

Nov. 15, 2018

## Six ways to tell if a programme is really 'doing development differently'



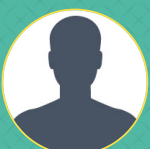
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All blogs

What tells us that a programme is genuinely adaptive - and what rings alarm bells?

These days it seems that everyone in the aid sector is doing development differently - presenting themselves as politically smart, locally led, flexible and adaptive. But is it true?

How much of this is "old wine in new bottles" - the language changing but the practice remaining much the same? And, if this is happening, what does a genuinely innovative and adaptive programme look like?



A small group of us - Angela Christie, Helen Derbyshire, Annette Fisher, Steve Fraser, and Wilf Mwamba - have been having a conversation about this - triggered by a recent conference in Brighton. We asked ourselves what tells us that a programme is genuinely adaptive - and on the other hand what rings alarm bells.

Here's what we came up with.

A programme is adaptive if there is .....

### **A shared understanding of why the programme is taking an adaptive approach**

The programme donor, implementers and local partners have a shared understanding of what problem an adaptive approach will help them to solve and how being adaptive will lead to better results. Adaptive approaches generally apply to work in complex contexts, on complex issues with messy politics. Pathways to change are unpredictable, and more conventional blueprint approaches have had limited effectiveness.

Alarm bells ring for us when proposals, conversations and reports are littered with doing development differently buzzwords – but there's no apparent understanding of why such an approach might be important in the programme context.

### **A shared understanding of and commitment to adaptive programming in practice**

Being adaptive, politically smart and locally led usually involves devolving significant operational and strategic decision-making to front-line staff and local partners. This means establishing systems, support structures and quality control mechanisms to enable frontline staff and local partners to watch and analyse their changing context, identify opportunities and momentum for change towards their strategic goals, learn from experience and adapt their interventions accordingly.

What adaptive programming is not is a programme without goals, or with continuously shifting goalposts. It is not a flexible fund built into a programme that otherwise continues with business as usual. PEA reports should be influencing thinking and action, not sitting on shelves – and in most cases, the team in the capital city shouldn't be dominating decision making. It rings alarm bells for us when programme actions and approaches remain the same even as the context changes, and when programmes repeat actions which have not been successful hoping for a different result. And they ring particularly loudly when, through the life of the programme and despite changing contexts and opportunities for learning, the programme Log Frame and Theory of Change remain unchanged.

### **As much flexibility as possible in management systems**

Programme-related roadblocks – such as insisting on delivery against pre-set top-down results, fixed budgets, and contractually rigid technical or financial inputs – stand in the way of adaptation. In an adaptive programme, donors, implementers and local partners are working together from the outset to create as much flexibility as possible – to work with any partners and stakeholders, to respond to shifts in momentum and opportunity, to shift resources rapidly to where they are needed, and to provide necessary technical support. This means building flexibility into management and contracting processes, and buffering front line staff and local partners from top-down requirements that might otherwise govern and constrain their decision-making.

Alarm bells ring for us when the management team – donors and implementers – are not open about and actively and collectively trying to manage the contradictions and constraints to adaptive programming posed by commercial and contractual requirements.

### **A commitment to working with the right people**

Working adaptively is more of an art than a science. At the front line, it involves being a 'dancer' and 'dancing with the system'. It's almost an approach to life.

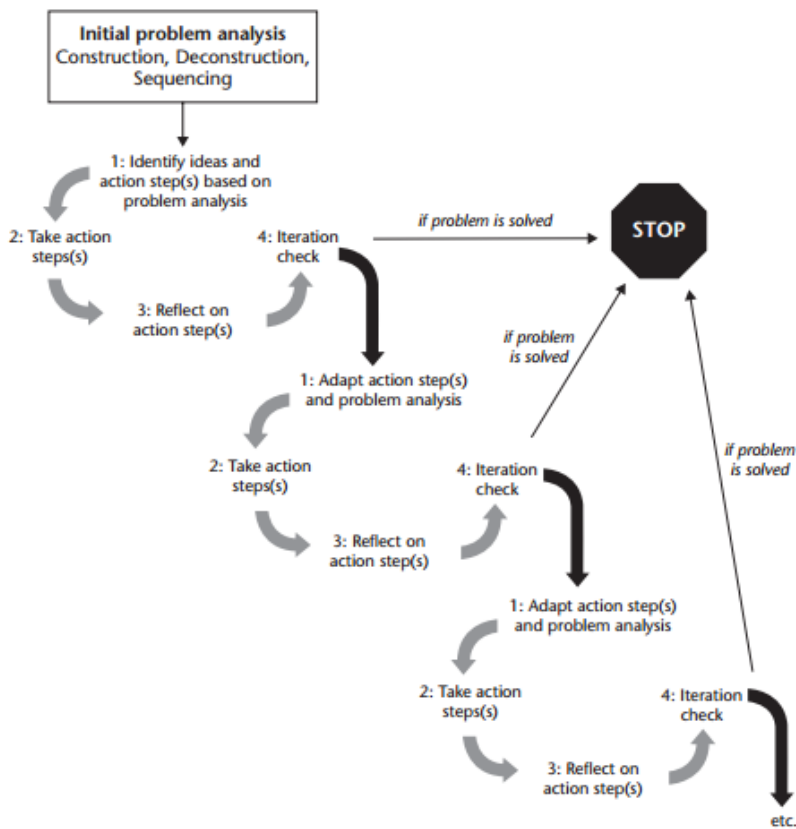


Figure 8.2. The iterative process in simple form

Adaptive programmes are re-orienting recruitment and appraisal systems, balancing technical expertise with softer skills, investing in people and nurturing potential. Important soft skills include a personal commitment to change; the ability to build trust and relationships; a willingness to listen, observe and understand; the courage to take opportunities without knowing where they will necessarily lead; and to make mistakes and learn from them. At the management level, technical skills are needed to find ways of adapting donor and supplier management systems to accommodate adaptive ways of working.

Alarm bells ring for us when teams experienced in conventional programming are delivering an adaptive programme with no changes in recruitment and appraisal processes, no systematic support to enable and empower staff to work in different ways often outside their comfort zone, and no change in management style.

### An organisational culture of learning

An organisational culture of learning includes systems and structures to enable front line staff and local partners to stand back from their day to day work, consider the bigger picture, reflect honestly on their actions, and learn from what is not working as well as what is. In programme management and donor teams, strategic reflection is needed on the overall programme approach, extending to “back room” processes that might otherwise constrain adaptive working.

Alarm bells ring when programme management information systems are focused primarily on performance management, and don’t provide front line staff and partners with information they can use for action learning and for adapting as they go. Another concern is when the focus of internal reporting is all on success, and there is no acknowledgement of or learning from what is not working.

## **An ability to tell honestly the story and learning journey behind results**

Results are not simply about numbers and delivery – but about behaviour change, set-backs, learning and progress on a journey of reform. In reporting results, adaptive programmes are telling their story – communicating a learning journey, positioning results in their context, and giving a realistic assessment of the programme's contribution to

change relative to other factors. Their communications enable an appreciation of how the programme is working and why, and contribute to wider debates about programme approaches.

Alarm bells ring for us when programme communications take a conventional approach – focused on churning out good news stories and self-promotion of the programme's achievements.

These are our initial thoughts. We'd all be really interested to hear yours.

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**Shared from Duncan Green's 'From poverty to power' blog** - guest post from some of the top exponents of adaptive management/doing development differently.