



## Applying Adaptive Management to Livelihoods in Emergency Settings: Challenges and Opportunities

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**Adaptive management is a way of working that starts with an assumption of uncertainty around how to address a particular challenge.**

This approach can be useful in complex emergency contexts, particularly for livelihoods and markets programs, yet humanitarian organizations have not embraced adaptive approaches as readily as the development sector, often due to the belief that the need for change is a failure of the initial needs assessment or a reflection of poor practice (ALNAP, p32). This brief invites an alternative perspective and provides an overview of how adaptive management can be applied to livelihoods and other market-related work in emergency settings. The foundation of this brief is a literature review of over 85 documents and resources on adaptive management in humanitarian settings, which was completed under the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)-funded **IDEAL Activity** in 2020.

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*Adaptive Management:  
An intentional approach  
to making decisions and  
adjustments in response  
to new information and  
changes in context.*

USAID ADS 201.6, 2018

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**Adaptive management (AM) is best understood as a broad approach, rather than as a specific methodology or toolkit.** It is characterized by flexibility: building in opportunities for structured and collective reflection, ongoing and real-time learning, course correction, and data-based decision-making to improve effectiveness. This is important in emergencies, but even more so in the protracted humanitarian contexts that now make up 45% of emergency settings ([Girling and Urquart](#), p24). In these contexts, livelihoods and market work (including cash and voucher assistance), would likely be better served by adaptive approaches and “intentional M&E design from program inception that is geared towards both learning and accountability” (original author’s emphasis, [Global Learning for Adaptive Management \(GLAM\)](#)). Adaptive approaches provide an alternative to ‘blueprint’ approaches, which emphasize detailed plans and solve problems in a more linear, mechanistic way.

**Because emergencies are dynamic and complex, adaptive approaches are particularly relevant to livelihoods and market work in these contexts.** As a recent review from [SPARC](#) (Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises) on livelihoods in protracted crises noted, “Because both economic circumstances and conflict evolve in ways that can be hard to foresee, management has to be adaptive. That requires not only flexible funding, but also flexible procedures.” Desired outcomes may be fixed—determined by immediate needs, donor preferences or other elements beyond the control of the organization—but the path to reaching those outcomes is not, even when using ‘tried and tested’ activities. AM provides a path for adjusting quickly to changing contexts and for testing new theories about ways of working. It encourages implementers to place ‘small bets’ on a series of solid best guesses about what may be effective in the context. For example, humanitarian actors responding to a crisis might support livelihoods and nutrition providing affected populations with cash to repair market stalls (enabling farmers to sell goods) or vouchers to purchase fodder (and thus increase milk supply). Programming in this way encourages humanitarian actors to embrace change as both a constant and an opportunity.

## SYNTHESIS OF FRAMEWORKS

Several frameworks for adaptive management exist. While the emphasis in each is slightly different, the barriers and enablers of adaptive management remain roughly the same across all AM frameworks. These elements include:

- People and teams
- Organizational culture, strategy, and political will
- Processes and learning
- Resources such as time and money
- Partnerships

Together these elements contribute to “robust decision-making in the face of uncertainty, with an aim to reducing uncertainty over time” ([Picon and Wild](#), p2). The ability to adjust to new information and make changes in programming is particularly important for livelihoods and markets work because markets are always adjusting to new influences and new actors.



The chart below captures the enablers and barriers described across most AM frameworks.

| AM ELEMENTS  | ENABLERS  | BARRIERS  |
|--|---|---|
| <b>People &amp; Teams</b>                                    | Dynamic and collaborative teams; leadership support; personal interest in learning and continuous improvement   | Frontline staff are unfamiliar with using AM approaches or uncomfortable telling leadership that something is not working; teams are working in silos   |
| <b>Organizational Culture, Strategy &amp; Political will</b> | Responsive decision-making and action by implementers and funders; streamlining approval processes for requests to changes in budgets, intervention plans, and results frameworks | Not knowing who to ask for 'permission' to change; lacking the time to think through why change is needed; bias towards quantitative data or soundbites instead of deep learning; office culture that fears failure; top-down management styles |
| <b>Processes &amp; Learning</b>                              | Appropriate data and reflective analysis; staff with competencies in reflection, learning, curiosity and open communications  | Staff not knowing what existing rules allow; logframes not designed with an expectation of change; inappropriate M&E method or timing; no strong analysis of data; indicators that are too output-oriented or do not support decision-making    |
| <b>Resources, Time &amp; Money</b>                           | Agile and integrated operations; ensuring that finance, planning, and performance management systems enable changes in interventions and budgets                                  | Small M&E budgets; budgets that need to be spent in short or arbitrary timeframes; no inception period or crisis modifier; rigid agreements   |
| <b>Partnerships</b>  | Trusting and flexible partnerships (including local partners, private sector, and donors); open communications  | Preference for hitting targets over learning; communication limited to formal reporting requirements; internal processes that are overly administrative   |

**At the core of adaptive management is informed decision-making.** Unfortunately, many humanitarian actors are overwhelmed by the number of indicators they are collecting (author interviews). They would like to see the number of required indicators reduced and to devote their time and resources to gathering only that data which truly informs decision-making. "No amount of information during project design will ever be good enough, so we must rely on continuous analysis and adaptation to allow a project to respond to local context, changing needs, and evolving knowledge as the project unfolds" (original author's emphasis, [Dillon](#), p3).

**Humanitarians are losing the ability to adapt, just at the time when they need it more than ever** ([Obrecht, et al](#), p4). Although humanitarian systems were set up to respond with agility, emergencies are becoming more protracted and complex. Over time, accountability mechanisms (such as monitoring systems, budgeting systems, and compliance systems) have limited the range of options humanitarians have at their disposal for responding in a dynamic environment, making it harder to implement changes in a timely and efficient manner. The diminishing space for adaptation should be an urgent point of discussion for donors and implementers. Adaptive approaches have much to offer in an emergency livelihoods context, and there are many examples of how adaptive management has been used to reduce the impact of crises ([Craft](#), p6). In addition, [GLAM](#) provides excellent resources for balancing the role of monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) for accountability purposes, with its role in supporting adaptive management.

## KEY AM THEMES IN EMERGENCY SETTINGS

Three themes emerged from the literature review as particular challenges to adaptive management in humanitarian contexts: 1) the need for more decentralized decision-making, 2) the lack of data to support adaptation, and 3) a lack of flexible funding. These themes are particularly relevant for livelihoods and markets programming in emergencies.



## DECENTRALIZED DECISION-MAKING

**To have true agility in programming, decentralized decision-making is critical.** Humanitarian actors on the ground need to be able to pivot quickly, with minimal bureaucratic delays. Decentralized decision-making can support timely shifts, early action, and adaptive responses to changing conditions. Yet a lack of decentralized decision-making by international agencies and donors is frequently cited as one of the main constraints to adaptation ([Obrecht \(Kenya\)](#), p44). In livelihoods programming, this can prevent humanitarian teams from changing tactics when a new actor enters the market or an infrastructure issue (such as a breakdown in transport linkages) disrupts market dynamics.

**Program designs that have high-level goals yet allow for localized decision-making on the best way to reach those goals, can avoid unfortunate compromises.** Crisis modifiers and inception periods provide formal opportunities and specific funding for programs to adjust programming according to changing needs, but even these innovative elements get slowed down by the need for formal approvals ([Montier](#)). When agreements are structured around the delivery of specific activities and outputs, it is easy for humanitarian actors to become focused on solving the problem as it was described when the activities and outputs were designed ([Obrecht \(DRC\)](#), p37). If the problem statement is no longer true, the trade-off often ends up being between adapting the program with great frustration or implementing the (less effective/needed) program as designed.

**Program staff often have increased job satisfaction when they have higher levels of decision-making control over their work (also called 'agency'); it is thus unsurprising that there is a psychological toll on those trying to manage change in a rigid system.** Staff from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), for example, identified organizational/managerial pressure and ineffective managers as their primary sources of stress, ranking these even above security risks ([Olive, et al.](#), p30). USAID's LEARN program also found that managing adaptively is more likely to improve outcomes when decision-making autonomy is placed close to frontline staff and local partners ([Dexis](#), p10). An example of how this can be incorporated was used in the USAID-funded PRIME (Pastoralist Areas Resilience Improvement and Market Expansion) program in Ethiopia, under which any field staff, in any position, was invited to suggest program activities through a concept note. The note had to explain how the proposed activity contributed to the high-level goals of the program and had to include a simple budget, which would then be approved by the Technical Lead. The staff and partners felt empowered and listened to once the system got up and running ([Mercy Corps](#), p3). This supported the organizational culture around adaptive management and decentralized decision-making.

**To create the environment where staff have increased agency, the literature emphasized the importance of courageous leadership at all levels;** in other words, a willingness to hand over control of decisions to those closest to the problem and to foster an environment that views the need for change as an opportunity rather than a failure. When such leadership existed, staff reported feeling they had a 'safer space' to apply adaptive management practices and to support learning. This sentiment was expressed by staff at all levels, including those in senior roles to whom others were looking for leadership and support ([Dexis](#), p10). Courageous leadership often requires a cultural change within an organization (as reflected in many adaptive management frameworks) because organizations are not just collections of individuals—they are social spaces ([Clark](#), p39). The alternative is a work environment where people fear being perceived as having failed; colleagues are generally unwilling to share experiences; and/or onerous risk mitigation procedures and compliance demands are in place, all of which can lead to institutional inertia.



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“Agility cannot be achieved by decree: it is achieved by means of individual and collective reflection and experience, often based on observations of shortcomings and failures of projects and teams, but also dreams of a different form of action.”

#### HUMANITARIANS ON THE MOVE

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**Adaptive management becomes a risk if the requirement to think, act, and be agile is added to the tensions that already affect humanitarian practitioners.** We cannot ask people to ‘think outside the box,’ while they are bound by rigid implementation, monitoring, and reporting structures ([Olive](#), p30). But adaptive management also provides a pathway for organizations to break out of the cycle of negative reinforcement; it can enhance implementation results while also improving the well-being of individual team members.

### DATA FOR DECISION-MAKING

**In humanitarian settings, monitoring and evaluation systems are generally cumbersome and lack the frequent light-touch data most useful for understanding and effectively responding to rapidly evolving situations** ([Alcayna](#), p32). One could argue that all humanitarian action requires a great deal of ongoing decision-making and course-correction simply to deliver results in the context of a humanitarian crisis. But rather than robust systems to support that decision-making, ALNAP and ODI both found a consistent pattern of weak data collection and monitoring mechanisms in humanitarian programming ([Ramalingam, et al.](#), p2 and [Obrecht et al.](#)), which over time can affect the quality of evaluations and limit the ability of decision-makers to implement improvements.

**GLAM did considerable work on what is needed to strengthen MEL systems for adaptive management (MEL4AM).** Improving data for adaptation has several elements, which resonate well with lessons that have been learned in livelihoods programming more broadly. MEL4AM should be:

1. **Fit for purpose:** Tools must be able to respond to changes that are both wide in scope and continuous in nature, balancing rapid feedback with the long horizons needed for effecting social or economic change.
2. **Well-timed:** Tools need to provide the right data at the right moment, so decision-making is based on adequate and appropriate information that is available when it is needed.
3. **Measuring success:** Results frameworks should make it easier to recognize incremental success in complex, adaptive programs; menus of indicators, for example, can help to identify multiple contributors to change.
4. **Learning:** MEL systems should support learning opportunities across programs and portfolios, helping practitioners to ask the right questions (not only those required by the donor), providing information in ways that are accessible to different humanitarian teams, and looking at the quality of the decision-making behind adaptation, as well as the results of the changes.
5. **Balancing:** Tools should ideally reduce compliance and reporting burdens, balancing AM’s flexible approaches with pressures around donor accountability and reporting.





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At the level of the individual, agility is about letting go the need and desire for control...

Is it possible to be agile when using standardized ways of thinking and tools?

...Agility is a question of humility and responsibility.

HUMANITARIANS ON THE MOVE

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Many would suggest that M&E budgets overall are simply too low, in part because of standardized approaches to M&E budgeting, for example using an assigned percentage (Byrne, et al., p20). Yet some supporters of AM nevertheless consider it a “resource intensive activity” (Arora et al., p5). This does not have to be the case. Implemented well, AM can be used to spread intense evaluation exercises—such as data gathering for mid-term and end-line evaluations—over the lifetime of the program, leading to better use of resources and improved programming, and creating the potential for better value for money (Dillon, p17). Others believe that adaptive management can be done “passively” without gathering additional data beyond normal monitoring (Martin, et al., p13). What these conversations miss is that often the issue is the need for agility rather than perfect data. Responding quickly in the short term with the best available data is a smarter, more efficient way to work than having ‘perfect’ data that is not used or arrives too late.

## FLEXIBLE FUNDING

The needs of crisis-affected populations are rarely compartmentalized in the way that humanitarian and development structures would imply (Debarre, p2). Even in protracted crises, an emergency does not hit all parts of the country in the same way or with the same severity. This has obvious effects on livelihoods and market programming. Yet the sector-based nature of funding streams often means that programs are unable to shift assistance to newly emerging needs if those needs are in different technical areas (Obrecht and Bourne, p32), or work with parts of a market system that are not crisis-affected but have the capacity to support recovery.



**Increasingly, crises are: 1) protracted emergencies with high to medium risk of conflict, 2) cyclical natural hazards in low to middle-income countries, or 3) migration crises, with large numbers of vulnerable people crossing borders (Obrecht (Kenya), p9).** When understanding of the impact of the emergency is clear (such as in a drought), ‘flexibility’ may be approached as a simple challenge of planning: identify likely scenarios, plan interventions for these scenarios, and pre-position resources (ALNAP, p7). However, this does not necessarily encourage learning or improvement over the life of the program or over multiple drought cycles, leading to activities that are not in line with current market realities.

**Because the contexts in which humanitarian operators have become more complex and protracted, there are now more triggers for change and current humanitarian structures are in overload. Yet the humanitarian financing available is generally regarded as short-term, slow, and often restricted by earmarking (UN, p20).** For example, the World Food Programme’s (WFP) support costs are tied to tonnage, meaning that at the same time food aid is being reduced, the support costs are expected to address more complex implementation such as livelihoods recovery interventions (Harvey, et al., p25). Many implementing agencies pointed to delayed funding as a major driving factor for the need to adapt their program plans. When funding is delayed, there is a greater likelihood that operational adaptations will be required due to shifts in population movement or the emergence of other aid actors serving the same population (Netzer, p10).

**The pressure to ‘professionalize’ humanitarian aid over the last 20 years has also resulted in an increased reliance on logframes and quantitative indicators,** which force linear thinking and often result in decreased flexibility. These processes and tools, while useful, have led many humanitarian actors to become more rigid and less able to shift their response as a crisis changes over time (Alcayna, p8).

**Interpersonal and inter-organizational dynamics have a significant impact on how formal rules and regulations are interpreted, and the flexibility of donors frequently depends on the level of trust between a donor and an implementer.** Donors can make the case for changes within their own institutions when they feel it is warranted. Due to their own internal accountability processes, donor staff in-country may feel they are putting themselves at risk on behalf of implementing agencies when approving changes. As such, they may be more willing to do this when there is a trusted relationship in place or the implementing agency has a proven track record (Byrne, et al., p18).

**Many donors have actively sought to make their processes and procedures more agile.** USAID has revised its ADS policies and procedures,<sup>1</sup> and both SDC and SIDA (Martin, et al. and Ruffer) have been experimenting with adaptive approaches. However, good processes still rely on the personalities that implement those processes. Flexible funding is most likely when there is a trusting relationship between implementer and funder (Byrne, et al., p17), and often this is based on regular informal interactions that go beyond formal reporting structures.

**ALNAP found that for those donors described as less flexible, the donor and its partners had divergent accounts of the same processes.** In one case, a donor that had been described as one of the least flexible explained the quick and simple process for making operational changes within a program cycle, claiming there was “nothing more...no formal approval process” (Obrecht (DRC), p38). This resonates with findings from BEAM Exchange where donors and implementers essentially described the same adaptive management challenge with each believing the other had the primary responsibility to make a change (Byrne, et al., interview notes). Yet, when humanitarian agencies were asked what they would do differently if given funding earlier in a crisis, they found it difficult to describe how they would change their program plans (Obrecht et al.).

<sup>1</sup> The USAID’s Automated Directives System (ADS) contains the policies and essential procedures that guide the Agency’s programs and operations. It has moved to a “principles based approach” in 2016.



## HOW CAN THESE FINDINGS BE APPLIED TO EMERGENCY LIVELIHOODS PROGRAMMING GOING FORWARD?

When applying this approach to livelihoods programming in emergency contexts, it can be helpful to think of adaptive management as:



This framing ([Obrecht and Bourne](#), p42) complements existing livelihoods tools and resources. Current livelihoods resources generally begin with a needs assessment—but it is important to understand that assessment and reflection is an ongoing process throughout the project, providing information on when and how to change. [This video](#) provides perspectives from two organizations that used adaptive management to support markets during the COVID response, discussing how they identified the need for changes and then implemented them. Alongside this, it is important to build opportunities for reflection into workplans and provide time to decide on the change that is needed as well as the time to implement the change.

BEAM Exchange also gives recommendations for livelihood and markets programming in fragile contexts ([Byrne \(BEAM\)](#), p8), bringing together the views of humanitarian and development implementers, as well as donor agencies. This work emphasizes the need for humanitarian and development actors to better coordinate internally and across organizations, which can play a key role in knowing when or in what way to make changes to a program.

Evidence shows that examples and guidance on using adaptive approaches is abundant, even in emergency settings. Affected communities have a great deal to gain from improved programming that better meets their needs and we as humanitarian practitioners have a responsibility to ensure that our systems are set up to provide that.



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## ABOUT SCALE

SCALE (Strengthening Capacity in Agriculture, Livelihoods, and Environment) is an initiative funded by USAID's Office of Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and implemented by Mercy Corps in collaboration with Save the Children. SCALE aims to enhance the impact, sustainability and scalability of BHA-funded agriculture, natural resource management, and off-farm livelihood activities in emergency and development contexts.

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## CONTACT INFORMATION

[www.fsnnetwork.org/SCALE](http://www.fsnnetwork.org/SCALE)

[scale@mercycorps.org](mailto:scale@mercycorps.org)

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