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# APPLYING ADAPTIVE THEORY OF CHANGE IN FRAGILE AND CONFLICT AFFECTED SETTINGS

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**Léonie Borel** Léonie Borel is a consultant at Tana Copenhagen, with experience in democracy and governance, humanitarian sector, refugee/asylum-seekers rights, and livelihoods development. She has worked on several large and complex evaluations for Sida, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the World Food Programme.

**Julian Brett** Julian Brett is a senior development consultant with Tana Copenhagen with over twenty five years experience from development and stabilisation assignments in fragile and conflict affected countries.

**Erik Bryld** Erik Bryld is the managing director of Tana Copenhagen. He has undertaken evaluations, research and design assignments in fragile and conflict affected states for more than twenty years.

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# Foreword by EBA

At the end of 2020, the Swedish Agency for Public Management (Statskontoret) and the Swedish National Financial Management Authority (ESV) undertook a review of the government's governance of Sida, and of the agency's internal efficiency and management procedures. One of the recommendations to Sida was that the authority should develop its work with theories of change in order to strengthen learning and the application of experience, evaluation and evidence in the implementation of the government's strategies.

To contribute to this work, EBA decided to produce an anthology with texts that shed light on theories of change from different perspectives. Before the finalisation of the anthology, the contributions, of which this is one, are published as separate working papers.

In this text, Léonie Borel, Julian Brett and Erik Bryld describe how theories of change can be used as a tool for adaptive management of aid and development cooperation. They focus on fragile and conflict affected settings, where the importance of being able of adapt is especially important. The authors then go on to describe how an adaptive approach can be evaluated, to ensure learning.

Swedish aid and development cooperation need to be able to adapt to changing circumstances. This is true not only for individual projects or programmes, but for entire portfolios and strategies. It is EBAs hope that this text will contribute to a better understanding of how theories of change can be used in complex and changing contexts to support adaptability.

EBA working papers are shorter studies that investigate a question of limited scope or that complements a regular EBA study. Working papers are not subject to a formal decision from the expert group but instead reviewed by the secretariat before publication. The authors are, as with other EBA publications, responsible for the content of the report and its conclusions.

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Jan Pettersson, Managing Director

# Introduction

Problems of poverty, vulnerability and human rights realisation continue to persist in fragile and conflict affected contexts for several reasons. For one, they continue to be affected by violence and political instability, and second the complexity and fragility of social, economic, and political systems in which the issues are situated persevere (Booth et al, 2018). Traditionally, the aid community prefers a tight control and management of development initiatives. Such control results in linear and rigid programme management and favours predictability (Arora et al, 2019). As a consequence, aid programmes can be unresponsive to change in the settings in which they are located unless they are alert to the complex interplay between contextual factors and have ways to internalise and reflect upon changes that may occur.

The aid community is increasingly recognising that the complexity of problems, the high pace of change, and interconnectedness of variables, particularly in fragile and conflict affected settings, requires a more adaptive approach (Arora et al, 2019). These contexts are typically exposed to unpredictable changes in the interplay between stakeholders, security, governance, climate etc. As the Fragile States Index illustrates, there are a significant number of countries performing consistently poorly in relation to group grievances, fractionalised and kleptocratic elites, predatory security actors, crime, corruption, uneven economic development, weak human rights – each with implications for the predictability (or lack of) political, economic, and social performance and cohesion (Fund for Peace, 2021) and thus the assumptions upon which programming is based.

Uncertainties and change in strategy development and intervention programming assumptions require adaptative, rather than the traditional rigid and tight management (Arora et al, 2019). Particularly in fragile, and conflict affected contexts, there is a need for regular Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) that considers the applicable variables affecting interventions (GSDRC, 2007; Walden, 2013). Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) in these contexts should be flexible, iterative, adaptable and allow for the involvement of stakeholders in a participatory manner (GSDRC, 2007; Walden, 2013). In other words, an adaptable M&E mechanism needs to monitor assumed causalities as well as expected and unexpected results. This focus on causality underscores the relevance of the use of theory of change in programme design and implementation in these contexts.

Theory of change explains the assumptions that underpin expected results. It is a multifaceted and more flexible tool compared to traditional logical frameworks and allows for causality explanations that are relevant in complex settings where there is a risk of programme failure if the assumptions behind expected results do not hold true.

By providing a stronger basis for MEL, theory of change also helps facilitate adaptation over time. Indeed, adaptability "requires an environment that promotes intentional learning and flexible project design" (USAID, 2018:1), from minor programming adjustments to wholesale revision of results frameworks and programme assumptions. Theories of change are therefore often used in development programmes and evaluations as a reflection tool and results-focused approach that describes the logical change pathways that are embedded in programming (Vogel, 2012, Tana 2014). However, in practice, much development programming has had weak or absent theories of change (Bryld et al, 2019) which poses challenges for programme management as well as evaluation.

As is evident in the current global COVID-19 health crisis, instability is not limited to certain operational areas; it can be global. An adaptive answer is therefore not only necessary in the field, but at every level of an operation (field, country, and headquarters) and between stakeholders (Carrier, 2020). The more unstable the context, the more vulnerable to change will be the intervention and the greater the demands for monitoring and adaptability. However, such adaptability has implications for evaluability, especially regarding the object of the evaluation considering that the expectations for results and the assumptions underpinning them are changing over time. In short, it raises the question of what one is evaluating?

This article explores the implications for the planning, implementation and evaluation of aid programmes as well as strategies in fragile and conflict-effected settings where an adaptive management approach has been used and it includes reflections on the tools and approaches that can be drawn upon to improve these processes. The article will start by considering adaptive management, its definition and use in aid and development. Then, three key tools in adaptive management will be presented: theory of change, political economy analysis and action research. Finally, the article will discuss how these tools can be applied to improve the evaluation of aid programmes employing adaptive management in fragile and conflict affected settings.

# Overview of Adaptive Management

Being able to adapt requires institutional learning and a management environment that promotes flexible project design and implementation. Such an environment allows for managing in an adaptable way (USAID, 2018). Adaptive management is thus particularly suited for work in environments that are unstable, fragile and/or in transition, where the context, operational objectives or methods can change significantly (USAID, 2018; Carrier, 2020) and which demands flexibility. It is in such environments that practitioners must be able to adapt in response to contextual changes and new information. Adaptation to new circumstances allows for programmes to move forward, even if the information needed for the programme is incomplete (Carrier, 2020). However, even in the most stable contexts, circumstances may change and therefore affect programming in irregular ways (USAID, 2018).

As an alternative approach to development programming, adaptive management challenges the traditional, rigid technical assessment of a problem and its associated solution (Schlingheider et al, 2017). The approach puts more emphasis on non-linearity, local relationships, and leadership, and at the same time criticises traditional programme management for being "distant from the ground reality and encouraging short-termism over the larger problem" (Arora et al, 2019:3).

Adaptive management is defined as an "intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context" (USAID, 2018:1). It is not about changing the objectives during the implementation of a programme. Rather, it is about adapting the way those objectives are achieved, if needed, in response to wider changes (USAID, 2018). The overall objective of the approach is to incorporate a real-time learning element into programme management to ensure that the intervention remains fit for purpose. As Bunnefeld et al (2015: i) define it:

> "It is an iterative process for continually improving management by learning from how current management affects the system. Adaptive Management is therefore based on monitoring and evaluating past management and devising alternative actions that can be tested against desired objectives"

Arora et al (2019) base adaptive management on six core principles: 1) an evolving theory of change, 2) stakeholder alignment, 3) experimentation, and learning, 4) locally led and politically savvy, 5) resource availability, and 6) management flexibility. In turn, OXFAM recognises three pillars: 1) fostering flexibility for planning, 2) developing locally owned tools, practices, and partnerships for M&E, and 3) creating an enabling environment for learning (in Schlingheider et al, 2017). There is a degree of agreement between the two; notably in the emphasis on the learning environment and leadership. Importantly, the approach should also be context specific (Arora et al, 2019; Pasanen & Barnett, 2019; Schlingheider et al, 2017). Thus, while adaptive management is defined differently depending on the author or the organisation, the following are the most common components of this approach (Carrier, 2020):

- Accepted uncertainty about what will (or will not) work to meet the given challenges.
- Priority given to understanding 'why' changes are occurring.
- Short cycles and iterative decision-making.
- Continuous and rapid learning.
- A particular focus on human relations.

Importantly for our consideration of its application in fragile and conflict-affected settings, adaptive management allows for programmes to move forward even if there is incomplete information. Notably, the approach is not an excuse to default from commitments made by donors and reduce the accountability of the delivery partner to produce results (Arora et al, 2019). Instead, it aims to secure results through actively responding to changes that would otherwise risk programme failure. Figure 1 illustrates the adaptive management cycle.

**Figure 1: The Adaptative Management Cycle, adapted from Carrier (2020) and DPIPWE (2016)**



As the diagram shows, adaptive management is fundamentally dependent upon the injection of empirical knowledge and learning at critical phases of the project or programme cycle, notably during the design and planning phase (to ensure that plans reflect the environment in which they are located, that objectives are relevant and realistic, that activities are feasible and appropriate etc.) and then subsequently during implementation to ensure that experience and lessons are captured and fed back into the project, informing adjustments to implementation as required.

The following Box 1 highlights how adaptive management was used in the unstable and fragile aid/development context of Sierra Leone during the Ebola crisis.

**Box 1: Adaptative Management in Sierra Leone in the context of Ebola**

Two education projects in Sierra Leone responded to the Ebola situation in very different ways even if they faced the same change in context. Both initiatives were implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and showed how adaptive management helps projects to accomplish results in the face of changing circumstances. The IRC was managing several education projects in Sierra Leone when the Ebola outbreak began in May 2014. The Ebola outbreak rendered both the LWOL (Lɛ Wi ɔl Lan) and GEC (Girls' Education Challenge) projects impossible to implement in their original forms, as schools were closed nationwide. LWOL was designed iteratively from the start, with a flexible funder who trusted the implementing agency and gave field employees autonomy. This project immediately switched its focus

and continued to promote education in the Kenema district of south-eastern Sierra Leone. By contrast, the GEC project featured a complicated coalition as well as stringent donor conditions. At the height of the Ebola outbreak, it shut down operations for nearly nine months before resuming with a new strategy that swiftly proved obsolete.

While the GEC project suspended all field activities, the LWOL project conducted an informal risk assessment of the outbreak's impact on learning. This led to the development of an alternative model focused on small groups learning, facilitated by unsalaried community teachers, and supported by community members. The LOWL levered existing adaptive capabilities and enablers in the face in crisis, while the GEC was unable to overcome its changing context. Donor flexibility and trust in the project implementer, devolved decision making and empowered field staff, and team culture and flexibility enabled LWOL to succeed even when the environment changed. On the contrary, consortium challenges, donor rigidity and delays were barriers to the GEC project.

(Mercy Corps, 2016)

# Key Tools in Adaptive Programme Management

There are a number of tools that can be employed to facilitate an adaptive approach to aid management. Here we will explore three of the most common.

## Adaptable Theory of Change

While traditional logical framework approaches can be seen as being rigid and linear, rooted in implicit understandings of causality, adaptative management considers theory of change as a key tool because it helps explain the causality involved in developmental change and thus provides us with the opportunity to adjust implementation when it appears from project monitoring that key assumptions and pre-conditions will no longer hold true. The validity of a theory of change and the assumptions on which it is based should constantly be tested through interaction with the real world (Arora et al, 2019).

Within adaptive programmes, a theory of change approach is most useful when it is regularly updated and reflected on throughout the programme implementation (Pasanen & Barnett, 2019). Indeed, it needs to be recognised that the assumptions underlying the theory of change do not necessarily hold true throughout the programme cycle (Pasanen & Bernett, 2019; USAID, 2018; Bryld et al 2020). Theory of change should therefore not be treated as an "one-off exercise for a design or inception phase" (Pasanen & Bernett, 2019:14). Rather, underlying assumptions and theories on how change is expected to happen (and actually happens) should be regularly reviewed to bring value and facilitate learning and adaptation that enables the intervention to remain relevant. The continued validity of programme assumptions and explanations of change thus become a key focus for programme monitoring and learning.

In traditional results terminology, while outcomes can remain the same in adaptive programming, it is the outputs, assumptions, strategies and pathways that can change with the context, or when new information emerges (Pasanen & Barnett, 2019). USAID (2018), for example, recommends defining higher level outcomes, but to leave lower-level outcomes undefined to allow for adaptation during implementation.

Theory of change should start with a simple results framework and gradually include different pathways, assumptions, and causal feedback loops (Pasanen & Barnett, 2019). These pathways explain how change is expected to happen and thus, if made explicit, can be checked and tested and can be adjusted if found wanting due to changes in the context.

USAID (2019) also sees the theory of change as a living document that should be revisited and adjusted throughout implementation. The following Table 1 illustrates how theory of change can be useful for adaptive programming, especially in complex and fragile settings.

**Table 1: Usefulness of Theory of Change in Function of the Type of Adaptive Programming (Pasanen & Barnett, 2019)**

| Type of adaptive programming | Usefulness of Theory of Change |
| --- | --- |
| Innovative | Can aid in the mapping of original thoughts, as well as the discovery of implicit assumptions and prospective change routes. It's critical to keep track of new evidence as it comes in. |
| Uncertain or contested pathway of change | Can aid in the mapping of various or contentious change pathways, as well as the updating and reorganization of a team's ideas as a programme progress. It can also be used to reach an agreement between opposing ideas or to encourage strategy innovation. |
| Operate in uncertain or unstable environments | In addition to the foregoing, theory of change can aid in the clarification and comprehension of assumptions and constraints relating to an uncertain and complicated environment. |

Applying the participatory, reflective and context specific approach upon which adaptive management rests demands a strong alignment with and cooperation between stakeholders, especially the intended beneficiaries. Decision-making should be cognisant of and take into account the experiences and observations of the field level. Such an approach ensures that programmes integrate local considerations and a strong understanding of the context into their decision making (Arora et al, 2019). Furthermore, the approach should accept 'successful failure' as a basis for adaptation. Programme managers should clearly identify, understand, and accept that a path taken did not work. There should be an understanding between stakeholders that pathways can fail but be an occasion for learning.

Box 2 and Box 3 below provide examples of how an adaptable theory of change was used in two projects in South East Asia. What is common to both is the employment of participatory monitoring and learning processes that enabled the projects concerned to be adjusted to reflect changes in the contexts and planning assumptions.

**Box 2: Adaptable Theory of Change in Action of Climate Today**

ACT was a £23 million DFID funded technical assistance programme to support countries in South Asia to mainstream climate change resilience factors into their policies and budgets. The programme started in 2014 and lasted until March 2019. It was managed by a consortium of partners across five countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal & Pakistan). The overall programme theory of change, results framework and monitoring indicators evolved over the duration of ACT. The original log frame was designed in a way that outcomes were clear, and outputs flexible to meet the demand of government partners. The inception period being very short, it was challenging for the team to design the full programme scope. There were further risks to adjust in relation to relationships with stakeholders and delivery partners.

The programme managed those challenges through an evolving theory of change principle:

- The planning period extended from the inception period to the first year of implementation.

- Long-range exercises were used in which consultations with government and non-governmental partners informed the selection of focal sectors.

- The use of location-specific strategies which articulated the theory of change in each location, as well as analysis of risks and key decision points.

- A participatory annual governance on climate change assessment, involving focus group discussions with local stakeholders, documented changes on a range of indicators related to the local enabling environment. This was a critical point to the evolution of the strategy.

- Use of a flexible and rapid response mechanism to respond to unanticipated requests from government.

- A sustainability planning exercise was carried out in the last two years to identify elements introduced by the programme that needed to be sustained.

(Arora et al, 2019)

**Box 3: Adaptable Theory of Change, Sabal Programme in Nepal**

After two years of operations, the Sabal programme team in Nepal felt that a collaborative review and restructuring of Sabal's theory of change would help the team reflect on contextual and operational changes. These changes included a devastating earthquake, budget cuts, and an administrative restructuring of the Government of Nepal. The Sabal programme organised two workshops for staff members from districts, central and headquarters levels to analyse evidence, review mid-term evaluation findings, test previous theory of change links and assumptions, and adapt the programme's implementation design and approach accordingly.

It was reported that the process felt like a burdensome donor requirement by many staff members. However, after the workshop, the mindset changed. The theory of change revision helped the team visualise the different contextual and operational changes that had taken place and adapt components of implementation based on these changes and new evidence. The theory of change was understood as a living project tool for improving implementation. As a result, Sabal shifted its implementation to improve integration and layering of livelihoods, health and nutrition, and disaster risk reduction and climate change adaption activities to enhance resilience outcomes.

(Pasanen & Barnett, 2019)

# Political Economy Analysis and Action Research as Enabling Adaptability

Political economy analysis (PEA) and action research are well suited for an adaptive management approach. PEA is a diagnostic tool that captures nuances and change in stakeholders, contexts, institutions, norms, power relations, relationships and other issues that may affect the programme (Pasanen & Bernett, 2019; USAID, 2018; Whaites, 2017). It allows us to understand what is 'going on' in a situation – being political, economic, social and cultural – and what lies behind the surface of the immediate problem (Whaites, 2017, USAID, 2018). PEA should help to prepare programme strategies, theories of change, and not simply to satisfy one's curiosity (Whaites, 2017; USAID, 2018). It is mostly used at the beginning of a programme but can be used at regular intervals during the implementation, especially in fragile and complex contexts to highlight changes from baselines and assess the continued validity of assumptions. Importantly PEA can help adaptive programmes to think politically by facilitating regular reflection and analysis among programme teams on what developments in power relations mean for the programme. It has implications on how a team might think, revise, or adapt the theory of change and the expectations regarding results. The following Table 2 outlines the usefulness of PEA in different contexts and shows its particular value when operating in fragile and conflict affected environments.

**Table 2: Usefulness of Political Economy Analysis in Function of the Type of Adaptive Programming (Pasanen & Barnett, 2019)**

| Type of adaptive programming | Usefulness of Political Economy Analysis |
|---|---|
| Innovative | Understanding the relationships, dynamics, and context in which the programme runs can help you understand why a new service or solution works (or doesn't). Programmes that attempt to find innovative solutions for a problem, on the other hand, may benefit more from a problem analysis or user requirements study. |
| Uncertain or contested pathway of change | It's critical to appreciate variances in the socioeconomic and political environment, especially if a programme with ambiguous or controversial change paths operates in various places, and how changes in the context may influence the programme. PEA can also help a team have a better grasp of how change occurs and what external influences can influence it. |
| Operate in uncertain or unstable environments | In fragile and conflict-affected situations, where the issue of constructing stable societies is fundamentally political, understanding opportunities and impediments for policy reforms, as well as the role of a programme in supporting those reforms, is critical. |

To illustrate how these considerations apply in practice, we can consider the experience of a long-term project aimed at enhancing the accountability of informal camp managers (so-called "gatekeepers") in internally displaced areas in Mogadishu, Somalia. Here, PEA was used throughout the project cycle to understand how gatekeepers became a resilient power structure and remained unavoidable power brokers in relation to the protection and assistance of internally displaced persons (IDPs). The project based the PEA on two steps:

- A concept note based on the original study on gatekeepers in Mogadishu (Bryld et al, 2013), outlining the main theory of change and approach for a possible improvement of gatekeepers' accountability.

- A feasibility study, after reviewing the relevance of the concept note, to reassess the local political economy and identify possible IDP settlements to work in, while articulating specific work streams.

This PEA informed the intervention actions of the project, carried out under the form of an action research implementation. The PEA, however, was not a one-off exercise. Instead, it was updated regularly and used to validate the assumptions underpinning the project. Combining PEA and action research, the team found that some of the assumptions identified in the theory of change in the project design phase could not be validated (see Box 4 below). These findings meant that the project team needed to reassess the project's theory of change and realign it with the new information. The resulting change to the implementation strategy enhanced the effectiveness of the project (Bryld et al, 2020).

**Box 4: Adapting the theory of change of the Tana Copenhagen Gatekeeper project in Mogadishu using action research and PEA**

The gatekeeper project in Mogadishu was designed to ensure that informal settlement managers (aka Gatekeepers) of informal IDP settlements became accountable to the IDPs in an otherwise predatory IDP environment.

The first theory of change was based on the assumption that IDPs would move to IDP settlements with the best services. However, the PEA and action research found that IDPs settled with clan and ethnic likeminded groups and that movements between settlements were challenging. The initial assumption was thus not validated.

Based on the action research and PEA work, the team found that what motivated accountability of the informal settlement managers was recognition and linkages to authorities and the aid community. Using this motivation, the team changed the project theory of change by introducing the assumption that linkages with the authorities and international community would motivate the settlement manager to improve services and accountabilities to IDPs. This change enhanced project effectiveness.

(Bryld et al, 2014; 2017; 2020)

Action Research is a label that covers similar approaches used to carry out research that is typically values-based, action oriented and participatory (Popplewell & Hayman, 2012). It is usually defined as:

> "A participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in pursuit of worthwhile human purposes … it seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities" (Popplewell & Hayman, 2012:2)

Being a cycle, action research is well suited for facilitating and promoting organisational learning and informing theory of change adaptation. Researchers and practitioners collaborate on planning, acting, reflecting, and learning cycles (Popplewell & Hayman, 2012). Individuals research, analyse, and assess their activities and experiences before learning from them, rather than learning something, banking it, and then implementing it (Popplewell & Hayman, 2012). Action research is especially favoured in M&E by practitioners due to its participatory nature. The approach enhances the retention of learning, facilitates downward responsibility, and develops in-depth understanding of local communities and situations during project implementation and not only at the project design phase (Popplewell & Hayman, 2012).

Action research has the possibility to facilitate downward accountability (to stakeholders, participants, and beneficiaries), as well as upward accountability (to donors and senior organisational management). The following Box 4 highlights the different components of the action research undertaken in this in the gatekeeper project to inform project theory of change adaptation (Bryld et al, 2020).

**Box 5: Action Research Components Enabling an Adaptive Approach to Making Gatekeepers Accountable to IDPS in Somalia**

- Throughout implementation, different action research was undertaken to inform activities and test the theory of change. Results from this research were used to adjust implementation. The action research included the following components:

- Open – and closed-ended questionnaires surveys with IDPs and host communities in around the targeted settlements.

- Semi-structured interviews with informal settlement managers, District Commissioners and NGOs representatives.

- Focus group discussions with IDPs and informal settlement managers – 16 in total in the project cycle.

- Social mapping carried out jointly with IDPs in three settlements.

- Observations during six different training events utilising role-plays to gain further insights into the social and power dynamics.

- Multiple field monitoring visits.

(Bryld et al, 2020)

Building on political economy analysis and an action research implementation, Bryld et al (2020) demonstrated the effectiveness of an adaptive management approach in theory of change application to enhance accountability in difficult environments in the aid/development sector. Without adaptation, the project would have been set in stone from the design phase and would have been less likely to adjust as it was implemented. As Booth et al 2018:9 states: adaptive management is where the theory of change is "revisited and reassessed at regular intervals […], on this basis decisions are taken to adjust, extend and/or abandon current operations until optimal effectiveness is achieved."

# Evaluations using adaptive Theory of Change

Adaptive management brings additional challenges for "monitoring and evaluating programmes as they need intentional design from the start that is oriented toward both learning and accountability" (Pasanen & Barnett, 2019:7). However, there are a few components to consider before conducting evaluations of programmes implemented through an adaptive management approach. This section will look at the evaluation of programmes using adaptable theory of change and results frameworks in complex and fragile settings.

In the context of an evaluation, the theory of change approach is concerned with overall programme outcomes and synergies between various strands of an intervention or a portfolio of interventions (Blamey and Mackenzie, 2007). Traditionally, evaluations are often undertaken towards the end of a programme and result in the production of a single evaluation report. They assess the performance of an intervention according to a set of criteria, typically relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, sustainability and coherence (OECD, 2021). Performance is assessed against the objectives set in the results framework – did the engagement achieve what it set out to do and did the assumptions underlying the theory of change hold true?

As referred to above, using a theory of change approach allows to develop evaluation questions and methodologies that are context-related, while also reflecting hypotheses about how change occurs. These hypotheses can be tested and validated/disproved in relation to the context in question provided that sufficient and correct data is collected and analysed. As part of this, the theory clarifies the assumptions relating to the context, and is a way of mapping out the logical sequence of an initiative (Tana, 2014).

However, fragile and conflict-affected settings pose special challenges for evaluation, not least because of their fluid contexts and the effects of these on programme implementation. As we have discussed, adaptive management provides a means to reflect such changes in programme assumptions and activity, thereby maintaining programme relevance and effectiveness. But for evaluation purposes, it also means that reconstructing a theory of change from the original project design is often insufficient to capture results actually achieved because such an approach will disregard formal and informal changes made during the course of an adaptive implementation.

To mitigate this, evaluations will need to capture such formal and informal changes to assess relevance, effectiveness and impact. In some instances, using an adaptive "theory in-use" approach to evaluations may mean doing evaluation real-time during the implementation. Such real time evaluations (RTE) allow teams to make changes to implementation, using information from the evaluation. Referring to figure 1 on the adaptable management cycle, the light green arrow 'adjust' illustrates the aforementioned approach, also known as 'double-loop learning'.

In other cases, ex post evaluations conducted following the conclusion of an intervention will need to take into account the formal and informal changes made during the intervention's lifetime and assess the relevance and effectiveness of such changes in relation to the overall objectives. In results terms, it will make most sense to assess the effects of changes in outputs (normally the focus for adaptive management) on an intervention's outcomes and overall impact. Thus, the evaluation question will be whether the adaptation served to maintain or improve the intervention's outcomes and contribution to impact? To answer this, there will be a need to know what the original theory of change was, what the changes in context were, and whether and how the intervention responded to these.

In the evaluation of Sida's support to peacebuilding in conflict and post-conflict contexts over 25 years, a timeline theory-based approach was developed and applied (Bryld et al, 2019). As this evaluation covers several decades, the theories of change underpinning the interventions in a number of case study countries were reconstructed (based on an assessment of the portfolio through documents and interviews) for important strategy periods or for their significant contextual relevance (Bryld et al, 2019). The identified theories of change were then mapped and assessed against: (1) the contextual events in the period; (2) their explicit and implicit targeting of key conflict and peace drivers in the country; (3) major international events; and (4) engagements by other development partners in the period (Bryld et al, 2019). This timeline approach provided an overview of Sida's ability to respond to the peacebuilding context in a relevant and effective manner across different periods through the application by the evaluation team of an adaptive theory-based evaluation approach.

The same time-line theory-based approach has also been used in recent several Norad-funded evaluations. As an example, the Evaluation of Norway's engagement in South Sudan 2005–2018 found that: 'Norway and implementing partners were able to adapt to a changing context and to maintain the ability to operate. ... However, this adapted engagement was not always driven by an explicitly articulated Theory of Change, which often requires a different technical and evidence-based perspective. Programme management on the basis of trust and relationship lacked systematic reflection that would have allowed Norway and its partners to assess their learning, or clearly articulate on what evidence or experiences programmatic adaptations were made.' (Norad 2020b: 83).

However, a timeline theory-based approach should not be the only approach considered to evaluations with adaptable theories of change. The following table 3 provides a summary of other tools and approaches that can be used.

**Table 3: Key Tools for Evaluations with Adaptative Theory of Change**

| Tools | Use in Evaluation with Adaptable Theory of Change |
|---|---|
| Double Loop Learning | Expansion of single-loop cycle of acting-adjusting-acting by adding systematic reflection and interpretation that looks beyond the immediate course of events and questions context variables, assumptions, or theory of change. (DMFA, 2020; William & Brown, 2018) |
| Most Significant Change | It entails the gathering and selection of change stories created by programme or project stakeholders. It is a participatory strategy that entails involving stakeholders in a discussion, analysis, and documentation of change. This tool can be used in projects and programmes where it is not possible to precisely predict desired changes beforehand and is therefore difficult to set pre-defined indicators of change (INTRAC, 2017a) |
| Contribution Analysis | Contribution Analysis is a technique for determining the impact of a development intervention on a change or collection of changes. Rather than producing conclusive proof, the goal is to create a believable, evidence-based narrative of contribution that a reasonable person would likely agree with. Contribution analysis can be utilized during, after, or during a development intervention (INTRAC, 2017b). It is a theory-based confirmatory evaluation approach to understand a programme's contribution to observed changes, by building and verifying the programme's contribution story (Pasanen & Barnett, 2019). |
| Outcome Harvesting | Outcome Harvesting can be used to support causal analysis at specific time-points. Outcome Harvesting is an objective free exploratory evaluation approach to capture a variety of outcomes, including unintended ones (Pasanen & Barnett, 2019). Outcome Harvesting has proven to be particularly beneficial in complex scenarios when most of what an intervention wants to achieve, or even what precise activities will be conducted over a multi-year period, cannot be defined concretely (Wilson-Grau,2015). |
| Outcome Mapping | Outcome Mapping, as a method of evaluation, deconstructs an initiative's theory of change, provides a framework for collecting data on immediate, fundamental changes that lead to longer, more transformative changes, and allows for a realistic assessment of the initiative's contribution to outcomes. It is a strong methodology that can be adapted to a wide range of contexts (Hearn, 2013). |

# Applying adaptive management at strategy level

Adaptive management can also be applied at a strategy level using the same principles and tools as outlined above. This is well illustrated from an evaluation perspective as described in the three evaluations referred to above, which all pertain to either global strategies (the Sida peacebuilding evaluation) or multiple year country strategies (the Norad evaluations). Often adaptation takes place when one strategy period is about to expire and stock-taking processes provide inputs to a new strategy period.

There are very few actual examples of strategy adaptation during the course of implementation. In many contexts where adaptation is needed there is instead a tendency to let a strategy expire or extend the current strategy. An example of this has been the last year or two's engagement in Afghanistan where several countries decided to extend existing strategies in a situation where the future has been uncertain. Interviews undertaken by the authors to this article in September 2020 revealed that key development partners such as USAID, EU, FCDO, UN as well as smaller partners such as Denmark refrained from updating their strategy but instead either let the strategy run out or extended it.

The lack of new strategy development provides a lot of flexibility, but also risks undermining strategic direction in the work undertaken. Based on past evaluation of strategies (Bryld et al, 2019; Norad, 2020a and 2020b), we can show how strategies can be adapted and how the use of scenario planning can further improve this process.

We argue that the tools and processes presented above are suited to the adaptation of strategy processes in the same way as they are applied to programmes. This means applying political economy analysis and regularly updated research to assess the context and inform decision-making about challenges or opportunities which may merit or require adaptation. As highlighted in the text above, the key to adaptation is the identification of a theory of change and regular assessment of the underlying assumptions. These need to be precise enough to provide a monitorable foundation against which to assess change. Assumptions can then be validated during the course of strategy application. And changes will be reflected in adjustments to the strategy and programming.

**Figure 2: Strategy Adaptation Processes**
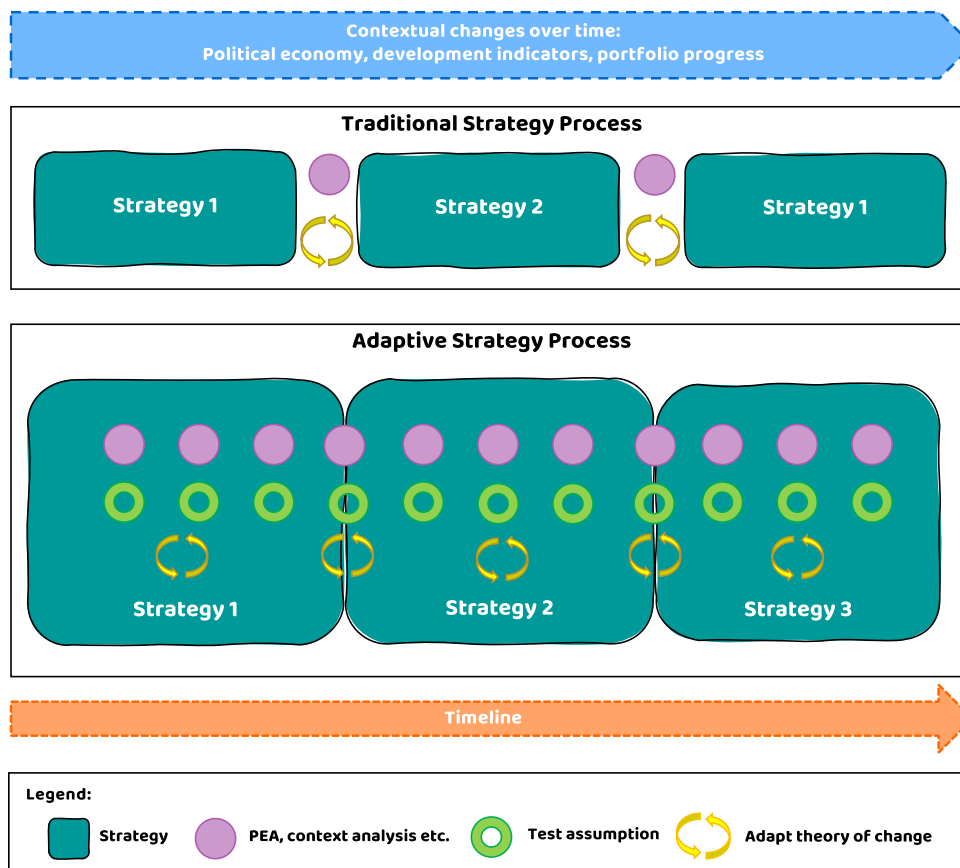


We illustrate the strategy adaptation process in the figure 2 above and how this relates to the tools for application and assumption validation processes over time. The figure here shows how (i) a normal strategy process typically involves an assessment of context and needs at the end of a strategy period, which then informs a new strategy. Often the strategy period is five years during which considerable changes in context may be expected (changes in government, for example) causing the strategy to become less relevant. And such changes will be reflected in the new strategy, but obviously with a time-lag. The figure also illustrates (ii) an adaptable approach where more regular PEA and research is undertaken. These analyses are used to test assumptions of the underlying theory of change at regular intervals. If assumptions cannot be validated, this will result in an adaptation to the theory of change, with knock on effects requiring changes at intervention level. This therefore provides greater opportunity for maintaining theory of change and programming relevance, maintaining effectiveness, minimising risks, including the potential for harm.

Needless to say, an adaptive strategy process requires the same mindset of accepting 'successful failure' and the willingness of the management to change strategies as they are implemented. It furthermore requires resources to undertake the needed analysis which can inform the validation of assumptions. Clearly, contexts such as typically found in fragile and conflict affected states which are vulnerable to rapid and possibly significant and multi-sector change, require both risk taking and regular assessment to keep strategies and programming up-to-date. The consequences of not doing this include weak results, programme failure and possibly also harm.

# Conclusion

Adaptive management is not a new concept in the aid/development sector. However, it is becoming increasingly promoted for development projects in unstable, fragile, and insecure contexts and there is therefore a need to consider its implications for planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Indeed, these contexts continue to be affected by political insecurity and have complex and fragile social, economic, and political systems, allowing fragility to persevere. As an approach to strategy development and development programming, adaptive management challenges the rigid traditional technical assessment of the problem and its associated solution (Schlingheider et al, 2017). Adaptive management requires regular Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning in all contexts but is especially important in fragile and complex settings. A variety of tools can be considered for adaptive programming management, such as theory of change, political economy analysis and action research.

Traditionally, evaluations have often focused on the formal or reconstructed theory of change from the programme design. However, this will not capture formal and informal changes from the project implementation or strategy application and the reasons for these adaptations, understandings which are as important for evaluation as they are for successful implementation. The use of action research and political economy analysis will provide greater clarity of contextual changes that have implications for programme implementation – specifically, they will provide knowledge about the implications of such changes for the assumptions underpinning programme theories of change. Such knowledge can be used to adapt assumptions about the causal links between different levels within the results chain, notably between outputs and outcomes, and allow adjustments to activities and outputs to be made. Regular monitoring will enable interventions to assess their continued relevance and effectiveness provided that the factors affecting change are made explicit.

To be meaningful, real time and ex post evaluations need to also use an adaptive theory-based approach that assesses the reasons for changes to programme implementation and their effects. This will be particularly relevant in fragile and conflict-affected settings where change can be expected to be frequent and complex. As illustrated in this article, there are a variety of tools available to undertake adaptive management as well as tools for evaluating such adaptations. This article shows how a time-line theory-based approach can be considered if the evaluation is

undertaken ex-post. The approach can be applied irrespective of whether an intervention has an explicit theory of change or not. It works on the basis of theories of change that are reconstructed from the evidence (or lack) of changes to interventions' results frameworks, changes in context that are documented through political economy analysis or similar approaches, and primary data collected from implementors and beneficiaries. The changes can then be set against a timeline of contextual changes. It requires that changes to an intervention's outputs are documented and enables the assessment of the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and coherence of these and their outcomes and contribution to impact.

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