**What does Civil Society think of Adaptive Management? Not that much, it turns out.**

     By Duncan Green

[*Nicola Nixon*](https://asiafoundation.org/people/nicola-nixon/)*,* [*Kim McQuay*](https://asiafoundation.org/people/kim-mcquay/)*,* [*Peter Yates*](https://twitter.com/yatespj)*,* [*Sumaya Saluja*](https://www.linkedin.com/in/sumayasaluja/) *and* [*Su Lae Yi*](https://www.linkedin.com/in/su-lae-yi-she-her-8b65b61b1/)*, all of The Asia Foundation, continue our posts questioning the impact of the whole Adaptive Management/ Thinking and Working Politically Thing (I* [*did my bit*](https://oxfamapps.org/fp2p/second-and-third-thoughts-on-adaptive-management-and-thinking-and-working-politically/) *yesterday).*

Throughout 2021, we spent many hours talking with civil society organizations about adaptive management. We engaged with over 100 civil society organizations (CSOs) in 70 countries in workshops on adaptive management run largely at the behest of donors and other INGOs, and in some cases requested by civil society organizations themselves, across South Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Pacific. What did we find out?

Our workshops drew on what is now a vast canon of material on [adaptive management](https://abtassocgovernancesoapbox.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/abt-associates_adaptive-management_a-frontline-effort_digital-1.pdf), [delivery](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/14556) and [program monitoring](https://odi.org/en/publications/supporting-adaptive-management-monitoring-and-evaluation-tools-and-approaches/). To these we added reflections on making operations and procurement more adaptive, and – importantly – on creating and mentoring adaptive teams.

These are our 5 key takeaways:

1. **It’s largely driven by the development elite**: The discourse of adaptive management tends to position donors and multilaterals, and their implementing partners, as central actors – all those with large, cumbersome and historically risk averse bureaucracies. A good deal of material [focuses](https://www.linkedin.com/in/su-lae-yi-she-her-8b65b61b1/) on how to get those bureaucracies to be much more flexible in program and activity design. For civil society partners, however, the challenge tends to be not so much how to be adaptive than how to create or navigate the authorizing environment for adaptation and – in particular – to secure authority to experiment and security to fail. Those conditions – how to eke out the space to try, test. fail, and learn – and the composition of the teams needed to do so, took up a large chunk of our workshops.

* **It’s still more theory than practice:** That said, many of the CSOs with whom we engaged had rarely, if ever, returned to the original theory of change or underpinning logic of their respective programs to consider whether they were still on track to achieve their projected outcomes. Once the business of implementation kicks off, theories of change and earlier design documents tend to be shelved, in part as workplans and other documents take their place, and in part because CSO partners were under the impression that theories of change cannot be altered during program implementation – either due to explicit instruction from donors or simply ingrained habits of years of not changing them. Theory of change diagrams – often beautified in final design documents – tend to give the impression that they are unchangeable, which partners tend to assume if not explicitly stated otherwise. Teams tend to see a big gap between the aspirational project and the actual project that gets done.
* **The language is alienating:** As always, language is power. Because many local implementing partners have not really been part of the adaptive management conversation, as a body of thought it risks alienating and excluding those who are not conversant with its terms. A focus in some of our discussions on how to make the case for program adaptation with donors went down very well. At its weakest, asking partner organizations to ‘do adaptive management’ just adds an unnecessary layer of documentation, reporting and/or stress to already stretched teams. That can be made worse when some donors are pushing adaptive management and others are insisting on traditional programming and operational styles.
* **Donors put strict limits on what can be adapted**: Speaking of power dynamics, we heard that donors tend not to be very clear on what can and cannot be adapted. For example, CSOs pointed out that major changes in program direction can be difficult if the program must remain within its original budget envelope, and even more so when changes involve testing new ideas or hypotheses. More frank and open conversations are needed on the red flags and goal posts, grounded in trust relationships.
* **Governments are getting in the way**: Given the tight and often tightening regulation of the civil society sector in many of the countries from which our participants joined us, the question of how to engage with government regulatory bodies and other government stakeholders was raised as a significant concern. Indeed, government regulatory bodies that require detailed reporting from local organizations for any alterations to agreed workplans are the elephant in the adaptive management room.

That’s pretty depressing, but it’s not all bad news. Overall – and quite encouragingly – there’s tons of enthusiasm. So how might we do adaptive management better? Here are our thoughts – please add your own.

Adaptive management shouldn’t be presented as a whole new shiny thing. Arguably, the original driver was the desire to address the rigidity of systems – donors, multilaterals, host government regulators – that didn’t facilitate more nimble programming, particularly given the scale of resources churning through them or subject to their scrutiny. That is not the case for CSOs, who are just as likely to come at it from the perspective of being highly agile and perhaps needing the systems to structure and process the learning that flow from adaptive management rather than the need to be more agile. Investigating and understanding those efforts can only make the field richer. A great case in point is [Karkhana Samuha](https://karkhanasamuha.org.np/), an education non-profit in Nepal, who presented their own iterative style of programming called call TMPI (Think, Make, Play, Improve), which draws on the principles of human-centred design and which takes a welcome lighthearted leap away from the earnest tone of much adaptive management discourse.

More needs to be said on the nitty gritty of funding and resourcing adaptive approaches, particularly where implementing partners are held to narrow standards of value-for-money. A ‘small bet’ for a donor might be a big bet for a CSO – not least if the failure of that bet means money is lost or reputations tarnished, even if there are lessons to be learned from the experience. All these considerations must be part and parcel of being ‘safe to fail’. Carving out space for meaningful reflection also costs time and money for which partners need to budget if they are to prioritize.

And more thought needs to be put into the local politics in which adaptive programming is meant to happen. This includes the full gamut of actors who have a stake in and power over the program’s outcomes; particularly those such as host governments, who may prefer to see something fully planned and predictable. There is untapped potential here for donors to bring to bear the full weight of linked-up development and diplomatic agendas to improve the quality of partner government engagement and oversight. Indeed, perhaps working through diplomatic channels to ease intense CSO oversight is a very practical way that donors could be pushing back against broader democratic backsliding.

If these and other considerations fail to be weighed up, as a field adaptive management risks becoming apolitical. No one knows the political economy of program implementation better than the local partners that lead it. Some frank conversations should focus on surfacing more creative ways of clearing the elephant-sized hurdles and make adaptive development a more inclusive field.