



Report

Learning to make a difference

Christian Aid Ireland's adaptive programme management in governance, gender, peace building and human rights

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Cover photo: A mother carries her child in a crop field in Chimaltenango, Guatemala. Photo: Maria Fleischmann / World Bank

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Executive summary

Tackling the problems of poverty, vulnerability and exclusion that persist in parts of the world that continue to be affected by violence or political insecurity is difficult for several reasons. For one, because of the complexity of the prevailing social, economic and political systems, solutions to chronic problems are far from obvious. One response to this aspect of the challenge is adaptive programme design and management.

This paper is the product of a multi-year collaboration between ODI and the core team of Christian Aid Ireland to assess the relevance of adaptive or trial-and-error approaches to the field of governance, peace building and human rights. It explains the basis on which Christian Aid Ireland's current five-year programme funded by Irish Aid has become committed to an adaptive approach. It then describes and seeks to draw lessons from the programme's first year of experience, considering the possible implications for implementation over the coming years.

Interest in adaptive programme management is growing fast, reflecting increasing global awareness of the limitations of 'blueprint' plans for addressing complex problems. However, a large literature shows that moving to a more learning-based approach is challenging. It is particularly hard for organisations that either believe they know the solutions to typical problems or are otherwise limited in their ability to recognise mistakes and change course between scheduled mid-term reviews and final evaluations. Christian Aid Ireland's experience reviewed here is therefore of interest to a wider community of practice concerned with how to redesign a programme to make it more adaptive and what issues can arise in the process. At this stage, it is of course not possible to assess the impact of the new approach.

The programme works in seven countries affected by conflict, violence or political instability – Angola, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe. It is based on partnerships with local organisations, especially non-governmental and civil society organisations working with marginalised women and men, and other gender identities. It aims to make a difference to people's lives by helping them realise their human rights, improve their security and address gender inequalities.

Joint activities and management tools are now being used to structure the programme's relationships with partners. These include 'strategy testing', explicit theories of change and 'outcome harvesting'. Annual strategy testing events, based on a procedure developed by The Asia Foundation, are designed to stimulate regular reflection around the theories of change underpinning partner activities. Participatory outcome harvesting is used to inform the testing of strategies and to support revision of theories of change where necessary. Both the strategy testing and the outcome harvesting serve to populate the results frameworks required for reporting to Irish Aid, in which pre-set targets – a legacy of the previous approach to management for results – are still a feature.

A review of the experience so far suggests that the instruments and processes being introduced are strongly welcomed by partners and show promise as a means of increasing their effectiveness in contributing to ambitious objectives. Partners are generally embracing the changed relationship with Christian Aid Ireland with enthusiasm, although the required self-awareness, analytical capacity and willingness to adapt come more easily to some than to others. Flexible adjustments to changed circumstances are currently more common than genuine adaptation. To get full benefits from the move to adaptive management, the new ways of working and their underlying principles will need to become more embedded in the organisations' practices and cultures.

Based on their review, the authors believe Christian Aid Ireland will need to be proactive in supporting this change, between as well as during the formally scheduled strategy testing cycles. It should lay increasing emphasis on the difference between desirable flexibility and adaptive working in the full sense. And it should report to Irish Aid in a way that gives maximum prominence to the expected benefits of 'learning to make a difference'. Irish Aid, for its part, should consider the potential benefits of the new approach for achieving results over traditional reporting against pre-set targets. Other international development organisations might take inspiration from what this programme is doing, especially if they are working on similar issues with a comparable partnership approach.

1 Introduction

The past 60 years have seen unprecedented economic and social progress in large parts of the developing world. Countries and peoples that within living memory were afflicted by chronic poverty, endemic disease and human insecurity are now advancing at a pace not seen before in history. But the distribution of these gains is highly uneven. In dozens of mainly (but not exclusively) conflict-affected parts of the world, acute deprivation remains doggedly persistent and, despite the best efforts of governments and development organisations, large populations fail to realise their basic human rights. Inequities between social classes, genders and ethnicities are large and growing. For rural areas and women and girls in particular, the timescale of expected improvements in basic social indicators extends far into the future (Wild et al., 2015).

While some of the causes of this are deep-seated and systemic, others reflect inadequate effort. It is becoming clear that the forms of support to development and peace building that have appeared sufficient in the past are no longer effective enough. Governments and the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector alike need to raise their game and seek ways of improving their reach and effectiveness. Christian Aid Ireland is one international NGO that is currently attempting to do this. With the help of a new five-year programme grant from Irish Aid, it has thoroughly redesigned its support to country partners in the fields of governance, peace building, gender equality and human rights. The new programme promotes an adaptive approach. That is, it supports partners to discover, by means of purposeful trial and error, how to make a difference to people's lives in challenging country contexts.

This is an important and exciting initiative, for two reasons.

First, it is the latest in a growing series of national and international efforts to move away from 'blueprint' plans (e.g. logframes and similar results frameworks) that assume the solutions to complex development and peace-building problems are simple and knowable in advance. As outlined in Section 2, based on the general literature, the limitations of blueprint planning and the need to adopt a more learning-oriented approach are long-established and compelling. However, the evidence on how to turn an adaptive approach into an effective alternative remains relatively scarce. Documenting and sharing experiences in this whole field is an important task, to which this paper makes a small contribution.

Second, the new approach of Christian Aid Ireland – the subject of Sections 3 and 4 – has a number of features of special interest. The programme works in seven countries affected by conflict, violence or political instability: Angola, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (IOPT), Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe. It works exclusively through partner organisations that are tackling unjust power dynamics, the social impacts of violence and gender inequality. This partnership basis is a great source of strength, and is consistent with the goal of localising development and peace-building efforts as far as possible. At the same time, it poses particular challenges on both sides of the relationship when it comes to introducing a new approach to programme design and management. The lessons this experience is generating will be especially relevant for other international organisations whose programmes are similarly structured.

Christian Aid Ireland's programme began implementation in early 2017. The intention is to track its progress in a series of learning papers over the remaining years of its five-year lifespan. This paper starts off the series by describing the context and rationale of the new approach, and identifying some early lessons and issues to be addressed during implementation. While the lessons are of most immediate concern to Christian Aid Ireland and its funder, Irish Aid, they will also be of interest to any organisations undertaking or contemplating similar innovations in programming. The paper also aims to contribute to the wider discussion dedicated to adaptive approaches in development and humanitarian work.

Section 2 explains the background – what the move to adaptive programme management is all about. This section is based on the lead author's reading of current literature and discussion, as modified and enriched by his engagement with Christian Aid Ireland. The remainder of the paper is the product of extended discussion, between the lead author and the named members of Christian Aid Ireland's core team in a joint effort to describe an accurate and clear picture of the programme.

Section 3 describes the approach of the current programme – what it is intending to do and how. Section 4 explains the sources of evidence on which it is possible to draw at this stage, and identifies what the authors see as the main lessons and emerging issues after a year of implementation. Section 5 sets out the authors' agreed conclusions and recommendations.

2 Adaptive programme management – what it's all about

Development and peace-building challenges in areas affected by conflict and violence are tough, for two reasons. First and most obviously, they are concentrated in the less accessible, harder-to-reach, parts of societies, often in troubled regions that are ridden with violence and instability. Second, less evidently perhaps, they are bound up in human systems that are highly complex. They consist of many actors, with a multiplicity of beliefs, incentives and powers, interacting repeatedly with their circumstances and each other, ultimately generating outcomes that cannot be anticipated with any certainty. Adaptive programme management is about responding more effectively to this second kind of uncertainty.

2.1 The implications of complexity

Problems that are complex in this sense, as well as difficult in other respects, do not have obvious solutions. They are not amenable to detailed planning, even if the planning draws on good technical and local knowledge. Experience in fields of human endeavour as diverse as business start-ups and warfare illustrates the basic insight that big plans often lead to costly failures. Success is more often the result of a learning-oriented approach, based on 'trial and error' and the ability to adjust rapidly in the light of experience (Harford, 2011; Ramalingam, 2013; Boulton et al., 2015).

In international development, it is over 30 years since the idea was first advanced that those designing projects that affect people's lives should abandon 'blueprint' planning and adopt instead a learning-process or adaptive approach, where every intervention uses trial and error (Korten, 1980; Rondinelli, 1983). Development programmes that find it difficult to make timely course corrections, because they are locked into implementing a pre-conceived plan, have continued to see limited development results.¹ However, for a variety of reasons, the alternative approach, sometimes known as 'problem-driven

iterative adaptation' (PDIA), has only recently begun to grab the headlines and enter the mainstream of discussion.

The view now widely advocated (Andrews et al., 2013; Faustino and Booth, 2014; Burns and Worsley, 2015; Green, 2016; Andrews et al., 2017; Kirsch et al., 2017) is that we do not know enough to map out in advance the solutions to many of the problems in the world today, because – as well as being inherently challenging – they are bound up in complex systems. In contrast, interventions can make a positive difference to outcomes, even in highly complex situations, if they deliberately set themselves up to learn by trial and error, testing initial approaches and adjusting rapidly as evidence on possible avenues of change is acquired. This is what an adaptive approach is about.

2.2 The crucial difference

It is important to understand that, while in some respects an old idea, an adaptive approach has not been widely practised. Adaptation in the full sense involves more than a general commitment to working flexibly and learning from experience. It requires regular honest reflection on whether current ways of working are making progress towards the desired change or not and, if not, having the freedom to change them accordingly there and then. The crucial difference between a blueprint and an adaptive programme management design concerns the relationship between ends and means – the relationship between the desired outcomes, or programme objectives, and the activities and outputs that are thought likely to contribute to these outcomes.

In the blueprint approach, the outputs are fully specified at the outset. There is a fixed programme logic. It is believed we know enough to be able to say that, so long as some reasonably likely assumptions hold, the delivered outputs will contribute to the desired outcomes. Therefore, the monitoring of programme performance focuses on whether or not the agreed activities and

¹ For examples, see Porter et al. (1991) and Easterly (2007).

outputs have been delivered in a timely and efficient manner. The theory of change underlying the belief that ‘x’ will lead to ‘y’ may be articulated and subject to critical appraisal at the outset and at programme end. However, there is little room or incentive to reconsider during implementation whether the right deliverables have been selected. Rigorous evaluations, when they occur, come too late to make a difference.

The distinguishing feature of an adaptive approach is that certainty about what is likely to ‘work’ is not expected. While the desired outcomes are fixed, the programme outputs are not. Rather than taking a large gamble on some preferred solution, the programme lays a series of ‘small bets’ on a succession of more or less solid best guesses about what may be effective in the context. These best guesses are formulated as tentative strategies and theories of change that are revisited and reassessed at regular intervals. On this basis, decisions are taken to adjust, extend and/or abandon current operations until optimal effectiveness is achieved.

As with the blueprint plan, the success of the intervention is judged at programme end by whether the desired outcomes have been achieved and whether the intervention has contributed. But, with an adaptive approach, there is a crucial difference in the way programme performance is assessed in the meantime. Rather than tracking output delivery according to a scheme set out in advance, the monitoring of an adaptive approach focuses on the quality of the learning and adaptation processes.

A common confusion is to identify adaptive working with having the flexibility to amend outputs in the light of changed circumstances. This kind of flexibility is of course desirable when working in highly volatile country contexts. However, it is not the same thing as the purposeful experimentation and course correction that is required because of complexity. A limitation of what might be called the flexible blueprint approach – as in the design of many of the traditional programmes funded by the World Bank, bilateral donors and NGOs – is that they may ‘flex’ in response to changes in external circumstances, but they do not learn. They do not change course in a decisive way when it becomes clear their initial strategies are not working. The result can be poor final results and a massive waste of resources.²

2.3 A growing body of experience

Programmes that are purposefully adaptive are still much less common than ones that have incorporated elements of flexibility or learning into a blueprint design. However, we believe the trend is in the right direction.

Promising examples of adaptive or ‘entrepreneurial’ methods are increasingly found in the operations of NGOs and other implementing organisations in several fields of work. These areas include property rights reform, public financial management, market systems and economic growth projects, industrial policy, gender equity, health management, education systems, peace building and human rights advocacy.³ As well as the influence of compelling new ideas, this trend reflects an increasing willingness of official donors and other funding bodies to support innovation in programming (see e.g. Wild et al., 2017).

As yet, the direct evidence of distinctly better outcomes and improved value for money from moving from blueprint-style to adaptive working exists in a few areas but is patchy. This should change as more of these programmes reach final evaluation stage, most having started within the last three to four years. In the meantime, change initiatives of the kind undertaken by Christian Aid Ireland are generating compelling suggestions about the potential to improve effectiveness by this route.

2.4 Two sources of difficulty

Moving from blueprint thinking to rigorously adaptive working is not easy. An initial hurdle to be overcome is the commitment to established ‘solutions’ – activities that seem so obviously relevant, or are so good in themselves, that we don’t need to examine their effectiveness.

Official development agencies have often been the worst offenders in this regard. Especially in the field of governance, they have promoted solution-driven formulas that set up impressive façades of ‘good practice’ while making little real impact. Equally, however, some civil society organisations (CSOs) have prior commitments to particular ways of working, for example on advocacy or capacity building, that prevent them distinguishing clearly between goals and the most effective ways of pursuing them. This is unfortunate in view of the strength of the arguments for purposeful trialling of alternative approaches until a pathway to effectiveness can be found (Kleinfeld, 2015; Booth, 2016; Booth et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2016). It is doubly unfortunate insofar as NGO-led local partnerships are in principle ideally suited to the ‘politically smart and locally led’ lines of work that provide some of the best examples of adaptive programme management in action (Hummelbrunner and Jones, 2013; Autesserre, 2014; Booth and Unsworth, 2014; Pinnington, 2014).

Another source of difficulty is the mistaken belief that monitoring against a pre-planned delivery schedule

2 The previous references include numerous documented examples.

3 Adding to the publications already referenced, a number of recent reports describe the promise and early challenges of official donor and civil society programmes making efforts on these lines (Engineers Without Borders Canada and Mercy Corps, 2015; Brock et al., 2016; Derbyshire and Donovan, 2016; Mercy Corps and International Rescue Committee, 2016; O’Neil, 2016).

or annual targets provides the most, if not the only, rigorous basis for results-based accountability. For decades, international NGOs have been compelled to report to their funders on the basis of fully designed implementation plans with predefined progress milestones and targets. To a greater or lesser extent, the same requirements have been transmitted to NGO partners on the ground, as it has seemed like the best way of maintaining accountability for the funds disbursed. This has involved all parties acting as if they know ahead of time what is likely to work. It has continued in part because neither funders nor recipients have been able to imagine an alternative reporting arrangement that would be equally results-oriented and sufficiently rigorous. Fortunately, however, there is now less reason for this. There is a growing body of guidance on how to make adaptive programme management rigorously monitorable in a results-oriented framework (Patton, 2011; Pritchett et al., 2013; Ladner, 2015; Valters et al., 2016). The experience described in this paper shows how some of this can be applied.

2.5 Specific challenges

To complete this summary of the background to Christian Aid Ireland's new programming approach, mention should be made of some more specific challenges that have been observed in the previously cited studies of experience to date:

- While funding agencies are increasingly interested in innovative programme design and implementation, the support for such change can be inconsistent. The most experienced practitioners in large development agencies are aware of the limitations of blueprint planning. But agencies under the direct or indirect control of government ministers are constantly reminded that taxpayers want aid money spent on activities that are guaranteed to produce development results. In their turn, they regularly remind those they fund of this reality. The truth is that aid often contributes significantly to beneficial outcomes but quite often in ways that are unexpected and almost always in ways that are far from guaranteed. Few official agencies have yet found a way of being fully honest with taxpayers about how aid works when it works. As a result, their commitment to adaptive programme management is always vulnerable to the risk of backsliding in response to political pressure.
- Development practitioners, at all levels, typically find it easy to embrace the need for programmes to have flexibility to respond to unpredictable changes in context. Adaptive programme management, which responds to the uncertainty inherent in a complex context, is less natural. It involves admitting limited understanding and being willing to adopt an experimental mind-set, including changing course

when the current evidence suggests it to be necessary – regardless of whether the context has changed. Particularly for those trained to report programme implementation against a results framework or other predefined schedules of activities, outputs and targets, embracing the 'error' element in trial and error is hard psychologically. Getting the full implications of adaptive working accepted from top to bottom of an organisation's practice and culture calls for deliberate and attentive change management.

- At a more technical level, organisations that have committed themselves to adaptive programme management are still searching for adequate arrangements for assessing and reporting on progress towards expected outcomes on an annual basis. There are some good models – the best of them involving regular 'strategy testing' or review of theories of change to see if current activities are showing the expected signs of contributing to the desired outcomes and, if not, how they need to be changed – but there is not yet a wide body of experience in applying them and demonstrating their viability. Monitoring and evaluation of adaptive programme management remains an underdeveloped art.

2.6 Especially for non-governmental organisations

In addition to these general challenges, there are several others of relevance to NGOs and CSOs seeking to change course towards adaptive working:

- At the global level, international NGOs that rely at least in part on official agency funding are obviously subject to agency policy. Moreover, it can be the case that the department of the agency responsible for civil society funding is not the most innovative part of the organisation or the best at managing diversionary pressures from politicians or the mass media. Less obviously, NGO fundraisers are notoriously subject to the temptation to put out misleading messages about how to solve the problems of the world – recall the Make Poverty History campaign of the past decade. So, pressures to downplay messages about uncertainty and the necessity of a learning-oriented approach can arise even within the NGO sphere of operations.
- International NGOs, like official development agencies, usually have mandates that are firmly defined only at the level of expected outcomes, leaving them free to adopt a variety of approaches to programming. On the other hand, national and local NGOs and CSOs often have a particular line of work – such as agricultural extension, participatory budgeting or human rights advocacy – as their reason for existing. In other words, their identity is bound up with delivering a particular type of output. For global programmes that essentially fund and accompany

local organisations, this is a likely source of friction and difficult dilemmas when it comes to breaking away from solution-driven, and espousing problem-driven, approaches.

- In addition, it should not be forgotten that international NGOs, as providers of funds, exercise power over NGOs at country level. Regardless of the partnership principles in operation and the messages being conveyed about the value of adaptive working, NGOs can find it challenging to admit to failure of strategies, for fear of losing funding as a result.
- Finally, international programmes that are designed to support local partners are seldom exclusive funders of those partners. NGOs and CSOs at country level being

able to receive support from a variety of sources is no doubt a good thing, giving them greater ability to define their own approaches and acquire capabilities for self-direction. The challenge with this for local NGOs lies in programme staff implementing projects with different management structures, depending on the donor. It also means, however, that a progressive funder has fewer levers with which to steer its partners in a new and better direction. Any messages about the strengths and potentially liberating consequences of adaptive working may be offset or diluted by instructions from other funders, either reaffirming blueprint-type reporting practices or, perhaps worse, limiting reporting to predefined activities without much regard to outcomes.

3 Christian Aid Ireland's new programme approach

During 2015, as Christian Aid Ireland's previous five-year programme grant from Irish Aid was drawing to a close, thoughts in the organisation turned towards the future shape of a successor programme. Applications for funding to the Irish government were due in mid-2016. Christian Aid Ireland's international Programme Strategy of early 2016 supported a continued focus on governance, gender, peace building and human rights in seven countries. Christian Aid Ireland's core team⁴ decided to submit a funding proposal informed by the latest thinking on adaptive programme management.

3.1 Origins

The seven programme countries – Angola, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, IOPT, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe – are geographically diverse. However, they share repressive, often violent, contexts, in which the space for civil society is at risk or already shrinking. The drivers of poverty are linked to inequalities between elite power holders and marginalised communities, violations of human rights and lack of public accountability.

In Angola, a major issue is access to land for poor people, including the forced eviction of vulnerable households to make way for urban developments that further enrich the elites. In Colombia, Christian Aid partners work with marginalised communities and other victims of the armed conflict to ensure that the peace agreement and government spending priorities take their interests into account. In El Salvador and Guatemala, the focus is on mitigating the effects of gang violence, especially on women and young men, against a background of extreme inequality and high-level corruption. Displacement of Bedouin communities to make room for new Jewish settlements in the Negev and the discriminatory policies of the Israeli government in the Occupied Territories are central issues for NGOs in IOPT. In Sierra Leone, the enduring legacies of civil war include weak taxation systems and budget management, land grabs and intimidation, gang violence and persistent gender inequalities. In Zimbabwe's informal sector and in rural areas affected by mining, political violence is common,

human rights monitors are regularly abused or intimidated and gender-based violence remains widespread.

Against this background, the overall goal of Christian Aid Ireland's new programme is to contribute to ongoing struggles to remove barriers to the realisation of the human rights of poor and marginalised groups, paying particular attention to reducing gender inequality.

Across the countries, the new programme would pursue three objectives in partnership with local NGOs and CSOs: (1) to support marginalised women and men to realise their human rights in respect of land, housing, basic services, livelihood security and citizen participation; (2) to support those facing violence to have greater safety, security and resilience, and to benefit from inclusive peace processes delivering lasting justice; and (3) to support marginalised women and girls to increase their control of assets and participation in decision-making, while mitigating gender-based violence and intimidation.

Four factors helped point the programme in the direction of adaptive design and management:

- The finding of the independent final evaluation of the previous programme – that adapting strategies in the light of experience had, in some cases, made a substantial contribution to the results achieved; however, this was not being captured satisfactorily, since partners were continuing to report pre-set strategies and targets. Whether this was intended or not, in practice the targets were treated as a compliance measure, to the detriment of a focus on learning from experience and making timely adjustments.
- A conclusion from the programme's mid-term review that partners' assumptions about pathways of change had not always been questioned sufficiently, often being rolled up in broad statements about programme objectives.
- Feedback from country staff and partners, suggesting that the focus of annual reporting on incremental improvements in outcomes (targets) was unhelpful, given that outcomes are subject to various factors other than the programme's contribution and gains are seldom regular and linear.

⁴ The core team is made up of a head of programmes and four advisors; collectively, they liaise between Irish Aid and Christian Aid Ireland country teams, provide technical support in the areas of governance, human rights and peace building, gender and inclusion, and monitoring and evaluation.

- New thinking circulating in NGO and think-tank milieux about the advantages of adaptive approaches, combined with the encouragement to innovation included in Irish Aid’s Guidance Note for the new programme grant. As well as drawing on the general literature, the core team sought personal advice from one of the pioneers of adaptive programme management at country level, Jaime Faustino of The Asia Foundation. They were also guided by the main author of this paper.

Various factors influenced the way the new programme could move towards an adaptive approach. To begin with, the programme is organisationally complicated. The core team based in Dublin coordinates and supports country managers and programme teams in countries and sub-regions, who in turn support and supervise multiple local partners, whose interests range across the fields of governance, peace building and human rights. In two cases, the country programme teams are based in London. The core team reports to Irish Aid on the performance of the programme as a whole, which, until this new programme, used country office reporting, based in turn on partner reporting, as the main source of evidence.

The main features of the programme proposal arose from the way these and other constraints were managed. Three particular features need to be explained: strategy testing, outcome harvesting and the results framework.

3.2 Theories of change and the strategy testing cycle

As during the previous programme, Irish Aid’s guidance included an emphasis on articulating theories of change to justify and explain overall programme content. The challenge in shaping the new programme was to move towards using theories of change in a more refined way, as revisable hypotheses about what is likely to ‘work’ in a complex change environment. This needed to be done with due attention to the requirements of the multi-level management structure.

The approach agreed and now being implemented involves ‘nested’ theories of change at three levels: overall programme level, country level and partner level. Theories of change perform slightly different roles at each level.

In the past, little distinction was made between the programme’s theory of change and its results framework. The new overall theory of change puts adaptive learning at its centre. As indicated above, the programme works

towards outcomes in three areas: realisation of human rights, from violence to peace and gender equality. It does so by applying principles of adaptive programme management to the overall steering and management of the country-level partnerships that make up the programme. The overall theory of change tries to make explicit the ‘why’ of the expected contribution or change at this level, along the lines of ‘if ..., then ..., because ...’ (see Box 1).

At the country programme and partner project levels, too, theories of change are expected to make explicit the assumptions about how change happens that underlie particular interventions. The purpose of making these assumptions explicit is to lay them out for critical review and revision in light of experience.⁵ Understood this way, theories of change are meant to cover *both* how change is expected to occur in a given context and why, *and* what role various individuals and organisations are expected to play and why.⁶

At partner level, the formulation and review of theories of change is the centrepiece of a cycle of systematic critical reflection. This is deliberate, structured and subject to regular and focused monitoring. Reflecting the general thinking about complex situations and the associated uncertainty, the programme assumes it is realistic to set out initial strategies and theories for one year and unwise to fix these for an entire five-year programme period, even if contexts are stable – which they seldom are. Therefore, once formulated, strategies are expected to be tested at least annually and, if necessary, modified. In operationalising this idea, the programme has drawn heavily on the strategy testing model used in multi-country work by The Asia Foundation and described in the previously cited paper by Debra Ladner (2015).

Box 1 Overall theory of change

If Christian Aid programmes regularly reassess and try to understand better the changing political, economic and social context in which they are working, **then** they will be more effective, **because** opportunities to make an impact are constantly changing. If the overall programme management assists them to adjust their strategies in the light of experience and changed circumstances, **then** the whole programme will contribute most to improving the lives of women and men in contexts of poverty and inequality, **because** contexts are typically complex and variable.

⁵ The theory of change approach is misused when it simply takes the form of a flow chart containing no more information about likely mechanisms of change than a traditional logframe – see Funnell and Rogers (2011).

⁶ This definition helps tackle a recurrent problem with theories of change – when organisations imply that change in a society revolves around them and their programme, rather than around a range of interrelated contextual factors, of which their programme is one small part – see Valters (2015).

Table 1 Christian Aid's theory of change format

Outcomes	Assumptions	Initial strategies	Indicators
Change you want to see at the level of changes in people's lives, sought over the five years of the programme	About how the desired changes are expected to happen	Describing actions and activities that are likely to contribute to the change	Answers to the questions: 'how will you know if your strategy is working?' and 'on what basis will you adapt?'

Implementing this approach begins with partners and Christian Aid programme officers articulating their initial strategies and theories of change (see Table 1)

Then, at intervals of a year or less, partners together with Christian Aid staff (in-country and from Dublin) reflect on significant changes that occurred during the year (major events, decisions made, achievements and roadblocks) and consider the possible contribution of programme activities. This process is undertaken with each partner organisation, using the 'outcome harvesting' method described in more detail below to evidence such changes. The team then revisits the latest theory of change, using a set of guiding questions, and documents its discussion. It revises the theory of change as needed, with a focus on developing strategies with higher potential impact. During strategy testing, teams may drop strategies that have proven ineffective, add new strategies to address dimensions of the problem that were not previously understood or just refine the existing strategies.

In some cases, an external facilitator, critical friend or strategic advisor who is familiar with the partner's area of work is asked to take part where possible. This helps challenge the team's thinking and assumptions, and allows it to step back from the day-to-day tasks of implementation to focus on the changes the programme seeks to achieve and the intermediate stepping stones that need to be dealt with. The involvement of Christian Aid Ireland's core team helps ensure overall programme coherence, oversight and learning.

The final step in the process involves documenting how and why any theory of change is revised and identifying any related programmatic, operational or budgetary implications. As we shall see, various simple tools have been devised to assist the reflection, decision and recording processes. Recording is important, as the quality of the annual review process is a principal measure of programme performance. As a measure of whether parts of the programme are currently 'on track' or performing to standard, the quality of the scheduled learning process replaces the monitoring against predefined targets for incremental improvements in outcomes.

The scheduling of relatively formalised strategy testing events, with the participation of the Dublin-based core team and full reporting on these events, helps drive home the distinctiveness of the new approach. However, the intention is to make adaptive programme implementation an integral feature of partners' ways of working, with reflection on context and experience and adjustment to strategies occurring when and as needed. Between the major strategy testing events, interim

learning and adaptation are expected to be consolidated and recorded in more frequent partnership meetings. The core team plans regular catch-up calls to encourage and stimulate this type of practice in country partnerships, in the hope of its progressive adoption into organisational cultures over a period of time.

3.3 Outcome harvesting

In redesigning the programme, a second constraint to be managed – alongside the multi-level programme structure – was the funder's current understanding of its commitment to Results-Based Management (RBM). Irish Aid's Guidance Note for the funding round required programme proposals to include the outline of a results framework, complete with details of baselines and targets for review on an annual basis. In order to meet the need to report against a results framework while promoting and facilitating a shift to adaptive programme management, Christian Aid Ireland has introduced outcome harvesting (Rassmann et al., 2013), an evaluation method familiar in the NGO world during the past decade but not previously used by NGOs for regular programme management.

Outcome harvesting is the retrospective collection of evidence on results associated with or relevant to an intervention. It is in principle fully consistent with adaptive programme management, since the results reported do not have to have been specified in advance. It allows partners to identify changes, achievements and disappointments relevant to their interventions as they happened in a relatively open-ended way, as a helpful prelude to their reflections on strategy. At the same time, it contributes usefully to the qualitative data collection needed for annual reporting to the funder.

The reporting on the outcome harvesting activities undertaken with partners includes three features: (1) a description of each observed outcome, a comment on its significance and an assessment of the contribution made by the programme/partner; (2) confirmation of these data by Christian Aid Ireland programme staff; and (3) verification of the data by reference to external sources. This helpfully focuses partners on the difference between outcomes (within your spheres of influence but outside your sphere of control) and outputs (within your sphere of control). Christian Aid Ireland has developed an app (the OH App) to facilitate the process of capturing outcomes as they happen, and to ensure consistent presentation of the data.

3.4 Results framework

Under the previous programme, a results framework had been constructed from the bottom up, beginning at the partner level. At the outset, results frameworks were agreed for each partner organisation, including quantitative baselines, indicators and targets for a set of outcome-level objectives. For example, a partner committed to reducing violent land-grabbing would set as a target an agreed number of favourable resolutions of land disputes in its area of work. An organisation with the objective of increasing social spending by local governments would target a percentage increase over the current baseline. These partner objectives and targets were then brought together, in spreadsheet format, to constitute the frameworks for country programmes. Those were in turn merged for the purposes of overall reporting to Irish Aid.

Under this arrangement, partners were expected to hold themselves accountable for their contributions to improved outcomes, including whether or not the agreed targets were on track to being met. This not only was onerous but also made little sense in the many cases where the originally agreed targets were rendered unrealistic – either over- or under-ambitious – as a result of large political or economic changes outside the partner’s control. More important, it focused partners’ attention on justifying failure or celebrating success in delivering the specified results on an annual schedule, distracting them from using the experience to improve their chances of meeting their objectives over the programme period as a whole. This was contrary to the adaptive programme management principle of ‘failing fast’, where any evidence that an approach is not working is used to inform reflection and timely correction.

Something needed to change, but not everything could, because of the requirements set out by Irish Aid. The programme proposal now being implemented is a compromise solution. The results spreadsheets have been retained in more or less their old form for the purpose of reporting to Irish Aid. They continue to specify baselines, indicators and targets at the partner

and country programme levels. However, partners have been freed from reporting against these pre-set targets and are encouraged to focus their efforts on outcome harvesting and strategy testing. The core team in Dublin, with support from country programme officers, has assumed all responsibility for reporting against the results framework. A key question for this learning paper is whether this compromise between adaptive working in country and elements of blueprint-style reporting to the funding agency can work in practice.

3.5 Additional design features

A few additional features of the programme design should be explained. None of these is in principle inconsistent with the programme’s adaptive ambitions. However, they originated independently. Some arose from the evaluation of the previous programme; some from Christian Aid Ireland’s strategic rethinking in dialogue with colleagues and supporters of Christian Aid globally; and others from Irish Aid comments on the strengths and weaknesses of Christian Aid Ireland’s portfolio. They include:

- An enhanced emphasis on targeting of vulnerable and excluded groups and on gender inclusion objectives in particular, to be reflected in greater attention to the collection of data disaggregated by sex, age and disability across the programme;
- Greater efforts to capture direct feedback from community-level stakeholders, enabling more participatory forms of programme monitoring;
- More robust data collection to validate partner claims about reach, results and contributions.

These requirements are set to be among the factors influencing the way data collection is practised in the programme. Whether they turn out to be supportive of, or a distraction from, the promotion of adaptive programme management is a question to be regularly revisited during implementation.

4 Early lessons and emerging issues

At the time of finalising this paper (May 2018), the new programme management arrangements are only a little over one year old and the new methods are still getting embedded. Nonetheless, very substantial changes have been made, and some important early lessons have been learnt. This section of the paper reflects the considered joint views of the lead author and the members of the Christian Aid Ireland core team, who are the named co-authors. It outlines the change process to date, including the tracking and reporting of progress, and then asks how well the approach is working. It draws on the guidance materials and on the detailed trip reports produced by the members of the core team following the first strategy testing exercises. The lead author supplemented these inputs by undertaking direct interviews with a small sample of country programme officers and partners (in Spanish, in Central America, in November 2017). The findings were drawn together during a collective debriefing day involving the team of authors in Dublin in January 2018.

4.1 The process so far

Since the programme was launched at the beginning of 2017, there have been two cycles of facilitated country-level deliberations to establish the new approach. These have involved up to two days with each partner organisation (five to six per country on average) and additional time with all partners in joint session. They

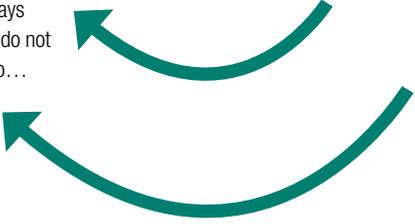
have effectively refocused the dialogue between Christian Aid Ireland and its partners, and instituted a new set of practices for planning and reporting. The dialogue now centres on articulating and regularly reviewing partner theories of change, and this in turn informs planning and annual reporting.

In the first cycle of meetings, in early 2017, partners were introduced to the tool reproduced in Table 2. Partners first focused on outcomes relevant to their work that could be achievable in five years. After that, they were encouraged to think about the assumptions being made about how those outcomes were going to happen. Strategies were then identified based on how the programme would contribute to the expected change, keeping in mind the assumptions. This was a relatively light process, with the accent on communicating the new approach. Programme officers wrote up the theories of change, drawing on their discussions with partners. Review and commentary was provided by an assigned member of the core team.

This cycle was complemented by a series of trainings. The first, with all Christian Aid programme officers in Dublin, concentrated on the three new elements in the programme’s methodology. Emphasis was placed on the *theory of change*, how it would be used during *strategy testing* and how *outcome harvesting* would provide the evidence needed to stimulate honest and accurate reflection. After the Dublin meeting, core team members accompanied programme officers in most of the countries to conduct a similar training with partners to ensure maximum familiarity and comfort with the new methods.

Table 2 Christian Aid Ireland’s theory of change review tool, 2017

What is the change you want to see (in the next five years)?	How do you assume this change will happen?	What initial strategies are worth trying out?	How will you know whether your strategies have worked?
We can be optimistic but realistic. We do not have to quantify the change, but we need to be very clear about what the change will be.	This should be based on power and gender analysis and conflict analysis. Be open to thinking about ways the change will happen that do not correspond with what you do...	Clearly relate what you will do to the assumption of change in Column 2.	We are saying that IF the change process in Column 2 is taking place, then your strategy may have worked. So you need to measure against Column 2, not Column 3.





Strategy testing in Colombia, 2017. © Alix Tiernan

A second cycle of meetings – a first ‘strategy testing’ exercise in terms of The Asia Foundation model – was more systematic and time-consuming. This was completed during the final months of 2017, with design support from Jonathan Beloe of the International Rescue Committee. This time, members of the core team facilitated the process, with country programme officers acting as co-facilitators and recorders.⁷ The strategy testing meeting, up to a full day with each individual partner, started with scene-setting discussion, using ‘time lines’ of key events and significant changes that had occurred. Following the outcome harvesting method, discussion of the significance of particular changes and any contributions attributable to partner activities were used to fuel, inform and provide checks on the subsequent strategy review. The review itself focused on whether the assumptions and strategies set out initially had been validated or needed to be adjusted.

In practice, each strategy testing day was a ‘journey of the Post-its’. A number of significant changes (whether contextual or outcome-oriented, positive or negative) were identified by partner staff, written on Post-its and then used throughout to explore what contextual changes had affected the programme and how the programme might have contributed. The significance of each change was reviewed collectively and then mapped onto the original theory of change, to establish whether progress was being made towards the envisioned outcome, whether the initial assumptions were still valid and whether the strategies were truly contributing. The picture above illustrates part of the process in Colombia.

The original theory of change is on the wall and the changes identified are being mapped against it.

The results of the first strategy testing exercises have been entered and stored in Microsoft Word versions of the tool, using the track changes function to record alterations. Partner monitoring specialists have been charged with capturing the main results of the outcome harvesting exercise using the new app (developed with a South African social enterprise specialising in assisting large CSO and government programmes). In addition, the trip reports on each country by the assigned core team members include (1) a summary of the outcomes achieved, judged against objectives; (2) a country context update, drawing on the outcome harvesting exercise; (3) a listing of significant alterations to partner strategies; and (4) evidence of active targeting or inclusion efforts by the partners.

4.2 How is it working?

These processes and tools have, as intended, refocused partners’ face-to-face interactions with Christian Aid Ireland on context analysis and strategy choices, and away from the meeting of predetermined targets. They are also designed to relieve partner organisations of unhelpful reporting burdens, and have done so to a significant extent.

Considerable reporting responsibilities have been shifted from partners to programme officers and Christian Aid Ireland staff, including the task of

⁷ In non-English speaking countries, the programme officers facilitated while the core team member supported and recorded discussions.

marrying up partner reporting that is increasingly flexible and *ex post* with reporting to the funder, which continues to feature *ex ante* target-setting as well as narrative annual reporting, financial accounting and audit. The core team has assumed responsibility for managing this hybrid overall arrangement, squeezing as much gain as possible from the innovative features while feeding the traditional appetite for pre-set progress markers.

At first sight, a decisive break with past practice has been achieved. On a second look, the partners and programme officers are not quite so relieved of traditional reporting obligations as it might appear. The programme's results framework is still constructed in the old way and this has several effects.

For example, the monitoring specialists of partner organisations were expected to assist in the collection of baseline data and the setting of targets in 2017. This old working style also influences the core team's role in strategy testing, as the template for their reporting includes a table comparing the harvested outcomes with the indicators and targets set in the results framework. This element is not presented to partners, with whom the emphasis is on having an open and reflective conversation. It nevertheless influences some of the questions raised during discussion. While this no doubt assists the core team in reporting against the results framework to Irish Aid, it reflects the necessary compromise discussed in Section 3. It is at least potentially confusing to country programme staff, as it suggests that old-style annual performance monitoring based on success or failure in meeting targets still has a place in programme management.

As regards net changes in the volume of data collection and reporting required of partners, it is too early to make an assessment. As we saw in Section 3, Christian Aid Ireland has introduced adaptive programme management (including outcome harvesting) along with a set of new imperatives relating to inclusion; the collection of disaggregated data (on sex, age and disability lines); and feedback from beneficiaries in the form of community-level 'voices'. Lying ahead is the possibility of new tasks for partners connected with these commitments, such as undertaking focus group or survey-based enquiries. However, who does what in this regard is still to be settled.

4.3 What else needs to happen?

We believe it needs to be borne in mind that getting adaptive working into the DNA of country programmes and partner approaches is at an early stage. The first strategy testing sessions served mostly to embed the general idea and reinforce the belief with partners that Christian Aid Ireland was really serious about making this change.

The opportunity to undertake an honest and structured examination of the evidence on the likely success of current strategies has been well received. Critically assessing the impact of their work against the context in which they work has generated new energy and enthusiasm among partners. But these are only the first steps.

Much will depend on what happens from now on, bearing in mind that, of course, there is some unevenness across countries and across partner organisations when it comes to grasping the implications of adaptive working. Adaptive working implies a change of mind-set, particularly when it comes to dealing with evidence of 'failure' in programme delivery. Experience so far confirms that leaders trained in critical analysis and debate, and local cultures that support friendly controversy, provide the most fertile type of seed-bed for the new approach. Especially where partner organisations are weak in this respect, the involvement of a well-chosen 'critical friend' can make an important positive difference. For example, members of the Centre for Conflict Management and Transformation (CCMT) in Zimbabwe were so impressed with the contributions from their critical friend that they expressed a wish to include a critical friend in their next strategic planning process.

Even though there is much still to be done to release the potential of the programme's new approach, it is of interest that aspects of the model are being picked up in other parts of the Christian Aid family. Box 2 provides an illustration.

Box 2 Adaptive management in Christian Aid's Health Legacy Programme

The development of the Christian Aid Ireland governance programme, including the innovations in processes and tools, has influenced other programmes in Christian Aid that have access to flexible funding. For example, the Health Legacy Programme, funded from a private donation, the Ellis-Hadwin Legacy, is working with partners in Burundi, Sierra Leone and South Sudan for better health outcomes for poor and vulnerable women and men. The programme has introduced a stronger element of purposeful strategy testing and review of theories of change. Partners are encouraged to challenge fixed ideas about the activities most likely to lead to key health-related behaviour changes. The programme has also started to use outcome harvesting, and the OH App is being adapted for its purposes. This illustrates worthwhile cross-organisational learning in the area of adaptive programme management. It suggests opportunities for future shared learning and a collective approach to addressing tough challenges and improving results.

4.4 Issues for further attention

Six sets of further findings and concerns seem to us to be of particular interest:

Trade-offs: time and quality

The new processes and tools are warmly welcomed as liberating partners from performance assessment based on delivery against targets. The initial strategy setting and strategy testing processes have required heavy commitments of workshop time. However, there seems to be general recognition that the new processes, while onerous, are genuinely useful and will improve effectiveness. The old processes were often felt to be rather tense and unhelpful (according to one source they were ‘a nightmare’), despite Christian Aid’s comparatively good record as a supportive funder. In different degrees and ways, partners have embraced the idea of distinguishing more sharply between ends and means, or objectives and strategies/activities. On a practical note, the discussions were most fruitful when a good combination of leaders (e.g. chief executives) and middle-level implementers were in the room. They were weaker when either one of these elements was missing.

The new flexibility

Most programme partners welcome the new flexibility (not only the willingness to countenance changes of strategy but also the positive encouragement to do so when required). They are enthusiastic for one principal reason. They see it as taking away the obligation to carry on delivering an output or activity when the context has changed in such a way that the original delivery timetable is no longer at all realistic. The majority of the strategy and theory of change revisions recorded in the late-2017 cycle of meetings were adjustments of this type. Although they represent flexible responses, rather than of adaptation proper, such readjustments can be both important and useful. Several examples of such adjustments can be given:

- **In El Salvador**, a partner seeking an increase in budgets for women, youth and indigenous groups adjusted its strategy for doing so. Its strategy had focused on lobbying local governments, but the resources available to be reallocated were very limited. Upon reflection, and bearing in mind a landmark Constitutional Court ruling requiring the state budget to apply the principle of universality in addressing citizens’ needs, the partner decided to change its strategy to include legal challenges when the government failed to adequately resource marginalised groups at the local level. The change in the context offered up some new possibilities for human rights-based jurisprudence.
- **In Sierra Leone**, a district radio programme was recently developed as a means for citizens to raise issues of concern. Although this programme covers a

range of local issues, it has become a useful platform for discussing the tensions and conflicts between cattle-keepers and land users. Owing to the radio programme’s wide reach, the complaints generated responses from local authorities. During strategy testing, Christian Aid’s Ireland’s partner reviewed its approach to mitigating conflicts and mobilising communities to engage with local authorities on land issues. It was decided that the new radio programme opened up new and promising opportunities for campaigning on land insecurity that should be adopted into the strategy.

- **In Colombia**, a partner working with communities to retain access to their farmlands has worked for 20 years by peaceful means to keep armed actors outside of the community boundaries. Since the signing of the peace agreement with FARC, the threat from agri-businesses and extractive industries on community access to their farmland has become more obvious, whereas previously it was disguised as paramilitary action. In response to this, partners have included a new strategy in the programme, to set up eco villages to protect communities’ right to access land when threatened by agri-businesses or extractive industries.

Learning to adapt

On the other hand, only a few partners so far have embraced with similar enthusiasm the freedom they now enjoy to adapt what they are doing in the light of evidence that the mechanisms of change they have assumed are not really working. Box 3 contains some examples, but these are comparatively rare at this stage.

The message has been quite well conveyed that, faced with complexity, even capable and well-run NGOs or CSOs cannot expect to have all the answers and should reckon on making mistakes and using these to make corrections.

Nevertheless, it may take some years before the opportunity this implies is taken up energetically. In Central America, for example, some of Christian Aid Ireland’s partners have a history of making tactical adjustments to their alliances, always within a framework of non-negotiable operational principles, in the pursuit of a worthwhile objective. There is also some evidence of changes of approach by partners working in some local government jurisdictions, where broad demands for budget transparency have given way to less confrontational dialogue with particular municipal offices (e.g. Women’s Affairs). In a still polarised post-war environment, however, other partner organisations sometimes see tactical adjustments as unprincipled. This factor reinforces the generic difficulty noted earlier, that local NGOs often have only one string to their bow; they have been set up to deliver a typical solution to a typical type of problem – for example budget transparency as the solution to insufficient social spending. Too much of a learning orientation could threaten their self-image, if not their existence. We believe this can and should be tackled.

Box 3 A sample of adaptive strategy revisions by partners, October–December 2017

Mining of high moorlands in Colombia: Colombian partner Corambiente works to guarantee the right to a livelihood for women and men in rural highland communities. They originally set out a strategy of working with and strengthening the San Turban Moorland Association in order to develop environmentally sound guidelines for agricultural and mining activities by both large-scale companies and local communities. It became clear during the first six months of the project that the Moorland Association had been co-opted by one of the mining companies with interests in San Turban, making collective progress benefiting all parties virtually impossible. Together with community leaders, Corambiente decided and agreed with Christian Aid during Strategy Testing, to cease engagement with the association, and instead, to work directly with the local authorities in the six communities of the moorland, to draft viable land use agreements to which the mining companies are obliged to adhere.

Right to housing in Angola: Angolan partner Omunga has been supporting street children to access housing in Benguela district for over a decade. After continued lobbying, housing was finally granted by the government on an individual basis. However, Omunga observed that over time such housing was automatically being given to family and friends (despite their economic circumstances), excluding other ‘tenting’ communities (those in need of housing) in the area from availing of the facility. At first, Omunga tried a strategy of working with the occupiers of the government-allocated housing and persuading them to engage in communal housing with others in need in the area. This strategy proved unsuccessful as people were unwilling to give up their homes or share with others. As a result, Omunga decided to change its strategy and advocate for the inclusion of the ‘tenting’ communities in Municipal Housing Plans and their official enlistment in the government housing scheme.

The effects of multiple funding

At present, the fact that some NGOs are over-attached to a particular type of output may prove a greater limitation to the roll-out of the adaptive approach than the fact that partners have other funders. For example, in Central America, the respect in which Christian Aid is held and the intrinsic interest the new approach is generating seems likely to overcome any countervailing influences from other funders. The latter appear to include representatives of two contrasting tendencies: logframe enthusiasts and those willing to fund CSO activities without close attention to the resulting development, human rights or peace-building outcomes. In contrast, in IOPT, the influence of other funders is more of a problem, because they are so numerous and very diverse in their monitoring requirements.

The compromise on results reporting

The hybrid arrangement in which Christian Aid Ireland must balance the requirements of innovation at the country level and traditional reporting against targets at the programme level is clearly problematic. We take the view that it is destined to be frustrating and exhausting. A compromise without which Irish Aid support might not have been obtained, it is nonetheless unsatisfactory. Just how unsatisfactory should be established by the research and learning papers that follow over the coming years.

This will be affected by both (1) the continuing prominence of the results framework and (2) the additional data collection duties, unrelated to strategy testing, that are expected to accompany the move to adaptive working.

1. Regarding the continuing prominence of the results framework, it will be important to monitor the degree to which feeding this detracts from the objective of putting the strategy testing processes

and adaptation at the centre of the programme’s performance measurement. This may come about not because of any pressure from the core team or because the results framework is inflexible (in fact, its targets can be revised annually and even deleted if no longer relevant, according to the agreement with Irish Aid); but rather because partners have not abandoned the traditional mode of thinking in aid-funded development and peace building. For example, in spite of embracing the core idea behind strategy testing, partners continue to worry about whether the harvested outcomes will be ‘acceptable to Irish Aid’.

2. Regarding additional data collection duties, the concern already noted is that the total burden of high-level data collection and validation becomes so onerous that it pushes aside the already challenging task of assessing alternative strategies and taking decisions about holding firm or changing course in a particular line of work. A danger that has not yet materialised but could do in the future is that a series of new data collection obligations could take either partner or advisor time, or both, away from critical reflection on partners’ effectiveness in pursuing inclusive outcomes.

Country-level theories of change?

In the original scheme of ‘nested’ theories of change, there was a place for country-level theories and review processes. This has not yet been given concrete form; country reporting has been based solely on aggregating partner strategies and testing. An important task in the next period will be to review the concept of a country-level theory of change and see how best to set out Christian Aid’s vision and assumptions for a given country context. An important benefit would be to make it possible to test and reflect upon the programme theory of change with partners.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

This paper is the first of a series of contributions to learning around Christian Aid Ireland's 2017–2021 programme on governance, gender, peace building and human rights. Based on partnerships with NGOs and CSOs in seven countries affected by conflict or violence, the programme is distinguished by a robust commitment to learning to make a difference in these challenging environments by adopting an adaptive approach to the support it delivers. Accordingly, the paper has explained why in the development and peace-building field at large there is growing interest in adaptive ways of working (Section 2); what features distinguish Christian Aid Ireland's new programme approach (Section 3); and what lessons have been learnt in the first year of implementation (Section 4).

The social, economic and political settings that shape the life chances of poor and marginalised people in politically insecure and violence-affected areas of the world are complex, as well as subject to frequent change. An adaptive approach is one that, as well as having the flexibility to adjust to important changes in operational environments, is oriented to systematic learning about how to be effective in contributing to complex change. As the paper has shown, this is the direction in which the Christian Aid Ireland governance programme is moving, based partly on the independent evaluation of the predecessor programme and other feedback from interactions with partners at country level. The innovations have benefited from the support of its funder, Irish Aid. They have also needed to be shaped by Irish Aid's bottom line in respect of management for results, including reporting at the overall programme level against pre-set outcome targets.

As we have seen, within a year the programme has gone a considerable way towards re-establishing its relations with partners on the basis of new processes and tools. The tools encourage partners to spell out the assumptions and theories of change on which their current operations are based, and to identify in advance indicators that will suggest whether or not these strategies are likely to contribute to the desired outcomes. The theories of change have already been formally revisited once with all partners, using retrospective outcome harvesting to fuel the necessary group reflection. Further formal cycles of reflection are planned, in the expectation that iterative learning and adjustment will over time become the standard working

method of all concerned. Annual reporting to Irish Aid by Christian Aid Ireland's core team will continue to make use of a results framework containing targets. But this will draw on the same outcome harvesting data used to support strategy testing. Importantly, judgements about whether partners and country programmes are 'on track' have been delinked from targets and refocused firmly on the quality of the strategy testing.

In drawing initial lessons, we have been mindful of the several general challenges that development organisations face in moving away from 'blueprint' planning and management, including some that are specific to multi-level NGO operations of the Christian Aid type. Against this background, it is not surprising that we have found that the new thinking about adaptive working is not yet fully embedded, with some partners and countries embracing the thinking more easily than others. It is interesting and encouraging that almost all partners have welcomed the move away from performance monitoring based on pre-set targets and the use of more open-ended outcome harvesting. The freedom to adapt ways of working in the light of experience is highly appreciated. However, we have seen that this is, at the moment, more about the flexibility to respond to changes in context than about making corrections in the light of evidence of weak effectiveness. This will need to be watched in the following years, along with the other issues identified in our preliminary discussion – that is, the legacies of past donor policies and the effects of funding from multiple sources for local NGOs and CSOs.

Other emerging issues we have noted concern the features of the programme design that are at least potentially at variance with the commitment to adaptive programme management. These matters are not settled at this point but need to be monitored and reflected upon at intervals over the coming years. They include the viability of the compromise around the programme results framework, where responsibility for monitoring against annual targets has been taken away from partners but is still the basis of reporting to Irish Aid. Others include the potentially large data collection requirements of the programme's commitment to better validate claims about outcomes and inclusion, and the still-to-be-settled question about the usefulness of country-level, as distinct from partner-based, theories of change and strategy testing.

In the light of its findings, this paper suggests:

- Christian Aid Ireland should feel encouraged to press ahead with the task of delivering a programme that makes more of a difference in challenging parts of the world by working adaptively.
- It should pay continuous attention to getting adaptation, and not just flexibility, into the standard working practices of partner organisations, raising the performance of the weakest to that of the best. As this proceeds, Christian Aid Ireland should develop criteria for assessing the quality of the learning and adaptation that are taking place, with close attention to outcomes.
- Particular attention should be paid to supporting cultural shifts within partner organisations that encourage analytical reflection and local decision-making in response to evidence on progress and context. This is especially important given that strategy testing is a once-a-year event and decisions are required more regularly.
- Christian Aid's annual reporting to Irish Aid should give prominence to what is being learnt about how to contribute better to outcomes, with a view to meeting programme objectives fully by programme end.
- Future learning papers should document the further evolution of the relationship between Christian Aid, country teams and partners, to build evidence on the effectiveness of the adaptive approach over time. They should also provide updates on the particular issues raised here, including the hybrid arrangement for results reporting, the respective roles of outcome harvesting and other data collection, and the question about the viability of country-level theories of change.
- Irish Aid should monitor whether results frameworks with pre-set targets are still the best way to encourage a strong orientation to outcomes in the programmes it funds. It should consider the additional burdens it creates for Christian Aid Ireland and, more important, the potential to limit the space for useful adaptation. The question is whether a fully adaptive approach accompanied by robust outcome harvesting should be both permitted and encouraged in the future.
- Other international development organisations – especially those that use a comparable partnership approach – should pay attention to this experience of Christian Aid Ireland as they consider what is appropriate in their particular fields of work.

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