

THE CURVE

HOW CAN PROPOSALS BE DESIGNED FROM THE OUTSET TO FACILITATE ADAPTATION:

PRAGMATIC ADVICE FOR PRACTITIONERS



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Purpose of this Document

The development sector recognizes the value of ensuring programs can adapt in response to emerging feedback and ongoing learning, often called “adaptive programming”.

Yet crafting program proposals that enable this flexibility is not always straightforward. As one development practitioner observed, ‘For decades the development sector has been dominated by a paradigm based on rigid designs and centrally controlled management procedures that aim to guarantee control and accountability’ (Ramalingam 2014).

The nature of proposals is to define plans ahead of time, while the nature of adaptive programming is to evolve our plans as facts emerge. How can proposals be agreed ahead of time, yet flex as learnings emerge? How is accountability possible when programs can change mid-stream? Other factors can inhibit flexibility from the demands of the procurement process to a stigmatization of course correction to simple inertia.

The purpose of this guide is to **provide pragmatic advice on how to design adaptive proposals**.

First, the guide explores **systemic challenges** to the achievement of adaptive proposals. These include

barriers and structural inhibitors to flexible proposals. Potential solutions are offered for many of these challenges.

Secondly, the guide identifies **promising practice**. This demonstrates how practitioners are overcoming barriers and successfully designing and deploying adaptive proposals.

This document **takes a practitioner’s point of view** to adaptive proposals. Practitioners are often best placed to understand the on-the-ground complexities and therefore the need for learning and adaptation. The guide is designed to help practitioners work with donors to craft and shape adaptive proposals.

This document is not intended to be an exhaustive study or a complete answer to the question of how to design adaptive proposals. Rather, it is a contribution to a vibrant sector-wide discussion including publications and perspectives by USAID, GLAM, DFID, ODI and many others (see References and Literature Overview).

We offer pragmatic advice based on the contributors’ own experiences that is intended to inform and broaden the conversation.



What is an adaptive proposal?

Adaptive proposals are built on a recognition of the inherent complexity of the challenges we address and the contexts we enter. Systems thinking tells us that the route to change is rarely linear or simple. Contexts vary, often dramatically, and what worked in one context may not work in another. Initial plans for a program may require revision as the context evolves or as information emerges about what is and isn't working. Progress requires an approach sensitively attuned to the reality we face and an ability to adapt in response.

Adaptive proposals will:

- **Encourage and enable ongoing learning during the life of the program.** From the start, adaptive proposals will ringfence resources and codify plans for continuous study of the program's success and the factors affecting this, with an eye to learning how the program should change in response.
- **Be designed to enable change during the program's life.** The program's design, budgets, decision making procedures, and accountability measures support and enable justified adaptation during the program's life.

Sometimes it is easier to define a concept by defining its opposite. A proposal that is not adaptive would lack provisions for ongoing learning that could indicate how the program should evolve. It would contain rigid plans, fixed budgets, and no plans or procedures for gaining approval for changes. As a result, the program may continue with little ability to respond to new information or changing realities on the ground.



7 Systemic Challenges

This section explores systemic challenges to the achievement of adaptive proposals. The barriers and structural inhibitors to flexible proposals are:

1. Uniting stakeholders on areas for learning
2. Challenges in analyzing and acting on real-time data
3. The difficulty of designing proposals to accommodate complexity
4. Ongoing learning is not a priority
5. Staff lack skills and a supportive environment for adaptation
6. Lack of flexibility in financial management, transparency, and accountability
7. Conflicting donor requirements

We outline some potential solutions to these challenges, although many questions remain.

This diagram summarizes 7 key challenges to adaptation:

Donor environment		Implementer (Internal) Environment			External environment		Challenge
Conflicting donor requirements	Lack of flexibility in financial management transparency and accountability	Uniting stakeholders on areas for learning	Ongoing learning is not a priority	Staff lack the skills and supportive environment for adaptation	Challenges in analysing and acting on Real-Time Data	Difficulty of designing proposals to accommodate complexity	
Different parts of a donor agency have different (and sometimes contradictory) priorities. When it comes to defining results, this means implementers perceive different demands coming from within a single donor. So more time is spent managing the donor relationship instead of delivering the programme.	Donors need to establish standards of practice for contract and agreement officers that reflect the priorities of co-creation and adaptive management and emphasize the hiring of officers with project management experience and adaptive management skills.	Given the disparate stakeholders involved – such as funders, implementers, front-line staff, research teams, government and more – reaching a consensus on priority areas for learning can be challenging.	Time and resources are limited. When resources are stretched, keeping the lights on can naturally be prioritised over the 'extra' of ongoing learning.	Staff may not be experienced in working adaptively. Adaptive programming is more about facilitation, team work, humility and mutual problem solving. This requires "soft skills" from staff which are generally not reflected in technical CVs (or prioritised in recruitment).	Contexts where a biomedical paradigm and global best practice are historically playing a key role, adaptation can be difficult to implement.	How can we design programs to address challenges that have multiple moving parts and unknowns?	Short description
Donors should speak with one voice as an organization. Bring donors closer to programs.	Donors to Select contract officers with adaptive management in mind. Donors to Improve pathways for communication and Knowledge sharing. Donors to Reward adaptive procurement and management practices. Implementers to Aim for transparency and accountability in financial management.	Prioritize areas in which causation or context are poorly understood. Prioritize areas in which uncertainty is high. Unite stakeholders by building trusting relationships and understanding each stakeholder's priorities.	Build in feedback and learning as the default. Build in a process for learning reviews as part of the workflow. Make learning a formal deliverable. Show donors that feedback and adaptation are more than a tick box affair. Encourage donors to evaluate proposals on quality of planning for learning. Ensure program leaders visibly support and prioritise learning from feedback.	Invest in time, space, skills and systems for staff and partners to learn and adapt. Institutionalise Pause & Reflect. Undo the old orthodoxies of leadership.	Use dynamic measurement. Articulate standards and processes for analysing and drawing conclusions from real-time data.	Think of the Theory of Change/Logframe as a living document. Design for complexity take a portfolio approach.	



7 Systemic Challenges

CHALLENGE



Uniting stakeholders in areas for learning

While there is overwhelming agreement that learning is valuable, landing on which areas to prioritize for learning can be a challenge. When resources for learning are limited, which areas should be prioritized? And given the disparate stakeholders involved – such as funders, implementers, front-line staff, research teams, government and more – how can stakeholders be united in a view of priority learning areas?

Potential solutions

Prioritize areas in which causation or context are poorly understood

If the program involves well-known causal links in a thoroughly understood context, adaptive management may be less relevant. But if knowledge of causation or context is lacking, iteration and experimentation can be indispensable tools.

Prioritize areas in which uncertainty is high

Rapid iteration is particularly relevant when there is uncertainty about what will work. Uncertainty is often higher in the early stages of projects, or in new contexts.

Apply a healthy skepticism to a planned project. Ask: How confident are we that the intervention will work in just the way we expect? What assumptions are we making? What might the unknown unknowns be?

Distinguish 'core' and 'emerging' areas of the program. Core areas are based on well-proven, thoroughly understood processes. Emerging areas, however, are at the frontiers of knowledge. Emerging areas involve more doubt and uncertainty about what works and why. So emerging areas can be worthwhile priorities for learning.

Take the time to work out a Theory of Change. Are we confident in all the causal links in our theory? Are there places that we need to test our assumptions?

Pay particular attention to parts of the program that require dealing with people as these can be especially unpredictable. Do we know that people will react in the way we want? Do they really have the incentives, beliefs, and desires that we think?

Consider whether projects like ours have ever failed. Do we know the reasons for that? Have these issues been satisfactorily addressed in our project?

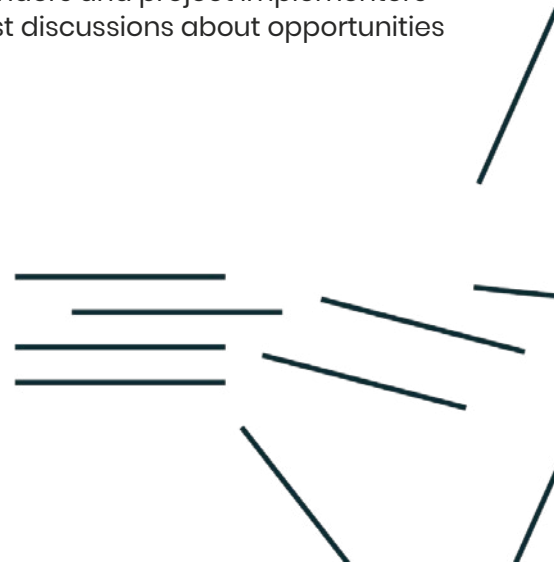
Make sure you build in time to test & learn about any areas of uncertainty. And remember that areas of uncertainty are not inherently a bad thing. They can be great opportunities to learn, and spotting them early helps ensure project success.

Unite stakeholders by building trusting relationships and understanding each stakeholder's priorities

Funders, project implementers, and other stakeholders share a desire for program success, but they may have different loyalties and accountabilities. How can varied stakeholders agree priority areas for learning and adaptation?

Listen to each stakeholders' priorities for the program. Which areas/deliverables are most important to each stakeholder viewing the program as a success? Consider prioritizing these as areas for learning.

Take the time to build relationships of trust. Build an environment in which people are prepared to talk about what they don't know as well as the things they do. This takes time but is critically important. Trust between funders and project implementers will lead to honest discussions about opportunities to learn.





7 Systemic Challenges

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Challenge 2:

Challenges in analyzing and acting on real-time data

Historically, the global health sector has been strengthened and transformed by biomedical solutions, like drugs and vaccines, which were tested using randomized controlled trials (RCTs).

RCTs are often touted as the gold standard in our sector and have advanced the science of what works.

Tested interventions like immunization, oral rehydration therapy, tuberculosis treatment programs and sexually transmitted infections screening etc. occupy a hallowed spot in global health, because when replicated properly across countries and different contexts they produce similar results.

However, there are a wide range of complex, entrenched social issues being addressed in the development sector but which do not lend themselves to RCTs. Instead, they require multi-level, multi-faceted and multi-pronged solutions.

As contexts change and evolve, we should of course use data for real-time learning while adapting to ensure that high-quality, effective services 'fit' the context and reach those who need them. In addition to what works, we must understand why it works (or could work) and how to implement it.

Change is not easy, however, and in contexts where a biomedical paradigm and global best practice have historically played a key role, adaptation can be even more difficult to implement.

Mindsets and skillsets need to be shifted to allow for problem-solving using real-time data, even if it means adapting and modifying global best practices.

Potential solutions

Use dynamic measurement

Adaptive work is all about change, so we need dynamic measurement methodologies to capture output and understand what works.

This means being more flexible about types of evidence, types of study and timeframes. In other words, a Theory of Change and MEL plan that are updated and reflect what the team has learned, not that sit on the shelf in between annual reviews.

Look beyond the data

Supplement data that proves "what" with other forms of evidence to provide additional "why" context.

Build in use of tacit evidence when examining data by gathering insights from the broader stakeholder network, local organizations working in the same space, members of relevant institutions and team members across the program.

Test assumptions and work fast

Use review frameworks such as [Recency, Frequency, Monetary Value \(RFM\)](#) to help evaluate the project in conjunction with RCT data.

Rapid testing of assumptions, rapid implementation, testing through comparison of cohorts, even micro tweaks to approaches can help garner insight and learning and optimize impact more quickly.



Challenge 2:

Potential solutions

Rethink timeframes

Flexibility in types of evidence and types of study allows you to rethink traditional monitoring cycles.

Only wait for slow(er) research instruments if you need the rigor they bring. Otherwise, if you can benefit from failing very fast and early, draw on the insights already at your fingertips and respond dynamically.

Get together as a team more regularly to assess progress and make decisions. The flexibility of data and types of study don't have to be complex or burdensome.

Be flexible, but set standards

When designing a responsive feedback mechanism, define upfront how long it will run, what the evidence threshold for iterating is and what method for data-gathering will be used.

To maximize the benefit of this flexibility, consider how you will analyze the data, what criteria decision-making will be based upon and who will be responsible for different parts of the process.

It should be clear from the outset whether the goal is to inform conclusions that will drive micro tweaks, or whether it will inform a major programmatic decision.

Keep perspective on the desire to act on data's implications with the need to maintain caution and minimize the risk of poor decision-making. For more on this, see The Curve guide [Evidence in Decision-Making](#).





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Challenge 3:

The difficulty of designing proposals to accommodate complexity

Development challenges are by their nature systemic and complex. Yet, there's an inherent bias in the proposal process towards pre-defining a program's approach.

As a result, activities in proposals are often presented as linear and may not be immediately suited to adaptation.

A proposal aims to describe a course of action to achieve results. Such proposals are expressed with a degree of certainty that is necessary to enable donors to responsibly allocate funds.

Ensuring effective programming and value for money is an entirely valid objective. It does, however, have consequences in the way that proposals are identified, developed and approved.

Few proposals offer a nuanced, conditional description of the problem and its intended solution, even if that truthfully reflects the current

understanding. Similarly, few donors will be keen to support projects that express a vague or uncertain approach.

As a consequence, project implementers are likely to understate or omit adaptive elements, and funders will be inclined to support proposals that offer the strongest possible sense of certainty and predictability.¹

Logframes are the perfect illustration of this. While a Theory of Change goes some way towards a more complex description of a problem and context, it assumes we know the problem we are going to solve, and requires that we design solutions that fit neatly and linearly.

It is important to craft proposals that address donors' natural concern with how funds will be spent while recognizing and accommodating the complexity and unpredictability of on-the-ground challenges.

Potential solutions

Plan for change

Think of your Theory of Change or logframe as a living document that is never finished. Be as clear as possible about what can be changed and what cannot be influenced or changed.

Articulate and make sure everyone is clear about any assumptions being made about the program and how and why they will produce the intended outcomes.

Revisit the Theory of Change periodically to test these assumptions and assess if they were correct. Examine if they need to be revised and what future changes this might create.

Design for complexity

Use the proposal to describe how you plan to track and adapt to a changing context over time.

Include information about the context, components, stakeholders, influences, enablers and barriers you may need to respond to.

Describe how this context will inform pause-reflect moments and support adaptive learning and programming practices.

Take a portfolio approach

With complex problems, propose taking a portfolio view.

Balance core "good practice" or "proven" strategies with bolder, less certain ideas that allow the exploration of the problem from an alternative perspective and the designing and testing of innovative solutions.

Plan to test early, test often and adapt based on the lessons learned.

1. One of the core concepts of the Adaptive Leadership framework is the differentiation between technical and adaptive problems. Most development projects reflect a combination of both technical and adaptive issues, but there can be a tendency on the part of the project implementer to place too much emphasis on technical over adaptive as the latter can be difficult to define and highly complex.



7 Systemic Challenges

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Challenge 4:

Ongoing learning is not a priority

Running a program can be hard enough without introducing the need to study performance and make adaptations.

Time and resources are limited and in these circumstances keeping the lights on can naturally be prioritized over the “extra” of ongoing learning.

Furthermore, using the language of learning and adaptation doesn’t always help implementing organizations win contracts.

Project implementers win funding because they know “what works.” This creates an incentive to show achievements in terms of results, rather than as a process of learning.

Potential solutions

Make responsive feedback the default.

Responsive feedback should be a key part of your proposal.

First, ensure that feedback forms a key part of your organizational approach, so it naturally flows into the way any program is shaped.

Feedback and learning should form an integral part and not an additional layer of the program.

Build learning reviews into your workflow.

Project implementers should arrange time with donors to review targets, feedback and test assumptions.

Moments for pause and reflection can inform future actions. Be clear about roles and responsibilities for these learning review processes and assign decision-makers.

Feedback mechanisms should be woven throughout the strategy and approach integrally, not pulled out as a separate element.

Work together with all stakeholders in the project to make feedback processes coherent and central to the work and approach being taken.

Learning and adapting is not an “extra”.

Feedback and adaptation help to keep programs on track, support success and protect value for money.

Use your proposal to present RFMs as a critical, non-negotiable part of approaching delivery management for any program, rather than as an optional extra.

Demonstrate how feedback and learning provide a valuable combination of insurance policy, early warning system and quality control rolled into one.

Make learning a formal deliverable.

Feedback and adaptation are more than just a tick box affair. Make it clear to donors that learning from feedback is a defined deliverable of the grant just like any other.

Emphasize the need to remain sensitive to on-the-ground realities, changing circumstances and unknowns. Highlight areas of uncertainty where learning is critical to program success.

Include a “learning agenda” of what is important during the program’s life, supported by results from past projects and examples of how ongoing learning made a tangible difference to success.



Challenge 4:

Potential solutions

Clearly define the value of planning for learning.

Encourage donors to see the value of adaptively managed programs and planning for learning.

Value should be placed on the realism of the proposal, its relevance in its context and the drive to learn and improve as integral to the program.

Donors should choose teams who can learn and adapt rather than just provide a safe pair of hands.

Visibly support learning from feedback.

Leaders need to visibly champion learning and adaptation, approving the use of time and resources to pause and reflect.

This doesn't mean anything goes, however. You should define a process and clear standards for learning and evolving on your proposal, making a distinction between predictable program areas and areas of uncertainty where adaptation may be needed.

Implementers and donors can strive to develop the trusting and open relationship required to share frank feedback and agree on program changes over time.

Learning is central to adaptation. Reflect a strong approach and commitment to learning. This should be supported and incentivized through the funding mechanisms.





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Challenge 5:

Staff lack the skills and supportive environment for adaptation

Staff may not be experienced in working adaptively and have more traditional skills and mindsets. For example, they may lack the data analysis skills to analyze feedback.

Adaptive programming can require “soft skills” from staff which are generally not reflected in technical job descriptions or prioritized in recruitment.

Even if staff do have the necessary skills, the organization must have created an environment that ensures that adaptation takes place in a robust way.

It is necessary to create the right environment so that leaders and project implementers have space and ability to develop the required skills.

Potential solutions

Space, skills and systems

All staff need to be actively involved in analyzing their changing context and monitoring the effectiveness of their activities.

Internal systems need to empower front line staff, but also exercise effective scrutiny on adaptive decision-making.

Institutionalize Pause & Reflect

Build in adaptive processes or methods that do not require strong technical skills.

Coming together once a week or once a month to see what changes or adaptations should be made in implementation plans is a valuable tool and Pause & Reflect sessions provide a framework for success.

For more information please watch The Curve's guide to [Pause & Reflect](#).

Make adaptation a KPI

Adaptivity isn't about command and control. It's about fostering an environment that supports and is conducive to experimentation and learning.

Providing incentives to work adaptively and embrace uncertainty is a good way to sweep away the old and less ineffective ways of doing things that may have become entrenched.





7 Systemic Challenges

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Lack of flexibility in financial management, transparency and accountability

Other challenges to creating an adaptive environment include the lack of flexibility in financial management, transparency and accountability.

The understandable need of donors to weigh up risk, as well as the role of managerial staff who may need to demonstrate results that follow expected KPIs, can be detrimental to a context that supports adaptive management.

Potential solutions

Create results frameworks to better recognize success in complex settings

Standard logframes can inhibit adaptation by creating a focus on the pre-specified means rather than the ends. Overly rigid specification of activities can discourage course correction. And it can create a myopic focus on activities rather than a broad consideration of whether the activities are taking us where we want to go.

Create results frameworks that balance necessary planning and accountability with flexibility. There is a range of approaches. Some may be applied in combination.

- Focus on 'ultimate KPIs' more than intermediate KPIs. Ask what the true non-negotiable definition is of success. (A Theory of Change can help. What ultimate outcome are all our activities driving to?) Then leave flexibility for how to get there.
- Expand the 'success envelope' so that an outcome viewed as successful can occur in a range of ways. Have menus of indicators, any of which may mark success.
- Instead of pre-set indicators, have ongoing monitoring of the key outcomes in play. Understand that these may change over time. This can be especially relevant to humanitarian situations when the on-the-ground reality is changing rapidly.

Select managers with flexibility in mind

Emphasize the hiring of project implementers who have adaptive management skills. Human resource practices should regularly assess and update requirements for contract officer certification and continuous learning to ensure they possess the necessary skills. Existing training may be supplemented to build the soft skills needed for new roles and relationships with local partners, such as collaborating and facilitating engagement.

Reward adaptive management practices

Donors may establish an award system for project implementers that recognizes leadership and success in adaptive procurement and implementation approaches in a given year. USAID's [CLA case study awards](#) are a good example of this. By rewarding such approaches donors may improve manager commitment to adaptivity and overall retention of quality project implementers.

Improve pathways knowledge sharing

To improve communication and transparency, donor organizations need to create a mechanism to share knowledge. This might take the form of a knowledge management platform for the acquisitions and assistance workforce. There may be a need to re-define what is "procurement sensitive" to allow for more transparent discussions between donors and partners on how to plan and adapt.

Financial transparency and accountability

Regular budget reviews and continuous re-forecasting are essential. Financial forecasting and management processes need to facilitate adaptive planning, allowing financial resources to be moved around whilst still meeting donor requirements for predictable financial flows and value for money.



7 Systemic Challenges

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Challenge 7:

Conflicting donor requirements

Donor organizations may have different and sometimes contradictory internal priorities when it comes to defining results.

The commercial arm may want a predictable blueprint of deliverables. The political section may want reports of tangible impacts. While the research team might want results that reveal learning.

Complicating things further, donors must manage both upward accountability and program delivery.

This means project implementers perceive different demands coming from within a single donor.

This means as much time can be spent managing the donor relationship as delivering the program.

Ongoing adaptation requires ongoing communication and negotiation with the donor. The more challenging the donor relationship becomes, the more challenging adaptation becomes.

Potential solutions

Donors must speak with one voice

Sometimes project implementers perceive different demands coming from a donor, which negatively affects program delivery.

Frank conversations must be had to explore what different parts of the organization are looking for and to reach compromises where necessary.

Strengthen donor communication

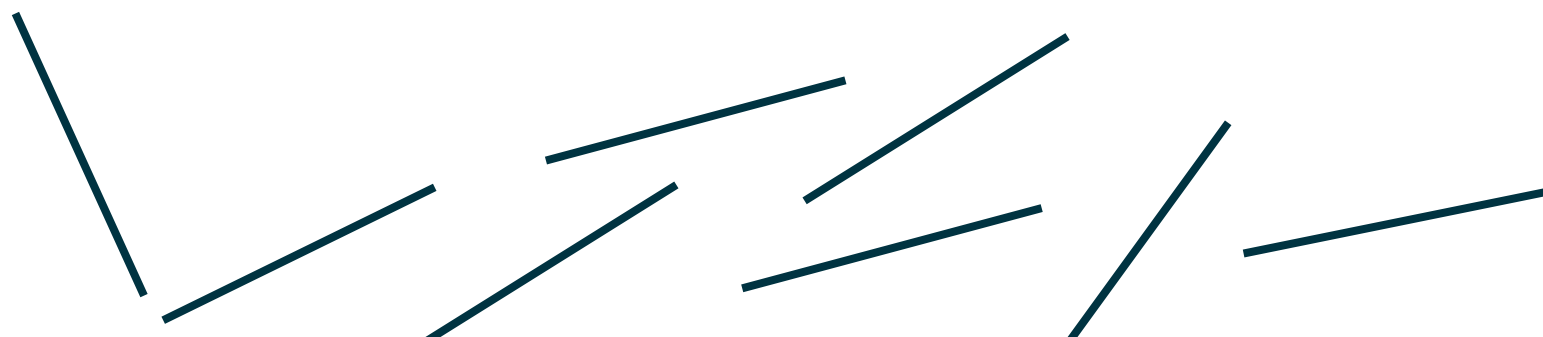
Clarification and compromise on expectations must be discussed and confirmed internally by the donor organization.

This must take place before the project is commenced by the project implementers.

Bring donors closer to programs

Donor staff can be seconded to work within a program.

This means the donor has a presence and close understanding of the program, potentially reducing the need for constant reporting.





PROMISING PRACTICE



Promising Practice

This section explores some ways in which practitioners are overcoming barriers to successfully design and deploy adaptive proposals.

Implementer perspective:

Example 1: Every1 Mobile

Every1Mobile is a digital agency specializing in leveraging mobile technology to drive social impact.

The nature of digital delivery means that the responsive feedback loop performance can be monitored and understood in real-time, rather than waiting for standard program monitoring cycles.

Every1Mobile has developed an Impact Accelerator approach to speed up, deepen and scale impact. The team designs and implements responsive feedback loops to test and validate assumptions inherent within the Theory of Change and to drive rapid insights.

Adaptive management framework

To facilitate testing and learning, Every1Mobile uses a responsive feedback monitoring framework that outlines the assumptions inherent in the model and establishes the likely critical drivers, laying out the measurements and approaches required to validate those assumptions and evaluate performance.

Optimizing impact

During implementation, Every1Mobile monitors progress, managing the responsive feedback loops to optimize the program design and strategy.

NaijaCare case study – the Impact Accelerator in action:

In Nigeria, owner-operated drug retail outlets, known as patent and proprietary medicine vendors (PPMVs), are the main source of medicines for acute conditions.²

PPMVs are essentially “a person without formal training in pharmacy who sells orthodox pharmaceutical products on a retail basis for profit.”³ National-level surveys report that PPMVs treat between 8–55% of illnesses diagnosed in children under the age of five; and at the community-level, it is estimated they treat between 35–55% of adults for malaria.⁴

Despite the prevalence of PPMVs, little has been known about how they operate, who is responsible for administering treatments or where vendors obtain their medications.

NaijaCare is a digital community aimed at improving the business capacity and quality of service provided by PPMVs. It is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

NaijaCare PPMVs can access a suite of features to strengthen business operations and help deliver better quality primary care to customers, particularly family planning services. The digital solutions provided through the platform are:

Capacity-building activities, such as:

- Formal e-learning courses
- Digitized training resources from the new official PPMV curriculum – infographics and animations
- Mentoring and expert advice
- Business and customer care advice from fellow PPMVs through interactive forums, question and answer portals and commenting on posts

Digital tools, such as:

- Online stock ordering to reduce the prevalence of counterfeit medicines

The proposal for the current phase of NaijaCare focused on utilizing the Impact Accelerator model for the current phase through a series of loops looking at validating, testing and optimizing elements of both the theory and the implementation. These have been designed to test micro-hypotheses and draw comparisons between various cohorts of PPMVs:

Micro-study 1 is designed to optimize an implementation approach via A/B cohort testing of remote onboarding of existing NaijaCare users to online ordering through the NaijaCare Shop.

Micro-study 2 is designed to optimize and validate an element of the NaijaCare Theory of Change: that the business content is the primary value proposition for PPMVs to engage with NaijaCare.

2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4309565/>

3. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/file?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0117165&type=printable>

4. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/file?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0117165&type=printable>

Promising Practice

Example 2: AFENET

Example 6: Building trust by making learning a priority from the start

Problem and context:

The African Field Epidemiology Network (AFENET) is a networking alliance of African Field Epidemiology (and Laboratory) Training Programs (FELTPs). It is committed to ensuring effective prevention and control of epidemics and other priority public health problems in Africa.

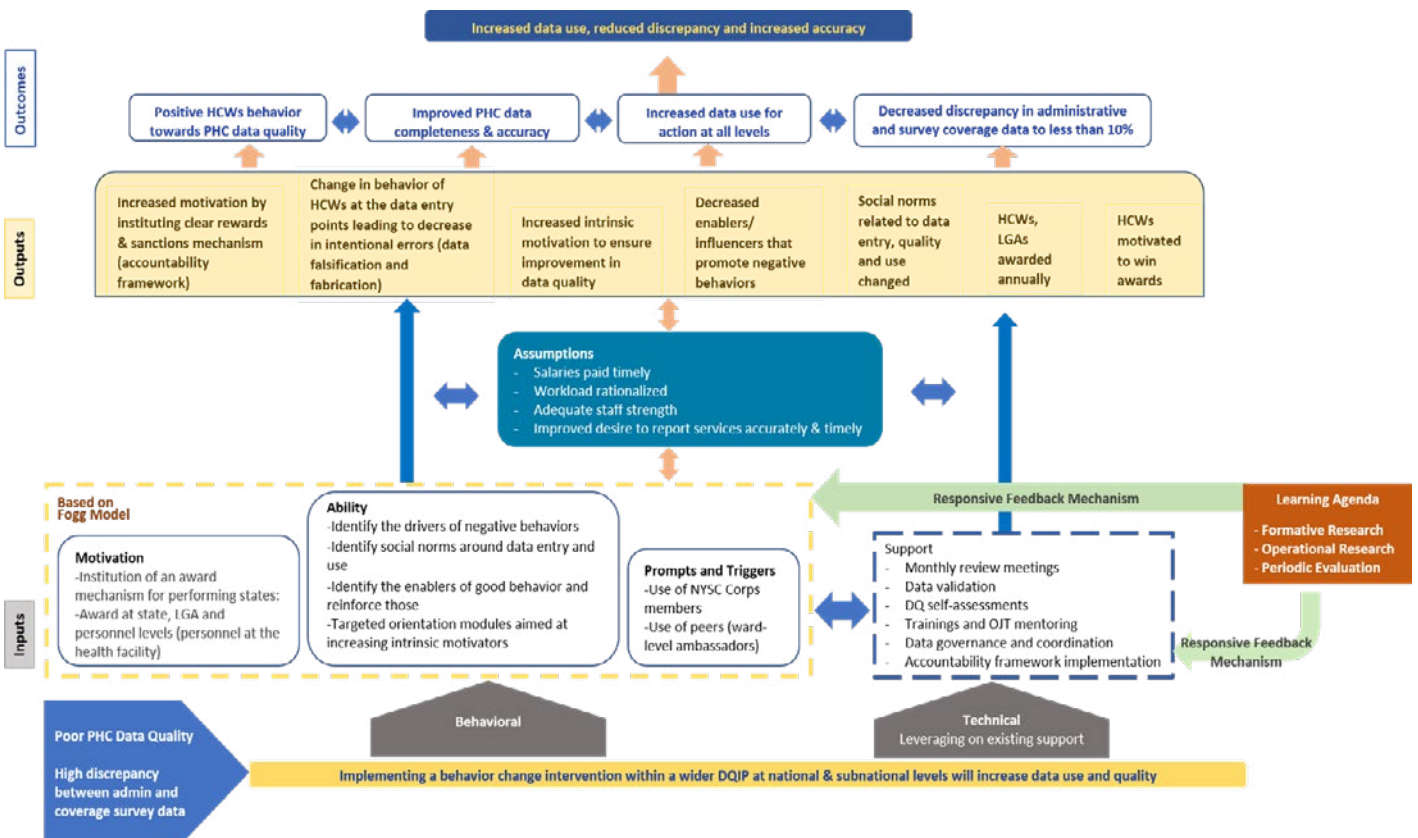
Data quality in Nigeria is very poor and often unsuitable for making policy recommendations or for encouraging investment in health care. Historically, this issue has often been addressed by trying to increase the technical capacity of the people who record the data, with a focus on real-time reporting, but with minimal attention on the behavior of those generating, entering and using the data.

AFENET’s proposal suggested a step-change away from a technical capacity approach to instead harness human-centered design and behavioral

science (HCD-BS) principles. The proposal was the first to approach the problem in this way. However, AFENET, whilst established in building technical capacity, had never applied the HCD-BS approach in its work either.

To mitigate the approach-expertise gap, learning needed to be central to the proposal and program. A learning agenda was put in place as a framework for the project team to implement, monitor, assess, learn and correct the strategies and processes while in the field. This learning agenda provided a platform to address knowledge gaps, test assumptions and hypotheses around what works, and helped document and understand why it did or did not work.

Six responsive feedback loops were built into the proposal to address the questions posed in the learning agenda. To understand where the feedback loops were needed, a robust set of learning questions, identifying risks and critical knowledge gaps around the intervention strategies were identified. These were then prioritized and key questions selected in which to build the loop.



Theory of Change in the AFENET proposal

Promising Practice

Example 2: AFENET

How did AFENET build this learning and flexibility into its proposal?

AFENET and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation had an existing relationship before coming together to write this proposal. The team at AFENET had established themselves as experts in building technical capacity in data recording. However, this did not position them as experts in HCD-BS; in fact, no-one in Nigeria was expert in HCD-BS when applied to increasing data quality.

The team at AFENET built trust throughout the proposal by showing how they would test and learn throughout the project so that they could course-

correct if needed. This willingness to say what they did not know, coupled with a clear path to overcoming knowledge gaps, shone through in the proposal.

Learning and adaptability were woven throughout AFENET's proposal to ensure the learning component was front and center. Learning was presented as the norm rather than as an exception throughout the proposal and subsequently the program. Feedback loops were used to illustrate the importance of learning, as well as for educating important stakeholders on potential outcomes for the program.



Promising Practice

Donor perspective:

Example 3: USAID Procurement processes

USAID has explored ways to build flexibility into the procurement process with project implementers by building a variety of contract types. The examples shared below are relevant in circumstances where there is evidence that all requirements cannot be defined with a reasonable level of confidence in advance:

1. A single project-based contract for an indefinite quantity of services.

This approach can be used in cases where: (1) the overall project landscape is shifting in complex ways, cause and effect relationships are unclear or are non-linear, and/or there is the potential for external influences that could have a significant but unknown effect on development results, and (2) the expected cost of administration of multiple contracts outweighs the expected benefits of making multiple awards. This will enable shorter, more iterative planning cycles while avoiding the time and expense of awarding a series of successive, standalone contracts.

2. A hybrid cost-plus fixed-fee contract to allow for supplemental technical assistance to respond to changing needs.

This approach can be used to enable supplemental technical assistance to be available to respond to changing circumstances within the statement of work and other terms and conditions of the contract.

Both methods I and II allow the operating unit to build adaptability and flexibility into the implementation of activities under the award.

3. Phased Funding Approaches

USAID has experimented with releasing tranches of funds through a stage-gating approach. Rapid Feedback Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (RF-MERL), a USAID MERLIN mechanism designed to help USAID implementers build systematic feedback loops into project implementation, frequently takes this approach to manage risk while building in space for innovation and flexibility. Funds are allocated for an initial scoping phase, and then later stage proposals are developed to release additional funds as the idea is refined and developed. At the same time, a Joint Partnership Plan is developed to outline the anticipated Scope of Work for the entirety of the engagement, but more as a memorandum of understanding than a contractual agreement.

4. Standard A&A with “substantial involvement” to support adaptive management

Procurement practices that support adaptive management can exist through more standard acquisition and assistance mechanisms if the contract or assistance officers are supportive. It requires a clear definition of “substantial involvement” with each contract to share the responsibility for adaptive management between donors and project implementers, including feedback loops and pause-and-reflect moments into the activity work plan, with flexible deliverables that allow for course-correction.

Examples 4 & 5 below come from an expert workshop which brought together those who have been working on innovative value for money (VfM) approaches within adaptive programs, alongside VfM experts, researchers and DFID staff.



Promising Practice

Example 4: Visibility management

The Engaged Citizens team in Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (PERL) purposely take a “behind-the-scenes” approach, supporting local partners to take the lead, take the responsibility and take the credit for whatever is collectively achieved.

Programs and donors which are more visible and take public credit for achievements can undermine local partners and diminish the credibility of the reform process itself. However, at the same time, the donor needs to be able to “tell a good story” about the program – and these stories are framed to give the donor/program responsibility and credit for achievements.

This tension is there in all programs – but the pressure is higher in PERL due to its financial size, its prominence in the UK Department for International Development’s (DFID) portfolio of work in Nigeria, and DFID’s need to justify this spend.

It can be hard to show contribution and tell a complex story well in programs that are trying to be adaptive and locally-led, especially where there is pressure to focus on regular reporting of tangible results for funding. Project implementers have to balance results and process, shielding partners who are already swimming against the tide to deliver complex change on the ground.

Example 5: Measuring Value for Money

Adaptive programs start from a position of uncertainty about which approaches may be the best to achieve a specific result. Project implementers, therefore, engage in an iterative process of testing and learning.

In such circumstances, it has been suggested that donors need tools that enable program teams to assess and reassess their value for money in “real-time” as the program progresses. This includes considering whether the value of some activities consists of the learning they generate.

Different measures of value for money are likely to be more or less suitable depending on the type of adaptive program at hand. For example, efficiency for a small, experimental water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) program that is working in short sprints to test key assumptions in its Theory of Change will likely need to be measured differently compared to a large, technical assistance program that takes a problem-driven approach to build state capacity. While both are examples of adaptive programming, measuring and managing their value for money requires different tools and measures.



Contributors

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Ritika is the associate director – Health, Nutrition and WASH at IPE Global Ltd where she is responsible for managing partnerships, donors and support in implementing projects. She was previously the project director with Digital Green and currently also manages the USAID-India project on using digital platforms for improving family planning, maternal child health, and nutrition outcomes. Ritika has more than 10 years of experience of working across private and development sectors, in program implementation and research, with multiple Government, national and international partners, and working in the communication sector across various mediums.

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Reshma is the project director at Pathfinder. She has over 20 years of experience driving innovation and supporting high-quality health programs in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Throughout her career, Reshma has designed and implemented research, performance monitoring, evaluation, and learning approaches for complex programs around HIV and AIDS, health systems strengthening, family planning, reproductive health, water and sanitation, and gender programs.

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Farouk is a dedicated health systems expert with experience working in public health promotion interventions in northern Nigeria. He has held many senior leadership positions including as a territorial manager providing oversight to Society for Family Health, six programs in maternal, newborn and child health, sexual and reproductive health and was the state program manager for one of the largest and most successful DFID programs, the 'Enhancing Nigeria's Response to HIV/AIDS' (The ENR program). In his role as national demand creation advisor for MNCH2, Farouk provides leadership on demand creation.

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Dr David has 35 years of experience working in Nigeria as a health practitioner and he has spent the past 15 years advocating for the strengthening of the Nigerian Health System. David has worked as a consultant for various organizations and programs, including the British Council, Kwara State Government of Nigeria, Health Reform Foundation of Nigeria, Nigeria's National Program on Immunization, Partnership for Reviving Routine Immunization in Northern Nigeria and Women for Health, among others. He has been part of several study tours, including in Cambodia, Malaysia, Ethiopia and Tanzania. David joined Save the Children as senior manager coordinating advocacy in 2010.

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Christina is program director with Results for Development (R4D) and co-founded and leads its Evaluation and Adaptive Learning practice. She previously managed the flagship Rapid Feedback Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (RF MERL) partnership with USAID's Global Development Lab. She joined R4D in 2012 and has worked across the organization's health, education, early childhood development, and child protection initiatives. Previously, she was at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, where she earned her MSc in Public Health as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar.

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Abi is director of digital strategy at EveryIMobile, working to leverage the advantages offered by technology to accelerate, deepen and scale social impact. She specializes in facilitating targeted digital strategies, and in leading human-centered design approaches to create accessible, engaging and impactful digital solutions utilizing mobile-led technology in low-resource contexts. Abi has over 10 years of experience working on programs across sub-Saharan Africa and has deep technical expertise in social and behavior change communication, sexual and reproductive health, maternal health and health system strengthening – as well as experience in women's economic empowerment and livelihoods strengthening. She has an MSc in International Development specializing in Global Health from the London School of Economics.

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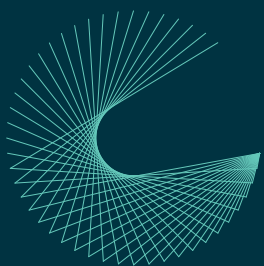
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Dr Anne is a senior evaluation advisor for USAID's Global Health Bureau and holds both an MPH and PhD in International Health from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. She has more than 15 years of experience in global public health monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) across technical areas, including maternal and child health, family planning, health systems, infectious disease and HIV/AIDS. She has recently launched an advanced evaluation curriculum for the USAID that focuses on MEL for adaptive management and complexity aware monitoring and evaluation.



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