Re-Perceiving Results:

Aid Programs and Change in Fragile Societies

Policy Brief | March 2017

Re-Perceiving Results:

Aid Programs and Change in Fragile Societies

author: **Erwin van Veen**, Senior Research Fellow, Conflict
          Research Unit, Clingendael Institute
          Alies Rijper, Research Specialist, Knowledge
          Platform Security & Rule of Law
date: March 2017

Clingendael
Netherlands Institute of International Relations

The Hague Institute
for Global Justice

Table of contents

Summary

Fragile societies face a constant risk of violent conflict that produces suffering, disorder and crisis. Unsurprisingly, it is in these contexts that development problems are most profound. Addressing such problems usually requires change in a status quo that features vested interests and structures of power. This makes the process of development subject to political contestation. As a result, change typically takes time, happens during 'windows of opportunity', and advances incrementally with occasional regress. Because developmental change is dynamic, aid programs need to be able to adapt their objectives and operations to changes in their (political) environment. Unfortunately, this is often not the case, meaning that donors reduce the positive influence their aid can have and risk wasting taxes. Three actions are needed to bring more adaptive aid programming about. While these actions make the political discussion on aid results in donor countries more complex, they also enable more effective spending of aid:

- Parliaments and ministries in donor countries should move away from reporting quantified and tangible results against preset objectives at output level. This focus should be replaced by a broader understanding of the type of results that aid programs can deliver.

- The same actors must shift the emphasis from programs being accountable for being executed as planned to being accountable for timely and politically savvy adjustment to contextual change.

- Funders and implementers of adaptive aid programs must sustain long-term partnerships that focus on establishing shared objectives, building trust, enabling joint learning, and conducting good risk management.

1. Introduction[1]

Aid programs are a key instrument for international donors to contribute to positive change in fragile societies.[2] Such programs typically seek to advance both the interests of people living in such societies and of the countries funding them. Their influence is generally modest for two reasons. To start with, developmental processes are inherently indigenous and normally dominated by domestic influences. International donors may nudge events, but they do not usually determine them. Moreover, developmental processes are erratic and complex because they feature many stakeholders with different interests, resources, and levels of power interacting at multiple levels. International donors can influence this political arena, but only when they understand it and can connect with it. This is a difficult task. Contributing to positive change requires aid programs to be adaptive, i.e. to be designed to evolve as a function of operational experiences, learning and adjusting to the inevitable changes in their context.

For example, between 2009 and 2016, the Burundian-Dutch Security Sector Development program (SSD) sought to improve the quality of governance over the country's military forces and police service. However, effective interventions to improve governance proved difficult to establish. 'Merely' achieving recognition of the fact that security is a legitimate concern of many Burundian stakeholders beyond the security forces, took 2.5 years. It was only when key stakeholders were engaged more deeply, when relations between civil society, media, security forces, and parliament had improved, and when greater local capacity was available that progress became possible. Trial, error, and time were key in bringing this about and the program was structured in ways that enabled such experimentation. This increased its ability to change course and adapt. By 2015, the governance component was one of the program's greatest successes.[3]

Such 'adaptiveness' is essential to ensure aid programs can meaningfully influence the development trajectories of fragile societies. An 'adaptive program' is an aid program that starts with few assumptions on what the development problem might be (let alone its solution), develops experimentally with flexible deployment of resources, and is accountable mostly for adjusting its operations and objectives based on its operational experience (i.e. what happens, what works and what does not) (see also Box 1 below). This makes it difficult to specify results upfront, but has a higher potential to achieve results with real 'value for money'. Experiences with

---

[1] Erwin van Veen is a senior research fellow with Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit, Alies Rijper a researcher with the Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law (the Platform). They thank Joost Andriessen, Megan Price and Anna Gouwenberg for their feedback. The brief is based on, and inspired by, the proceedings of five workshops on adaptive programming that were organized by the Platform in Utrecht and The Hague between May and November 2016. Its contents remain the responsibility of the authors.

[2] We use the term 'aid programs' because it underlines that such programs are only a small part of broader development processes and because it reflects their grant-making character.

[3] Ball, N., *Putting governance at the heart of security sector reform: Lessons from the Burundi-Netherlands Security Sector Development program*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2014; Van Veen, E. and A. van den Boogaard, 'De politieke dynamiek van veiligheid in Burundi', *Militaire Spectator*, Vol. 185, No. 7/8, 2016. The crisis around President Nkurunziza's 'third mandate' fatally disrupted the program's progress in 2016.

adaptive programming are well-documented and provide convincing evidence of its merits.[4] However, deliberate efforts to develop more such programs remain rare.

2. The case for adaptive programming

Development can be defined as 'a conscious acceleration of the process of modernization, understood as a four-dimensional transition of economy, government, the political system, and society' to raise standards of living, increase human fulfillment, and improve the quality of governance.[5] Two characteristics stand out from this definition. First, development is a highly political process because acceleration inevitably reconfigures existing power- and public authority structures. It also affects the distribution of public resources in ways that will create winners and losers. In short, development means change and change is neither value-neutral nor cost-free. This means that its shape, intensity, and consequences will be socially and politically contested. Aid programs that seek to initiate or support such acceleration need to be able to respond and engage with the local politics of development. This puts high demands on having the analytical capability to understand these politics and the flexibility to adjust programming accordingly.

The second characteristic that stands out from the preceding definition is that development is a highly interdependent, messy, and even chaotic enterprise. A transition along those four dimensions with some ambition of synchronization can hardly be an orderly affair.[6] The associated unpredictability is especially elevated in fragile societies because they feature low levels of institutionalization, little formal rule-based behavior, and reduced social capital. For example, Afghanistan is controlled by a mix of government leaders, customary figures, and quasi-warlords that each have their own sets of interests and rules, whose loyalties change rapidly and who have their own transnational networks. What happens politically in a system like this is difficult to predict and close to impossible for external actors to fully understand.[7]

---

[4] For example: Derbyshire, H. and E. Donovan, *Adaptive programming in practice: Shared lessons from the DFID-funded LASER and SAVI programmes*, 2016, online: http://savi-nigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Laser_Savi_Report-online-version-final-120816pdf.pdf (accessed 6 January 2017); Andrews, M., *The limits of institutional reform in development: Changing rules of realistic institutions*, Cambridge: CUP, 2013; Van Veen, E, *Improving Security and Justice Programming in Fragile Situations: Better Political Engagement, More Change Management*, Paris: OECD, 2016; Kleinfeld, R., *Improving development aid design and implementation: Plan for Sailboats not Trains*, Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015; Booth, D. and S. Unsworth, *Politically smart, locally led development*, London: ODI, 2014.

[5] The part in brackets is adapted from: Van Lieshout, P., R. Went and M. Kremer, *Less pretension, more ambition: Development policy in times of globalization*, Amsterdam: AUP, 2010.

[6] There are stark parallels with complexity theory: Johnson, N., *Simply complexity: A clear guide to complexity theory*, London: Oneworld publications, 2007.

[7] Van Veen, E. and V. Dudouet, *Hitting the target but missing the point? Assessing donor support for inclusive and legitimate politics in fragile societies*, Paris: OECD, 2017.

Box 1: What are the defining characteristics of an adaptive program?

A program is a time-limited intervention to realize complex objectives in a dynamic environment. It coherently organizes and applies a set of *resources* (e.g. financial, human and relational), *processes* (e.g. decision-making, procurement and learning), and *activities* (e.g. analysis and implementation) to realize its objectives. An adaptive program:

- *Operates on the basis of an exploratory and iterative approach*. It identifies a problem, maps its interest and stakeholder environment, finds an entry point for engagement to initiate improvements, and learns so that it can adjust based on experiences;

- *Is guided by a strategic aim and intermediate objectives*. A strategic aim provides a clear, over-the-horizon orientation point that guides program development. Intermediate objectives provide measurable activity signposts for the short-term that are emergent and alterable. Final results are not preset, but produced by continuous interaction between the strategic aim and progressive sets of intermediate objectives;

- *Organizes and uses its resources flexibly*. Time, funds, and staff are not set in stone at the start, but are scalable within certain bandwidths so that the program can respond to opportunities and learn from experiences;

- *Is expressly designed to learn and adjust*, i.e. it articulates a clear process for how learning and monitoring influence the nature of program operations and focus of program objectives;

- *Features ongoing analysis* that deepens the understanding of the program's socio-political environment, stimulates reflection, and informs program activities.

Sources: [Five Knowledge Platform workshops](#); Prevaas, B., *Werken aan Programma's, 2016, online:* www.werkenaanprogrammas.nl (accessed 6 January 2017); Derbyshire and Donovan (2016), *op.cit.*

Many aid programs are designed on the basis of logic that is almost in denial of this definition of development. They tend to unfold sequentially from start to finish, seek to deliver preset outputs, and are based on a sketchy understanding of the interests and stakeholders they will affect. They also either neglect or minimize the possibility of socio-political change occurring during their implementation, which means they under-prioritize the need to be able to learn. A possible consequence is the creation of a façade of results, generally expressed in quantified outputs, that do not have much meaning because they have become disconnected from the issues they are supposed to address. In short, it is not surprising that many aid programs fail: expecting interventions with a fixed and quasi-linear design to effectively address complex problems in dynamic settings is wishful thinking. Problematically, recurrent failure of such programs diminishes public support for aid spending.

It is here that adaptive programs enter the stage as a more responsive and innovative aid program variety (see Box 1). They go by many names, including *Problem-Driven Iterative Adaption*,

Doing Development Differently or *Thinking and Working Politically*.[8] These different labels make a case for a more flexible, 'on the go', and politically-aware approach to developmental problem-solving. They are also relatively marginal in volume compared with their more static and linear cousins.[9] The next sections discuss three key actions that can increase the feasibility and volume of adaptive programming.

3. Enabling adaptive programs: Develop a broader view on aid results

To start with, to increase the feasibility and volume of adaptive programs, Parliaments and ministries in donor countries need to replace their focus on the reporting of quantified and tangible results against preset objectives at output level with more sophisticated reporting on the dynamic relations between the nature of the developmental change and aid program activity in a particular country.

The most common type of reported result of aid programs today is based on a preset objective, quantified, tangible, and situated at output level. In other words, it reflects delivery against a program's immediate objective. Consider, for example, result statements such as these: 'globally, 5,644 police and national security forces were trained with Dutch support', or: 'thanks to Dutch interventions, 191,000 jobs were created in developing countries'.[10] This type of result is attractive because it is politically marketable (it sounds impressive in terms of achievement) and administratively desirable (it is easy to measure). Results such as these are premised on two notions: a) the pursuit of preset and fixed objectives can generate meaningful results, and: b)

---

[8] Andrews (2013), *op.cit.*; https://twpcommunity.org/ or http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/where-has-the-doing-development-differently-movement-got-to-two-years-on/ (accessed 8 December 2016).

[9] There are positive signs of change. USAID in particular is introducing a new practice of 'adaptive management' at scale while the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade conducts significant experimentation with 'strategy testing' (an adaptive programming tool). See: http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/adaptive-management-looks-like-its-hear-to-stay-heres-why-that-matters/ (accessed 8 December 2016); Ladner, D., *Strategy testing: An innovative approach to monitoring highly flexible aid programs*, San Franciso: The Asia Foundation, 2015.

[10] See: http://www.dutchdevelopmentresults.nl/magazine/development-results-2015/security-rule-law/ (accessed 8 December 2016); DGIS, 'Ontwikkelingsresultaten in beeld – editie 2016', *Letter to Parliament MINBUZA-2016.537669*, The Hague: MFA, 2016. Such result statements are not necessarily reflective of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' own views as it is under significant pressure of the Dutch Parliament to take this approach. Illustrative is the fourth paragraph of the adopted motion by Member of Parliament Smaling *c.s.* during the debate on the budget for Dutch development cooperation on 7 November 2016. Online: https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/detail?id=2016Z20608&did=2016D42456 (accessed 5 January 2017).

reporting on quantifiable and tangible results at output level offers a good reflection of a program's contribution to developmental change.[11] Both notions are rather problematic.

As to the first notion, the preceding discussion of the nature of development has made it abundantly clear that the conventional practice of setting end-state objectives upfront to guide interventions in complex environments is rarely appropriate. This is especially problematic when these objectives are fixed and then doggedly pursued without reflection while the context changes. As developmental processes are erratic and unpredictable, they are hard to navigate with fixed markers. It is more helpful to define broad strategic objective at the program's horizon than it is to have the route of travel fully marked out in advance (see also Box 1).[12]

As to the second notion, many essential developmental results are intangible and hard to quantify. Consider, for example, the quality of relations between allies or adversaries, or degrees of institutional effectiveness. Fitting such results in a straightjacket of what is tangible and quantifiable introduces artificiality akin to the allusion by the proverb: "tell me what you will measure and I will tell you how I will behave."

A focus on tangible and quantified results also reduces interventions in complex systems to numbers that can be added up in the here and now. This risks leaving important emergent phenomena unaccounted for. For example, the NGO Jemstone once organized a program that exposed journalists of Lebanon's different sects to each other and to the effects of insular reporting on other social groups by way of a joint study visit to Belfast and Amsterdam.[13] A quantified and tangible result of this program would probably refer to the number of journalists involved and their diversity. This would say nothing about how the program influenced these journalists to cover subsequent events. A valid alternative would be to organize one or several facilitated focus group discussion(s) between participants on how the trips and exposure influenced their perceptions, thinking, and behavior. It is, however, a more qualitative approach that is more difficult and likely to be more expensive.

Finally, output level results only acquire meaning when one understands them in their broader context. For example, to know whether training a particular number of police and security forces made a difference, one needs to know whether the level of security in the countries involved actually improved and for whom. This, in turn, demands knowledge of other factors that played a role in influencing the security situation of these countries, as well as the interaction between different factors (including any programs). Alternatively, to understand the relevance of '191,000 jobs created', mentioned earlier, one needs to know what proportion of the annual number of new labor market entrants in fragile societies they represent. If, say, 191,000 jobs were created

---

[11] Outputs are typically tangible products or services, often quantifiable and/or observable, that can be controlled – and therefore attributed– to the organization (or program, in this case) that is generating them. This explains their widespread use. See for example Paul Duignan's 'Three Minute Outcomes video series' on LinkedIn.

[12] This is well expressed in Kleinfeld's exhortation to see programs as sailboats instead of railway tracks: Kleinfeld (2015), *op.cit.*

[13] See: http://www.jemstone.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=27&Itemid=66 (accessed 8 December 2016).

while 50 million young people entered the labor market, the impact of this result is likely to be very modest.

As illustrated in Box 1, adaptive programs do not operate on the basis of preset objectives or quantified and tangible results alone. They have the ability to navigate the currents of developmental change towards a strategic aim. However, it does raise the tricky problem of how they can demonstrate results. This, after all, is essential to enable political discussion about policy effectiveness and to ensure accountability for public funds. Both can be achieved by improving the prevailing results paradigm on three counts:

a)   Take tangible, relational, and perceptional results into account and track all three rigorously.

Programs need to achieve tangible results in the short-term to create political buy-in, build experience, and enable learning. They also need to demonstrate 'relational results', meaning improvements in the quality of social and political relations in the area relevant to the program. This is because behaviors and attitudes are key to enabling policy changes, producing new change coalitions, and generating further tangible results in the future. Moreover, programs need to influence and track 'perceptional results', i.e. improvements in how people view the level of performance or the direction of development in respect of the issue a program works on. Such tracking helps to indicate the presence/absence of popular support and points toward problems and trends for future action. Useful and established methodologies for tracking these three different types of results exist and include:

* *Storytelling*: This is basically a structured way of collecting and understanding individual experiences (of, for example, a program). Collections of aggregated stories can help identify program trends, patterns, and results. It can be done quantifiably.[14]

* *Outcome mapping*: This focuses on charting 'changes in the behavior, relationships, activities or actions of the people, groups, and organizations with whom a program works'.[15]

* *Perception surveys*: These are relatively standardized questionnaires that can be used to, inter alia, map public experiences with particular actors, services or issues and have been of added value in places as varied as Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Nepal.

b)   Allow future opportunities or non-events to count as results

The contested nature of developmental change in fragile environments means that progress and regress on a particular issue can happen in parallel, as well as in both present and future.[16] For

---

[14] On storytelling: http://betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/stories. For a mockup of visual possibilities: http://www.sprockler.com/FoME2015/index.php (both accessed 8 December 2016).

[15] Earl, S., F. Carden and T. Smutylo, *Outcome mapping: Building learning and reflection into development programs*, Ottawa: IDRC, 2001.

this reason, it must be accepted that the creation of a future opportunity can be a meaningful result. Consider an invitation of a program to participate in a politically sensitive issue like the production of a defense white paper or a program bringing adversaries together in a meeting to discuss a particular dispute. Such achievements are not just interim steps on the way to another, ultimate objective. They are also results in themselves. In the same vein, the non-occurrence of a negative event that can plausibly be related to a program should also qualify for result status. Consider, for instance, the non-occurrence of protracted civil strife due to the French intervention in Ivory Coast in 2011, which believably prevented thousands of deaths. Useful and established methodologies for identifying and tracking such time-varied results include:

- *Theories of change*: This is a heuristic that helps identify, test, and revise assumptions underpinning a program on the basis of its implementation experiences. It helps to articulate, review, and refine expected cause-effect relations across issues, time, and actors.

- *Outcome harvesting*: A method to collect evidence of what has changed in a program's context as a basis to assess whether and how an intervention contributed to these changes.

- *Most significant change technique*: A story collecting method that is geared to understanding how and when change comes about.[17]

c) Ensure programs can connect their context with their activities and achievements

The results of an aid program are as good as their relevance to the developmental context in which they are achieved. This makes it of critical importance that program dynamics are regularly recalibrated in relation to contextual dynamics. The ensuing adjustment will go a long way toward making sure that program development remains meaningful and that activity impact can plausibly be attributed to the program. It requires, of course, a thorough understanding of the program's context. Unfortunately, monitoring of feedback loops between context and program is typically insufficiently rigorous, underfunded, or simply ignored.[18] Nevertheless, useful and established methodologies for doing this effectively exist and include:

---

[16] For example, the aforementioned Burundian-Dutch Security Sector Development program was delivering meaningful results in terms of improving the governance, esprit de corps and effectiveness of the Burundian military and police in the stable environment of 2014. However, the violence of 2015 - when the third mandate crisis erupted – made the program look like it had become irrelevant, or even that its support for the police had made things worse.

[17] The last two bullets are derived from: http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/most_significant_change (accessed 5 January 2017).

[18] For example, many European Union aid programs in support of African counties that aim to reduce migration flows are based on a poor grasp of the domestic migration politics of these countries, an inadequate socio-economic understanding of intra-continental migration flows and the – often incorrect - assumption that the security institutions of these countries are impartial. See: Molenaar, F. and F. El Kamouni-Janssen, *Turning the tide: The politics of irregular migration in the Sahel and Libya*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2017.

- *Scenario planning*: A method for identifying and anticipating possible versions of the future on the basis of deep analysis, wide stakeholder engagement, and collective reflection.[19]

- *Longitudinal surveys*: A tool to compare perceptions across time to gain a better idea of how issues, their composite elements, influencing factors, and interventions develop.[20]

- *Political-economy analysis*: A method to map political stakeholders, interests, and power in respect of a specific area or a particular topic to understand change dynamics (including possibilities and blockages).

In sum, adaptive programs offer a more realistic way of achieving aid results in developmental environments because they explicitly recognize and seek to engage with contextual complexity. A broader understanding of results is required to do justice to the nature of developmental change. Although this makes it more difficult to monitor programs and develop a sense of what aid is achieving, plenty of tried and tested methodologies exist that can track a more diverse array of results.

What is urgently required, however, is that Parliaments in donor countries accept that crafting a mature narrative on aid results needs more political patience rather than the current pressure for 'results'. It also means that funding organizations like ministries of foreign affairs need to become more courageous, experimental, and rigorous about achieving results through adaptive programming and reserve more funds for program-related analysis and monitoring. Maturation of the political and administrative understanding of aid results is essential to achieving sustainable value for money and pursue national interests effectively.

4. Enabling adaptive programs: Focus on accountability for learning and adjustment

To increase the feasibility and volume of adaptive programs, Parliaments and ministries in donor countries also need to shift the emphasis from programs being accountable for execution-as-planned, to programs being accountable for learning from experience and making corresponding adjustments in their operations and results.[21]

---

[19] This methodology was, for example, widely applied during and after South Africa's transition from apartheid to 'rainbow nation': Galer, G., 'Scenarios of change in South Africa', *Round Table*, Vol, 93, No. 375 (2004), pp. 369-383. For more in-depth analysis: Van der Heijden, K., *Scenario planning: The art of strategic conversation*, Second edition, Chichester: John Wiley, 2009

[20] Consider the excellent 'surveys of the Afghan people' of The Asia Foundation. Such longitudinal public opinion polls (now running from 2004 to 2016) are nevertheless the exception rather than the rule.

[21] It should be noted that the discussion here is not about accountability for the legality of a program's operations, but about accountability for its effectiveness. Naturally, aid programs must be fully financially

The previous section argued that the delivery of quantifiable and tangible results at output level against preset objectives should not be the core of an aid program's accountability. In the unpredictable and complex environment of fragile societies, this is akin to perceiving reality as the figurative 'shadows on the wall' in Plato's cave. Instead, adaptive programs have something more exciting to offer in recognition of erratic realties, namely accountability for their ability to learn and adjust. The assumption here is that high-quality learning processes and consequent thoughtful adjustment produce better results given the characteristics of fragile societies.

If accountability is re-oriented in this manner, it should focus on the quality of the insights that a program develops, the rigor with which it interrogates its own assumptions, the creativity with which it reflects on its experiences, and the clarity of thought with which it justifies changes to its operations and objectives. Results, as conventionally understood, will simply be the end product of this process.[22] To avoid charges of creating vague and unaccountable programs in this way, it should be noted that rigorous methods to assess a program's ability to learn and adjust exist and include:

- *Strategy testing*: A structured method for regular reflection on program assumptions, progress, and required adjustments on the basis of program experience and analysis. Its results can be captured through pre-structured protocols of strategy testing sessions.[23]

- *Program diaries*: A regular written report on what happened with and within the program against preset dimensions of change to develop a trend line of contextual changes and corresponding programmatic development;

- *Evidence sheets*: A written record that logs the why and what of major changes in program operations and objectives, how the relevant decision was arrived at, and who took it.

Applying such methods ensures that the process of program adaptation becomes evidence-based, documented and situated in analysis of the connections between context and program. Such methods make program adaptation accountable and subject to external judgment including evaluation. In fact, programs should be occasionally and randomly audited on the quality of their ability to learn to stimulate accuracy, quality, and consistency across adaptive approaches.

Focusing accountability on the ability to learn and adjust has the additional advantage of potentially reducing the tension between achieving learning and delivering results, because high-quality learning becomes the way by which excellent results are delivered. It has been observed, for example by many Dutch civil society organizations, that significant tension exists between the

---

accountable in the sense that there is justification, proper authorization and a correct paper trail for each expenditure under the applicable set(s) of laws, rules and regulations by which it operates.

[22] Emergent evidence for this assertion can be found in: Cole, W., D.Ladner, M. Koenig and L. Tyrrei, *Reflections on implementing politically informed, searching programs: Lessons for aid practitioners and policy makers*, Los Angeles: The Asia Foundation, Working politically in practice series, case study no. 5., 2016; Valters, C., C. Cummings and H. Nixon, *Putting learning at the center: Adaptive development programming in practice*, London: ODI, 2016.

[23] More detail in: Ladner (2015), *op.cit*.

desire to learn and the accountability to generate results. This tension creates the perverse incentive to avoid learning that jeopardizes delivery of agreed and preset results as it risks trouble with a program's funder. Imagine an organization that, through analysis and stakeholder engagement, finds out that its constitutional support program in country x should not focus on assisting constitutional drafting, but on a civic awareness campaign. However, the organization has committed to deliver a draft constitution by a certain date… This organization has a major incentive to continue doing what it signed up to do, even though the result might be relatively meaningless.

5. Enabling adaptive programs: Sustain long-term relationships between funders and implementers

To increase the feasibility and volume of adaptive programs, long-term partnerships between funders and implementers of aid programs are essential and must focus on establishing shared objectives, building trust, enabling joint learning, and good risk management.

Notwithstanding its promise and evident merits, adaptive programming is also a difficult and risky undertaking. The challenge to success resides in creatively resolving the tension between adaptation and continuity. Despite the dynamics of fragile environments, programs cannot simultaneously adjust all their parameters and remain coherent.[24] Practically, a program needs to regularly review:

- How its operational experiences are contributing to its strategic aim and intermediate objectives;

- What its analysis suggests about relevant changes in its (political) context that it must take into account;

- How it can maintain a coherent set of activities.

Program adjustments to operations and objectives must be made in function of these three factors. Two conditions must be met to ensure it is possible to do so in a balanced manner. First, implementing organizations must have the institutional ability to run adaptive programs effectively in the operational sense. This pertains to the quality and flexibility of their internal processes to organize analysis, resources, program management, and monitoring. Second, the relationship between the funding entity and the implementing organization of an adaptive program must be of high quality to create an environment that both authorizes and stimulates adaptation. Focusing on the second condition for the purpose of brevity, the workshops

---

[24] Consider, for example, the contractual aspects of adaptive programs that must be managed. See: Bryan, K. and P. Carter, *Contracts for adaptive programming*, London: ODI, 2016.

underpinning this report suggested that successful and sustained funder-implementer relationships have four key characteristics: 1) they are premised on broad, shared objectives; 2) they expand significant effort to build trust; 3) they create space for joint learning; 4) they feature good risk management.[25]

An important improvement in developing such relations are the Strategic Partnerships (SP) that the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated in 2015 with coalitions of civil society organizations. During the aforementioned Platform workshops, these SP's were lauded for their design that includes a focus on outcomes (pre-set results at output-level do not feature), the length of their time horizon (five years), their explicit recognition of the need for programs to adjust, and their flexible approach to monitoring. A few thorny issues nevertheless remain:

- These partnerships only pertain to civil society organizations that represent around 25% of the value of Dutch aid.[26] This suggests that there is significant space to apply the same adaptive principles to aid funds expended directly or through multilateral institutions;

- The Ministry is likely to struggle to reconcile the results from its adaptive approach to the SP's with its current approach to reporting aid results as reflected on www.dutchdevelopmentresults.nl for the reasons elaborated in section 3 of this brief;

- Participants in the workshops also flagged that the implementation of the SP's needs much more focus and effort to deliver on the promise of its design (while recognizing it is still early days). In particular, time to build trust, reflect jointly and manage risks was felt to be scarce. Moreover, it was felt that an adequate understanding of adaptive programs and the skills to manage corresponding contracts accordingly are often scarce on the part of the Foreign Ministry. This could jeopardize essential aspects of a promising initiative.

Consequently, it seems incumbent on both the Ministry and its Strategic Partners to put greater focus on, and dedicate more capacity to, regular and consistent strategic conversations. This echoes the brief's earlier observation that adaptive programming likely requires greater effort and expense (due to higher overheads, greater focus on learning and more analysis) and so it offers an opportunity for the parties involved 'to put their money where their mouth is'. Having an external partner facilitate such conversations might increase neutrality, ensure coherence of methods (such as monitoring) across conversations, leverage emergent lessons and keep a semi-public track record that supports meta-learning. This would greatly reduce the risks of adaptive approaches for the Ministry and its Strategic Partners.[27]

---

[25] See: http://www.kpsrl.org/browse/browse-item/t/adaptive-programming-and-learning-in-the-strategic-partnerships-dialogue-and-dissent; Van der Jagt, N., *Capturing success: is it time to rethink our results frameworks?*, The Hague: Knowledge Platform, 2016. Online blog: http://www.kpsrl.org/browse/browse-item/t/capturing-success-is-it-time-to-rethink-our-results-frameworks (both accessed 5 January 2017).

[26] 'Rijksbegroting 2017, hoofstuk XVII: Buitenlandse handel en en ontwikkelingssamenwerking', November 2016.

[27] Consider risks like program scope-creep, insufficiently rigorous monitoring of adjustments, incompatible monitoring and overly rigid contract management.

6. Recommendations to enable more adaptive programming

Adaptive programming is essential to address complex development problems effectively, i.e. problems that have non-replicable cause-effect relationships, which can only be identified retroactively, and that feature unclear, as well as politically contested, framing and solutions.[28] Complex development problems include issues such as (re)crafting dysfunctional rules for political competition, improving the balanced exercise of public authority, increasing the fairness of economic revenue distribution, and strengthening the quality of governance of security and justice provision.

Essentially, adaptive programming offers an enhanced method for navigating the politics of developmental change. Greater use of this method requires creating politically permissive space for experimental aid programming because it is both more promising and more difficult to execute. Three actions need to be taken to create this space:

- *Parliaments and ministries in donor countries need to replace a focus on reporting quantified and tangible results against preset objectives at output level with a more sophisticated view of the results that aid programs can deliver*. This can be achieved by initiating a focused political and public discussion on the nature of aid results and what aid programs may achieve that is grounded in the existing evidence-base. Practically, a range of methodologies exist to track a broader understanding of results just as rigorously, but much more meaningfully, than the current output-level reporting of quantified and tangible results.

- *Parliaments and ministries in donor countries must shift the emphasis from programs being accountable for being executed as planned to programs being accountable for timely adjustment informed by operational experience*. The usual parameters for assessing financial accountability can be retained. Accountability for results can be substituted by accountability for learning and adjustment via greater use of existing methodologies such as strategy testing, program diaries, and evidence sheets. Emergent evidence suggests that program results are likely to follow from better learning.

- *Funders and implementers of adaptive aid programs must sustain long-term partnerships that focus on establishing broad, shared objectives, building trust, enabling joint learning and conducting good risk management*. This can be achieved by increasing the political focus on, and capacity available for, progressing the existing Strategic Partnerships between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch civil society organizations. Practically, around 10 adaptive programs could be chosen from the range of programs available within the SP's to help Parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and implementing organizations build a collective evidence base on when an adaptive approach work best, how, and why.

---

[28] David Snowden's 'Cynefin' sense- and decision-making framework offers a useful lens for considering complex problems. *See: http://cognitive-edge.com/*. For a brief narrated introduction of the Cynefin framework: https://vivifychangecatalyst.wordpress.com/2015/06/26/complexity-theory-cynefin-framework-decision-making/; for a visualization: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f7/Cynefin_framework_by_Edwin_Stoop.jpg (all accessed 8 December 2016).

Knowledge
Platform
**Security &
Rule of Law**

Sophialaan 10
2514 JR The Hague
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)70 302 8130
info@kpsrl.org
www.kpsrl.org