Listen carefully. Tread lightly. Adapt quickly.

Approaching Adaptive Management: Examples from our Somalia Education Programming

Summary

Adaptive management approaches potentially offer us opportunities to deliver high quality results in circumstances where change is complex, including in **fragile, unstable or conflict affected places.** However, building adaptive programming continues to be a challenge for the sector.

For CARE, our Department for International Development -UK Aid funded Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) programming has provided useful learning on how to operationalise adaptive approaches. In this paper we expand on our learning from this project and offer some recommendations for how to create more opportunities for truly adaptive programming in the future. In particular:

- **Projects that are designed to adapt need budget structures, results frameworks and governance that enable the process of adaptation**. In our GEC projects the approaches employed by DFID, including the introduction of Review and Adaptation meetings have served to support meaningful adaptation.

- **Adaptive projects require both strong participatory elements and flexible governance and accountability structures**. Whilst rigorous and comprehensive Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) systems are important without these other elements appropriate adaptation can be hindered.

- **Adaptive Management requires resources.** Where the expected change is complex, adaptation is frequently necessary to ensure we are responding to context and evidence. This should be adequately resourced if we are to expect results.

In an environment where many INGOs work consistently within complex environments, the sector also needs more opportunities to trial these approaches and could benefit from more funding streams available which include the kinds of approaches used by DFID in current GEC programming.

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[1] Image: ©2019, Toby Madden.

Background

Through the Department for International Development's (DFID) Girls' Education Challenge CARE has, since 2013, worked to extend access to equitable education and improve learning outcomes for girls in Somalia, including some of the most vulnerable.

Despite ongoing efforts, access to education in Somalia remains among the lowest in the region, particularly for girls. Boys and girls contend with different gender and social norms that tend to undermine their ability to stay in school, study and advance from grade to grade.

CARE's Somali Girls' Education Promotion Programmes have operated in an environment of rapid contextual shifts. Conflict, drought and displacement required a dynamic process of adapting implementation strategies to respond to population dynamics and their impact on student attendance, mental health and performance. However, alongside these contextual challenges we also see social and gender dynamics in Somali society changing at a fast pace as a result of migration, women's engagement in economic activities and the use of technology.

In order to ensure sustainable impact on learning, our Girls' Education Challenge projects have had to adapt approaches and implementation strategies. These projects have been enabled in their adaptation both by strong monitoring and evaluation frameworks and, importantly, by project governance and accountability structures: Approaches deployed by the Department for International Development, particularly within the SOMGEP-Transition (2017-2021) and Adolescent Girls' Education in Somalia (2018-2022) projects, have provided useful learning on how to embed a focus on accountable adaptation into results-driven, complex programming.

In this document we outline some of the aspects of adaptation which have helped to maintain agile and effective programming even in this challenging environment. We look at the Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning Frameworks used but also go beyond this to explore how governance and accountability frameworks, combined with community engagement have been vital for ensuring the project can adapt to meet the needs of communities.

CARE's approach to Adaptive Management

Adaptive management is about more than changing your activities to suit a changing environment (being reactive): it is about planning, implementing and understanding projects in a way that is sensitive to context, allows you to anticipate issues that may arise and centers voices from communities.

Trying to move the needle on some of the most intractable development issues requires that we recognise and work with complexity. Our programming does not exist in a vacuum and we must frequently manage shifting environments, competing stakeholder needs, complex power dynamics and diverse barriers to, and drivers of change. In this complexity it is necessary to take deliberate action to ensure that our programmes can cope with the unknowns.

CARE's approach to Adaptive Management focuses on careful and thoughtful programme design which builds in mechanisms for continual learning and evidence-based adaptation throughout the programme cycle. This should go beyond experimenting, piloting and scaling to base adaptation on:
1. Shifting contexts and changing needs of communities
2. Changing power dynamics which arise both as a result of the programme and as a result of other local dynamics
3. Developing knowledge about what is working in this environment and why.

- Define those project components which are flexible as well as those that cannot change.
- Understand the context using analytical & participatory tools.
- Build a robust theory of change which defines strategies for making change.
- Work with the donor to define strong parameters of adaptation and to ensure adequate, flexible budget for learning and adaptation.

Plan

CARE's Adaptive Management approach

Learn
- Bring together key stakeholders at learning junctures to make sense of new information.
- Agree new strategies and adaptations.
- Adapt theory of change and test new assumptions.

Act
- Engage with stakeholders, communities and programme participants to design the program.
- Prototype and pilot approaches that need validation with clear parameters and timelines for success.

Monitor
- Monitor implementation and context using activity and sentinel monitoring.
- Enable feedback loops to inform continual adaptation.
- Understand progress against interim outcomes.

Review
- Bring together monitoring data, analyse and feed back to team.
- Where feasible supplement project based data with community based research.
- Validate findings in collaboration with communities.

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It is possible to develop flexible, high quality, results driven and accountable programming which is able to meet the needs of communities by taking an intentional approach to design and implementation incorporating:

- An understanding of what cannot, as well as what can change: so that all stakeholders understand the parameters of adaptation
- A robust Theory of Change with clearly defined assumptions to be tested with appropriately resourced ongoing learning and reflection
- Governance structures which look to devolve meaningful and appropriate decision making and ensure flexibility whilst also maintaining clear accountability on issues of milestones and budgets
- Strong relationships with local actors including project participants who can ensure that the project meets the needs of context.

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Adaptive Management in action: CARE's Somalia Girls' Education Programming

CARE has implemented Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) projects in Somalia since 2013, starting with the Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project (SOMGEP) which ran from 2013 to 2017.

CARE is currently implementing two projects: SOMGEP-Transition (SOMGEP-T) which will run until 2021 and seeks to build on learning from SOMGEP, and Adolescent Girls' Education in Somalia (AGES) which runs from 2018-2022 and which is aiming to further extend access to education for some of the country's most marginalised. All of these projects have sought to take adaptive approaches which manage context effectively and are flexible to emerging knowledge on how to improve learning outcomes for girls.

These projects use an approach which focuses on improving learning outcomes and retention by being context and community driven and taking a more holistic approach to tackling the barriers to education for some of Somalia's most educationally disadvantaged girls.

To achieve this CARE works with a wide variety of stakeholders in order to address the complex reasons which can keep girls from achieving in schools. CARE works with:

- Schools to ensure supportive school practices, quality content delivery and safe conditions for girls
- Communities and religious leaders to support positive shifts in gender and social norms
- Learners to increase participation in education and foster girls' leadership skills
- Ministries of Education to enhance capacity to deliver quality and relevant education.

The Somali context in which these programmes are implemented is affected by drought, conflict and pervasive cultural and traditional barriers to girls' education. It is through an adaptive approach, able to deal with the complexities of this challenging environment, that these programmes are making progress on learning outcomes.

Outcomes from the SOMGEP project

The SOMGEP project (2013-2017) achieved significant outcomes against its objectives by the time the final evaluation was completed. This included:

A 13.5 percentage point rise in literacy scores (55.7% to 69.2%)

A 19 percentage point rise in reading scores (37% to 56%)

A 17 percentage point rise in addition scores (53% to 70%)

A 12 percentage point rise in subtraction scores (44% to 56%)

The project saw substantial increases in enrolment (from 57% to 74%) and there was increased community interest in education: at endline 54% of caregivers knew where the nearest secondary school was compared to 23% at baseline.

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Lessons in Adaptive Management

Enabled in part by a spirit of learning embedded in DFID's Girls' Education Challenge, CARE has invested in structures and processes which have helped us to create programmes which have adapted to context, even when this has not been easy.

In order to ensure sustainable impact on learning, these projects have had to continuously adapt approaches and implementation strategies. In order to ensure an agile learning and adaptation process, the project uses a robust monitoring system, combining fidelity of implementation and adherence tracking, as well as capturing data on the school population and carrying out contextual analyses. The project's annual evaluation rounds track ongoing changes in the factors affecting girls' learning and transition, as well as population dynamics and social norm change processes. However, we know from our experiences in these projects that **the operationalization of adaptation does not begin and end with MEAL**. Adaptation needs to be built in to all aspects of programme design.

In this document, we outline three areas of learning which have arisen from our experiences within these programmes and which we hope can help shed light on how aspects of an Adaptive Management approach can be operationalised by donors and implementers:

1. **Project governance and accountability structures should create intentional and accountable spaces for adaptation**
2. **Data and monitoring systems must be robust, and analysis appropriately resourced to enable learning and adaptation**
3. **Context and community should be centered within the project: moving beyond 'what works?' to 'what will work here, for whom, now and in the future?'**

1. Project governance structures should create intentional and accountable spaces for adaptation

Key Lessons
- **Rigid structures can be a hindrance to adaptation**. Incorporating strategy testing or other flexible components into programme governance can enable accountable, results driven adaptive programming. This, combined with an increased degree of decentralisation in decision making, has enabled current GEC programmes to become more accountable and to respond in an agile manner to contextual changes
- **Flexibility in budgets and milestones is vita**l for flexibility in the project but requires close monitoring of spending rates
- **Donors can create a framework for adaptive, high quality, results driven programming**, even in challenging environments. DFID's Review and Adaptation Meetings, used within our SOMGEP-T and AGES programmes, are a great example.

Rigid budgets, prescriptive milestones and donor requirements are frequently cited reasons for projects failing to adapt. However, donors have an interest in projects working successfully and some donors are taking constructive steps to enable adaptation. In a project like SOMGEP, the focus on results driven outcomes-based programming meant that frequent adaptation was needed. However, this could sometimes be cumbersome: requiring budget or milestone revisions which could take considerable time to get approved.

As a result of DFID's learning from this first phase, Review and Adaptation Meetings (RAMs) have been introduced across the Girls' Education Challenge programmes. RAMs perform a role similar to strategy testing, occurring on a biannual basis and providing an opportunity for project stakeholders to consider what adaptations needs to occur: **effectively closing the learning loop.**

Table 1: Indicative Review and Adaptation Meeting (RAM) questions

Example issues	Questions
Actions from previous RAM	Please give an overview of your progress towards the actions that came out of the previous RAM. Please reflect on implementation and results.
Theory of Change	Does the ToC need to be reappraised or adjusted? In light of monitoring or evaluative data, please reflect on what these are telling you about your programme design and whether the assumptions in your ToC still hold.
Monitoring & Evaluation	What new evidence has monitoring provided around the progress you are making towards intermediate outcomes? Have results from evaluation or monitoring shown up any issues for consideration?
Adaptations	Are there any adaptations required in light of monitoring or evaluation by implementers, partners or the fund manager. Please provide a justification for each for required adaptation.
Budget	Is any budget re-profiling necessary as a result of the need to adapt?

This represents a positive partnership-based approach to adaptation and this is something that we hope to see explored more by donors, particularly where complex change is required or where projects are working in complex environments. RAMs build in critical junctures for appraisal of evidence and ensure that stakeholders interpret results collaboratively: increasing our power to explain the results we are seeing. This adaptive approach is not limited to the biannual RAMs, however, it is an ongoing process of agile response to contextual shifts. Seasonal fluctuations in attendance, low fidelity of implementation scores and poor adherence trigger discussions with communities to quickly analyse emerging issues and co-design solutions.

In addition to the introduction of RAMs, the second phase of Girls' Education Challenge projects also have other ways in which they look to make adaptation easier. DFID have **introduced flexibility of 10% within budgets** meaning that it is easier to fund adaptations to strategies. Whilst this requires close monitoring of spending rates and can require capacity building for financial teams, this has enabled these projects to meet the needs of a rapidly shifting context and to adapt based on the new knowledge that is being generated continually by the teams.

Milestone and targets, too, have greater levels of flexibility and can be reassessed more easily in line with the adaptations that are identified at RAM meetings. This dismantles the approach to accountability which looks to ensure that projects deliver by holding them to rigid targets and instead replaces it with an approach which ensures that projects are monitored closely to ensure quality delivery but can also flex with changing circumstances: thus ensuring a greater ability to achieve results.

Project components including flexible budgets and milestones, as well as Review and Adaptation Meetings, can create an adaptive environment in which the donor, fund manager, project teams and partners work together in order to iterate strategies, milestones and budgets, creating a project governance structure **which enables meaningful adaptation *and* maintains strong levels of accountability.**

2. Data and monitoring systems must be robust, and analysis appropriately resourced to enable learning and adaptation

Key Lessons
- **Adaptive programming requires coherent, streamlined but comprehensive monitoring systems** which go beyond implementation monitoring to look at aspects of context and outcomes
- **A mixture of quantitative, qualitative and participatory methods is frequently necessary** for developing a sufficiently rich understanding of emerging issues and potential solutions
- **Spaces for reflection, at all project levels, are critical** to the process of learning
- **Adaptive projects require significant budgets for monitoring, evaluation and learning,** as a result of the considerable investment of time and resource in MEL and analysis.

Adaptation needs to be evidence based. It should be informed by contextual understanding and our knowledge of what is and is not working. This means building monitoring and learning into programme cycles. The SOMGEP project created an adaptive approach by establishing a monitoring system that included trackers for activity, participation and programme adherence, using online toolboxes (e.g. KoBo) to collect real-time data and establish short-term feedback loops. It also used participatory tools to understand how participants perceived and responded to challenges. This was designed in order to address questions and assumptions raised within the project theory of change.

Because change is complex sometimes progress against one outcome can create problems for others. For this reason, multi-level triangulation of data and mixture of methods have been important for understanding what the data is telling us.

Within the first 18 months of the SOMGEP project we saw considerable increases in enrolment. However, the influx of previously unenrolled girls also led to a decrease in average literacy and numeracy scores, suggesting more needed to be done to increase the ability of teachers to serve this group. However, without the ability to triangulate and understand why literacy and numeracy rates were falling it would have been difficult to take appropriate action.

In order to make sense of emerging data CARE held regular meetings with field teams and project partners, and discussed challenges and issues: evidencing clearly the need for adaptation. User-friendly and concise presentations of data facilitated changes to the project such as the development of the "Numeracy Boost"[3] training for teachers.

> During the SOMGEP project (2013-2017) it was found that numeracy gains among target groups were slower than expected, particularly when compared to improvements in literacy.
>
> Triangulating this data on outcomes with qualitative data revealed gaps in teacher knowledge. This information allowed CARE to formulate and negotiate a plan with the Fund Manager and the donor to address slow progress on numeracy outcomes in the latter stages of the project by developing a training for teachers on the "Numeracy Boost". The plan was effective and numeracy gains were accelerated in the last year of the project.

As part of these projects, fidelity of implementation tools have been developed and they were used in an iterative manner, and often adjusted to better capture new trends. They were also streamlined over time to ensure that the volume of data collected is manageable and does not pose an undue burden on participants. The demand for additional information on specific areas also required the project to engage in co-creating evaluation tools and analysis frameworks with the external evaluator, thus ensuring that evaluation data can

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[3] Teachers were trained to deliver the "Numeracy Boost" which is an education programme developed by Save the Children.

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feed directly into Adaptive Management processes by adequately tracking outcome trends and factors affecting project outcomes such as learning and transition.

However, this level of monitoring and data driven adaptation can also be challenging to implement. It requires a high volume of data analysis within short time frames which can mean the need for significant levels of technical skill and for the time needed to be resourced. In the first phase of the project, these challenges were met through frequent field visits, heavy investment in training and capacity building, and data analysis support at the headquarters level.

3. Context and community should be centered within the project: moving beyond 'what works?' to 'what will work here, for whom, now and in the future?'

Key Lessons
- **Systems should be embedded which are sensitive to context**. This can include mechanisms like sentinel monitoring but should also look to regularly engage participants, communities, and stakeholders to make sure that the project is sensitive to needs and is still relevant
- **Ensure that the community has a leading role in project interventions**, in order to ensure that the project can adapt to changing needs more easily.

Adaptation is particularly important in fragile, unstable or conflict affected places where needs may shift rapidly. Ensuring monitoring frameworks make these changes visible and enable timely adaptation is important for ensuring that the project is not thrown off course by unexpected changes. For this reason, it can be important to include sentinel indicators within projects. Sentinel indicators are a type of proxy indicator used to measure contextual changes rather than results or activities. They act as a bellwether for indicating changes occurring within a complex system. They are most effective when developed to monitor critical points in a system such as assumptions defined in a Theory of Change.

> In some regions where the SOMGEP-Transition programme is working, drought is increasing migration. As a result of monitoring contextual factors, the project has been able to see that the population of girls is changing. The number of girls with additional learning needs returning to education, or who are entering school for the first time, is rising. The project has adapted to address these changing needs. Changes have been made in the implementation of our Accelerated Basic Education (ABE) intervention, as well as the Alternative Learning Programme (ALP). Doing this has provided additional learning tracks to meet the widely varying needs of girls to ensure they have the most appropriate educational support. These changes have helped us reach some of the hardest to reach such as girls from nomadic or pastoralist households.

However, in addition to sentinel indicators, adaptive projects should respond to context by centering the perspectives of communities and, wherever possible, seeking to hand power back to communities. Within our Somalia Education projects, we have seen that it is possible to increase the effectiveness of using sentinel monitoring by ensuring that indicators that indicate rapid changes - which need fast action - trigger both action by the team and also action with the community who work with us to co-design solutions. In this way, problems that are exposed by changes in contextual indicators are addressed in ways which are contextually relevant and in ways which understand - and place value on - the perspectives of the people who are experiencing and, in some cases, engendering these changes.

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The Somalia Education projects seek to ensure involvement of participants and stakeholders in a number of ways, which help to ensure not only adaptive programming but also better, more community-led and inclusive programming. These projects do this by:

- Incorporating participants in the design process by using participatory methods
- Ensuring that stakeholders and participants have regular opportunities to feed in to and influence the progression of the project
- Ensuring that community voice and action is centered in the implementation of the programme.

Within CARE's Somalia Education Programming we use a number of methods to ensure communities have the power to influence the project, including by working with and through Community Education Committees (CECs). Our current GEC programmes incorporate learners into defining project approaches through the use of participatory methods. This creates a route to inclusive and community specific adaptation. For example, in response to the drought described above, the SOMGEP-T programme has engaged with CECs and host communities to intensify efforts to enroll girls from nomadic communities, as well as from pastoralist households: helping to ensure that efforts to integrate new populations are embedded in and sensitive to community dynamics.

Concluding remarks

CARE's DFID-funded education programming in Somalia has developed strategies for effective adaptation which have been enabled by the donor, by the Girls' Education Challenge fund manager and by the project design including the monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning systems.

Through these programmes we are developing considerable learning on adaptive programming including:

- **Adaptive projects benefit from both strong participatory elements and from governance and accountability structures** that enable adaptation, in addition to rigorous and comprehensive Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) systems

- **Projects that are designed to adapt need funding structures, results frameworks and governance that enable the process of adaptation** and we should actively encourage donors to structure projects in ways that make this easier

- **Adaptive Management requires resources.** For this reason, lower budget projects can find it harder to resource these approaches. Where the expected change is complex, adaptation is frequently necessary and should be adequately resourced if we are to expect results.

At CARE, we have seen improvements in the adaptability of programming since new and more flexible governance structures were introduced to GEC, however this approach would benefit from more in-depth analysis to understand across the GEC portfolio - but also in new funding streams and new projects- what the results of this have been. This will help to provide a platform for understanding how such approaches can be used most effectively and might be scaled across other programmes and donors to enable more meaningful adaptation within rigorous accountability structures.

Given the importance of adaptive approaches to be able to deal with complex environments, we should be realistic in our expectations to be able to deliver complex change without adequate resources. In an environment where many INGOs work consistently within complex environments, the sector also needs more opportunities to trial these approaches. The sector could benefit from more funding streams available which include the kinds of approaches used by DFID in current GEC programming.