



# Using adaptive monitoring, evaluation and learning in programme design

## *Reflections from a new partnership with higher education in East Africa*

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## Defining adaptive management

“Traditional” project design in the development sector usually comprises the following – agreeing an outline of the project, its goals, outcomes, major deliverables, timeframes, success criteria and budget estimates. Monitoring and evaluation guidelines are often tagged on at the end, and more recently a requirement that “lessons learned” be documented.

The idea of bringing a systems-thinking led, and by implication, an adaptive design approach to the conceptualization, design, delivery and management of a project is almost diametrically opposed to the design parameters dictated by most current funding requirements and traditional approaches. While we all use elements of “adaptivity” or “adaptation” in managing routine project work, it is far less common to see this approach embraced in the design and delivery of development projects.

And yet this is precisely what the development world must do, if it is to improve, in all honesty, on a non-inspiring record of impact and change. While we do not seek to deny or minimize the contributory factors of governance, politics and leadership to “developmental impact” or the lack of it, project-level conceptualization, design and delivery approaches have also played an active role in promoting and sustaining minimal impact.

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But what do we mean here by the concept of adaptation or, more accurately and broadly, adaptive management? I like the definition from Foundation of Success (FOS): “The integration of design, management and monitoring in a manner that allows us to systematically test assumptions in order to adapt and learn”.

At INASP, we offer a slight modification to this definition based on our experience. An adaptive design allows us to test assumptions systematically in order to “iteratively learn and adapt to create impact”. We would suggest that where projects have the scope, freedom and flexibility to iteratively learn – again and again – and make improvements each time, true sustaining and sustainable impact becomes achievable.

## Adaptive design in practice

INASP is in real time testing this approach in one of our Africa-based higher-education institution (HEI) projects (see box to right). A partnership of four universities, and other partners spread across East Africa, it is complex by its very design attempting to create as its vision universities, industry, communities and government who work together to create a learning experience for students that produce employable and creative graduates for social change. This partnership draws together many inter-relationships (existing and new ones that require a level of awareness, respect for and embracing of difference and trust), a range of perspectives (each partner has their own unique understanding of the situation), a variety of contexts (each partner operates in differing institutional, social, economic and political realities) and multiple definitions of success (agreeing on the project’s direction, approach and potentially change approach and what constitutes improvement).

There are, as in any other type of project, a number of phases in the adaptively managed project cycle. Rarely in any project delivery process do these phases run sequentially. In an adaptively managed project this

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occurs even less. Here there is a high degree of concurrency of implementation within phases and across phases that is unique to this approach.

This next section focuses on the first phase - using adaptive monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) as an instrument of design. We define nine components of this design stage some of which run concurrently, while others will interface with some post-design phases of project implementation as these get underway. So, what are the components of this design phase?

## *1. Conceptualize the project*

In spite of being familiar with the sector of higher education in Africa, we spent a significant amount of time understanding the existing and potential levers of success as well as the needs by defining what the vision could be and what could be done to achieve this. This was of course not done in isolation sitting in our Oxford offices but with significant engagement with a range of practitioners especially those who live the reality we were attempting to impact. We recorded a £25k investment in this component and the one below financed from organizational reserves to significantly ramp up the chances of a successful partnership should we be successful in the bid. This involved considerable travel by a senior manager from INASP to meet with, discuss, explore and reflect on the issues and the potential partnership with partners.

## *2. Define and build the partnership*

Although this process starts in phase 1 of the project, without any doubt, defining and building the partnership is the most crucial factor in the success and longevity of the project. For our project it began in the project conceptualization phase and is set to continue well into implementation, evaluation and beyond. Our partnership recognizes that the needs it seeks to address are complex, recurring, without clearly defined or easy solutions and involving many actors at intra and inter disciplinary/sector/national levels. The growth of the partnership required significant investments of time and money (most often not recuperable), continuous engagement and discussion, and a building of mutual trust and respect. This created for us a “healthy” space in which difficult questions could be and are raised and addressed as honestly as possible. Our approach did not identify partners from afar based on someone else’s recommendations, write them into the bid as partners with some perfunctory level of consultation or discussion. It was, as in the building of any relationship, painstaking and a “labour of love” – not always guaranteed to pay dividends!

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## *3. Establish our theory of change (ToC)*

We clearly defined the project’s objectives, the expected change and the pathways to this change and the socio-political context in which the change is expected. We revisited and modified elements of these with every partnership encounter and discussion until we arrived at one to which we all broadly subscribed. We remain open to and expectant that our ToC and the assumptions underpinning it will change again before the conclusion of the project. A key part of this process was clarifying our assumptions – especially those external influences able to impact whether the goal and outcomes are achieved and indeed achievable. Applying the “equity/gender lens” introduced a particularly valuable perspective to the change narrative. From this a flexible results framework or results chain was derived. This will be our instrument of implementation, a “live” document that the partnership fully recognized would need to be refreshed, updated and primarily guide the project on its delivery and learning journey.

## *4. Identify the range of our expected results*

We identified the impact, outcomes, output, the broad parameters we agreed to work to. We expect, should our assumptions hold, that we will achieve these results but we know that our results will not be exactly as we expect. Here there is an assumption that we will systematically try out different

activities to achieve the desired outcomes. This is not mere “trial and error”. Rather, at our site of activity implementation, we try out our approach, reflect on what we achieve as well as the assumptions we are working to, dialogue amongst ourselves, iterate and adapt our activities to get us as close as possible to our desired outcomes and impact. We monitor our results closely, comparing them with the ones we first predicted under our original assumptions. By monitoring our results in this way we gain a real and deeper understanding of what works and why, as well as what has failed to work and why that has happened.

## *5. Agree our indicators for each of the results*

In defining the expected results, we identified a core set of (and subsidiary) indicators with which to measure our results. We acknowledge that we do not have total clarity as to which indicators are the best measures, and acknowledge that some modification will most probably occur. Each indicator will be monitored and examined for what it tells us. How closely, in reality, are they measuring the results we set out to achieve? How closely aligned are they to the changes we want to see? What do they truly tell us in relation to our results? How realistic, and most importantly, how accurate are they in indicating the success or otherwise of our direction of travel?

## *6. Define how we will measure our indicators, develop the appropriate tools and collect data*

We have located the data sources for our core indicators and we have identified who will collect this and with what tools will they be collected. Yet even here we have made allowances for changes to these instruments, sources of data etc. should we need to adapt these in the course of the project.

## *7. Define our adaptive budget*

How do we adapt in the event of fixed and inflexible budgets? It is interesting to reflect on theoretical adaptive management discourse. There is an assumption that projects can “persuade” donors to allow them greater flexibility in allocating projects funds. It is possible that this level of engagement may have resulted in budget rules being relaxed for some, but for most this is an unreality. While most donors of aid (or loaners of aid) would probably not define themselves as being advocates or the purveyors of inflexible budgeting systems, they are nonetheless guardians of the “command and control approaches” to disbursing funds and receiving accountability about the use of these funds. All the components of the design phase described above have budgetary implications. Adaptive budgeting, as an enabler of an adaptively managed project, suggests that we need to power down on traditional, annual-budget, pre-defined and pre-allocated processes, but to what? Entrust people more with the capacity and autonomy to think, reflect, learn and improve the deployment of resources in support of evidence being generated through their work. The designers of budget accountability

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systems in the development sector are yet to embrace the levels of flexibility and innovation required for this type of responsiveness and adaptation. We recognize the limitations potentially placed on any adaptively managed project because of these structural constraints.

## *8. Develop our learning and adaptation plan*

Some definable structure is required in which learning can systematically occur. We developed these learning spaces in the design stage of our project. Learning enables the systematic documentation of our approach and results, and an opportunity to continuously examine these. Ahead of the learning taking place we need to identify those critical junctures where we “take stock” of our progress. At these points we reflect on our experiences to understand what activities worked or did not work and why. And then adapt our project direction/plan/vision – our ToC. Something changes in the adaptation phase of our work – either our assumptions and/or our activities and/or our context and/or our monitoring approach. We change one or more of these to respond to our new evidence.

## *9. Develop our evaluation plan*

We have built in and plan to use participatory, equity-focused, gender-responsive methods, most evident in developmental evaluation or utilization focused evaluation approaches both of which are designed to be responsive to the complexities of adaptively managed projects. Our learning plan supports our evaluation plan – which also needs to respond to non-traditional forms of formative and summative evaluation.

### Ongoing commitment

We have just described phase I – the design stage in outline form of our adaptive HEI project. It is one of four key stages which we will document from a project management perspective. If this first stage sounds exhausting, we might want to think of it like a marriage needing the effort and commitment that goes into making one a success. Commitment is for the long haul. And how many of us have it, in reality, for people and projects often “far removed” from us?

Projects often try to solve problems from the surface – or “tip of the iceberg”. In adaptive management, and its accompanying enabler adaptive MEL, there is a commitment to exploring the lower level, more complex, meaningful and potentially more change enabling structures. This is done primarily by examining, understanding, critiquing and responding to the linkages and interactions between these structures in iterative fashion within the parameters we have outlined above. This is not an easy task – and this is certainly not supported in practice by most major agencies of development known to the sector.