Enabling Factors of Adaptive Programming

Learning Paper of the "Addressing Root Causes (ARC)" Learning Group on Adaptive Programming

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Table of contents

Chapter 1

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Introduction

The Addressing Root Causes (ARC) Fund of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands aims to tackle the root causes of armed conflict, instability and irregular migration. As part of its global learning agenda, a group of ARC Fund's implementing partners, composed of Red een Kind, Norwegian Church Aid, Saferworld, SUDIA, Woord & Daad, ACTED and the Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law (KPSRL), has produced this learning paper. Its objective is to stimulate adaptive programming within the ARC projects by sharing experiences and knowledge.

The paper uses various sources of information to pose further questions on adaptive programming: an online survey (March-April 2019) for ARC organisations' staff; three case studies that illustrate and bring additional light to the nature of adaptive programming in the framework of the ARC Fund; a number of workshops and conversations across the ARC learning group; and an interview with a representative of the Directorate of Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid, which manages the ARC Fund at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Chapter 2

The ARC global community: General Perspectives on Adaptive Programming

The information from and discussions among ARC organisations indicate that most organisations **do not have a common understanding of what Adaptive Programming entails,** even though all the survey respondents' organisations have adapted/changed their initial programmes, at least partially, showing that learning and adapting is an integral part of the ARC Fund's actions.

While most respondents to the survey rated the structure of the ARC Fund as enabling for programme adaptation, **the programmatic elements, such as the logical frameworks and the action plans, were seen as more favourable to flexible programming** than the administrative elements, such as procurement rules and contracts. Information indicates that adaptation is almost exclusively on the radar of "programme" staff and managers, rather than other staff (admin, support). Not surprisingly, all the reported adaptations of the programmes concern the type of activities to be implemented rather than innovations in the procedures or administration.

The survey further showed that many ARC organisations share **a bottom-up culture for adaptation and learning**. Adaptations have been made in response to a wide spectrum of situations/challenges: insecurity is the most common one, while more than half of the respondents linked their adaptations either to a lack of results, or to evidence of negative results. Others made adaptations in response to feedback from beneficiaries, to build on already positive changes, and to significant political changes.

Most organisations consulted stated that they obtained formal approval for their adaptations at the country, and even field level. This can be beneficial for flexibility and adapting to local challenges. However, **the process to obtain approval was slow for most partners** (one, two months, or more), which could be the result of unclear procedures to validate programme adaptations. Indeed, approval procedures varied between organisations, mostly comprising the programme coordination at the country office level and the donor, while in some cases also headquarters, consortium partners and implementing partners were involved. In fact, lack of clear procedures to validate changes was highlighted as the single most common cause for "not being able to adapt".

Whereas the reasons to adapt the programmes have been documented, most ARC partners **have not evaluated formally the effect of such adaptations**. Informally, most respondents assess the impact of these changes to be positive, but it would be important to do formal assessments and, especially, share their outcomes. From the survey, most reported adaptations changed only one activity, and only a few inspired changes in other activities inside the same organisation. Very few organisations have shared their learning yet with other organisations.[1]

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[1] Note that during the year organisations have held learning events and conducted mid-term reviews or assessments, which are likely to generate substantially more learning on the issues surrounding Adaptive Programming. The ARC Fund Mid-Term Review, as the first substantive assessment of the whole ARC Fund, will also add to the bank of knowledge.

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Chapter 3

How to do Adaptive Programming? Three examples of Practical Experience

3.1   Adaptive Programming in Burundi – the Midline study as driver of adaptations

3.1.1 From M&E to MEAL

Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) is the system that provides relevant management information for adaptive programming. However, M&E is worth very little for adaptive programming if the management information gathered in the project is only used for Accountability (A) and not for Learning (L). In this case study, we zoom into an ARC project in Burundi, to discover how the consortium of Red een Kind was effective in adaptive programming, by streamlining the M&E with decision-making processes.

Zooming in on the accountability requirements of the ARC donor, the Red een Kind consortium in Burundi needs to report on 24 compulsory indicators. This high number is caused by the fact that the consortium has a holistic approach and is active on all four Result Areas of the ARC Fund. One can imagine that this creates high pressure on the implementing partners and the MEAL staff, to ensure proper accountability via developing tools, data collection, data cleaning, aggregation, analysis and reporting. The complete log frame of indicators has 33 additional indicators related to outputs and outcomes of the consortium itself, resulting in a massive M&E system with 57 indicators, with the key aim of accountability only. Already in the early stages of

the project, the consortium realised that there was a very high risk of not getting into learning with such an M&E system at all. This made us decide to invest to ensure all this work at least would result in relevant learning.

3.1.2 Reflection and Mid-Term evaluation

Although not a strict requirement, an external consultant was contracted to do a baseline (early 2017), a midline (early 2019) and end line study (late 2021). These studies were conducted to ensure that there was investment in a good understanding of the complex programme and enough moments for external reflections on the design. **Most emphasis in terms of time and budget was put on the midline evaluation**, because the midline reflections can really help in adapting the programme, whilst an end line evaluation is too late to inform decision-making and is only good for accountability.

For the midline study, consortium members from the UK, US, Netherlands and of course many actors from Burundi were invited to be part of the midline process: from briefing and de-briefing around the midline to **a special reflection session in-country with dedicated time for adaptive programming**. This session has been very fruitful for the whole consortium, by distilling the lessons indicated in the external midline report and further in-depth discussions on recommendations and the way forward. The reflection session really ensured optimal use of the external midline evaluation and on many points. This was a crucial moment for setting actions to ensure more beneficiaries in Burundi embrace peaceful coexistence, as the consortium envisioned from the start. Since the reflection- and action-planning based on the midline was done in April and May 2019, it was also in time to ensure that these results could be part of the annual report 2018, and, more important for adaptive programming, the annual plan 2020. This annual plan is the proof of a very effective midline reflection process. With a budget of about 20.000 euro extra on top of the midline evaluation itself**, we can truly speak in Burundi of a MEAL system, with a capital L.** A system that has proven to be able to adapt our Theory of Change to serve more Burundians in dire need for peace.

3.1.3 Changes in the programme

Prior to the mid-term review exercise, the BBB project had already strategically adapted its transitional justice strategy. Due to the dynamic and challenging context in Burundi, the project proposed a new transition justice strategy, which was approved by the donor. During the mid-term review learning exercise, the affirmation of such a new strategy was overwhelmingly endorsed by all partners. The in-depth analysis of the mid-term review has led to other key adaptations within the programme. For example, the BBB decided to align some of the activities to the ongoing process of the development of a *Plan Communal de Development Communautaire* (PCDC). Such alignment will not only ensure that the BBB project is inline toward the achievement of the overall goal but sustainability is ensured beyond the project life. Also a renewed gender policy has been written to ensure that the project is fully gender transformative. Finally, as a result of reflections, peace building will get more focus throughout the remaining years of project interventions, so that all activities in the end are clearly linked to the long-term objective of the project to address root causes of armed conflict, instability and irregular migration in Burundi are reduced.

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3.2 Adaptive Programming in Sudan – open feedback, communication channels and community involvement

3.2.1 Fragile settings ask for an open and flexible approach

Saferworld and Sudanese Development Initiative (SUDIA) work in partnership on the "Building Constituencies for Peaceful Change (BCPC)" project funded by the ARC Fund. This project sits within a wider Saferworld strategy for work on Sudan.

Working in fragile states and in conflict situations on peacebuilding and conflict transformation automatically involves navigating the unpredictable mix of changing political, economic, social and environmental contexts and Sudan is one of the most challenging of these. Within these changing contexts, the priorities and needs of communities evolve, key actors may change, and opportunities open and close. **Flexibility and room to adapt is therefore key for both programme relevance, and risk management.** Systematic identification of these changes and room to take decisions on how to respond to these changes is essential. We need to be proactive in the operating environment and ensure the actors involved understand those changes and can develop practical solutions to respond in conflict-sensitive ways.

The ability to adapt requires an **environment that promotes intentional learning and flexible activity design**, and minimises the obstacles to modifying programming. Longer-term programme funding provides an enabling environment for adaptation that is almost impossible in shorter-term arrangements. Our case study outlines how we support adaptation within the BCPC project, which is a reflection of our commitment to a learning and innovation culture across both Saferworld and SUDIA.

3.2.2 Involving communities –decentralised design, feedback-loops and decision-making

"What we have learned is that as community priorities change, processes and approaches need to change, to remain relevant - for example starting with a focus on conflict prevention issues such as inter-tribal conflicts that call for more dialogue interventions, to gradually progressing to conflict transformation - building trust and collaboration". SUDIA Project Focal Point, North Darfur State.

Saferworld and SUDIA have worked to ensure responsiveness in the programme by incorporating many actors right from the design phase, including local researchers and community representatives. This is critical for both understanding community priorities better and supporting community ownership of initiatives. It allows for a co-design process where community priorities continuously feed into the direction of the programme. Open feedback and communication channels have been created to enhance the exchange of information about opportunities and challenges between the different levels of implementation, in what is a risky and volatile securitised context, in which feedback loops are open to distortion.

One of the actions the programme has put in place is the **decentralisation of a community communication system (CCS).** This decentralisation has helped to expand and manage an existing system of data-collection and decision-making, and root the project more successfully in states and regions that are remote from the partners. This can be seen as a type of **co-design process** in which community-driven priorities are collected and verified by community correspondents, and continuously feed into the decision-making on the direction of the programme. This is a two-way process, through which community feedback is collated, acted on and communicated back to the community in timely fashion.

Consistent feedback loops managed by community representatives have thus provided the impetus for adaptation by providing linkages for communicating needs and ideas. In Darfur, for example, the programme has adapted to work on voluntary return, which was not part of its identified outputs in the MEL framework, but became a priority as the programme evolved. The involvement of communities has fostered the awareness and understanding of communities of a culture of dialogue and discussion, and supported locally-driven initiatives. This system has enabled a mutual understanding of the programme to develop, and for **community priorities to be built-in to an evolving and adapting design**.

3.2.3 Flexible human resources and (financial) procedures

An important aspect of adaptive programming has proved to be flexible human resources and financial/administrative procedures. Flexible financial and administration systems that enable a continuous process of re-shaping how programme objectives are interpreted and activities put in practice are critical success factors for the adaptation process. Team structures may need to change, and partnerships may expand or alter their shape, as different areas of specialisation increase in importance. Having a donor that responds openly to requests for movements and realignments of budgets is key here, and seeing them as a partner in the project's success through regular interaction makes adaptation more possible.

3.2.4 Repeated conflict and context analysis, regular monitoring of changes, and consequent scenario planning

Repeated conflict and context analysis, bi-annual outcome monitoring sessions, focused learning events, and consequent scenario planning have proven to be essential components of the programme's ability to adapt. Conflict and context analysis happens regularly through the use of conflict and context specialists, feedback from the CCS, and use of Saferworld's standard Conflict Systems methodology. Saferworld also trains its partners and the communities it works with in a straightforward outcome monitoring approach, which emphasises the importance of changes in behaviour and relationships. We **map and analyse any changes between key players that can be seen**, and use that learning to invest in the areas that will lead to greater, more sustainable change. We then use all this data to support the **development of alternative plans** at biannual review points. Using scenario-based approaches for planning generates mutual understanding of conflict drivers, key actors, and possible entry points for change. We have learnt that having more than one set plan of response and action gives us the confidence to adapt to the ever-dynamic changes that are synonymous with fragile contexts.

Lastly, we created a ring-fenced budget to enable horizontal and vertical learning both across the programme and between Saferworld programmes that work on the same fundamental issues in different locations. This has enabled us to hold several Learning Events at East Africa Regional Level, thus ensuring that knowledge and learning spreads wider than just the ARC-funded projects.

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3.3 Adaptive Programming in Lebanon – coordination and adaptation

3.3.1 Adaptive programming on two levels

The Alliance2015 Partnership, represented by the lead agency ACTED, Cesvi, Concern and Hivos, is implementing a Dutch Government funded programme that aims to Address Root Causes (ARC) of conflict and instability in Lebanon, through the creation of sustainable income-generating and livelihood opportunities for vulnerable populations. Over three years, Alliance2015 partners work directly with 1,800 individuals, 18 Social Development Centers (SDCs) and at least 27 Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) across Lebanon.

The integrated programme targets vulnerable communities with economic inclusion activities through three main pathways: (1) Building the capacity of SDCs for improved delivery of livelihood-related services; (2) Improving the technical and soft skills of vulnerable individuals to ensure increased economic opportunity, and to reduce negative coping mechanisms and tensions, and (3) Improving the capacity of private sector businesses in target industries leads to growth and job creation. Activities include providing livelihood-related resources, assets and renovations to each targeted SDC; offering TVET and soft skills training, paid apprenticeship programmes, and job-matching services for vulnerable individuals; and providing business development services and value chain support to MSMEs.

In the programme, adaptive programming has been organised around a Consortium Coordinator, who regularly exchanges with all the NGO partners, and two consortium level coordination platforms; one strategic and one technical platform:

A **High Level Steering Committee**, in which each NGO partner is represented by its Country Director, meets on a quarterly basis to discuss overall implementation status and how emerging contextual elements should be read and built up on, and thus, strategic setups of ways forward. This is most valued when looking at a context as rich as Lebanon, that has been the most affected by the Syrian crisis, and where international agencies have struggled to achieve socio-economic prosperity despite promising opportunities. Regular **monitoring of national and regional policies and affairs**, and reactive adaptation are critical for achieving long-term objectives of social stability and reduced conflict among co-existing population groups.

The second platform, a **Technical Working Group** gathers on a monthly basis to whom strategic decisions are related, and where M&E, programmatic and operational matters are thoroughly discussed. Progress in activity implementation has led to increasing lessons learnt, with **feedback mechanisms** supporting adaptive programming, which has been effectively inserted into the programme logic and operational strategy. Monitoring tools, developed at the start of the programme, have also been adjusted as implementation progressed, and feedback periodically incorporated for their improvement.

By doing this, an eye is constantly kept by the project teams on changes in surroundings and circumstances, the tuning to the national strategies of the local government and Dutch government representatives.

3.3.2 Changes in the programme

The impact of these two platforms has led to key adaptations within the programme. For example, adaptation has led to a **redefinition of the role of specific institutions** where livelihood activities are being implemented. While the original programme design placed a great emphasis on Social Development Centers (SDCs) as primarily livelihood stakeholders within vulnerable communities, the Consortium revised its approach and identified a unique value added for these centers that is complementary to the role of TVET schools. Following evaluation of collected monitoring data, and qualitative assessment of Social Development Centers' capacities, the Consortium identified that SDCs could play the role of mediator between the local community, with whom they have built a trusting relationship over the years, and livelihood services providers – such as TVET schools who have overall much higher technical readiness to deliver vocational programmes – as the best fit. Such adaptive programming has allowed the Consortium to meet the objective of improving quality education and vocational trainings, through building on the existing capacities of the different institutions, as well as fostering complementarity in service delivery, rendering the Consortium's intervention more sustainable. Integral to adaptive programming has been the pivotal role of M&E in providing systematical programme support to the project teams, and presenting strong data for decision-making.

Chapter 4

Key lessons

HAVING A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING IS KEY

Working in fragile and conflict-affected settings adds complexity to programme implementation. It is crucial to understand that solutions to navigate complexity need to be based on on-going, strategic political economy and conflict and context analysis, a focus on locally-defined problems, and adaptive planning processes throughout the life of the programme, informed by processes of *learning by doing.* A common understanding of adaptive programming is therefore key - by donors, implementing organisations and local partners - if we are to enable programmes to respond and adapt effectively in such complex environments.

BUILDING FLEXIBILITY AT BOTH PROGRAMMATIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE LEVEL IS PREREQUISITE

ARC implementing organisations have adapted their activities at least partially, for a number of reasons: insecurity and/or politically challenging situations; in response to changing needs; to address lack of results or evidence of negative results, or to make the most of results that are seen to have potential. However, a general observation is that adaptation tends to happen at the level of specific programme activities and not at the level of organisational administrative structures and procedures. There are not many requests for adaptation touching on practices, administrative procedures, monitoring, learning and related budget adjustments. If, technically speaking, we believe that programme adaptation occurs through conflict and context analysis and processes of learning by doing, then operationally speaking, this should involve programme management (including administration, procurement and finance), with adaptive approaches enabling and supporting, rather than driving or just delivering.

CAPITALISING ON MONITORING AND EVALUATION BY STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN ACCOUNTABILITY AND LEARNING IS ESSENTIAL

Both donors and implementing actors need to be intentional about learning and adaptive iteration. Moving beyond monitoring and evaluation for accountability purposes and creating space to learn as part of this process, by capitalising on regular reviews, mid-term assessments, and evaluations, is extremely important, and allows for real-time feedback, ongoing adaptation and improvement. Such an approach should be implemented in coordination with key stakeholders (including communities) to foster a reflective culture and inform intentional change. Providing data in real time complements the innovation process and helps to create a solid foundation of reliable information with which to make future decisions.

Beyond intentional learning on an ongoing basis and the use of such learning to refine programmes, there must be systematic analysis to assess whether lessons learned are effectively applied and are built into the fibre of organisations or programmes. Strategic technical leadership to support staff and partners to have the knowledge, skills and confidence to work in adaptive ways and learn by doing is also greatly needed.

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY IS ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO MANAGE ADAPTABILITY

It is crucial to understand that adaptability does not only relate to donors and international organisations. If we agree that the ultimate objective of being adaptive is delivering change as well as real solutions to real problems, we need to create a learning/reflecting space for communities/beneficiaries in order to maximise the positive impact of programmes. Communities should take part in analysis, decision-making, and collaborative problem solving, and should be core actors in defining their own immediate needs, finding ways to address them and measuring their own success. Such an approach allows us to respond effectively to local challenges by empowering people and promoting sustainability, while building trust at the same time.

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