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Adaptive management

Adaptive management has caused quite a buzz in development. At the same time, many practitioners, particularly those who have been around for a while, see it more as common sense than as something completely new. Mesopartner has always promoted an approach that is sensitive to the context and to stakeholder capabilities, and is able to incorporate learning over time, adapting and continuously improving.

Adaptive management is not a prescriptive recipe but a collection of principles, recognising that certain situations are not amenable to conventional planning and management approaches. In many situations a

conventional planning approach is not optimal for two main reasons. Firstly, we might not completely understand what is going on and more analysis does not help us to clarify the situation. Secondly the context shifts, both through our interventions and through other factors, and our responses will need to adapt to these shifts over time.

In this article we describe a number of elements that are important to integrate into an adaptive management strategy.

Manage the complicated and explore the complex

Complicated and complex situations need to be approached differently. Complicated situations can be managed. Traditional output-oriented project management techniques work well – progress can be accurately measured and risks can be managed. This works well, for example when distributing vaccines. Complex situations need to be explored because outcomes are not predictable. Incentive schemes, for example, might lead to perverse behaviours by actors trying to game the system.



Create and maintain situation awareness

It is critical for actors engaged in complex change to be aware of what is happening around them. Being situation aware requires us to construct and maintain a map that allows us to integrate diverse inputs and observations into a current understanding of the situation shared among the team. This map can, for example, be built on a framework such as Systemic Competitiveness (see Article 1 in Annual Reflection 2017, *Meso level, meso space and the relation to territories*).

Create a process to systematically develop interventions

Learning and adjusting should not happen in an ad hoc manner. An adaptively managed project should have a structured process that describes how new ideas are turned into interventions, how these interventions are planned, implemented and monitored, and how the individual interventions as well as the overall intervention portfolio are reviewed and updated.





The process of developing interventions often starts with a concept note that gives some detail to an idea, which is then discussed among the team. Once the concept note is approved, a more detailed intervention plan is developed. The overall project logic on how interventions are developed and reviewed should be informed by the Systemic Insight logic described in Article 1, *A process of search and discovery*.

Adapt the monitoring and review activities to the pace of change

In the intervention plan described above, the project needs to describe what changes are expected in the short, medium and long term. This way of documenting expected changes has three implications for monitoring:

- Firstly, the monitoring methods and tools need to be adapted to capture the changes described.
- Secondly, the monitoring plan needs to be adapted to measure the changes when they are expected to happen.
- Thirdly, the monitoring reach should be adapted to the expected outreach of the intervention.



An additional implication of the approach to adaptive management described is that not all baseline data can be captured before the project starts. In addition to some high-level baseline data captured in the beginning, the relevant baseline data needs to be captured for each intervention individually before the start of that intervention.

Regularly review interventions and the intervention portfolio

Adaptive management requires us to regularly review our interventions, our intervention portfolio, and the overall Theory of Change of the project. These reviews are done at different frequencies. Day-to-day activity plans should be reviewed frequently, and larger activities can be followed up with an After-Action Review. Reviews of individual interventions are done more often than the review of the intervention portfolio, which happens more frequently than the review of the overall project Theory of Change and the context.

Not only team members should be involved in these reviews, but depending on the level of review, it should also involve project partners, other stakeholders and

the donor. Some organisations also involve team members from other projects in larger reviews (e.g. portfolio or Theory of Change reviews) in order to strengthen project-to-project learning.

Integrate learning, strategy and theory

Strategic learning has three elements (Lynn, 2012: 2):

1. Learning: The systematic use of data for continuous improvement and the collective interpretation of new information.
2. Being strategic: Applying the collective interpretation of information to strategy.
3. Utilising theory and research to ground both strategy *and* learning in the broader context of what is known about the world.

Often only the first two elements are taken into account, and the third is disregarded, which is critical if the learning is to move from the intuitive to the strategic. This learning is only built on previous experiences, not taking into account the vast body of accumulated knowledge in theory. To be able to do this, however, requires the ability to



understand abstract concepts and apply them to one's own context.

Devolve decision-making and disintermediate information

Decisions should be made by the people with the most appropriate levels of information and the experience to make the decision. Managers who are responsible for implementing projects, such as team leaders or project directors, often do not have the bandwidth to read and engage with all the information that is necessary to understand the need for adaptations. Furthermore, they are not in the field enough to capture the tacit aspects of change and the weak signals that allow the staff closer to the action to make more informed calls. At the same time, the people who are close to the action are often more junior staff who lack the experience to make important decisions with consequences for the project implementation.

Consequently, there needs to be a balance of devolving decision-making to the field staff, while making sure that more senior management staff are able to engage with relevant data and effectively oversee what decisions are

taken and why. For that to work, all levels of staff in a project should be able to access the basic elements of data collected, not only the condensed conclusions and recommendations based on that data, as these most certainly contain an interpretation bias. This is what we call disintermediation.

Enabling environment and learning culture

Adaptive management needs a positive enabling environment – including tools and methods, structures and processes, leadership and management, and culture and mindsets. There is also a need for funders to become more flexible in their funding strategies with a greater emphasis on trusting relationships instead of command and control. There are no easy recipes on how to achieve this. Relationships, processes and trust evolve over time; this process is itself a process of exploration and learning.

In the project team itself, it is important to cultivate a culture of curiosity, enquiry, collaboration and learning. There needs to be an appetite to explore new ideas and an acceptance of failure as a source of learning. Team leadership must be able to balance what is needed in



the context with what is possible based on available funding, resources and stakeholder capability. Building this culture needs to start when recruiting team members as the ability of new members to integrate into a learning team depends on their mentality and previous experiences. The team members need to be able to think critically, understand abstract concepts and use them to develop ideas for change initiatives.

These elements are not necessarily new or original, but reflect our current thinking. Doing adaptive management well is in itself a process of exploration and learning as there is not a single right way of doing it. Hence a review cycle in addition to the cycles described above should cover the questions of how we learn and how we can learn better. Many questions remain. For example, many projects struggle with the question of when and how to drop interventions. Moreover, an important open question is how adaptive a project can be in an environment where there is a lot of rigid and detailed long-term planning.

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References

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