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What is adaptive management?



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All blogs

At the risk of simultaneously whinging about and perpetuating a phenomenon, Adaptive Management has recently filled the echo-chambers inhabited by those of us who like to blather on about ‘doing development’. However, unlike most of the hot air which blows through this chamber, I think there might be something in it. But is that something new? No.

What is adaptive management? It’s basically a reaction to the New Public Management paradigm that has governed most Western Democracies over the last two decades. We went from trusting that everything was going to be alright, to enforcing such a degree of accountability that everything couldn’t be alright, to adopting a more pragmatic approach where sensible people make sensible decisions, based on data together. How remarkable?

Almost a decade since its publication, the [Operational Guide for the Making Markets Work for the Poor \(M4P\) Approach](#) contains advice on how to use effective monitoring and measurement to refine interventions through feedback loops; how to negotiate with donors to refine programme objectives and logframes; and how to manage programmes internally by structuring implementation, staffing, financial systems, and programme culture to allow for more adaptive programming. Other publications have highlighted the pitfalls of management by measurement, compliance targets, contracting mechanisms (I’ll put the trumpet down now) and these are only in development; the adaptive management literature in other fields goes back to the 1970s. Nevertheless, I for one think this new outfit for his majesty is sartorially resplendent.

On the face of it, it is high time some of these techniques became mainstream. It’s motherhood and apple pie. But, let us not forget the status quo from whence the

New Public Management paradigm came. Profligate waste of public funds; old boys' networks, comfort zones of 'these are the sort of things we do' without any mind being paid towards impact. New Public Management has provided a structure which is, theoretically, supposed to neutralise the influence of personal and institutional incentives in pursuit of common goals. It provides everyone from donor staff to implementers with Specific, Measurable, Attainable (sometimes), Realistic (sometimes) and Time-bound metrics by which performance can be assessed. However, DFID's Smart rules – meaning clever rather than the acronym – contain the word 'adapt' 36 times. Can one be SMART and Smart?

One has to consider the best and worst case scenario that adaptive management brings. In the best case, programmes can change course according to opportunity for impact. They can adjust targets to be both realistic and ambitious – give and take, improving on design. Donors can manage their own individual and organisational performance frameworks to facilitate the delivery of greater and more sustainable impacts. In the worst case scenario, however, there is a disconnect at some point within the system where adaptability meets accountability. Career-minded individuals or profit-driven implementers (including you NGOs) default to risk aversion and what is left is a weaker form of New Public Management but without any perceived objectivity.

So what is to be done? It is incumbent upon those of us who see a more progressive and pragmatic system of aid delivery and management to both deliver on its promise and to effectively demonstrate evidence of that delivery. We need to identify what an enabling environment for adaptive management looks like – where systems and incentives are aligned throughout. What sort of people are needed to make it work and, if it does work, what's the relative pay-off in terms of sustainable results at scale. If we fail to do that, there's a fair chance that these emperor's new clothes will become stained with a grubbiness of implementers attempting to weasel out of their obligations, or trying to polish failure into something more palatable.