

# THE DIFFERENCE LEARNING MAKES

Factors that enable or inhibit adaptive programming for  
Christian Aid Ireland and partner organisations

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## Executive Summary

When Christian Aid (CA) Ireland devised its multi-country and multi-year Irish Aid funded Programme Grant II (2017-2022), they opted to move away from a linear programme management approach and to explore an adaptive one. Across seven countries: Angola, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe, CA and partner organisations support marginalised communities to realise their rights, reduce violence and address gender inequality.

Since 2019, Adapt Peacebuilding has accompanied CA Ireland, CA country teams and partner organisations as they experimented with using a deliberate adaptive approach. The authors were also asked to follow up on an initial study by CA Ireland and Overseas Development Institute in 2018, which described the rationale for adopting this new approach and included early lessons from its first year of implementation. The aim of this study is to help deepen CA Ireland, CA country teams' and partners' understanding of (a) whether their application of adaptive programming has resulted in better development outcomes, and (b) how they can better understand the factors that enabled or inhibited the effectiveness of using this approach.

Over the past three years, this study has found evidence and multiple examples that show **adaptive programming contributed to better development outcomes**. The main reasons cited were that these were made possible both from improvements to programming strategies based on *proactive* reflection and learning, as well as those that stem from the *reactive* capacity of adaptive programmes to change course in response to unanticipated changes in operating conditions.

This study found that **adaptive programming has enabled better development practice** where organisations are enhancing their skills to better respond and be flexible to contextual challenges. 72% of partners surveyed described adaptive programming as the most useful approach to programme management that they have used. The programme approach has meant that CA and partner staff were better able to explore the significance of change in the context and their contributions to them. It also enabled spaces for meaningful engagement with communities in learning and programme planning processes and encouraged opportunities for experimentation in programming.

The study also found that **adaptive programming has supported flexible delivery**. This led to better outcomes that would not have been possible were the programme not able to make flexible adjustments.

The main focus has been the analysis of **nine factors that can determine the effectiveness and impact (or otherwise) of using an adaptive approach**, flagging important issues for understanding. These factors are identified as: 1) Leadership; 2) Organisational culture; 3) Conceptual understanding; 4) Staff capacities; 5) Partnership approaches; 6) Participation; 7) Methods and tools; 8) Administrative procedures; and 9) The operating context. Together these can provide an analytical framework for assessing an organisation's 'adaptive scope', which can be used as a tool for better understanding an organisation's potential to generate improved development outcomes via adaptive programming and how to strengthen them.

The study concludes with several recommendations for CA Ireland, all of which have relevance for a broader community of donors and implementing organisations interested in the potential of adaptive programming.

## Introduction

This research examines the use of adaptive programming in Christian Aid (CA) Ireland's multi-country, poverty, governance, human rights, gender and peacebuilding programme, which is supported by Irish Aid's Programme Grant (PG II) 2017-2022. The grant supports programming in seven countries: Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (loPt), Sierra Leone, Angola and Zimbabwe. In each context communities are affected by violence, political instability, a history of autocratic governance and high levels of poverty and economic inequality. Locally implemented programmes address common and complex problems such as: how to strengthen the governance of natural resources, so that communities can benefit; how to reduce incidences of political violence so democratic norms can thrive; how to improve gender equality while mitigating risks of violence; and how to build lasting peace that includes the most marginalised? CA Ireland works in partnership with more than 30 local, independent implementing organisations, which range in size from 1-50 staff working closely with CA country offices. Programme funding with Irish Aid still required reporting to be against agreed planned results, but CA Ireland took on the responsibilities for monitoring and reporting these results annually, allowing country teams to apply an adaptive approach.

Adaptive programming (also known as adaptive management) is an approach CA Ireland, CA country offices and partners used in an effort to improve their results amid the uncertainty, volatility and complexity of these contexts. It is a way of working that recognises that change is not always linear and that optimal strategies for achieving impact cannot always be known in advance. It provides implementing organisations with the freedom to iteratively improve their strategies throughout a programming cycle. In some cases, this comes from intentionally reflecting on how to improve programme strategies year on year, while in others it comes from flexible adjustments to programme delivery, as have come to the fore during the Covid-19 pandemic. Adaptive programming is implemented via innovative programming methodologies that allow organisations to regularly monitor data, assess impact, reflect on what is and is not working well, and make timely improvements based on this learning.

Before experimenting with adaptive programming, CA and its partners recognised the limitations of results-based management approaches, especially the results framework which measures performance against planned outputs, targets and pre-set indicators. The approach worked well in keeping a focus on programme outputs and monitoring progress, but raised concerns that:

- a. It worked less well in complex, dynamic, fast-changing and insecure contexts
- b. It felt disempowering, requiring partners to spend energy and resources assessing indicators that they felt did not matter to their project
- c. It did not provide incentives for meaningful stakeholder participation
- d. It gave no incentives for reflection and learning and discouraged innovation and change
- e. It included assumptions about how change happened that were not always explicit and sometimes required a "leap of faith".

The move to adaptive programming was partly a response to these limitations, and partly a desire to explore a methodology that might be more suited to complex governance and peacebuilding work. To read more about the programme's adaptive approach, methodology and early learnings, see CA Ireland and ODI's 2018 publication "[Learning to Make a Difference](#)".<sup>1</sup>

## Primary research questions

Building on this first study, the main aim of this research has been to deepen CA Ireland, CA country teams' and partners' understanding of two key questions:

Building on this first study, the main aim of this research has been to deepen CA Ireland, CA country teams' and partners' understanding of two key questions:

- a. Has the application of adaptive programming resulted in better development outcomes?
- b. How can we understand the factors that enabled or inhibited this approach?

## Methodology

This paper is the result of various methods and forms of engagement, including:

- Observations from accompaniment, coaching and acting as resource persons at global events, country team and partner meetings 'strategy testing'<sup>2</sup> sessions, planning meetings, online 'communities of practice', and one-to-one advisory sessions
- Key informant interviews with CA, partner organisations, donors and expert advisers
- Surveys, including one staff survey and one partner survey of CA's over 30 partner organisations involved in the programme
- Literature review of academic and policy documents on adaptive programming
- Review of CA Ireland programme materials: Programme plans, guidance notes, reports from strategy testing sessions, meeting minutes, donor reporting, 'outcome harvesting' materials, programming and budgeting cycle documents
- Monthly reflections with CA Ireland (over 2.5 years).

## Limitations of the research

While our approach can and does show how adaptive programming has (or has not) led to better development practice, when it comes to finding comprehensive evidence of it leading to better development outcomes, we encountered similar measurement difficulties to those of earlier researchers:

1. A lack of robust evidence trails (i.e., of how specific learning and adaptation then led to better development outcomes)
2. Absence of control trials (i.e., the problem of concluding that an outcome was 'better' when no meaningful counterfactual exists in which adaptive programming did not take place) and
3. The challenge of combining anecdotal evidence towards aggregated and robust generalisable conclusions.

The complexity and geographic diversity of CA Ireland's multi-country programme also required a balance of depth and breadth of research that was difficult to achieve, and this was further challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic, which prevented planned observations of 'strategy testing' sessions, in-person interviews and observations of partner organisations, and the 2020 Dublin 'Global meeting'.<sup>3</sup> An independent evaluation that was to accompany this research was also delayed by the pandemic, depriving this research from additional sources of data regarding the quality of development outcomes that have been achieved.

## Research Findings

### How adaptive programming supported better development outcomes

The impetus for adaptive programming comes from a simple and compelling logic: Effective solutions to complex development challenges are unknowable in advance, but through evidence-based learning from the impact of our strategies we can adapt and improve those strategies to achieve better outcomes. The global evidence in support of this claim has been steadily building, mostly in the form of case studies that demonstrate how better outcomes were achieved in particular programming contexts.<sup>4</sup> These case studies have contributed to an emerging consensus in the development community that, in highly complex situations addressing complex problems, interventions are more likely to make a positive difference if they use adaptive principles and methods.<sup>5</sup>

This study adds to the accumulated case studies that show relationships between adaptive programming and better development outcomes. It finds ample evidence of better outcomes that were made possible both from improvements to programming strategies based on *proactive* reflection and learning, as well as those that stem from the *reactive* capacity of adaptive programmes to change course in response to unanticipated changes in the context.<sup>6</sup>

In assessing why adaptive programming was useful, partners and country teams interviewed for this research described various examples in which the proactive reflection and learning enabled by this programming approach led to revised strategies that ultimately yielded better outcomes than would otherwise have been possible. The following four examples are a sampling of many provided by CA and partner organisations where adaptive programming led to the intentional adaptation of strategies, which then produced better results.

**Sierra Leone:** Several iterations of strategy testing have led to improved measures for mitigating conflict between cattle herders and crop farmers. Reflecting on the failure of traditional conflict resolution methods led by Paramount Chiefs to stem the violence, the partner organisation, with representatives of farmers and cattle herders, formed a “cattle settlement committee”, which proposed their own conflict resolution strategy, including enacting a local byelaw to regulate land use. These strategies have led to a reduction in conflict, peaceful cohabitation between the groups, and the scaling up of the initiative into a district-wide byelaw. It has also led to an increase of cultivated land and harvest.

**El Salvador:** Experience from a partner organisation working on public fiscal transparency demonstrates the value of reflecting on which entry points offer the greatest potential to achieve desired changes. In this case, the partner’s advocacy for national law changes, to enable greater community access to municipal committees that decide on local resource allocation, were not providing the anticipated results. The partner took on board a community member’s advice to shift from a legal strategy to influencing municipal committees directly, following a community consultation. The partner organisation has since been able to broker greater community access to these committees by successfully advocating for changes to their internal regulations.

**Angola:** Programmes protecting and empowering former street children were repeatedly failing and lacked popular support. Through adaptive learning processes, the partner organisation identified distrust of the programmes for two inter-related reasons: 1) the strong tendencies of the programmes to lead in an authoritarian style, which has been internalised through decades

of living under an authoritarian state, and 2) the perception that the support programmes were associated with local and political leaders who misused resources for personal gain and governed through intimidation and violence. Using this learning, implementing partners and affected communities agreed to adopt a non-hierarchical, committee approach to leadership, whereby decisions must be taken collectively. By the end of the latest programming cycle there was a decrease in local incidents of violence and an increase in participation rates in support programmes for former street children.

**Zimbabwe:** One partner organisation realised during reflection and learning sessions that their focus on training community members as environmental monitors was not working well because of the barriers that community members faced to participation. This exclusion was largely due to gatekeeping by traditional leaders, who sometimes received financial compensation from mining companies. The strategy was adapted to include these leaders in training, who could then hear and be accountable to communities' perspectives on mining, and contribute to greater buy-in to monitoring efforts. As a result, the level of community participation in environmental monitoring efforts has been much higher.

### **Adaptive programming has enabled better development practice**

Throughout this research, further evidence emerged on how adaptive programming contributes, not only to better outcomes but to **better development practice**.

Of all the partners surveyed, 72% described adaptive programming as the most useful approach to programme management that they have used, while the remaining 28% said it was one of the most useful. Moreover, partner organisations reported enormous benefit in being freed from obligations to 'stay the course' even when their original objectives or strategies had been rendered obsolete by context changes.

The application of adaptive programming has encouraged and enabled new ways of making sense of, and responding to, the politics of contexts and organisations with constant flows of (sometimes confusing) information and stakeholders regularly changing their behaviour. The programme approach has meant that CA and partners were able to explore the significance of change within their context and their contributions to them. It also enabled spaces for meaningful engagement with communities in learning and planning processes and encouraged opportunities for experimentation.

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*"All this (adaptive programming) has made our strategic thinking more creative, effective and made what are so often ideas and wishes we have more likely to happen. Examples of work that has been further encouraged and developed following strategy sessions include: combating antisemitism and power and privilege training, risk strategies, inclusion policies, social media reach and engagement, messaging and language development, community accountability mechanisms, and work to decolonise the programme."*

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*- partner organisation, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory.*

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## Adaptive programming has enabled flexible delivery

Adaptive programming has also supported 'adaptive delivery', which has led to better outcomes, outcomes that would not have been possible were the programme not able to make flexible adjustments.<sup>7</sup> In the same partner survey as referenced above, more than half of partners understand the primary value of adaptive programming as this capacity for flexibility. The Covid-19 pandemic has provided evidence of how an adaptive approach can enable achievement of positive outcomes in the face of grave contextual challenges. Faced with an abrupt disruption to normal methods of delivering programmes, partners that were already primed in adaptive methodologies reported feeling ready and able to adapt to new ways of delivering their programmes in a starkly restricted operating environment. Partner organisations in Zimbabwe were able to quickly adjust budgets and reassign resources. Partners working on gender-based health initiatives in Colombia adapted their strategies to provide food vouchers so that women could get food supplies or access to shelter in the face of rising rates of gender-based violence. In El Salvador, changes in the political environment and the impact of natural disasters have challenged partners to shift priorities and ways of working so as to continue to provide value to programme participants.

In fact, around the world, CA and its partners have witnessed dramatic increases in the uptake of innovative new technologies in response to Covid challenges. The flexibility of the adaptive approach is allowing budgets and strategies to shift to cater for these new programming methods, and for technology-based approaches to be scaled up to improve outcomes for programme participants.

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*"The Covid experience has shown that we need to start differently with regards to how we mobilise the community. We used to have dialogues with up to 15 people due to resource constraints. Now we have started to use WhatsApp groups, we are getting more than 50 people taking part. That has been a positive, maybe we have been missing an opportunity... by inviting people digitally, now we are reaching people who can contribute remotely."*

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- *Christian Aid Staff member Zimbabwe*

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## Factors that enabled or inhibited adaptive programming

This study initially hypothesised six factors that enabled or inhibited adaptive programming: (1) Leadership, (2) Organisational culture, (3) Administrative procedures, (4) Methods and tools, (5) Participation, and (6) The operating context. Another three factors emerged during the research: (7) Staff capacities, (8) Partnership approach, and (9) Conceptual understanding.

We propose that paying attention to these nine factors is a useful way to better understand a programme or organisation's "adaptive scope"<sup>8</sup> or, in other words, a programme's spectrum of potentials and limitations to make the most of an adaptive approach. This framework could help in assessing and better understanding the strengths or challenges of its application.

These factors should not be understood as discrete categories, but instead as overlapping and interdependent competencies and conditions. Each factor influences adaptive programming in different ways, which is detailed in the next section. The research indicated that there is a hierarchy of factors, where leadership and organisational culture are essential and define whether the appropriate profile of the other factors are "essential" or merely "useful" to have.

**Diagram 1: Adaptive Scope: Nine factors that influence the application and impact of adaptive programming**



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*“Developing and reinforcing the mindset in colleagues and partners is the most important. Unless the right culture is there, none of our tools or approaches would work.”*

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- *Christian Aid staff member, Sierra Leone*

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## **1. Leadership**

Literature on adaptive programming emphasises the critical importance of leadership to its effective application. Leadership can be understood as the actions of key people that set the direction, model the values and behaviours, and allocate the time and resources that are necessary for adaptive programming to be used to its full potential.<sup>9</sup> In this research enabling leadership was identified as an essential factor for the approach to work well. Even if an organisation had excellent tools and methods at their disposal, adaptive programming would not work well if an enabling environment to use them was not created by leaders.

### *The leadership of partner organisations*

Questions to partner organisations concerning the conditions under which adaptive programming worked well consistently referenced the essential contributions of leaders. In Angola, we heard of the experience of one young leader who faced her fears in making a presentation to the African Commission, and that served as an example to others in her organisation and community of the value of facing fear, trying out new strategies of advocacy and “speaking truth to power”. In Sierra Leone, the willingness of leaders within partner organisations to incorporate alternative ideas and adjust their approaches was grounded in their frontline experiences and commitment to real and timely improvements in the lives of the communities they serve. In both Guatemala and El Salvador, the potential of partner organisations to learn and improve their strategies was linked to the willingness of leaders to seek out, value and incorporate multiple and sometimes contrary perspectives from members of affected communities and others. In contrast, some interviewees suggested that an older generation of leaders and board members, used to working in certain ways, are limiting the potential for innovation.

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*“It all starts with how leaders interact with teams. In our weekly meetings we rotate the chair to encourage the team to challenge each other. Being a manager is not about control, it is about influence, and about including others in the changes that we’re making.”*

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- *Christian Aid staff member, Sierra Leone*

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CA Ireland's early adoption of adaptive programming has positioned the organisation at the forefront of a broader community of NGOs and donors interested in the approach.

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*“The narrative for adaptive management has been won, but the political space is still very much contested. The space for adaptive approaches is shrinking just when we need them more. If we are going to do adaptive management in a more substantial way, we need to invest in improved systems, culture, and guidance. We need to hear the evidence to justify those investments.”*

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*- donor representative, Ireland*

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CA Ireland has also shown real leadership in its willingness to change its own programming methodologies. It has progressively responded to various lessons and challenges that have emerged in relation to this programme, including the need to distribute learning opportunities (i.e., strategy testing and outcome harvesting) more evenly throughout the year, the need for more attention to project design processes in adaptive methodologies, the discomfort about unexpected outcomes/fear of failure that have limited many partners' adaptive tendencies, and the need for more participatory approaches in developing country-level Theories of Change.

## **2. Organisational Culture**

Literature on adaptive programming emphasises the importance of an enabling culture in an organisation's values and ways of working. Important aspects of culture for adaptive programming include the emphasis on reflection and learning,<sup>10</sup> experimenting and taking risks,<sup>11</sup> decentralising decision making,<sup>12</sup> identification or willingness to depart from particular ways of working, and the emphasis placed on an environment of trust and psychological safety with colleagues and partners.<sup>13</sup>

CA Ireland's willingness to take on the adaptive approach is in itself an expression of an enabling culture, which is interested in innovating, being more collaborative than hierarchical, and willing to embrace new ways of working. This research also revealed the value that is placed within CA

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*“...(the most important factor for adaptive programming to work) is driving a culture of continuous learning and improvement, that always there could be a better way, and creating a space for your own people to continuously aspire to a better way.”*

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*- Christian Aid staff member, Sierra Leone*

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Ireland on accountability to primary stakeholders, and to creating “psychological safety” in internal discussions and during engagement with partners. During our accompaniment of this programme, being honest about learning from unexpected or undesired results was also a focus for CA Ireland. Fostering these attributes within the programme and among partners is creating an enabling environment for adaptive programming.

Additional aspects of organisational culture that enable adaptive programming to work well included whether gathering and reflecting on evidence is valued, whether there is a culture of debate and friendly critique, and a willingness to invite multiple perspectives (from within and outside of the organisation). Broadly, there has been positive progress in supporting culture change among partner organisations, though this progress is not even. There appears to be a mutually reinforcing relationship between an enabling culture and adaptive programming methods, insofar as effective application of adaptive programming methodologies encourages an enabling culture, and vice versa. Interviewees and survey respondents commonly cited that adaptive methods were prompting more regular strategic reflection and creativity, increased attention to the collection and use of evidence, and greater accountability to communities.

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*“Developing and reinforcing the adaptive mindset in colleagues and partners is the most important. Without that, none of our tools or approaches would work.”*

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- *Christian Aid staff member, Sierra Leone*

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#### *Thinking and working politically*

An organisational culture that values political analysis, engages deliberately to influence the political context, and adjusts strategies accordingly can derive real benefits from adaptive programming. CA actively encouraged analysis of power, gender and conflict dynamics, and references were made by partners to the value of this analysis in adaptive programming. In many cases, partner organisations were already very politically astute and constantly adapting and reflecting on the dynamics and actors dominating their operating context, though these learning and decision-making processes were rarely shared or reported.

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*“Power analysis has been very critical when looking at adaptive programming. Those power dynamics can spoil or enhance your effectiveness. Looking at the example of traditional leaders, when you look at the power dynamics it is very important to have them involved. If we don’t, they are likely to be spoilers.”*

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- *partner organisation, Zimbabwe*

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### *Fixed ways of working*

Partner organisations that were less inclined to explore the potential of adaptive programming were those with the strongest identification with certain issues and long-traditions of working on them in specific ways. This appeared to be a particular challenge for those working on macro strategies on gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity. Some Colombian partners, for example, have been using similar human rights defence strategies for decades, based on a combination of litigation and international advocacy. In Zimbabwe, some partners commented that changing long-held strategies would take them too far from their roots. In both cases, a lack of change in directors or members of governance boards over multiple decades was correlated with an unwillingness to adapt strategies.<sup>14</sup>

### *Fear of failure, trust and psychological safety*

A 2020 workshop with Colombian partners on the topic of “learning from failure” revealed the concerns that some have when taking on the adaptive approach. Notwithstanding the psychological impact of working in an armed conflict environment on trust and openness, for these partners, changing their strategies implied potential risks of doing harm in relation to conflict dynamics or personal security. Others were concerned that programmatic changes would result in failure, leading to a loss of support among programme participants or donors.

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*“Fear is a big issue (for adaptive programming). What we are trying to do has not been done before, so there is fear of going into new territory, and out of their comfort zones. Partners sense a lot of risk in making big/radical changes to strategies.”*

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*- Christian Aid staff member, Colombia*

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Organisations that struggled with adaptive programming seemed to be those that have been heavily influenced by traditional development approaches, which construes success as achieving and reporting expected results, and failure as the occurrence of anything unexpected. This research has shown that this mindset is changing at different speeds among partners, but increasingly overall unexpected results are being seen as a source of useful learning for programmatic improvements.

## **3. Conceptual understanding**

We observed a direct relationship between having a good understanding of the aims and scope of adaptive programming and being able to apply it towards better outcomes.

When asked about the value of adaptive programming, about half of survey respondents referred to the potential flexibility in programme implementation (especially in response to external changes), while about half also referred to its potential to improve the effectiveness of their own strategies.<sup>15</sup> Among partners and CA, the greater potential benefit that adaptive

programming promises in improving strategies is not well understood. This represents a lost opportunity for some partners to benefit from reflecting on the assumptions and effectiveness of their own strategies.

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*“(It is about) collecting useful information and feedback and making regular time and space for learning from what has worked and what hasn’t.”*

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- *partner organisation, Guatemala*

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Beyond the occasional mention by CA, we heard few references to adaptive programming as a process of proactive experimentation with alternative programming strategies, and we did not hear many examples of scaling up of successful interventions. As might be expected, this represents a more conservative application of learning to improve effectiveness that one might find in the private sector, for instance.

#### **4. Staff capacities**

The staff capacities that are identified in the literature as important to the application of adaptive programming include aspects related to mindset, such as curiosity, creativity, comfort with uncertainty, as well as strong political understanding. They also relate to the resources and skills that staff members have, such as diverse relationships and strong technical skills for facilitation, and monitoring, evaluation and learning.<sup>16</sup>

The degree to which staff of CA and partners possessed these competencies was influential over how deeply adaptive programming was applied. Not all these capacities can be achieved through training. Multiple partner organisations in Sierra Leone, El Salvador and Zimbabwe, for example, have benefited from staff who have ‘hybrid identities’, with roots, relationships and legitimacy among communities, as well as experience, policy-nous and networks in capital cities. These staff drive learning because they encourage innovation and courage, can move between local and national spaces, share in-depth knowledge of the context, translate between policy and practical concerns, and drive accountability to achieving change in the context.

Other competencies required for adaptive programming can be trained or modelled. Interviewees remarked that the methodologies of adaptive programming including strategy testing, ToCs, outcome harvesting, and community voices include steep learning curves for CA staff and those of partner organisations, and it is a challenging scenario for newcomers and those wanting to refresh their understanding. These challenges are offset by the efforts that CA Ireland makes to reinforce the understanding of adaptive programming concepts and methodologies via communications, communities of practice, accompaniment processes and global meetings. Such efforts are welcomed, both because they support the long-term culture change that is needed, and they help to refresh knowledge that is depleted by staff turnover.

## 5. Partnership approaches

Collaborative partnerships are at the heart of CA's way of working. Some elements of CA's approach to partnership are highly enabling of adaptive programming, including an emphasis on building trust and a commitment to equalising power and demonstrating downwards accountability. Other aspects of the partnership approach, such as the emphasis on solidarity (even when desired outcomes are not forthcoming), are harder to reconcile.

According to some partners, the adoption of the adaptive approach and the close support from CA that it entails has contributed to an improved experience of partnership, characterised by a more open and collegiate working relationship, deepening trust, and a shared commitment to learning and improved outcomes. The CA country office in Guatemala, who split their time between the adaptive programming approach and programmes with a more traditional approach, remarked that in comparison, adaptive programming promoted a less hierarchical relationship with partners, freer communication, greater trust, less fear of failure and an increased willingness to try new things.

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*“What’s useful in the experience with Christian Aid Ireland is the sense of trust and relaxation. It’s not a critical evaluation, as much as an environment of friendly questioning and a view to the future; of working as a team; a constructive perspective that is valuable.”*

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- *partner organisation, Zimbabwe*

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As trust in partnerships deepens, CA has challenged partners to question their assumptions, critique their impacts or consider alternative strategies. In this sense CA has played the role of ‘critical friend’ in some relationships. Care must be taken not to overstep in providing this advice, for example, where some partners have strong attachment to their strategies.

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*“They do (adaptive programming) inherently in the way that they operate and are happy to brief us – but they don’t need us to look at their strategies with a microscope. They don’t see the added value of it. Sometimes we are behind the curve, trying to figure out what their adaptations really are rather than actually helping them to adapt.”*

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- *Christian Aid staff member, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory*

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With the notable exception of Angola, CA country teams were not willing to change partnerships within the programme. The ability to alter partnership arrangements annually - including ending

them and starting new ones - would theoretically improve the adaptive scope of the programme at country level, but might be in contrast with other partnership values, such as solidarity, and potentially pose reputational risks to CA.

This research has also revealed the benefits of seeing partnership collaboratively. Partners benefit from participating in joint context analyses, refresher trainings on adaptive programming, and communities of practice. For CA, being a good partner in these settings becomes more about effective convening and ensuring an inclusive discussion. The collaborative approach to learning is encouraged by the literature on adaptive programming, which speaks to the multiple benefits of “knowledge pooling” across development partners.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to convening relationships between partners, this research revealed calls for CA Ireland to help bridge relationships between programme participants, partners, other implementing organisations and donors. Although available time has been an issue, Irish Aid expressed a desire to engage directly with partners and primary stakeholders. Irish Aid also welcomed the possibility of pooling experiences from partner organisations and communities and bringing this to bear on policy conversations in Dublin.<sup>18</sup>

## 6. Participation

When faced with the complexity and uncertainty of most development challenges, increasing the diversity of perspectives and being accountable to those perspectives by including them in evaluation, design and implementation has been shown to produce better results.<sup>19</sup>

### *Listening to community perspectives*

Including outside perspectives in learning processes has in many circumstances provided the crucial incentive that partner organisations have needed to step out of their comfort zone and make changes to strategies. There is a high correlation between partners that are learning and adapting and those that have close relationships with communities and other primary stakeholders. Particularly in Sierra Leone and El Salvador we have heard that the willingness of partners to adjust their strategies is driven by the accountability they feel towards communities for the changes that these strategies are or are not achieving. This research has been asking under what circumstances adaptive programming leads to better outcomes, but what we are also realising is that it is because communities are demanding better outcomes that partners are motivated to do adaptive programming well.

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*“Our customers are the community. We are entrusted with resources on their behalf. You have to get your staff to understand that we have to deliver change to communities, or we will be out of business”*

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*- Christian Aid staff member, Sierra Leone*

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### *Decentralised decision making*

Literature on adaptive programming commonly suggests that successful adaptation is more likely to occur when decision-making authority is placed as close to the ground as possible.<sup>20</sup> There is evidence to suggest that leaders who actively solicit feedback from across the team and seek opportunities to involve frontline workers in reflection and decision making are better apprised of the context and more able to make smart and timely changes to strategies.<sup>21</sup> CA's ability to adapt to changing country contexts and learn during implementation has benefitted from the willingness of CA Ireland to listen and respond to the feedback of country offices and partner organisations.

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*"It's important to listen to our staff that are in the field. We are in permanent contact and I respect their opinions. We want them to take a role in decision - making, as we've seen that decision-making powers need to be decentralised for this to work."*

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*- partner organisation, El Salvador*

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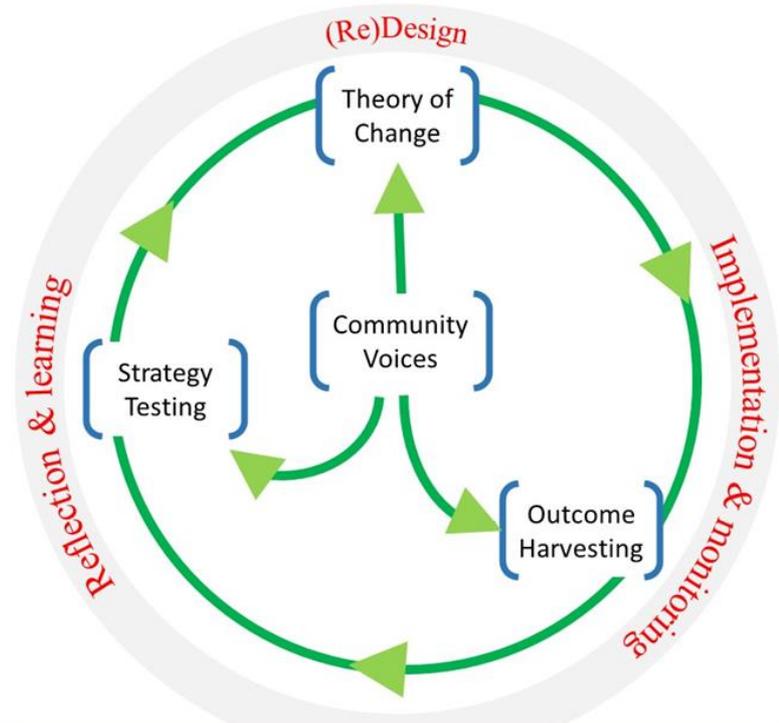
### *Involving 'Critical Friends'*

Critical friends are knowledgeable people who are known to CA or partners and provide sources of constructive feedback during strategy testing sessions. Like engaging with communities, critical friends provide additional perspectives regarding the changing context, the effectiveness and viability of programming strategies and the assumptions that underpin them, as well as ideas for new or adapted strategies. The value of critical friends to the adaptive approach was universally reinforced by interviewees. Their important competencies included: having prior knowledge of the partner organisation; being highly committed and having deep experience with the sector or issues in question; being able to switch between different viewpoints; and having the tact and trust to ask challenging questions without making a partner organisation's work look bad.

There has been innovation and expansion in the use of critical friends, though the practice is not as common as its benefits imply. For example, in Zimbabwe, multiple community members have been invited to strategy testing. However, critical friends are still only engaged at the strategy testing sessions and not at other times of the year when partners could benefit from an external, constructive perspective.

## 7. Methods and tools

CA and its partners expressed significant appreciation for the tools and methods of adaptive programming, which include (a) Strategy Testing, (b) Theory of Change, (c) Outcome Harvesting, and (d) Community Voices. In practice, experience accompanying this programme reveals that there is congestion in end-of-year outcome harvesting and strategy testing, as well as ambiguities regarding how learning from these flows into planning. CA Ireland has made various attempts to address congestion and gaps, and is gradually achieving more regular reflection and a more coherent “learning loop” as a result.



Programme management is designed with learning in mind; learning flows through each of these mutually supportive methodologies frequently. A cycle may be completed annually or more frequently.

### **Strategy testing**

Strategy testing is in many ways the centrepiece of CA’s adaptive programming methodology, providing the place in which evidence (from outcome harvesting, community voices and other sources) is brought to bear on the questions of ‘what’s changed in the context’, ‘how effective have we been’, and ‘what should we do differently’.

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*“(Partners) love strategy testing. I remember one had someone making an evaluation that was quite critical. It is easy to criticise, but it is not always constructive. When we do strategy testing on the other hand we might say, okay this is not working, but we also say maybe we can try that and that instead, and reach that point together.”*

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- *Christian Aid staff member, Angola*

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By creating a structured way of analysing and considering developments in the context, strategy testing has improved partners’ mindfulness, and potential to engage with, and responsiveness to, political and other actors and dynamics in the changing context. Moreover, strategy testing

reflections have prompted an explicit focus on testing assumptions, which was seen as its distinct benefit as compared to more traditional programming methodologies. This is a good example of 'double loop learning', which refers not just to assessing why strategies did or did not work, but testing the validity of the assumptions that underlie them.<sup>22</sup>



***Discussing adaptations with CA partner, NMJD in Sierra Leone, 2021. Photo: Chinsia Pascho George***

#### *The frequency of opportunities for learning and adaptive programme design*

Most strategy testing has typically taken place once a year (in part because of the energy invested in the annual reporting and accountability cycle to Irish Aid), which has been recognised as a limitation of the approach. Challenges to increase regularity have included the significant time-commitment needed to cover all the steps of strategy testing, which takes people away from regular duties for several days. When it happens only once a year, CA and partners report losing familiarity with the methodology, requiring additional reinvestment of time to refresh understanding.

When all the demands of strategy testing are combined into one annual session there has historically been too much emphasis on context analysis and harvesting outcomes, and less forward-looking attention to designing better strategies and unpacking them in operational plans that could provide the basis for more regular reflection and adaptation during the year.

CA Ireland reflections in 2020 recommended that strategy testing should be made simpler, including by limiting the number of participants, doing more of the process collaboratively among partners, or breaking up the stages of outcome harvesting, evaluating the theory of change, and redesigning strategies or operational planning throughout the year. CA has encouraged its partners to document outcomes more regularly throughout the year so as to reduce the burden on preparing for strategy testing.

There has been some recognition of the need for a more explicit focus and space on adaptive programme design and operational planning. In Guatemala, El Salvador and Zimbabwe, 'creative laboratories' have been trialled, which build on the context and outcome-focused learning of previous strategy testing sessions, and focus on the design and planning of new strategies. Steps such as these to strengthen annual programme redesign and the potential for regular adaptation based on operational plans is yet to be taken up consistently across partners and country programmes.



***Creative laboratories with CA partner, Padare, Zimbabwe in 2019. Photo: Maria Collison***

### ***Theories of Change (ToCs)***

ToCs are the articulation of intended outcomes, programme strategies and assumptions that are used at partner, country office and overall programme level. As a tool for facilitating conversation on intended outcomes, strategies and assumptions during strategy testing sessions, ToCs are widely valued.

The ToC as it is currently configured and used, however, is not particularly effective at capturing learning and change (i.e., the changes that were made in strategy and why). In this sense, opportunities are being missed to capture evidence of learning and programmatic improvement which could be useful for partners, CA and donors alike. The strategies set forth in ToCs might need to be revised in operational plans, but these revisions are not necessarily captured and often only make sense to those who were involved in the discussion.

ToCs have proven useful for checking assumptions and revising strategies. But, they are often redeveloped during strategy testing in a way that assumes that the requisite organisational resources and capacities (people, money, systems, infrastructure) are available, which may or may not be the case.

#### ***Strategies often flexibly framed within an already flexible framework***

Generally speaking, most ToCs are framed at a high level, sometimes using quite vague language. This high level allows for much flexibility in how partners implement their strategies, but might contribute to unclear interpretations of what is being planned, and a tendency that few adaptations are evident each year, because many of them take place "between the lines". For some partners, ToCs can include so many outcome areas that we had a sense that the organisation was 'trying to hedge their bets'. With too many outcomes that are not tightly enough linked to the testing of assumptions or past learning, there is a risk that ToCs (in their current form) fail in their purpose to choose the best strategies based on what does and does not work.

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*“We see the operational plan as easier to change. Adaptations to the theory of change come only at strategy testing time, and it feels like we need the approval of Christian Aid Ireland. The operational plan allows for more medium-term adaptations for things that have happened or in response to learning”.*

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*- partner organisation, El Salvador*

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#### *“Nested” ToC*

PGII was designed to achieve strategic alignment in its delivery of three broad outcome areas through specific country programmes and individual partnerships. This was to be achieved via ‘nested’ ToCs for partner organisations, CA country teams and CA Ireland.

At country level, there has been increasing use of ToCs to enable a more collegiate and strategically aligned approach with partners. In most countries, partners have been invited to comment and input in the country-level ToC. This consultative approach has the potential to realise the value of diverse perspectives in adapting strategies, just like community voices and critical friends do for partner organisations. Moreover, the consultative approach has helped in recognising how the unique competencies and preferred strategies of partners can combine, offering the potential for collaboration towards shared outcomes, including ‘micro’, ‘meso’, and ‘macro’<sup>23</sup> strategies.

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*“We have one partner that is very good with community work. They are good at consultation, mobilising people and getting those perspectives. One other partner is also working in relation to mining, but they are much better at advocacy around the laws. We are just starting to see the benefits of how these efforts could work together.”*

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*- Christian Aid staff member, Zimbabwe*

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#### **Outcome harvesting**

Outcome harvesting is an established evaluation methodology that is increasingly being used to monitor complex programmes. PGII was one of the earlier programmes to apply this approach to ongoing monitoring, rather than evaluation. It collects data on outcomes that have actually happened, rather than the traditional approach of assessing performance against what was originally planned.<sup>24</sup> In the version of outcome harvesting used by CA and partners, significance of the outcomes and partners’ contributions to them are assessed, but the causal pathway of how particular strategies yielded these outcomes is not examined.

Overall, outcome harvesting has been found to be very powerful. It promotes good reflection on how CA and its partners contribute to change, and has raised awareness of the importance of learning. For some thematic areas, outcome harvesting is strengthening the evidence that programmes are achieving desirable results. Some interviewees lauded outcome harvesting's ability to be honest, in that it captures what changes happened during the project, rather than just what was expected. Interviewees also felt that the programme's practice of quantifying and triangulating significance of and contribution to outcomes is a more relevant way of assessing positive impact when causality is complex.

One weakness that was raised is that the collection of outcomes does not require the capturing of information on why these outcomes resulted and not others, or how outcomes one year were causally related to either learning or outcomes in subsequent years.

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*"We can now say that we are doing great work. Governance can be accused of being wishy washy. But now (our partners) can show evidence, making a case for their achievements at micro, meso, and macro levels."*

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- *Christian Aid staff member, Zimbabwe*

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CA country teams and partner organisations are having mixed success with the challenge of collecting outcomes regularly enough so that they are not forgotten, or the process does not become an additional burden during strategy testing workshops. Additionally, there is still a high degree of variation in the relative perspectives on outcomes harvested by partners. The country programmes that have had more success in collecting outcomes more regularly and with greater quality are those that have prioritised training of partners or community members.

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*"(The partner has) people on the ground collecting the data, to reduce the amount of work that they have to do in the communities, and so that the community takes ownership of the process...outcome harvesting has been very useful on their side."*

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- *Christian Aid staff member, Angola*

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Another challenge with outcome harvesting is how the method encourages a focus on short-term and more attributable outcomes, encouraging less attention to the longer-term systemic changes perhaps influenced by multiple actors over time: "partners and country (teams) tend to identify outcomes as event-type stories, policy x changed, this chief did 'y'."

### *Integration and complementarity of prioritised tools, priorities and approaches*

We heard from partners how much they valued CA Ireland's sharing of new ideas and approaches, including specific praise for the inclusive programming, conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity approaches.

It can be challenging to work out how an adaptive programming approach should best dovetail with these other approaches and priorities. From a perspective of programming values, the adaptive approach is highly consistent with a desire to be more conflict sensitive, gender-sensitive and inclusive. But from the perspective of time and resources, the application of all these methods can be overly burdensome. The integration of these methods worked best when the adaptive programming cycle provided a 'backbone' of learning, and additional methods and approaches were integrated throughout the year in a useful and efficient way.

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*"During strategy testing we used the gender analysis tool and could see the issues affecting women are very different. If a miner dies women can't claim ownership of the mine because traditionally the husband is mining and the wife is staying at home. So, we have to work with the government on inheritance laws. So, then we are challenging power, so we have to go back to our power analysis."*

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*- partner organisation, Zimbabwe*

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### *Time Management*

CA and some partners reported that training, accompaniment and delivery of adaptive programming methodologies are quite time-consuming. Survey responses indicated that one third of partner organisations are making only "a little or a medium amount of time available for learning". For some, the amount of time required for adaptive programming had not been sufficiently acknowledged or planned for upfront.

### **Community Voices**

Community Voices is a methodology of stakeholder participation used by CA and partners that integrates the perspectives of primary stakeholders, including government officials, into programme planning, monitoring and evaluation.

Community voices methodology is credited for more accurate and up-to-date contextual understanding, insights as to why prior strategies were not working, and ideas for new and improved strategies. Across the examples of improved strategies or better outcomes that this research has gathered, the impetus for learning and improvement has come from community consultations in between a third and a half of cases.

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*“The whole idea came out from the people. A leader in the feminist community brought it to us. We saw that it was a good proposal and were able to do it because of the available adaptive funding. These opportunities are possible because our staff live there in the province, very close to communities. It gives more of an opportunity for relationship building, and communities are more confident to share their knowledge with us.”*

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- *partner organisation, El Salvador*

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Partners working on meso and macro strategies such as advocacy, litigation, policy-change, research or law change, were much less likely to have identified a relevant ‘community’ of potential constituents or primary stakeholders to whom they were accountable, which tended to dampen the likelihood of these strategies being adapted.

## **8. Administrative procedures**

Administrative procedures refer to the financial, human resource, monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning processes among which adaptive programming takes place. Together they enable or impose limits on the timely adaptation of programmes.<sup>25</sup>

### *Budget policies and procedures*

CA Ireland decides the proportion of Irish Aid funding for each country programme under PG II. Country teams have autonomy to allocate the grant and there is high flexibility (compared to other funding instruments) for partners to reassign costs between budget lines or to do entirely new activities, with the agreement of CA. CA Ireland recommends that country teams have an adaptation fund, which sets aside €10,000 for partners to increase their activities in response to learning or context changes, but this is not yet actively used across the programme.

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*“We had this situation with another donor where we realised that we needed to use the media to highlight the seriousness of the (displacement) problem. But in the project plan there was very little money for it. We could not convince the donor that the issue of displacement needed to be talked about, so we could not put our learning into practice. If the budget had been more flexible, we could have been more effective.”*

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- *partner organisation, Zimbabwe*

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Partner organisations valued the relative flexibility under this programme to reassign costs between budget lines, or to entirely new activities. Core funding in IoPt was also seen as invaluable to adaptation, insofar as it enables partners to consider learning or context changes and make adaptations without the time-delay or bureaucracy of approvals. The straightforward requirements for budgetary changes were valued by partners, although some called for clearer procedures and timelines.

With the adaptation fund, in some country contexts there have been limited proposals to make use of these additional funds. In other contexts, the adaptation funds are seen as having been invaluable. El Salvador availed of funds that allowed a partner organisation to respond to a recognised need for LGBTQ-specific training, in addition to their work with women-only groups.

#### *Donor accountability*

Under CA Ireland's compromise on reporting to Irish Aid, partners report annual outcomes that have actually been achieved, which are then interpreted by CA Ireland into a traditional, predetermined results framework. The approach agreed with Irish Aid allows for an explanation (in an additional column) of why targets were not met but also whether the programme is making progress, regressing or at a standstill. It is also a space for providing richer understanding of what was learned from implementation, and what strategies were adapted based on that learning. Targets and indicators are revised in the results framework accordingly.

Unlike traditional approaches, the responsibility of compiling and reporting data for the results framework is assumed by CA Ireland rather than by CA country teams and partners. This sought to free up partners to implement as best they could in accordance with their learning, rather than requiring them to spend time reporting against performance targets that were sometimes rendered meaningless over time.

The implications of this compromise have been mixed. On the one hand, some CA Ireland staff reported that it has not been problematic. Others felt that "there is a tension between using results frameworks with pre-set and mostly rigid targets that have to be reported on an annual basis alongside the adaptive programming approach – it seems counterproductive".<sup>26</sup>

There are implications of this compromise for future programming. Evidence from both interviews and documentation suggests that the need for performance data can drive a more backwards-looking and results-orientated inquiry during strategy testing, rather than the open-ended, reflective and imaginative inquiry that is needed for learning and courageous improvement of strategies. To the extent that the need to gather performance data infects the reflective moment of strategy testing, it can undermine the essential, longer-term work that is being done to enable a culture of trust, psychological safety and learning from failure.<sup>27</sup>

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*"If a partner says that we are accountable to the people that we work with, that should be rewarded. We see better results when local people are included in their plans, designs, and changes, so we should support that somehow."*

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*- Christian Aid Ireland staff member*

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To be consistent with the paradigm shift that adaptive programming implies, some interviews suggested that adaptive programmes should be accountable not to performance against pre-set targets, but to the quality of learning that is taking place. It was said, this learning should be linked year on year to the unexpected and expected outcomes that the programme is achieving over time. Accountability to primary stakeholders was also raised as an element that encouraged partners to learn and improve strategies, which was not always captured in reporting.

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*“We should be reporting the quality of the learning process, being accountable to how and why we changed. The high-level outcome can be well defined, but intermediate outcomes should be open to change and adaptation. We could be accountable for the contribution to that outcome.”*

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- *donor representative, Ireland*

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#### *Documenting learning and adaptation*

Current adaptive programming tools and methods do not adequately capture what CA Ireland or its partners are learning from year to year. Learning from strategy testing sessions, in terms of revised assumptions, context changes, or the reasons why strategies were changed are captured in strategy testing reports but not in a systematic, accessible or accumulative way. While some of this learning no doubt informs the reporting to Irish Aid, it does not seem to be organised in a way that can trace learning and adaptation over time.

The first implication of this finding is that the benefits of this learning are not easily available to partners or primary stakeholders. When partners proceed from strategy testing to planning new activities, or when they return to strategy testing the next time, they rely on their own record to inform the discussion, not the reports.

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*“This outcome harvesting app is really good, but sometimes you miss the important information about change. You might have that conversation in strategy testing, but it’s not always reflected in the reporting.”*

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- *Christian Aid staff member, Colombia*

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The second implication concerns the missed potential to make the link between learning and better outcomes. This link is fundamental to adaptive programming. While this evidence gap persists, it is harder than it should be to make a reasoned case to donors or the wider development community about whether adaptive programming contributes to greater impact.

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*“We kind of get adaptive programming, but we don’t really know whether it works. It’s easy to speak to the champions about adaptive management, but for the agnostics or the sceptics it is a leap of faith. How do you make that cold hard cash decision when you are not 100% sure how it will work or if it will, or when your culture of your sector is not built around venture capitalist values of taking a risk and learning from it?”*

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*- donor representative, Ireland*

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## **9. Operating Context**

Organisations experience distinct political, security, social, technological and environmental conditions that can allow for or constrain the data collection, reflective time or creative strategising required for adaptive programming. Contexts that are repressive, insecure or highly dynamic with respect to these conditions can impose particular challenges on adaptive programmers. The expectations of each country programme to implement adaptive programming under PG II is quite uniform, despite the unique profile of these conditions that each country experiences. The emphasis that CA and adaptive programming places on analysing the context, engaging with changing dynamics and being clear-headed about how change happens has helped CA and partner organisations adapt better to these circumstances.

In highly dynamic contexts (or during volatile periods), adaptive programming allows for flexibility in how programmes are delivered when conditions change, but can also undermine more strategic and long-term learning. In Zimbabwe, for instance, partners have welcomed the ability to flex in response to economic and political fluctuations and natural disasters. But these disruptions have also undermined partners’ ability to see strategies through, learn from them and reliably implement improved approaches. These disruptions render some stakeholders or geographies off limits, contribute to the loss or diversion of resources, involve threats or detention of staff, and create a tendency to jump from one crisis to another. Under such volatile conditions, it is less reasonable to expect that adaptive programming will yield improved strategies year on year as much as it might contribute to resilience in the face of all these challenges.

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*“When it comes to shrinking space, for Palestinians that is losing staff, not getting funds in or on time, losing donors, and spending your time dealing with that. There isn’t a huge amount of bandwidth left for thinking creatively. The reality is in Gaza that they focus more on survival.”*

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*- Christian Aid staff member, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory*

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## Recommendations

The capacity to conduct adaptive programming is also affected by the degree of risk inherent in the context. In IoPt, for instance, partner organisations can be reluctant to collect evidence due to surveillance fears, or to report outcomes that might compromise them publicly. Against a backdrop of shrinking political space, the willingness to consider alternative strategies has decreased as partners focus their attention on just surviving. One partner said that the greatest challenges to their effectiveness were “the shrinking space for civil society, hostility and public attacks against our organisation, insufficient human resources to carry out all the work, and challenges posed by the occupation itself”. The respondent did not feel that taking an adaptive approach was of direct help with any of these challenges.

CA Ireland’s programme is a leading global example of how adaptive programming can contribute to improved development effectiveness, particularly in collaborative interventions between international NGOs and local implementing partners. The evidence that adaptive programming leads to better development outcomes is not unequivocal, however. CA Ireland can and should leverage its leadership position in the application of adaptive programming to gather systematic evidence and convene further conversations with donors and implementing organisations on the conditions under which adaptive programming does and does not work well. This study should serve as fuel for further actions and discussions.

Based on the findings of this research, this report has produced detailed recommendations for CA, partners and Irish Aid in designing the successor to PG II. These findings were based on an analytical framework for an ‘adaptive scope’, which can be used as a diagnostic tool for understanding an organisation’s potential to generate improved development outcomes via adaptive programming, including by revealing how to strengthen or tailor particular competencies of specific partners or programmes. What follows is a summary of recommendations for a broader community of donors and implementing organisations interested in the potential of adaptive programming.

### Enabling Leadership

Organisations such as CA Ireland that provide or channel resources for development interventions need to set the tone for adaptive programming by ‘walking the talk’ by

- Modelling how the organisation’s decisions respond to evidence from midterm and overall evaluations, and demonstrate how their programming decisions have been made.
- Opening up its annual strategic reflection process to collaborative critique and adjustment with partners, as CA is demonstrating in several country contexts.
- Setting the tone, as a leader in a network of partners, for the programme’s desirable degree of experimentation overall. For example, CA Ireland should consider if and in what partnerships or country programmes it might want to shift the needle from the ‘flexible adjustment’ interpretation of adaptive programming that predominates in most country programmes to a more ‘purposeful experimentation’ paradigm, which offers higher potential risk and reward.
- Empowering leadership for adaptive programming by: 1) recognising and empowering people that embody and champion the values, conceptual understanding, and have the methodological competencies that effective adaptive

programming requires; 2) providing more opportunities for country teams and partners to share their experience among peers, travel between contexts, and set the agenda for the programme as a whole; and 3) providing incentives for sharing of experiences without central coordination.

- Country teams and partners identifying and championing those leaders who enable the factors of adaptive programming. Consider how can they be afforded leadership positions in the network of partners within a programme, to share their experience, host collaborative events, act as critical friends, access specific adaptation funds for their initiatives and work with other country programmes and partners.

## **Deepening organisational culture change**

An optimally conducive culture for adaptive programming will emerge when all nine factors of adaptive scope are geared towards learning and improvement of development strategies. Encouraging conditions of trust and psychological safety will continue to be paramount, as well as the minimisation of competing demands. For CA and its partners, the co-existence of traditional and adaptive funding mechanisms and programming to some extent send mixed messages. To avoid this, consider:

- Aligning all incentives towards adaptation. This means in-programme changes like removing incentives to gather performance data (for the results framework) from reflective processes like strategy testing
- Using reporting procedures to measure and incentivise learning, and its contribution to results
- Taking on the adaptive approach across more or all its programmes.

## **Improving methods**

Reducing complexity and time-costs. While annual processes like strategy testing are valued for the rigour and intention that they bring to data collection and reflection, their complexity and time-costs pose challenges. To address these:

- Opportunities for reflection can be better distributed through the programme cycle, for example, focusing on one outcome several times a year; separating reflection of outcomes from design/planning of new strategies; conducting mini strategy testing at different times in the year. This can also be supported by the engagement of 'critical friends' in moments throughout the year.
- Supporting better quality programming through various approaches (inclusion, conflict sensitivity) can often overburden partners and country teams. Be intentional in integrating additional methods into an adaptive programming of learning throughout the year.
- Adaptive programming can build on the experience of Covid-19 by undertaking reflections like strategy testing online with CA and partners co-facilitating, and/or collaboratively across partners to save time and improve learning.

Bridging the gap between strategy testing and programme design and implementation.

Implementing adaptive programming via methodologies such as outcome harvesting and strategy testing can induce a backwards-looking focus on context changes and outcomes, in lieu

of the open, creative process required to design and experiment with new strategies. To counter this tendency:

- Organisations should ensure their adaptive programming cycle pays sufficient attention to how reflections on context, assumptions and the effectiveness of programming strategies are followed through in revised strategies.
- Organisations should also pay sufficient attention to operational planning, which considers the viability of revised strategies in light of practical planning considerations (i.e., timing and resources). Operational planning should schedule moments throughout the annual programming cycle to reflect on the performance of these strategies and provide a sense of whether these revised approaches are on track (so-called “light monitoring”).<sup>28</sup>

Improving the usefulness of ToCs. When we see the organisations in which we work as part of a network geared towards common goals, ToCs can define (or create) collective strategies. Instead of documents whereby organisations articulate their hypotheses in isolation, ToCs should be opportunities for partners to come together and understand how they contribute to outcomes alongside the strategies of others, provoking a more strategic conversation in which the possibilities for collaboration, constructive critique and synergy emerges. To improve this, consider:

- a more open, collaborative and trust-fuelled approach to reflection, strategies, and programming.
- engaging more with ‘critical friends’ from within or outside the organisation and partner networks who can help to challenge assumptions and consider alternative strategies when the time comes to pause and reflect on the effectiveness of interventions.

## **Administrative Procedures**

To ensure that organisational processes enable timely adaptations of programmes, organisations and donors should consider two key areas:

- Reimagining performance metrics to measure learning, quality of learning processes and the impacts that learning has on adaptation. For example, monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) systems for adaptive programmes should emphasise the relationship between learning and the evolution of outcomes year on year, instead of seeing each year as a static report of outcomes. This will require:
  - Reporting guidance and templates for the collection, aggregation and analysis of learning, adaptations and outcomes across the entire programme, and
  - Reviewing year by year so that the evolution of learning can be traced according to a country or partner.
- Creating reliable and flexible budgets that incentivise innovation. For example, maintaining or increasing core funding ratios will provide partners with the breathing space and flexibility to make their own decisions in response to context changes and/or internal learning. Building on previous experience of the adaptation fund, CA Ireland can make sure that the availability of funds is well known and linked to decisions taken at specific points of the adaptive programming cycle.

## Participation

To ensure participation is genuinely bringing about power shifts and accountability to primary stakeholders, it is necessary to provide sufficient funds and time for implementing organisations to engage with those stakeholders in programme design, planning and evaluation.

The impetus required for partners to step out of their comfort zones means that the use of 'critical friends' is an easy and efficient way of bringing increased rigour to context analysis, testing of assumptions and encouraging creativity in strategy formation. Consider expanding the use of 'critical friends' not just in annual strategy testing sessions, but in other moments throughout the year.

## Staff Capacities

In addition to the concepts and skills of adaptive programming methodologies, advanced skills in monitoring and evaluation, and facilitation, are useful. A mindset of openness, comfort with uncertainty, willingness to experiment and take risks, and the desire and willingness to foster conditions of trust and psychological safety are important but can be difficult to train. To achieve this, consider:

- Recruiting staff that have hybrid identities, and relationships that cut across organisational and geographical boundaries, or donor, implementing organisation, partner and/or communities. Organisations should try to recruit staff with the appropriate mindset and skills (including political analysis), and train them in these same qualities to the extent possible.
- Sharing experience and examples of success across country contexts. For example, profiling and celebrating partners that are being adaptive, highlighting how they used adaptive programming, and how they benefit from it in their own words. These examples should be shared in online cross-country exchanges where possible, making use of increased uptake of technology tools since Covid.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Booth, Balfe, Gallagher, Kilcullen, O'Boyle, & Tiernan, 2018.

<sup>2</sup>'Strategy Testing' is a methodology developed by the [ASIA Foundation](#) and used by Christian Aid to refer to regular planned and facilitated workshop opportunities for analysis and learning to evaluate whether and how programme strategies are working as expected and whether they need to be changed and if so how. Strategy testing sessions that have been observed during this study include those in Colombia, Zimbabwe and IoPt.

<sup>3</sup> Global meeting is an annual face-to-face week-long workshop of Christian Aid Ireland and country representatives involved in the Irish Aid PG II (usually in Dublin, Ireland).

<sup>4</sup> Valters, Cummings, & Nixon, 2016; Jones, 2011; Akhtar, Tse, Khan, & Nicholson, 2016; Froude & Zanchelli, 2017; Derbyshire & Donovan, 2016; Mercy Corps & International Rescue Committee, 2016; Bandali et al, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Honig et al, 2018. Note that these studies were typically examined by programme insiders, and/or did not allow for the assessment of counterfactuals.

<sup>6</sup> The distinction is known as "adaptive programming" versus "adaptive delivery" (Green, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Green, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> This framework was first developed and deployed by the NGO Adapt Peacebuilding as way of diagnosing capacities and support priorities to develop adaptive programming approaches with Colombian Government agencies.

<sup>9</sup> Schein, 1992; de Wet & Schoots, 2016; Faustino & Booth, 2014; Hailey & James, 2002; LaFasto & Larson, 2001; Lencioni, 2002; Byrne, Sparkman, & Fowler, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> USAID, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Booth et al, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Mercy Corps & International Rescue Committee, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Edmondson, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Based on interviews with Christian Aid Ireland staff. This potential limitation in applying the adaptive approach was hinted at in the early "Learning to make a difference" report that underpinned this programme, which commented that "national and local NGOs and CSOs often have a particular line of work...as their reason for existing. In other words, their identity is bound up with delivering a particular type of output." (Booth et al, 2018)

<sup>15</sup> Survey with Christian Aid's partner organisations, February 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Bain, Booth, & Wild, 2016; Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2014; Mercy Corps & International Rescue Committee, 2016; Honig & Gulrajani, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Faustino & Booth, 2014; Booth, 2016; Booth, 2015; Drew, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Irish Aid interview, November 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Reuter, (2012): <http://web.pdx.edu/~rueterj/multiple-perspectives/multiple-perspectives-v43.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Mercy Corps & International Rescue Committee, 2016; Honig & Gulrajani, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Harford, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Vogel, 2012; Valters, 2014; Valters, Cummings, & Nixon, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> 'Micro' implies a focus on individuals and very specific projects, 'meso' (or mezzo) in this context refers to working with and between groups and communities, and 'macro' to helping very large groups or influencing the system more broadly indirectly.

<sup>24</sup> Wilson-Grau, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> USAID, 2020; Booth et al, 2018; Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Mercy Corps & International Rescue Committee, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Christian Aid Ireland staff, October 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Booth et al, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> See for example Morel et al, 2020.



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