

Introduction to adaptive management

This guidance note is elaborated upon requests from Sida's cooperation partners. As Sida is not implementing projects and programmes ourselves, the section on how to apply adaptive management is based on the experiences of implementing organisations.

Why adaptive management?

Sometimes, apparently successful development programmes have very limited impact. E.g. governments adopt reforms which are not being implemented or the capacity of organisations are being built but they do not change their ways of working.

This happens because in many cases development progress cannot be predicted in advance, the causal relationship between input and results is not apparent and solutions are not simple or obvious. In such cases it is often a waste of time to elaborate detailed plans as they quickly become irrelevant. Or even worse, they lead to costly failures if there is a striving to adhere to the plan without questioning the relevance of the plan. In these cases, i.e. in complex settings, and in cases when the context is changing rapidly, adaptive management is an appropriate approach.

Adaptive management is not the solution to everything. In cases when development is more predictable, when the causal relations between inputs and results are well known and solutions are simple and obvious, there is no need for adaptive management. However, the higher the level of complexity and the more the context is changing, the more adaptive management is needed. Interventions that aim to change the attitudes, behaviours and relations of human beings, e.g. capacity development, organizational development, advocacy work, reform processes and promotion of democracy and human rights are often complex. Thus, a large share of the interventions that Sida supports can be considered more or less complex. Adaptive management can be applied to a varying degree.

What is adaptive management according to Sida?

Adaptive management is an approach rather than a specific method. This approach can be applied to a varying degree. Central to this approach is to treat plans as hypotheses

which regularly need to be questioned and revised the more you learn about the problem that is being addressed and about the context. Thus, the approach recognizes the uncertainty about what is likely to work. In adaptive management learning is crucial, whereby flexible plans are tested, monitored, analysed and adapted regularly until the objectives are being achieved.

According to Sida's view, results-based management and adaptive management are quite similar as both approaches aim to maximize achievements by continuous learning and adaptations. However, whereas results based management is relevant for any intervention, adaptive management is not relevant for all interventions as described above.

Adaptive management implies more than a general commitment to working flexibly and learning from experience. It requires methods, tools, routines and the mindset to regularly question whether current ways of working are making progress towards the desired change or not and, if not, have the freedom and courage to change them accordingly.

Local problem solving is a central feature of adaptive management. Instead of following best practices or solutions that have proven successful elsewhere, in adaptive management there is a focus on local solutions to local problems. Thus it requires curiosity and a good understanding of the local context.

Adaptive management is not a "let-go" approach in which monitoring, evidence, control or results are not so important. Adaptive management is about making deliberate adaptations and not just correcting poor planning.

The difference from a more traditional approach is not the rigour of planning and monitoring but that they focus on other things. Traditional plans specify in detail what is to be done or produced by when. In adaptive management plans focus on elaborating a structured process for testing and learning what will work best to achieve the objectives. In more traditional monitoring there is often a focus on assessing to what extent predefined targets have been achieved. In adaptive management the monitoring focusses on assessing and adapting the strategy to achieve the objectives.

What to consider while applying adaptive management?

Please remember that adaptive management is not a relevant approach to everything. In cases when the causality is fairly predictable and when the context is well known and relatively stable there is no need to invest the time required for adaptive management. You may find the following questions useful when determining whether adaptive management is an appropriate approach for your programme.

- How certain are we and our partner organisations that the assumed causality between planned activities and envisaged effects (i.e theory of change or intervention logic) will prove valid? How sure are we that we will know before it is too late?
- How well known and certain is the context? How are changes likely to affect the objectives that we would like to achieve?

Please note that you do not have to use the same approach for the entire programme. In some cases causality of parts of a programme could be fairly predictable (e.g components on service delivery) whereas other could be unpredictable (e.g. components on capacity building). In such cases it could be worthwhile to choose more traditional forms of planning and monitoring for the predictable components and adaptive management for the unpredictable ones.

Adaptive management is not about choosing a specific method. There are many organisations devoted to contributing to change that apply adaptive management without even knowing it. Adaptive management is very much about having a mindset and organisational culture that embraces uncertainty and encourages experimentation, learning and adaptations.

There is a lot of guidance available on the web on methods to be used for adaptive management, e.g. Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA), Market System Development (MSD) and Politically Agile Programming. Sida does not prescribe any specific approach or method.

If you'd like to apply adaptive management please keep the following in mind.

Problem solving instead of good practices or business as usual

In development cooperation there are a lot of good practices, i.e. solutions, on how to address various development problems. Often good practices are being used without prior proper analysis of whether this particular solution is suitable for the specific context or if it addresses the root causes of the problem(s). In such cases there is a risk that the intervention will implement a strategy that is not relevant for addressing the development problem(s).

Therefore, Adaptive management is very much about problem solving. Firstly you need to identify what problem(s) you are to address, which may seem to be obvious. However, quite often problems are formulated as the lack of a solution. By formulating your problem(s) in that way you lock yourself in to that particular solution. You can avoid this by asking yourself questions like;

- Why is this a problem?
 - Why does it matter?
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- For whom does it matter?

Once you have clarified what problem(s) you would like to address you need to identify its root causes. There are various methods to do this, e.g. the problem tree of LFA (Logical Framework Approach), the fishbone/Ishikawa diagramme or the 5 why technique.

In adaptive management you recognize that even if you make a solid analysis while planning your intervention most likely you will learn more about the problem during implementation. Therefore strategies or plans need to be treated as hypotheses which need to be adapted as you learn more about the problem and its root causes.

Learning and adaptations which require mindset and methods

If you would like to apply adaptive management you need to have a mindset and an organisational culture that encourages questioning, learning and adaptations. Managers and leaders can create such culture by not only asking staff about activities and achievements but also what they have learnt and what adaptations they would suggest based on the learning.

Adaptive management is about having fast feed-back loops, i.e. that you regularly ask yourself questions like:

- What has been achieved?
- What have we learnt?
- How do we know if our strategy is working?
- What do we need to do differently?

In order to be able to answer these questions you need a to have methods, tools and routines for monitoring and evaluation that provide you with information on the effects of your activities within a relative short period of time. For capacity building and advocacy work methods like outcome mapping or outcome harvesting, which focus on changes in behaviour, attitudes or relations, can be useful. Sida does not require (more information is available [here](#)) you to use any specific method for monitoring. What matters is that you chose a method that provide you with information necessary for your learning and adaptations. Don't feel obliged to follow all steps of a method. In many cases it is more relevant to choose bits and pieces of different methods and tailor the method to your specific needs. The following questions may guide you when choosing monitoring method:

- How will you know whether your strategy works or whether you have to make adaptations?
 - What will you learn from this method or measurement, how will it inform decision making?
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What to consider in your interaction with Sida

Sida welcomes you, our cooperation partners, to apply adaptive management when you deem it relevant. We understand that in cases when development is very unpredictable it is crucial that you are able to test and revise different strategies instead of rigidly following detailed plans. At the same time, as with all proposals, Sida needs to assess the proposed programme and the cooperation partner's capacity. In order to do so Sida needs information. Sometimes this need for information leads to misunderstandings, e.g. that cooperation partners feel obliged to provide Sida with detailed plans and budgets. Such misunderstandings may happen when our cooperation partners, in order to safeguard the flexibility needed for adaptive management, provide Sida with very little concrete information on the proposed programme.

Below you will find some advice on how to avoid this dilemma. In brief it is very much about providing clarity and asking for clarity.

Clarify theory of change and the hypotheses to be tested

Though adaptive management is about embracing uncertainty it is not about doing things at complete random. Thus, as described above, you need to analyse the problem to be addressed and on the basis of the analysis you elaborate a theory of change and hypotheses on how it could be solved.

If you provide Sida with information on your analysis, theory of change and the hypotheses that you would like to test, it is easier for Sida to understand the thinking behind the programme and what you would like to do. Moreover you show to Sida that you are serious in your intentions to apply adaptive management. You can safeguard the flexibility necessary for adaptive management by explicitly stating what are hypotheses to be tested and what is less likely to be changed during implementation. In due time before signing the agreement you can discuss with Sida what document describing your programme (e.g programme document/strategy/proposal) should be attached to the agreement and how detailed it should be. By doing so you can ensure that the agreement allows you to make adaptations based on what you learn once you start to implement the programme.

Difference between budget information for assessment and budget for agreement

For the sake of people living in poverty and under oppression it is very important that development funds are well spent. Therefore, prior to making a funding decision, Sida assesses the relevance of the costs and whether the level of costs is reasonable. In order to ensure that Sida has sufficient information for the assessment you can suggest to Sida that you submit fairly detailed budgets for Sida's assessment, but then use a more aggregated budget as attachment to the agreement. You can also suggest to Sida that you include writings in the agreement clarifying what changes to the budget

require that you request permission in advance and what changes can be justified retroactively in the financial report.

Clarify your routines, methods and tools for adaptive management and agree on format for reporting

In adaptive management plans are hypotheses that need to be continuously tested and revised, thus your ability to learn and adapt is crucial. By providing Sida with information on your routines, methods and tools you enable Sida to better understand your ability to apply adaptive management. The more confident Sida is about your capacity the easier it is for Sida to allow you the flexibility necessary for applying adaptive management.

Create trust by being honest and share your learning

Adaptive management is about testing and learning. Thus it is inevitable that you sometimes won't achieve what you envisaged to achieve. What matters is that you ask yourself questions like;

- What did this lead to?
- Why?
- What do we need to do differently?

By sharing information on e.g. lack of progress, failed hypotheses, learning and adaptations you show to Sida that you indeed apply adaptive management. You also create trust. If Sida knows that you will inform us when there is lack of progress it is easier for us to trust you when you inform us about progress and achieved results.

Further support

If you would like support in elaborating methods and tools for adaptive management you can suggest to your Sida programme manager to make a call-off from Sida's framework agreement on RBM and Adaptive Management.

Have any questions?

If you need further help or guidance, please reach out to your Sida Programme Officer.