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# Applying adaptive management in the field



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## **The importance of people and skills required to support the adaptive management of programs.**

A year or so ago, while I was providing TA to an M&E team, I found that they really struggled to create actionable information out of the qualitative data they collected to support adaptive management of their program.

With all the attention to adaptive management, this made me curious about how other activities were inspiring their staff to support this new approach. So, I spoke to five current or former senior managers working in agricultural market systems development to see what lessons they are learning about the people and skills required to support adaptive management of their programs.

The managers we spoke to emphasized three things:

1. getting the culture right
2. recruiting the right people and skills
3. evolving staff roles and responsibilities for creating actionable information.

**This blog focuses on the evolution of staff roles and responsibilities.**

## Organizational Structure: Staff Roles and Responsibilities

Project leaders emphasized that in market systems development programs collecting information about the market is everyone's job. As a result, staff roles and responsibilities for collecting data and creating actionable information are evolving.

## Program Staff

In the projects we studied, program staff are responsible for both formal data collection and for the informal information collection that is key to adaptive management.

They are often now responsible for analyzing and reporting data, too. As one project leader pointed out, if program staff do not observe, learn and report on what is happening in the market, then the team will not be able to inform changes in programming.

With adaptive management, tacit knowledge which comes about through constant discussions among staff about how actors in the system are behaving and reacting, is critical.

At one program studied, the team used a framework of the desired behaviors of market actors in inclusive markets to assess whether the behavior patterns they were observing in the field aligned with desired patterns or indicated problems.

## M&E Staff

Some projects have sought to expand the role of M&E staff to better support adaptive management through learning activities. These include testing new research methodologies or building the capacity of the project team.

However, getting M&E staff to change what they are doing can be challenging. Traditional M&E tasks are time consuming and staff are usually stretched.

Projects are using different approaches to free up M&E staff so they can pursue learning activities. In one program, the M&E team was split in two. One half continued to work on traditional responsibilities. The other half worked in new areas such as developing new data collection tools and conducting learning activities.

*We adjusted the monitoring to be more integrated with the technical work. ...  
more about observational and data on things related to the changes we want.  
So monitoring becomes a continuous real time discussion.*

Mike Field, DAI

The line between M&E and program staff roles is blurring with program staff taking on more analysis and reporting and M&E staff taking on more data collection.

## Technology as an enabling factor in evolving roles

A key enabler of the evolving role of M&E staff is greater use of technology. This allows them to reduce the amount of time spent on donor reporting and take on new activities related to learning and producing actionable information for adaptive management.

Examples of technology and systems that have helped free up staff include:

- In Uganda, Mercy Corps developed a database that does the calculations necessary for reporting indicators
- In Bangladesh, the Agricultural Value Chain activity is using an app to collect observational data about businesses in the market system. The app allows staff to observe trendlines and patterns in the businesses, thereby supporting the information needs

## Capacity to undertake qualitative research for learning activities

One key area that remains a challenge for project leaders wishing to conduct internal learning activities for adaptive management is the lack of staff capabilities with managing qualitative data.

One leader admitted that staff were not that successful at it:

*... I honestly believe focus groups and key informant interviews needs experience and some expertise and there is a science there. Otherwise you just get a bunch of information that no one really knows what to do with.*

Country Director

Another leader noted that M&E staff usually do not have the skills to conduct qualitative research. They have been hired for their orientation to detail and willingness to work with indicators and M&E jobs are often too narrowly defined.

## Lessons from the Field

- Hire people, for M&E roles, who have more of a program management background or more of a research background, including previous training in qualitative research and analysis
- Reduce the burden of time that staff have to spend on regular donor reporting which is less informative for learning. The right technical tools can help free up staff time.

**What have you or your organization done to inspire staff to take up adaptive management practices?**

## Find out more on emerging practices in adaptive management

- Adaptive Management: Responding to the evolving needs of PRIME's complex systems)
- Navigating Complexity: Adaptive Management at the Northern Karamoja Growth, Health, and Governance Program
- Adaptive Management in Practice: Lessons from the Field
- Building an Adaptive Team for Market Systems Development in Acholi: Uganda Adapt Case Study
- Managing Complexity: Adaptive management at Mercy Corps
- The road to adaptive management: knowledge, leadership, culture and rules
- BEAM's Guidance page on Adaptive Management