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How implementers can help donors be adaptive



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Donor institutions are packed full of passionate professionals who want to support positive system change. But they need help! Here, Ian Randall shares practical strategies to help donors be adaptive.

This blog is part of our [series on adaptive management](#).

Donors are enthused about adaptive programming, and are encouraging implementers to embrace such a progressive management approach. My company, [Wasafiri Consulting](#), often works with companies and communities, who are willing to embark on complex change with a spirit of adventure and openness. However, donor institutions seem to find this harder. Despite their recent advocacy for adaptive programming and their explicit mandate to deliver change, the culture and systems of donor institutions continue to incentivise top-down planning and risk aversion. There are underlying reasons for this that BEAM Exchange has previously discussed in its [report on adaptive management](#).



This internal tension means that implementers can work with a donor who encourages the agility, experimentation and sensing required for adaptive programming, but whose institution asks for detailed plans, rigid results measurement and delivery on budget. It takes real leadership from donor staff to operate in a way that is counter to their dominant institutional culture. Positively donor institutions are packed full of passionate professionals who want to support positive system change. They need help! As implementers receiving donor funds, we can actively support our donor counterparts so they can in turn support us in programming adaptively. Wasafiri's experience highlights the following practical strategies to help donors be adaptive.

Donor immersion

As soon as possible, get your donor counterpart away from their desk and in the field. I recently witnessed a donor go from technocrat to enthusiast after spending the morning visiting a small Rwandan business that was working with smallholders to grow produce for Kigali consumers. This kind of experience connects them directly to the complexity and opportunities that exist outside their

logframe. This experience is the basis for their interest and understanding when reality deviates from plan. Internally, they will need to justify changes to plans and budgets. Direct contact with the field increases their willingness and ability to be a champion with their agency.

Communication

Keep in regular and frank communication with your donor, so they too can sense issues and opportunities emerging. When the programme hits a problem or needs to pivot, they will then be in a position to collaborate and share ownership of changes to the original plan.

Secure a senior champion

Ensure your technical-level donor counterpart has a senior champion within their agency. When they bump up against rules and norms, a senior champion can help enormously in making the bureaucracy flex. Donor staff often rotate in to new roles, and as a new counterpart arrives in post they often take a more bureaucratic approach to programmes they inherit, whilst focussing their energy on new projects full of uncomplicated promise. Having a senior champion place can mitigate this risk, and encourage continuity of support for adaptive approaches. Practical ways to secure such champions include providing platforms that require a senior representative to make a speech or announcement; or establishing a steering committee for your initiative.

Focussed agenda

On top of the main explicit goal of a programme, donors are under pressure to ensure interventions address multiple political imperatives and have no negative impacts. For example, an initiative on agricultural investment may be asked to demonstrate progress on smallholder incomes, women's economic empowerment, nutrition, climate change, land rights, whilst ensuring that none of the companies they support have negative social or environmental consequences

Change in complex systems is hard and interventions are mostly likely to succeed when all efforts are focussed on a single target e.g. increased rice production, or faster customs. As an implementer, we can advocate strongly for very specific, singular goals; and encourage donor counterparts to resist internal pressure to layer on multiple agendas that ultimately create inertia. Ask them which target will success ultimately be judged against. Keep the logframe simple, whilst allowing for multiple pathways to achieving the primary goal.

Similarly, market system change is not a "solution", it is change from one imperfect set of dynamics to another. There will be winners in that change, but also losers e.g. domestic production of rice will hit importers. Avoiding any negative impacts is likely to result in such risk aversion that no change is achieved at all. Take control of messaging, by providing communication materials that are honest and timely about reporting the balance of impacts. Without this, there is a risk that antagonists take control of messaging so that donors find themselves in an unexpected defensive position and retreat to a very risk-averse, rigid institutional approach.

Bridge across the Prime

Most donors now out-source their bureaucracy to Primes, who handle large programmes and sub-contract expert consultancies to deliver. This creates an institutional wall between the implementer and the donor, and it is a wall incentivised to deliver on budget and on plan, not to be adaptive and entrepreneurial. Implementers should ensure they have a close working relationship with the donor, so

both parties can advocate to the Prime for adaptive management. This must be managed respectively, so that the Prime's role and relationships are maintained. For example, by requesting tri-party meetings between implementer, prime and donor to review progress.

Wasafiri's approach to complex system change is evoked by a poem that said, "Traveller, there is no path. We make the path as we walk together." Donors can be anxious fellow travellers, but with friendship, communication and clarity, they bring the political, technical and financial resources that make for a successful journey.

Ian Randall is a Director of Wasafiri Consulting. Wasafiri provides strategy and project management for clients working on complex change. Current focus areas include: agriculture and private sector development; conflict and security; and climate change. Clients include donor agencies, international companies and NGOs. Follow Ian [@ianwasafiri](#).

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