	Doing Development Differently
EAO	ethnic armed organisation
FCVAS	fragile, conflict, and violence-affected states
IDPs	internally displaced people
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
IRC	International Red Cross
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
MEAL	monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PDIA	Problem Driven Iterative Adaption
TWP	Thinking and Working Politically
WASH	water, sanitation, and hygiene

1. Introduction

The conversation on adaptive management has grown fast amongst development actors, including in fragile contexts, in response to a rising critique of traditional pre-determined programmes. There have been some useful publications on different facets of adaptation and political work (Levy 2014; Andrews *et al*. 2013; Booth *et al*. 2016), primarily across the governance programming sector. Yet, whilst there are growing similarities and convergence (sometimes referred to as a 'Second Orthodoxy' (Teskey 2017)), there is currently no agreed upon definition amongst development actors of what elements comprise adaptive governance, management, programming, delivery, approaches, or techniques. The pressure to be seen to be thinking and working politically whilst delivering against ever stricter donor requirements in the name of value for money and greater aid accountability is often unhelpful and contradictory. In a complex, conflict-affected environment, we suggest more focus within these discussions is needed on getting adaptive delivery right. Certainly in the case of Myanmar, adaptive delivery already happens in political and rights-based programming far more regularly than is currently recognised, as a necessity to get activities delivered in an ever-shifting, highly politicised context. However, it happens **despite** the system, not because of it, and is therefore often hidden from donors and other practitioners and carried out 'under the radar' rather than celebrated as a success in difficult environments.

This paper derives from the Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) research programme and draws on semi-structured reflections throughout its implementation, as well as combined years of development practitioner experience of implementing politically relevant, governance, and transitional programming in Myanmar. This paper articulates a frontline contribution to what have largely been higher-level debates around adaptive programming amongst donors, thinktanks, and headquarters of international implementing organisations. We focus particularly on adaptive programming approaches within fragile, conflict, and violence-affected states (FCVAS).

Through this paper, we reflect on the difference between adaptive programming and adaptive delivery, drawing on various examples from Oxfam's programming to look at why and how adaptive delivery is currently happening in Myanmar. The paper explores how external factors of fragility can help practitioners make decisions on how adaptive a programme should be, moving into a discussion on risk, and the proxy measures that have been put in place to manage risk and upward accountability. We identify five areas which influence how transparently adaptive a programme can be and provide recommendations on steps that donors, international organisations, local staff, and partners could take to promote a system of encouraging and celebrating adaptation in programme delivery.

2. Context

Myanmar is a highly unpredictable context, fast moving in the political, social, economic, and environmental spheres, where, even before the 2021 military coup, governance was still very much contested at the national, regional, and local levels, all of which makes development programming complex, to say the least.

Inequality is high, with multiple ethnic conflicts taking place simultaneously across the country. Many of these intersect with natural resource contestation and related interests and investments from regional players including China, Japan, India, and Thailand. These conflicts have resulted in high numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs), approximately 500,000 in total living in camps or camp-like settings (primarily in Kachin and Rakhine) prior to the coup, with numbers increasing significantly (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2020).

Political power has historically been, and often remains, personalised within individuals, and lies within a fragile mix of military, civilian government, cronyism, and a powerful Sangha (Buddhist authority) (Steinberg 2018). At the time of writing, there is dual governance in many of the ethnic border areas of Myanmar – between the Myanmar government and ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) – with control over territory being a key driver of conflict and regularly changing. Many of these conflicts are rooted in Myanmar's colonial past (Brenner and Schulman 2019).

This has resulted in a highly political operating environment, one in which neither who the power lies with, nor the systems in which programmes operate in, are stable or clearly discernible. Ultimately, in Myanmar, how change is likely to happen and what impact it will have is always highly uncertain.

Oxfam's work in Myanmar, before the 2021 military coup, crossed both governance and humanitarian programming and therefore combined different spheres of thinking. It was based on partnerships with local organisations, particularly civil society organisations (CSOs) working with marginalised women and men. Oxfam's work aimed to promote the collective power of men and women to harness the benefits of political reforms and economic development. Practically, this meant strengthening social accountability and supporting more inclusive local governance systems, engaging at the time with both the then Myanmar government and EAOs, supporting alliances and engaging in local and national-level advocacy on contentious issues of women's rights, land and water resources, as well as responsible investment. All whilst playing an ongoing balancing act between advocating for and retaining access to providing basic services in support of human rights for minority groups.

Oxfam in Myanmar's humanitarian projects were largely implemented in contexts of protracted or entrenched conflicts and needed to incorporate governance and social accountability approaches; the context of Oxfam's Governance and Economic Justice programmes therefore fluctuated between humanitarian and more stable, yet in both contexts was inherently political. The classic humanitarian–development divide was barely relevant in Myanmar but was still used to describe who was and was not working with people living in a camp or with IDPs. The physical and political security in the context of shrinking and shifting civic space was becoming a greater risk for all Oxfam's partners, and no longer applied only to strictly defined conflict areas. As such, navigating entrenched political interests, trying to anticipate the next change or disaster, and battling with unclear national and organisational administrative processes were all central to a programme manager's job description – regardless of programmatic content. We would see that so much of the work being done by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and CSOs in Myanmar was political, not in the sense of formal party or electoral politics but in the sense that the work necessarily had to grapple with a range of rapidly shifting power dynamics and vested interests in an attempt to strengthen the ability of communities to access the services and resources they needed and influence the decisions that impacted them. This required a level of agility for which many international development and humanitarian programmes are not well known.

After years of working within this, and other fragile and uncertain contexts, it became clear that in order to be effective in their work, our teams were not following logframes strictly; that months could get lost on programme delivery due to the mood of a powerful official; that quickly altering invitation lists or seating charts based on the latest political whims, and altering programmatic or influencing approaches and in some cases, locations, all were just a daily reality to implementation within Myanmar. Programme teams' ability to duck and weave and adjust was admirable. Yet the teams found themselves struggling to retrofit these essential adaptions into donor documentation, feeling inhibited by detailed budgets and activity plans, but also trying to fit activities and expenses that were unpredicted back into these. At the same time our monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) system was struggling to capture the successes and nuances within these ever-changing programmes, driven instead by a need to report back to donors on often rigid indicators.

3. Methodology

This paper draws on reflections from the authors' combined 25 years work experience across contexts that include Tanzania, Kenya, Papua New Guinea, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Somalia, Laos, Liberia, and Myanmar, and was developed whilst working with Oxfam in Myanmar.

As part of the A4EA programme, a workstream that looked specifically at the role of external actors sought to answer the overall question: what are the best ways for external actors, particularly donors and NGOs, to support internally led social and political actions that lead to greater empowerment and accountability, or to create enabling conditions that contribute to these? Oxfam and Itad's series of papers on adaptive programming for empowerment and accountability, which largely focused on governance of programmes that were intentionally set up to be adaptive, spurred us to explore how the field-level reality fits into these discussions. At what level of a results framework is adaptation helpful? Does adaptive programming align with and give adequate space to adaptive delivery? Is the level of adaptive delivery needed in Myanmar because of the conflict and (at the time) active political transition? What are the practical ways that donors and implementers can support adaptive delivery and overcome current barriers whilst still ensuring appropriate accountability? As we started exploring these questions, further questions arose specifically around how an organisation or a donor manages risk within adaptive delivery, and the realisation that not all projects need to be delivered in an adaptive way. If this is the case, then what factors affect how adaptive a programme should be in its delivery?

This paper is a product of a reflective process of inquiry into these questions, which took place between 2017 and 2019. We drew on our daily experiences in the Yangon office, guiding, supporting, and often trying to enable space for field staff and local partners as they navigate and balance their daily adaption to contribute to change, with project design documents, logframes, budgets, and reporting. This helped us identify the extent of adaption that was taking place. We specifically focused on these questions through our roles facilitating project and programme learning reviews, periodic points of reflection and adjustments over the course of 18 months, which helped us understand the components that either hindered or supported this. Throughout this period, we undertook points of semi-structured reflection based primarily on Oxfam's work in Myanmar, but also drawing on both our professional histories. This was complemented and periodically informed by a desk review of development literature. Due to the reflective nature of this work, and rapid changes that have taken place in Myanmar since the time of writing, this paper does not necessarily reflect the current views of Oxfam in Myanmar.

3.1 How adaptation sits within development debates

Adaptive delivery, adaptive programming, adaptive management, and adaptive governance – an appreciation that to become more effective and stay relevant, development and humanitarian assistance needs to be 'adaptive' – have been discussed since the early 2000s.

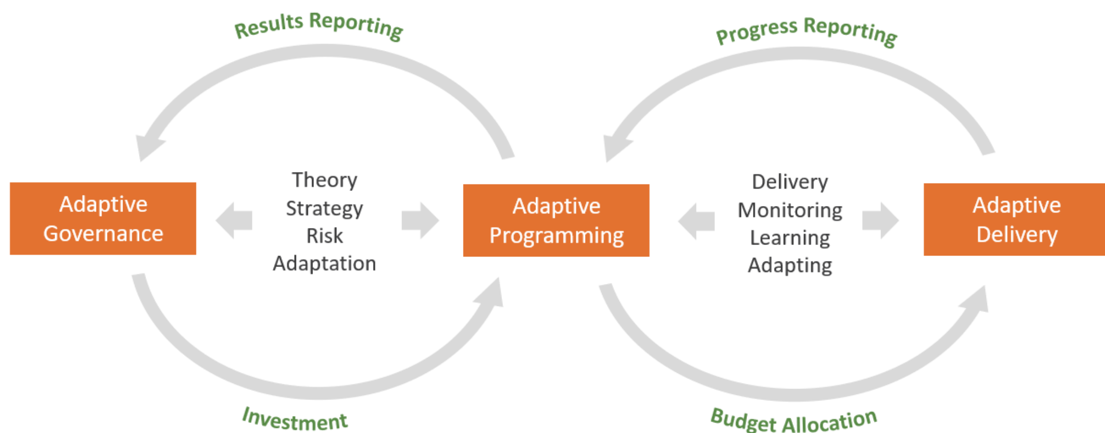
Debates critiquing development effectiveness, from a perceived predetermined 'blueprint' or 'substantialist' approach, point to a growing body of evidence where programmes have failed to achieve outcomes, due to not understanding and/or not being responsive enough to the context (Easterly 2007; Booth *et al*. 2018; Eyben 2010). The current dominant approach to development implies supposing that by doing enough problem analysis, and having comprehensive contextual knowledge, we will know enough to be confident that as long as key assumptions hold true, we can predict how change will happen. The theory of change underlying this belief is articulated at the beginning of the project planning, stating that if 'X' takes place this will lead to 'Y'. Critics of this thinking have supported a call for development programmes to not only better understand context, but to respond to changes by becoming more adaptive, for example by using a learning-by-trial-and-error approach.

Whilst this recognition of a need to move towards more adaptive management has been gathering steam, debates are still characterised by varying definitions of exact terminology: Problem Driven Iterative Adaption (PDIA), Doing Development Differently (DDD), and Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) (Levy 2014; Andrews *et al*. 2013; Booth *et al*. 2016; Andrews 2013) are all part of this broader debate – yet, these, and other terminology specifically on adaptive management appear to focus more strongly on designing, commissioning, and managing large-scale development programmes. Exactly how this impacts the frontline, the implementers, and day-to-day project delivery is still being debated – so too is the extent of adaptation. Yet, with the notable exception of Christian Aid, Mercycorps, and the International Red Cross (IRC) (Algoso *et al*. 2016; Christian Aid 2016), perspectives drawn directly from practice seem to be largely missing within these debates.

In Angela Christie and Duncan Green's paper *Adaptive Programming in Fragile, Conflict and Violence-Affected Settings, What Works and Under What Conditions?: The Case of Pyoe Pin, Myanmar* (Christie and Green 2018), adaptive programming or adaptive management is used to refer to the design, procurement, contracting, and management of programmes, with adaptive delivery being used to refer to coal-face project implementation undertaken by both INGO staff and/or national NGO or CSO staff. This has been further developed in a synthesis paper in the same series, *The Case for an Adaptive*

Approach to Empowerment and Accountability Programming in Fragile Settings (Christie and Green 2019), which depicts the interaction across various levels of adaption. This suggests that adaptive governance is largely under the control of the donor; how large-scale programmes are commissioned and 'governed'. Adaptive programming lies with a contract manager or NGO headquarters and focuses on the overall management of a project, while adaptive delivery focuses on implementation by the field staff in order to achieve these results.

Figure 3.1 Diagram outlining adaption from Christie and Green (2019)



Source: Christie and Green (2019: 5). © Itad, **CC BY 4.0**.

We propose an alternative, yet compatible understanding, whereby adaptive management/programming and adaptive delivery can be used to refer to levels of change within a more common logframe hierarchy: adaptive delivery focuses on the 'how' of project implementation – the way we get to certain outcomes, or the solution pathways as yet unknown – and adaptive programming focuses more on the extent to which results or higher-level outcomes are adaptive – the 'what'. This understanding complements Christie and Green's framework, as stakeholders are often associated with or have a greater control over particular levels within a logframe hierarchy.

This paper focuses on adaptive delivery (as the 'how') within FCVAS, where staff duck and weave, embed political economy analysis into everyday decision-making, alter activities, abandon activities, instigate new activities, and engage with different stakeholders or intermediaries in order to achieve the project's results. To this extent, the 'adaptiveness' lies at the delivery or implementation, or in logframe language, focuses on the activity and output level.

4. Adaptive delivery in Myanmar – delivering under the radar

Our understanding of adaptive delivery stands in stark contrast to standard project management and implementation approaches such as that taught through PRINCE2 and other commonly drawn-on methods. In our experience, these standard approaches have been embraced and viewed as 'best practice' project management in Myanmar. This is problematic, as classic predetermined project design, with delivery against a detailed workplan and budget, is barely possible for any project in FCVAS. In Myanmar, the country's history and current political and conflict context means an ever-changing political economy; shifting power dynamics; existing or potential risk of conflict which changes rapidly in both nature and geography; and contested governance arrangements, which can, literally, change over the course of a week. In our experience, within the Myanmar context (and in other FCVAS), all programming – development and humanitarian – is inherently political, when it operates in a context where the environment is changing significantly and frequently – and therefore requires a high level of adaptability.

For example, Oxfam's work on economic justice and value chains includes issues of deeply entrenched political and historical power and conflict – be it issues of land grabbing, value chain domination or investment from a variety of powerful actors. Similarly, Oxfam's work delivering sanitation services within long-term IDP camps in Rakhine is highly political in a context of conflict, discrimination, and segregation. What role INGOs should play in such a compromising context is the subject of much debate (Mahoney 2018).

Consequently, for a majority of projects to be successfully implemented within the context of Myanmar, an adaptive approach to delivery is essential. However, it is still being undertaken covertly and intuitively by many project and partner staff, a combination and interplay between international aid architecture and status quo, large organisational culture and processes, and Myanmar's history and cultural values. Working within the current international aid architecture that requires certain pre-determined planning and documentation combined with Oxfam's own systems which, in an effort to ensure accountability and avoid aid diversion, require drawn-out approval processes, leads to a 'one size fits all' approach. In addition to this, Myanmar's respect and saving face culture encourages and, in some cases, requires staff to follow superiors and planning documentation; standing out or openly doing something differently is not easy. In the absence of an enabling environment, adaptive delivery is happening largely under the radar. This is a constant source of strain on delivery teams but also renders invisible much of this excellent, nuanced work by field-level project staff.

Rosalind Eyben sums this up well, dubbing aid workers as 'double agents' – addressing the day-to-day, unpredictable manifestations of national politics, spotting opportunities, and supporting interesting new initiatives, but when they report back to their bosses this nuanced and highly political ducking and weaving gets translated back to 'delivering' on the logframes and strategic plans, as 'messy reality is shoehorned back into the substantialist fantasies of the machine' (Green 2010, citing Eyben 2010). Yet when trying to formalise the informal knowledge and instinctive delivery that already takes place at field level, in a context like Myanmar, there is a risk of adding to, rather than reducing the existing burden of implementation in a high-speed context. Given this, how do we enable, celebrate, and acknowledge what is essential informal knowledge and instinctive delivery without adding to staff burden? We outline some recommendations to organisations and donors on how to do this in a later section.

4.1 What level of a results framework should we adapt?

Adaptive delivery is not a lack of either strategic direction or an ultimate plan. It does not, nor should it, replace strong strategic decision-making, whether this is within one discrete project or across a whole country programme. A solid framework steering the direction of travel is required – for example, within the Oxfam Myanmar country programme, at the time of reflection, a strong and longer-term country strategy outlining overall direction, red lines, and ways of engagement existed as an umbrella, whilst discreet projects and funding sources within this strategy come and go over time. Whilst new project design and re-design will and should be developed in line with the changing context, this is not the same as delivering projects in an adaptive way.

The same concept applies within a programme in fragile and messy contexts. Where the environment, stakeholders and powerholders are ever-changing, meaning that the 'how' of the delivery of activities are also changing (see Figure 4.1 on page 19), the high-level results or outcomes, if carefully articulated, provide the anchoring strategic direction to steer the programme.

An adaptive approach that involves regular alteration at outcome level (often advocated for within adaptive programming/management), when nothing else is predictable, risks losing stability, grounding, and steering. Oxfam learnt this lesson through projects that provided adaptive funds to local partners. The flexibility and regular adaption of the outcome level in order to address changes in the context resulted in confusion over direction and objectives and did not allow the project to work at something for long enough to build the relationships that were needed to be able to demonstrate results. The stability of having clearly and carefully articulated outcomes that do not change significantly over

the life of the project, we argue, is also what allows for accountability to donors as discussed later. The higher-level outcomes sought are unlikely to change significantly, even within a fluid and rapidly changing context; the specifics of these may well change – for example, exactly who is involved or by what timeline, testing various strategies to get the intended lower-level results along the way, as well as the relative importance of each element of a programme. Yet the actual high-level outcomes themselves are less likely to change without an alteration to the overall project goal. The key here is in the formulation of outcomes or results to make sure they are sufficiently flexible to capture a broad and changing set of approaches or strategies.

Fragile environments generally need longer timeframes for real and lasting change to be achieved. It is essential we keep this in our line of sight, rather than allowing a project's high-level intentions to be sidetracked by the latest political murmurings or 'chopping and changing according to the partial and time-limited findings of the current analytical update' (Christie and Green 2018: 18). In Myanmar, projects face this risk as political 'hot topics' alter regularly, and staff with particular areas of interest or perspectives come and go. Whilst regular political analysis will, and should, inform and likely change how you get to a result – it should not, and in our experience does not, change a project's ultimate goal.

In practice, adaptive delivery largely becomes an assessment of risk and opportunity, both for the intermediate and short term. Responding to these assessments, it is almost guaranteed that the 'how', the non-linear path of approaches and activities that needs to be followed to get to the intended results, will need to be changed. One of Oxfam's projects which involved working closely with civil society provides a good demonstration of this. The contextual changes in Rakhine over the past five years as a result of a military crackdown against the Rohingya population in 2017 and fluidity of trust in, and engagement with the international community (including INGOs), has meant rapid changes to INGOs' activities and ways of engaging. For example, a greater focus began to be put on human rights or access to information as well as ensuring a balance in who programmes worked with. Two years on, and another conflict in the same location – this time with Rakhine populations being targeted – provided previously unforeseen openings given the growing interest from Rakhine civil society in understanding more about human rights-related concepts and mechanisms. This did not change overall outcomes or the intentions of the project – which articulated various elements of what comprises stronger civil society. However, this changing context meant adapting approaches as per an ever-evolving understanding of risk and opportunity.

In a fragile context, conflict sensitivity needs to be taken seriously; implementation can move from being sensitive to exacerbating conflict and

putting people at risk in a very short space of time. So, implementation needs to be nimble. Using the same example above, in 2017 if Oxfam had continued supporting Rakhine civil society without also paying attention to new pressing needs within the state more generally, at best it would have been turning a blind eye to, and at worst supporting, oppressive and exclusionary narratives and activities.

Based on our experience it is the unpredictable and fragile nature of Myanmar that requires adaptive delivery, but almost counter-intuitively, also requires stability at a high-level outcome level to provide an anchor around which adaption can revolve.

4.2 What factors affect decisions about how adaptive a programme should be in its delivery?

> Knowing when to work adaptively can be as much of a skill as being adaptive.
> (Christie and Green 2018: 18)

Myanmar demands significant flexibility within all project delivery. Based on our experience, the full extent to which adaptive delivery is needed seems to be impacted by three key dimensions:

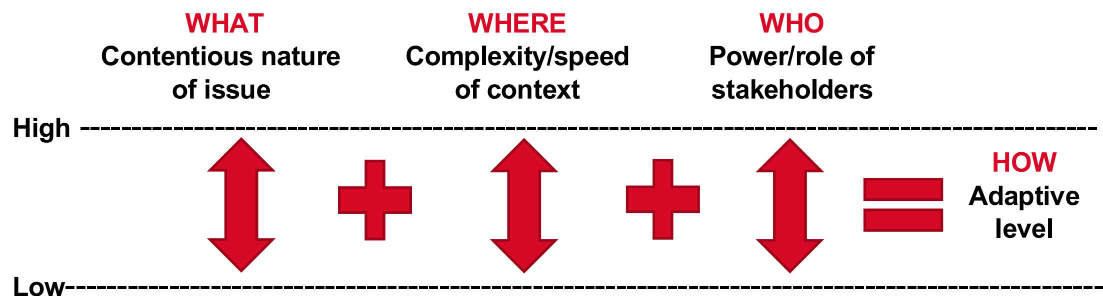
– What you are working on: the level of contestation around the issue – for example, working on peace-building or land rights being more explicitly contentious than health or sanitation.

– Where you are working: the complexity of context – within Myanmar, at the time, it was very different implementing a project in a central region such as Mandalay where a majority Bamar live compared with a border state with multiple authorities and conflict areas such as Kachin or Kayin.

– Who you are working with or around: the power and role of the stakeholders – the attention that the project generates, and the power and variety of the key stakeholders significantly influences the level of ducking and weaving required.

These are not fully independent variables, however, for example the level of contentiousness of an issue depends partially on how diverse the vested interests are, which is linked to power of the stakeholders. The combination of what, where, and who helps to determine how adaptive the project will need to be to deliver.

Figure 4.1 Model for deciding on degree of adaptive management



Questions to inform where on the spectrum

1. Is the programme issue sensitive?
2. Does it involve changing social norms, power dynamics or political status quo?
3. Is the solution still generally 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 marginalise the target communities on the issue?

Source: Authors' own.

High values in two or more dimensions (what, where, who) in Figure 4.1 would point to the need for a highly adaptive approach to implementation. This would subsequently require carefully articulated higher-level outcomes which remain relatively stable through the life of the project to ensure that the project remains on course, whilst the context and therefore, the delivery around it, is very regularly changing.

Conversely, low to medium values in two or more of the dimensions might indicate that a more regular project management approach to implementation would be applicable.

4.2.1 When and how to use this model

We would suggest at the very least bringing these questions into the design phase of a project to develop an upfront agreed-upon view on how adaptive a project will likely need to be and therefore how challenging it will be to implement, and what structures need to be in place to enable and support this. Ideally, this would be part of deciding whether to pursue a funding opportunity or design a new piece of work. Ensuring that this conversation takes place in an open way involving local partners and ideally donors is also key, ensuring that a diversity of views including gender, ethnicity, religion, and geographic communities are represented in the analysis and decision-making process. For instance, female and male staff will have different views on the personal and organisational risks involved for each dimension and sub-question, and therefore how adaptive the project will need to be.

The more contentious the issue, the more complex the environment, and the more attention it will get from powerful stakeholders indicates how adaptive the programme will need to be to be successful. It also means it will likely be more challenging to implement, and that there is more at stake if we get it wrong. In other words, it is likely that projects that fall into this category are higher risk. The more credibility or experience an organisation has in each of these three dimensions, the more it is possible to manage the risks in each dimension and responsibly take an adaptive approach to a seemingly difficult project. For example, in 2018 Oxfam was testing a new approach to sanitation in conflict-affected Kachin, where it had worked for ten years and had trust and legitimacy with communities, partners, and authorities. The challenging context was made more manageable by sanitation not being a particularly contentious issue, having the basics of a technological approach to adapt around, and having the relationships ready to work with. Adaption was still required though due to the complexity of the Kachin context and the fact that the approach was challenging community norms by introducing tiger-worms as a form of composting. However, the adaptions were mostly of a technical nature, rather than the riskier political ducking and weaving. In contrast, if attempting to set up an innovative project on community peace-building in Rakhine State without any track record in the area, this would pose high risks in all three dimensions: contentious issue, complex context, powerful stakeholders.

Assessing the situation under each dimension is key to deciding how adaptive a project will need to be, and convening honest discussions to appraise an organisation's risk appetite and ability to work within each dimension becomes key to deciding on whether this is possible and responsible. Partnership or consortium building is also sometimes used as a way to overcome an organisation's gaps or areas of weakness. Whilst this may be an effective solution, it can however also bring added complications of multiple organisations, cultures, management structures, and decision-making mechanisms, that make

responsive, agile delivery all the more difficult to achieve on the ground. Assessing risk across a portfolio of projects, aiming for a blend of projects that fall across this spectrum, may support reflection on capacity to meaningfully be adaptive and balance risk to an organisation.

The answer to all these questions can vary greatly even within a short timeframe, so whilst it is imperative at the design stage of a project, we suggest this model may also be useful during the life of a programme, to regularly check if the level of adaption built into the delivery is supportive in order to achieve a project's aims.

This model has been developed on the basis of working in fragile, and politically complex contexts; however, it could be applied in more stable countries. Particularly where a context may be less complex and slower-moving than a fragile context, but with pockets of higher complexity and unpredictability.

4.3 How central is risk? Doing accountability differently

Figure 4.1 can help guide us on how adaptive the delivery of a programme ought to be when considering context alone and assessing the risk associated with a project. However, the ecosystem in which programmes are delivered is much broader than context alone. It involves an international architecture that includes a voting constituency in donor countries, all the way through to community acceptance.

Being adaptive entails more risk – for the donors, for organisations, and for implementers as individuals. Specifically, it increases two types of risk. The first is to donors and organisations – it means activities and approaches are less pre-determined and 'approved'. There is often less time to think about and discuss risk involved in decision-making and, as a result, donors and implementers need to have greater mutual trust, and individuals and organisations to have more trust in delivery staff and to 'gamble'. Ultimately it means less control at a higher level of the 'development hierarchy'. Second, it introduces the potential for more personal risk to frontline implementers. Part of acknowledging that development is political, and delivering programming which responds to local realities, particularly in fragile contexts, risks repositioning development workers as political activists or on some occasions, dissidents (this is discussed more below) (Sims 2021). Whilst we suggest that not working adaptively within such contexts presents significant risk of programmes not being effective, it is notable that this is a much more 'passive risk' of not changing the status quo primarily faced by, often voiceless, communities. This is a risk that if it comes to fruition is rarely able to be convincingly demonstrated, and largely accepted within the sector, as opposed to overt risk to organisational reputation, donor public trust or

individuals. Delivering adaptively can mean not only an increase of risk, but sometimes an increase of risk specifically to implementing organisations, donors, and individuals involved.

If practitioners are calling for more flexibility to be able to deliver adaptively, how can donors fund this and still be assured that risks are mitigated, and that aid accountability is in place? Whilst acknowledging that varying levels of accountability are going to be required across the range of donors, and the sources of funds, we feel this is not a zero-sum game of either accountability or adaptability. To identify the win/win, it is essential to better understand donors' interests and concerns. In our experience, ultimately this often comes down to delivering on results, and minimising risk – be it to their reputation, frontline implementers, or programme failure. It is in risky contexts such as those affected by conflict or fragility where risks extend beyond programme failure, and may include risk to life, aid diversion and access issues, where donors and donor-funded projects appear less able to take programming risks. Interestingly, the response to increased risk in the context is often increased rigidity in order to mitigate and manage this risk. Yet as the previous section outlines, where the context is messy and risky, this is exactly where more flexibility and adaption are often required.

Rather than identifying and focusing directly on these concerns, donors and implementers often use 'proxy' documents to measure and assess – workplans, monitoring data, and detailed budgets required in advance. What if we instead take away the 'proxy' documentation, and go straight to the concerns – risk and results? By altering how we implement projects, what we prioritise in documentation and importantly, treating the donor–implementer relationship as any other partnership and building mutual trust, we argue that the balance of risk against results can be more explicit and transparent. This would be a key step towards altering the focus away from detailed pre-determined documentation outlining 'how' something would be (in theory) achieved, and on to an ongoing conversation, processes and systems that monitor changes and proactively identify and manage risks as they arise.

5. Adapting the current system to enable adaptive delivery

One of the key questions we wanted to address is how could the development sector and the systems, organisations, and process be practically re-imagined to not only enable, but encourage this approach to programming? Whilst the constraints to adaptive programming have previously been identified, we seek to contribute suggestions of practical and tangible changes that could assist in overcoming these constraints. We found a variety of components that if carried out differently we believe could help balance risk and results (and potentially increase risk appetite), whilst enabling transparent adaptive delivery. In the remainder of this paper we explore these components – people and human resources, organisational systems and culture, trust, monitoring and documentation, communicating success and complexity, and financial management.

Drawing on our experience, within each of these components we explore what it takes to deliver adaptively, and what is and is not enabling at a project delivery level. Within each component, we outline practical recommendations for donors and implementing organisations to support and celebrate visible adaptive delivery, without adding to the administrative burden of implementation staff.

5.1 People and human resources

Who: Much debate on adaptive programming highlights the recruitment of politically savvy staff; however, in our experience it is not a decision between having 'political movers' or standard projectised staff. People operate on a broad spectrum, and both approaches are required to get the job done and to be accountable about what is being delivered. Many years ago, Oxfam's governance programme had strongly politically savvy staff who were able to run small-scale projects that step by step pushed the boundaries. However, the team at the time did not have the skills to turn that into a large-scale fundable approach. Once project management and monitoring and evaluation staff were purposefully introduced alongside the team, the programme was able to grow in scale and visibility.

The correct mix of skills within a team matters as a route to adaptive delivery – this may include visionaries, nuts and bolts people, starters, finishers, a mix of diverse perspectives, individual knowledge/networks, and the occasional disrupter. In many countries, Myanmar included, it is often only men who are seen as being politically connected or able to influence. Ensuring a gendered approach to putting together a team includes not perpetuating this status quo;

finding the female ‘political animals’ needs to be deliberate. Similarly, finding a team with a mix of ethnicity in a fragile country affected by ethnic as well as political conflicts is important. By combining ‘political animals’ with people who have the project management experience of taking risks, together with those who can operate within the international aid structure, it is possible to credibly manage large-scale adaptive programming even in a messy context. This could also be about pairing national and international staff or CSOs and thinktanks, for example. However, along these multiple spectrums, managing dynamics within the team is in itself an art. Members of staff within or outside the core team need to have the emotional intelligence to know when they are useful and when they need to step out – of activities at grass-roots-level, or of decision-making – and focus on empowering locally grounded staff to lead. This can be done through joint decision-making, accompaniment rather than hierarchal line management, being a sounding board, dealing with blockages as identified by field staff and partners, and building the MEAL systems around the core team to measure, learn, and adapt.

Bringing in new ideas to teams that have not had international exposure is still valuable – ‘you don’t know what you don’t know’ – this could be through international staff, consultants, or networking and exchange visits. However, this needs to be done in a safe and trusting environment, minimising power dynamics that can lead to an invisible and often internalised narrative that ‘outside’ ideas carry more value, bringing pressure to adopt these ideas. The importance of contextual nuances is one of the key defining features of both FCVAS and adaptive delivery; therefore, it is essential that this is done within the parameters of accepting that transplanting models does not work – not across countries, or even across regions or states, a common trap that international staff fall into. In fact, in contexts such as Myanmar, where historically alignment to pre-determined programmatic documents has been professionally rewarded, it can be the ‘outsiders’ who can provide a more objective sounding board when needed, providing different resources and sometimes giving both technical and at times institutional ‘permission’ and freedom for the team and partners to do what they know needs to happen on the ground, helping to shift traditional narratives of ‘good’ project management.

Timeframe: Finding the correct mix of staff at the beginning of a project takes time – often well beyond a three-month inception period, as expected by some donors. Within Myanmar, finding a combination of ‘political animals’ and flexible project management staff regularly takes multiple recruitment rounds, and significant due diligence. This is heightened in fragile contexts where the stakes for making a wrong recruitment are high. This ultimately means not giving in to the temptation of ‘close enough is good enough’, which is tempting when the time and effort recruitment takes from senior staff and pressure to get started are strong factors. Additionally, donors often expect project activities to have

commenced shortly after signing a contract. This not only fails to acknowledge that within these contexts power structures are often less visible, and thus require relationships and trust to be unearthed and navigated, but also on a practical level puts pressure on organisational staff (who already have full-time workloads) to back-fill until recruitment is completed. This provides an internal disincentive for a recruitment process that takes time. Alternatively, longer inception periods of six months allow for a meaningful team recruitment, for active co-creation of plans with partners, and for activities to be delayed a little if needed. If this is not possible interim consultants can be brought in whilst the team is put together, but this is by no means ideal.

At the same time, donors are increasingly requesting CVs at the time of proposal writing, requiring organisations to invest significant time in finding good candidates with only a chance of winning a piece of work. This trend encourages ‘recycling’ of reliable but traditional project management staff and provides a disincentive to find teams that are fit for purpose for the specific project. It is also often a pointless exercise to win a contract judging by the number of personnel changes that take place once an organisation eventually wins the work, due to candidates having taken another job while they were waiting. If donors requested job descriptions rather than CVs upfront, this would provide a clear indication of the different skills sets within the team. CVs of existing senior staff could also provide assurances that the overarching capacity exists. For the project team, donors could approve or disapprove CVs once recruitment is completed – which would provide the same level of oversight at a later stage.

Risks to staff and partners: ‘Political movers’ are inherently, well, political. Thus, they are likely to get tangled up in or overtly challenge national politics and the status quo. As mentioned above, politically adaptive programming and employing political staff or political partners, comes with more risk to those individuals and to the organisation, requiring a very considered approach to staff risk. This is particularly important in authoritarian or failing democracies, or contexts which are politically fragile, where consequences of activities can be severe or even life threatening.

When the risks occur as part of daily work, as has been the case for some of Oxfam’s staff and partner staff receiving threats of harm, it is crucial to be careful and clear about risk transfer and organisational responsibilities, acknowledging that nationality, ethnicity, religion, and gender can subject people to different risks. Ensuring that regular risk monitoring is participatory and unpacks risks to partners and staff, as well as risks to the project and organisational reputation is vital. Recognising that risks occur, NGOs need to be ready with support mechanisms if and when individuals are arrested or death threats are received. People need to rally support networks and finances, work out who it is possible to influence, or possibly support individuals to flee across the border.

Being ready for this rather than becoming repeatedly disturbed and unprepared when it happens is essential. Quick communication, careful management, and agile decision-making can minimise the harm to these individuals. However, if risks associated with their political involvement are identified at the point of recruitment, detailed action plans can be put in place in advance. A key element of this is to therefore build in budget lines to new projects to allow the funding of these contingency plans.

Box 5.1 People and human resources recommendations

- Pay attention to the 'mix' of people in a team – both politically minded staff members and those more focused on project management are essential.
- Allow time for recruitment – finding the right people takes time.
- Build in lengthy inception periods.
- Bring in outside expertise to work with local teams in order to alter narratives of 'good' project management.
- Donors to request detailed job descriptions or CVs of existing senior staff (for example, on other projects) instead of project staff CVs during proposal phases.
- Donors and NGOs to build in funded contingency plans to support project staff and partners mitigate and respond to individual risk.

5.2 Organisational systems and culture

Internal systems: One of the key challenges to adaptive delivery is NGOs or delivery organisations themselves. It is not sufficient to make sure that project-specific staff understand the principles behind adaptive delivery. Instead, the underlying principles need to become embedded in the broader organisational practices and culture. Large international organisations are set up around traditional organisational accountability and risk management on a macro level. To ensure this, many internal processes and systems are standardised, with the requirement that these policies and processes be strictly adhered to, to safeguard against misuse of funds, and in order to aggregate and demonstrate impact. However, these systems often require significant pre-planning and fairly long timeframes, are often more appropriate for stable contexts, and support a rhetoric of adherence to pre-determined budgets and workplans – in our experience many of these are not conducive to adaptive delivery. In practice, project staff often find themselves spending significant time battling with internal

systems. The question then becomes how can these be more enabling and allow for contextualisation at the country level, still allow the appropriate level of safeguards, whilst also embodying the nimbleness that adaptive delivery requires?

One example of this has been a general Oxfam requirement that all partners are either registered with the in-country government, or if not are supported through Oxfam to be working towards registration. Yet, in many fragile contexts, the 'government' is often contested and change-makers are often politically savvy or activist groups rather than formally registered local organisations. In Myanmar, even before the 2021 coup, many local organisations were ethnically aligned and fundamentally challenged the Myanmar government's control over ethnically dominant locations. They often carried out work that directly challenged government interests and legitimacy, such as supporting people who were displaced due to active conflict with the Myanmar military or mobilising communities to have a voice in the development of Special Economic Zones. They, clearly, had limited interest in registering with the government – which, according to global Oxfam regulations, would suggest that we could not work with them without jumping through significant hoops. Another example is the need for comprehensive partner assessments, and lengthy agreements to be developed before contracting even small pieces of work. These processes require significant staff and organisational resources and do not support experimental, evolutionary programming where we might want to try out small activities with different partners on a regular basis. This presents a tension within organisational systems, but also often with donor requirements, which also frequently require registration and in-depth assessment.

The result in both these cases is that staff then spend time coming up with workarounds, replicated at a micro-level in various country programmes around the world, but which are not official processes. This highlights the need for change within larger organisations, not only from a programming perspective but also from a global policies and processes perspective. Organisations need to invest time and money in ensuring organisational systems have been comprehensively adapted to contextual realities and that they, and the staff implementing them, are nimble enough to support adaptive delivery. In Oxfam in Myanmar we found that on some occasions global processes are more flexible than they appear yet when mixed with a culture of adherence, the way they are applied becomes more rigid. For example, some mandated partnership templates were originally designed for country teams to adapt to include only elements which are appropriate; yet, once these pass through multiple hands, getting further away from those who designed them and are embedded into systems, they morph into compliance checklists. One way of doing this is to review the various systems in light of the programming portfolio. It may be required to develop different levels of process to match different types of

programming with agreements up front on what type of project is being implemented, the level of risk, how adaptive it will need to be, and therefore which systems are useful and applicable. This would require multiple versions of systems, which in turn requires adequate operational budgeting to be able to manage these.

Organisational acceptance of failure: One of the key inhibitors of flexible delivery is an organisation's appetite for risk of failure. A lack of culture of acceptance of failure either organisationally, within the donor world, or within deeply embedded and reinforced understandings of individual profession success has inhibited meaningful learning, and restricted people's appetite for taking risks. Fear of taking a new or different programming approach, due to potential failure, therefore relegates project managers more commonly to following workplans, rather than optimising opportunities as they present. A cultural change is required whereby success or failure are equally openly acknowledged, both organisationally by NGOs and within the aid architecture more generally. Yet currently this is not the case. An example of this is the convergence of qualitative monitoring and evaluation methodologies, such as case studies and Most Significant Change (Davies and Dart 2005), with 'success stories'. This demonstrates how people often view monitoring and evaluation primarily as a way to 'market' projects and are uncomfortable with negative components or areas where projects are 'failing'.

A culture of acceptance of failure is essential to create a reflective practice about our own programming choices. Whilst building this culture organisationally is not easy, especially against the backdrop contexts that value saving face, there are steps that organisations can take to reward honesty about failure and incentivise project managers and partners to discover the most suitable approach by purposeful trial and error; to take risks in the moment without fear of failure. However, considering the cultural restraints and that of the sector more broadly, there needs to be a very intentional effort by organisations to foster such a work environment. Taking this further, the hesitation of organisations to discuss failure openly, and especially with donors, due to a competitive funding environment, only reinforces this fear. In our experience the 'Lessons Learnt' section of donor reports are censored to the point that they are often fairly mediocre lessons that avoid outrightly addressing where things did not work, and needed to be fundamentally adapted.

Differentiating between different types of failure could be a starting point: if a project component failed because of conflict, political manoeuvrings or other contextual changes and we did not/could not adapt fast enough, or we tried a whole new and untested approach. This is very different to a project failing because of poor management such as staff performance, staff retention issues, poor budget management or safeguarding failures. In encouraging an

acceptance of failure, it is therefore essential to create an organisational culture that differentiates between performance or management failure, and design or adaptation failure to encourage staff to speak out when projects are not working and examine the reasons why, without fear that this reflects poorly on their performance. Clearly recognising this difference would still enable the ability to manage poor performance.

Box 5.2 Organisational systems and culture recommendations

– Review practical global systems and compliance requirements to assess how enabling these are to agile programme delivery and differentiate minimum requirements according to project type.
– Adopt small workplace initiatives which begin to create a culture of acceptance of transparency and failure.

5.3 Trust

Local trust: Trust is all-important in fragile contexts, both as a route to being able to deliver any intervention, and as an important intended outcome in itself for more political programming. In Myanmar, as in many other fragile contexts, trust is largely broken or has never existed in many places, both between groups and between communities and authorities (A4EA n.d.). Trust with communities, governments, and civil society is essential for successful programming; however, building trust can take a long time, especially in contexts with histories of authoritarian regimes, and monitoring of people's movements and activism, to name a few. For example, Oxfam's first year of its social accountability programming was entirely analysis and relationship building. It is difficult to pre-plan with whom it will be possible to build trust, and that may well change over time as conflicts change and as individuals within authorities change. Trust-building is very much part of knowing, learning, and testing day-to-day tactics, including when and how far a relationship can be progressed. One way to acknowledge the essential role that this plays, and without needing to request a one year inception phase, is to build trust-building into the programming logic (and related measurement) as an outcome or desired change in itself – giving it the visibility, and therefore time, that it deserves.

Building from one initiative into the next one can maximise the investment in trust. In building trust, it is often essential to demonstrate support and respect for existing work and local actors – specifically those that are more politically connected and nimble than international organisations. We would argue that in fragile contexts it is not responsible for organisations to be getting into new

issues or contexts lightly and for short periods of time. It takes a huge amount of effort to get the analysis, staff, partnerships, relationships, and trust of authorities and communities to even begin to work in Myanmar in a conflict- and gender-sensitive way, and many years to secure any level of legitimacy and respect on an issue and geographical area.

The need for organisations to show tangible results as well as to be visible inherently presents a tension between respecting the autonomy, trust and support for local actors and processes, and the requirement from many large organisations and donors for visibility. This manifests in two ways, through the requirement to demonstrate tangible results through project monitoring and through requirements for project visibility.

In fragile, messy contexts, when change does take place, it is rarely due to one organisation or intervention solely. FCVAS, more so than stable contexts, often have multiple authorities holding different territory and or providing services, and therefore more complex power dynamics and tensions. Project monitoring and claims need to acknowledge this complexity and focus on contribution, rather than attribution, to ensure that trust with other actors is not undermined. This is depicted by an organisational tale amongst Oxfam in Myanmar that speaks about the critical role that Oxfam historically played in supporting to 'establish' a local organisation, which is now one of the largest Myanmar NGOs – dwarfing Oxfam in size. This tale was commonly repeated amongst Oxfam staff. Whilst it is true that Oxfam played an important role both financially and in capacity development at one point in time, this organisation's success, even in projects where Oxfam are still involved, is their success. Staff repeating a 'claim' to a local organisation's success can undermine trust and reinforce historic power dynamics between international and local organisations.

Similarly, visibility requirements can be viewed as taking responsibility or credit for work which has resulted out of long-term work by local actors or by which international organisations' support or partnership only plays a small part – be that with CSOs, political actors or government. Doing so can fundamentally undermine trust-building and localisation. In reality, reputation is more about which local actors you are trusted by and quality programming than it is about signboards.

Trust between funders and funded: Building up greater trust between donors and implementing organisations could go a long way to encouraging greater adaption at a delivery level. Initially, greater transparency and visibility of each other's internal pressures, incentives, and concerns, along with expectations, could be a step to building up a more enabling relationship. A deeper understanding of donors as political organisations themselves, being made up of individuals with various incentives, involving sometimes conflicting agendas, time pressures, and internal political manoeuvring could be helpful here.

This relationship needs to be treated like any other partnership – be transparent about the motivations and key concerns of each party and provide regular communication and information to pre-empt and support each other to remove blockages.

Where there is less communication, more unknowns, and less trust in how decisions will get made, who is involved, and the judgement involved in those decisions, documentation is often used to extract information, provide assurances, and ultimately manage risks. To strengthen these relationships, we must overcome the current power dynamics of implementing partners attempting to hold funders at arm's length (often because things have not gone exactly as per the pre-determined plan) and in turn funders extracting detailed budgets, activity plans, and reports. One way we have seen this carried out is by involving funders in the project's feedback loops to a much greater extent. This could include inviting donors into learning reviews or feeding-up significant events and changes informally in between reporting periods.

In addition to documenting adaption (discussed in detail below), by bringing donors into the process, it can provide funders with confidence to understand not only what types of adaptions are taking place in delivery, but also confidence in the decision-making itself. Closer, more relaxed and trusting relationships will go far to encourage a culture that is more enabling, less risk adverse, and support those responsible within donor organisations to provide information and enable confidence to their superiors that risks are being managed.

Box 5.3 Trust recommendations

- Acknowledge the crucial role of developing trust (inception phases, programme logic).
- Minimise the need for visibility requirements that can undermine trust and detract from the roles of other actors.
- Focus on monitoring that measures contribution, rather than claiming attribution.
- Implementers to 'bring donors into the programme processes' to strengthen trust between donors and implementers.

5.4 Monitoring and documentation

Programme monitoring requirements: In 2016, when the national peace process in Myanmar had greater legitimacy, and engagement was beginning between the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and the Myanmar

government, Oxfam and local partners developed a programme that sought to achieve more peaceful environments for IDPs and villagers in contested areas of Kachin. The pathway anticipated at the time was of bringing in community members and civil society into the national peace process, to ground the process in people's reality. Within the implementation period, the KIO removed themselves from the peace processes, ceasefires were broken, and the national peace process in general started faltering, resulting in more active conflict, more displacement, and a strain on people's livelihoods. Through this time, we saw an increase in tensions and violence as well as gender-based violence, aligning to increase in stress over declining livelihoods and trauma of living around active conflict. Whilst our high-level outcomes of safety and peace remained, in order to reach these we now needed to re-programme away from the formal processes and address the localised needs stemming from a lack of cohesion and violence. Due to a close relationship with the donor, we were able to make the changes required; however, there was a significant time lag due to the processes that were required to change the logframe and, specifically, the budget (more on this later), leaving the project team in the position of either not responding, or finding ways to do so, and 'categorising' it as an already existing activity, risking a funding 'disallowance' at potential great organisational cost.

Detailed logframes and workplans pre-determined years in advance hinder adaptive delivery; it is prescriptive and a disincentive for adaptive and flexible problem-solving that takes advantage of opportunities as they arise and adapts to changes in context. However, there needs to be a distinction between requesting flexibility and allowing excuses for poor quality programming. We assume that the primacy of operating from detailed programme documents has arisen from a donor desire to ensure results for funds and minimise potential risks. In our experience, a balance could be struck through putting greater emphasis on results frameworks, an initial indicative theory of action, and a credible and detailed risk matrix (see below). This would require much less activity and budget detail to be defined beyond the inception phase.

If these became the core documents for project management, which were updated through more rigorous risk monitoring and team-learning events and regularly communicated back to the donor as part of the standard reporting, this should give assurances internally and to donors to allow for the flexibility in detailed delivery required to achieve these results, and importantly that risks are being pre-empted, monitored and where possible mitigated, and where this is not possible, communicated to jointly decide a path of action. Managing on risk and results rather than budgets and workplans would allow steering of project implementation, reassurance to donors and other stakeholders, but would also give implementation teams flexibility in what needs to be done to reach those results.

Monitoring risk: As discussed above, adaptive delivery is inherently riskier – both for the project and the individuals involved. There is less direct control and time for detailed checks and balances; therefore, it is recommended that risk management needs to be addressed from the start and be embedded in the design and monitoring processes. We suggest that risk management becomes a central ongoing project management tool. To do this effectively, risk management needs to be more about an ongoing conversation with teams, based on indicators or early warning signs of risks eventuating, documenting this within a detailed and regularly reviewed and updated risk matrix. In volatile contexts, where risk profiles can change very quickly, a sliding scale or markers to look for as visible early warning indicators to stimulate discussion of trends which engage the tacit knowledge in the team, would provide more useful information than the standard high-medium-low probability and impact matrix. Regular documentation and transparent communication of these is key information that can be fed up to management and donors. In our experience, approaches to conflict monitoring have much to offer to support regular in-depth conversations on changing risks.[1]

Lean monitoring and regular reflection: Over the past decade, evaluation theorists have debated the level of rigour required for data to be acceptable, especially when evaluating complex social and political change. This comes in part as a reaction to the then growing push for randomised control trials and other big data experimental evaluation practices.[2] These debates in themselves demonstrate some of the challenges faced within monitoring and evaluation when discussing complexity and adaption. In theory, more regular data to inform adaptive programming would, in a stable context, make sense and ensure that decisions were evidence based. However, the sheer effort (and risk) of trying to collect meaningful statistical data in FCVAS makes it more of a burden than a help. The permissions required to collect data in Myanmar, and the trust and skillset needed to get information that goes beyond the superficial makes it time-consuming and expensive, and the resulting data is less useful than it should be. For example, in Oxfam's governance work, it would be desirable to gather regular data on relationships, trust, and levels of engagement between civil society and government officials. However, the power dynamics at play as to who asks these questions, the politics of who is seen as needing 'support or capacity building', security issues within asking non-state-aligned officials these questions or, in some locations (such as Rakhine), collecting any data at all, all make data-gathering problematic. In addition, the highly qualitative nature and, thus, skillset in interviewing and notetaking required to capture these changes is

1 Amongst others, we found Saferworld (2004) useful.

2 The **Big Push Forward initiative**.

rare – making this exercise less useful from a monitoring perspective than one would initially perceive.

Instead, we could look at what is traditionally defined as acceptable data and data sources. In our experience, project staff or partners in most projects know what is happening in the field. They generally know what approaches are working and which are not, and they generally know where the needs are. Yet this important knowledge is often disregarded in the search for ‘objectivity’. In Myanmar, we have had multiple examples of projects where monitoring or evaluation data unearths more substantial changes required to the programme. In many of these cases it became clear that the project staff are aware of this gap, but either do not feel it is their role, have not had the space to discuss it and problem solve, or feel limited by an original project design.

Valuing and managing projects based on tacit project management, context information and ‘instinct’, coupled with light-touch monitoring where greater time for reflection is given, is more helpful. Methodologies such as outcome mapping, and strategy testing can help us move away from rigid indicators, while still providing rigorous frameworks (Earl *et al*. 2001; Ladner 2015). They are also often less laborious and more instantly useful to field staff. If felt necessary, monitoring could also be given an additional element of robustness by including diverse views where possible and having a panel of knowledgeable outsiders to act as a sounding board or to facilitate regular stand-backs. This would require a shift to valuing informal and tacit knowledge and investing in the frequency of information sharing and action-oriented reflection. In order to avoid paralysis by analysis, reflection needs to focus on the practical. Monitoring needs to be very light touch, frequent, and combined with context monitoring – to support frequent programme manoeuvring. Rigid monitoring requirements by donors and, often more importantly, organisations’ own policies, by contrast are unhelpful and divert energy away from adaptability and instead towards proving we are delivering on an often inappropriately linear model of results.

We would suggest this approach needs to be coupled with thorough evaluation processes, moving away from lengthy and laborious monitoring processes, and refocusing to leaner, more frequent feedback loops and then investing in less frequent but skilled and rigorous evaluation points. This provides both the regular data needed to manage and adapt as well as using evaluations to demonstrate delivery against results – ensuring an evidence base is developed, which adaptive programmes are often critiqued as lacking.

Decision-making and information flows: Adaptive delivery requires acknowledging and trusting field-level knowledge and actions. This means empowering staff to use their instincts and react in real time to risks and opportunities, especially on the ground in difficult meetings and situations. This also means ‘backing’ staff – field-level staff need to know they have the broader

team's support in their decision-making, regardless of the outcome (Algoso *et al*. 2016; Honig 2018). Much of the adaptive programming literature broadly recommends devolving decision-making. In practice, whilst field staff need to have the authority to make on-the-spot decisions as required about activities and delivery – the 'how' – the intersection between delivery and project management also requires agility of higher-level decision-making on the 'what'.

Deciding when to stop or start doing something completely new requires efficient, timely, joint decision-making between field staff, technical staff, and project management, supported by timely and lean monitoring data (Green and Guijt 2018). An example of this is Oxfam's previous work in IDP camps in Rakhine, where INGOs are allowed only to supply services, and any work that was perceived as being empowering or political in nature was frequently met with access being revoked. Through integration with a water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) service delivery programme, Oxfam was able to undertake women's empowerment work, both within the IDP camps and in Rakhine villages – with the programme drawing on, and where possible sharing with each community, the experiences of the other. This work was very sensitive and inherently risky. To ensure that we were not putting any of the participants in harm's way we required ongoing monitoring of the context, and very fast communication from in-camp staff to the project team, up to the programme lead. In our experience, it is the speed of downward/upward information flows and a culture of transparency, trust and joint decision-making from field staff to senior management that drives how responsive and adaptive decisions and thus, projects can be.

Box 5.4 Monitoring and documentation recommendations

- Manage projects using robust and meaningful risk matrixes, and result frameworks as core project management tools.
- Minimise heavy data collection monitoring processes.
- Introduce light touch, frequent reflection.
- Draw on frequent context monitoring.
- Draw on a broader range of data and data sources.
- Invest in and resource rigorous and creative evaluations.
- Increase trust and communication with field staff to combine agile higher-level decision-making on the 'what' with field-level decision-making on the 'how'.

5.5 Communicating the ‘journey’ (success and complexivity)

Better documentation: As outlined, adaptive delivery is not an excuse for failure to deliver or a lack of strategic direction. To justify adaptions and changes, evidence and documentation of these and the reasons that led to them is essential. Yet in places of fragility, much of this is undertaken through conversations, ‘reading’ the political climate or informal engagement, rather than strictly from monitoring evidence. It is often not until too late, if at all, that the trigger for changes is put in writing or collected through formal monitoring processes. Again, this requires rethinking what counts as evidence. Requirements for traditional project evidence (photos, workshop reports, attendance sheets, baselines, data assessments) are not always practical, nor possible, and on occasion not safe, when we need to make quick decisions, and so much programming and influencing takes place in less formal spaces, such as informal and sometimes confidential conversations, through alliances and coalitions, or where those targeted need to be able to save face. Furthermore, within politically savvy programmes, what counts as success can often be the small but important changes. Implementers need to get better at documenting the analysis we have, the actions we have taken, and the changes we are seeing. Instead, in our experience, much of these decisions and successes have historically been put down to the ‘it’s intangible’ explanation rather than looking at ways to regularly document and thus provide evidence for the changes that take place. Qualitative methodologies such as outcome harvesting can help here, by incorporating this documentation into a project’s M&E. Staff diaries instead of monthly reports, if implemented in a light touch way, could support staff to document their experiences and decision-making, with the added value of providing useful content for donor reports. It could also provide staff with an avenue to reduce the significant juggling of information and decision-making that can become overwhelming in busy, messy contexts; staying sane and getting headspace are key to actually being able to reflect and deliver adaptively. Where Oxfam has failed to enable this, we have instead ended up purely reporting against pre-determined results, omitting the detail and nuance as to how we successfully adapted the project. This perpetuates understandings of linear programming within the sector, but also often misrepresents the successes or failures of the project, and omits some of the more interesting content.

Monitoring and communicating the quality of the learning and adaption process: Monitoring and evaluation needs to extend to the ‘adaption process’ itself. After action reviews or accompanied learning with external academics or evaluators allow us to reflect on what we had to adapt and why, whether it was successful, and if we could have done things differently. An example of how Oxfam in Myanmar did this was by engaging external evaluators from the

beginning of a project, and getting them to document technical notes on how we believed a project would be implemented. The same evaluators accompanied us through the programme implementation, including being present at regular reflection points, and then documented at the completion of the project what the technical notes now look like, highlighting not only the key adaptions, but also the key internal and external lessons learnt along the way. Alternatively, as discussed above, bringing in donors and other stakeholders to points of reflection and adaption can be powerful in not only communicating how this is happening, but also in building trust between donors and implementers.

Box 5.5 'Communicate the journey' recommendations

- Minimise requirement for 'traditional' evidence.
- Identify feasible and safe ways to document and communicate the 'process' – analysis, adaption, and result.
- Consider drawing on methodologies such as staff diaries, outcome harvesting, after action reviews, or accompanied learning processes.

5.6 Financial management

It is highly important to find ways to support flexibility within how projects are financially managed. The previous example of the large peace programme in Kachin demonstrates the issue of having pre-determined detailed budgets dictated by donor requirements. It is unlikely that in a location of conflict and fragility that we will be able to predict how many workshops or other events will be required to achieve the desired change and how many people will attend each event, let alone predicting if the activity in itself will still be the most appropriate approach in three years' time. Budgets that are broken down line by line, workshop by workshop, day by day, participant by participant are not conducive to adaptive programming in fragile contexts. Yet this level of detail is often required by many institutional donors within the proposal phase. Instead, we suggest that budgets which are built on 'lump sums' and permitting movement of funds between categories allows projects to be able to react, take advantage of opportunities, and remain conflict sensitive. This would require a very clear shared understanding of types of costs that would be allowed and disallowed, in advance of projects beginning.

A combination of planning well for what is known and having financial flexibility built in for what will be worked out as the project progresses would provide more adaptability whilst giving assurances to donors that project management is

strong. There is no reason why financial reporting after the fact cannot go into the same level of detail currently expected, providing evidence of sound financial management, and allowing for corrective measures if this is not the case. However, asking for this level of detail upfront is inefficient and risks the programme's potential to achieve outcomes. It locks projects into a perceived correct way of implementing – setting a restrictive path, which in our experience, most project managers (with the exception of mavericks) are hesitant and have little incentive to diverge from.

Box 5.6 Financial management recommendations

- Ensure a shared understanding of allowable and disallowable costs.
- Project budgets to be reviewed and revised every six months as standard practice.
- Funders minimise bureaucracy around revising project budgets so there is no disincentive to be adaptive.
- Focus on more lump-sum budgeting from the outset of a project for what is not known in advance.
- Detailed financial reporting after the activities have taken place to allow for same level of detailed accountability.

6. Conclusions

Adaptive management seems to be gaining more momentum; in our view this has significant merit if it means we can support both adaptions currently happening on the ground and find ways to be even more adaptive with the intention of delivering politically and conflict sensitive interventions and achieving greater impact. Moving this conversation beyond that of large-scale donor designs and contracts and ensuring this does not become an additional burden on project implementers, particularly local organisations, is crucial. In Myanmar (and possibly other places of fragility and contestation), we suggest a more nuanced approach to understanding at what logic level work on adaption is the most appropriate. For projects working on contentious issues, in deeply contested political climates, instead of moving on to adaptive programming at the macro levels of aid programming governance, start with a systemic approach to acknowledging and enabling the delivery adaptions that already take place on a day-to-day level.

Whilst development debates about adaptive management have seemed to centre on governance programming, our experience in Myanmar demonstrates that in fragile contexts, depending on how contentious the issue is and who is involved, all programming can be inherently political. Thus, adaptive delivery is key to creating change far beyond only governance programming. In such settings, the context in which we operate is ever changing, so the way to reach the outcomes – the 'how' – must equally change to succeed in the context. Whilst adaptiveness is key to success, we suggest that these conversations currently focus on the wrong level for fragile countries. In these environments, an anchor is required to ensure the project stays on course. Somewhat counterintuitively, it is the complexity, contestation, and fragile nature of the context that we argue drives the need for high-level outcomes to remain stable (so that something is!) in order to retain a steer and direction. Instead, let's start with addressing the practical barriers that exist within the aid architecture, donor relationships and our own organisations to make explicit the level of adaption that already takes place in how projects are implemented, and encourage more.

Adaptive delivery is not only about day-to-day political economy analysis. It is also about the process, the nuts and bolts of how project management gets done. Strong links between working politically, generating evidence, robust project management and being accountable are necessary to deliver impactful, conflict-sensitive gendered programming in fragile contexts.

Implementing projects in a way that can react to changing context and respond to opportunities requires clear and transparent communication, greater emphasis on tacit knowledge and a culture that enables reflection and conversations about what is not working. In Oxfam in Myanmar, a large amount of adaption already takes place in how projects are delivered. However, it lacks incentives by either

organisational or donor systems, and is sometimes buried in an effort to appear to be on track with inflexible workplans and logframes. Having systems that encourage this, whilst also mitigating risk, rather than project staff having to find ‘work-arounds’ – would allow us to stop ‘hiding’ the important and often impressive politically nuanced work undertaken by field staff, and instead allow us to celebrate it, in turn helping to grow a culture of responsiveness, adaption, trust, and acceptance of failures that contribute to real learning. Current practices ranging from how things are done within human resources, organisational systems and culture, trust, monitoring and documentation, communicating adaption, and financial management have been identified and recommendations made of practical steps that stakeholders can consider to encourage more transparent adaption.

Calls for greater flexibility must be balanced with ensuring robust aid accountability. Yet the aid architecture has, in our view, somewhere along the line, conflated accountability with having a pre-planned blueprint. This often goes as far as making explicit exactly what a project will do and how. For example, where a project is seeking to influence government, required detail can be down to the level of predicting exactly how many meetings will be required, where, and therefore what flights and accommodation. When articulated in its simplest sense, many would disagree with this level of pre-determination. We question why conformity to such plans has become a measure of good project planning and implementation. Whilst this conflation is not isolated to fragile contexts, such contexts make a predetermined approach untenable; yet, we argue, the increased level of risk and extent of consequences within such environments actually drives further rigidity, in an attempt to manage these risks.

Taking this into account, this paper suggests rethinking what it takes to deliver well at all stages of the project management cycle, and how that needs to be evidenced and communicated within the aid architecture. This would allow implementers to stop ‘hiding’ the extent to which our implementation has been messy and ever-changing, and to work closer with donors on what matters – results and risk. This would create more space for implementers to choose and alter the path required to get to those results. We want to challenge donors, implementers, and teams to manage projects using documents that focus on results and risk (results frameworks and risk matrixes) and put greater emphasis on more transparent relationships and documentation of decision-making. This, we argue, will allow for both accountability, greater transparency, greater adaption and less administrative burden, and ultimately greater results in fragile and messy contexts. We understand that this is not easy. Changes are required at multiple levels: the level of relationship with funders, within our own organisations in who we hire, and in how we manage projects. But acknowledging and identifying what needs to change and how has to be a first step to moving adaptive delivery into accepted practice.

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Charitable Company Number 877338
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