

The Role of Tools for Programmatic Learning

Case Study: A tool in practice



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Published: 10/02/2025

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This research is the result of the collaboration between:



With a special thanks to the Knowledge Platform Security & the Rule of Law for making this research possible and all the participants who contributed and continue to contribute to this project.

Summary

This case study is part of the Programmatic Learning Instrument’s research trajectory by the Knowledge Platform Security and the Rule of Law with a specific focus on “The role of digital tools for programmatic learning”. Informed by an initial Observation Report, which collected insights from practitioners and their experiences with digital tools for programmatic learning, this case study is **the third** in a 3-part series: (1) Case Study - Programmatic Implications, (2) Case Study 2 - Policy Implications, and **(3) Case Study 3 - A tool in practice**.

This case study explores the process and experiences of adopting a digital tool for programmatic learning within the Miisaan and Damal programmes in the Security and Rule of Law (SRoL) sector. It focuses on how the tool was introduced to support organisational and programmatic learning, facilitate adaptive management, and enhance decision-making in complex and dynamic operational contexts.

At its heart, the study examines the collaborative efforts to define learning questions, organise historical learning data, and engage programme teams in validating and updating the information entered into the tool. By highlighting specific challenges, such as embedding the tool in ongoing programmes and fostering team engagement in remote settings, and the opportunities for connecting fragmented learnings across programmes, the case study provides critical insights into the practical implications of digital tools for learning in the SRoL sector. It reflects on the expectations, initial outcomes, and potential for such tools to support evidence-based recommendations and inform future programming and policy in fragile contexts.

Why this case study?

This case study highlights the real-world challenges and opportunities of integrating a digital learning tool, Propel, into complex programmes in the Security and Rule of Law (SRoL) sector. It provides insights into how digital tools can bridge fragmented knowledge, support adaptive learning, and inform strategic decision-making, while also acknowledging the practical difficulties of embedding such tools in established workflows. The lessons drawn here are valuable for understanding the potential and limitations of digital tools in fostering impactful, sustainable programmatic learning.

Programmatic Learning Instrument (PLI) Report

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Introduction and background

This case study provides an investigative lens into the role of digital tools within the SRoL sectors, outlining both the promising opportunities and the inherent challenges posed by these technologies. It serves as a guide to understanding the role that digital tools can play contributing to programmatic learning in security and rule of law initiatives, how they can be applied and what challenges and benefits they entail as well as how they can potentially contribute to shifting the paradigms of programmatic learning.

The programmatic context

This case focuses on the adoption of a digital tool, Propel, for programmatic learning in the context of two SRoL programmes, the Damal and the Miisaan programmes. The Damal and Miisaan programmes are part of broader efforts to strengthen the social contract and promote peace, justice, and governance in Somalia and Somaliland. Both programmes are funded by the Netherlands and focus on addressing systemic challenges in governance, access to justice, and transitional justice frameworks.

The case: The programme contexts

The Damal programme, implemented in Somaliland, seeks to increase the legitimacy of justice institutions by improving access to alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms and formal justice for vulnerable groups, while fostering citizen participation in accountability processes. It adopts a Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) approach and builds on the Alternative Dispute Resolution Somalia project, with notable milestones such as integrating ADR into national frameworks.

The Miisaan programme focuses on transitional justice, aiming to develop inclusive, locally informed processes that address historical grievances, foster reconciliation, and build social cohesion in Somalia and Somaliland. Recognising the region's complex historical and socio-political dynamics, the programme places strong emphasis on community-driven approaches, blending international best practices with Somali norms and perceptions of justice.

Both programmes emphasise **adaptive learning and collaborative partnerships** to ensure local ownership, sustainability, and responsiveness to evolving needs. Their **Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEAL)** approaches underpin these efforts, fostering reflection, evidence-based decision-making, and continuous improvement.

Additionally, the two programmes operate through dynamic multi-stakeholder consortia, designed to leverage diverse expertise and foster collaboration across sectors. The **Damal programme**, led by the International Development Law Organization (IDLO), collaborates with

Media INK, the Network Against Female Genital Mutilation in Somaliland (NAFIS), and the Legal Aid Clinic of the University of Hargeisa (LAC). The **Miisaan programme**, led by Interpeace, partners with Media INK and the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) at Hargeisa University. This consortium collaborates with civil society organisations, local governments, and international stakeholders to develop inclusive and locally informed transitional justice processes. Together, the consortia ensure a holistic, locally driven approach to addressing justice, governance, and social cohesion challenges.

The donor of the programmes, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (MFA) played a key role in fostering and enabling learning. On the one hand, the programmes were set up in ways that allowed for more adaptive learning approaches. On the other hand, the donor also facilitated and encouraged learning actively. For example, quarterly sessions were held to bring the consortia members together to reflect from and with one another. This set-up and support gave the programmes for freedom and ability to implement their programmes and report of them from a learning perspective. It therefore also made it easier to integrate Propel as there was a “basis for learning” already in place. Nevertheless, digital tools like Propel can contribute and support these processes and as mentioned the team, should connect to these processes.

A tool for learning in practice: Adoption of Propel

In an era of rapid technological advancement, digital tools have become increasingly vital for programmes addressing governance and justice challenges in fragile contexts. For initiatives like the Damal and Miisaan programmes, which operate in the complex legal and social landscapes of Somaliland, these tools can be essential for managing data, enabling effective stakeholder coordination, and guiding adaptive decision-making. By fostering transparency, accountability, and operational efficiency, digital tools can contribute to enhancing the delivery of justice and governance services.

The integration of technologies such as Propel, a digital platform for organisational learning, can contribute to addressing the intricacies of programme implementation. However, realising the full potential of these tools requires addressing several challenges, including limited digital literacy, infrastructure deficits, and organisational resistance to change. This case study examines how the Damal and Miisaan programmes have utilised this digital tool, Propel, to navigate these barriers to support their programmatic learning efforts.

The Damal and Miisaan programmes operate in Somaliland, a region characterised by a complex mix of political, social, and logistical challenges. Politically, Somaliland has made significant strides toward democratisation and governance, yet tensions persist due to unresolved clan dynamics, competition over resources, and limited institutional capacity. Socially, efforts to foster reconciliation and transitional justice face barriers such as entrenched mistrust between communities, insufficient inclusion of women and youth in decision-making processes, and limited access to justice for vulnerable groups. Logistical challenges, including infrastructure deficits, fragmented communication systems, and resource constraints, further complicate the implementation of governance and justice initiatives. In addition, Miisaan also works in Somalia which is also an equally challenging context.

In this context, adaptive learning is not just beneficial but essential. The dynamic nature of Somaliland's governance and social fabric requires programmes to remain flexible, iteratively refining their approaches to address emerging needs and challenges. Propel was adopted by the Damal and Miisaan programmes as a response to these complexities, offering a structured digital platform to capture, organise, and apply learning in real time. This approach aligns with the broader Security and Rule of Law (SRoL) sector, where programmes frequently encounter similar challenges of adapting to volatile environments, managing diverse stakeholder expectations, and preserving institutional knowledge for future use.

Purpose and implementation

The decision to adopt Propel was driven by the Damal and Miisaan programmes' commitment to embedding adaptive learning and evidence-based decision-making into their operations. Propel, with its focus on capturing and applying lessons from implementation, was seen as a solution to overcome fragmented knowledge-sharing and improve programme responsiveness in Somaliland's evolving context.

The Damal and Miisaan programmes have integrated Propel to support their efforts in consolidating learning from their implementation phases. By providing a structured platform, Propel aims to enable the systematic capture and organisation of programme insights, fostering reflection and coordination across the two consortia programmes. The tool connects programme-specific learning with thematic priorities in the SRoL sector, creating a foundation for sharing knowledge at multiple levels. This use of Propel aligns with the programmes' goals of building institutional memory, facilitating stakeholder collaboration, and contributing to broader policy discussions, particularly as they prepare for future phases and explore how programme experiences can inform strategic directions.

The implementation of Propel began with a systematic onboarding process, ensuring that programme teams were trained to use the platform effectively. Existing learning resources and data were reviewed and entered into Propel to establish a baseline of programme insights. The programmes had, to varying degrees, learning approaches in place. Hence, they had insights, reflection and learning data already available. However, this data was in reports or other documents which made it difficult to access the data and draw conclusion within a programme or across the consortia on, for example, thematic areas of work. Regular reflection sessions are planned to be conducted in a next stage with stakeholders to identify knowledge gaps and ensure continuous engagement with the tool.

The goal of the tool adoption is to build on the tool's ability to centralise knowledge-sharing facilitated collaboration across consortia, ensuring that insights from both Damal and Miisaan could inform broader strategic priorities. By linking programme-level learning with thematic objectives in the SRoL sector, the teams aim to use Propel to enhance the programmes' capacity to adapt and provide insights to the policy-level.

In the coming section, we will zoom in on our findings from setting up and integrating Propel for these programmes, describing the steps undertaken, the process with the teams and initial reflections on the progress.

Key Findings

This section outlines the key findings from the adoption of Propel within the Damal and Miisaan programmes. It highlights the practical insights gained, challenges encountered, and lessons learned during its integration to support programmatic learning and adaptive management in complex operational contexts.

The process of adopting a tool

The adoption of Propel in the Damal and Miisaan programmes followed a systematic approach designed to establish a strong foundation for programmatic learning and collaboration. The process focused on aligning expectations, engaging team members, and integrating existing knowledge into the platform to support adaptive decision-making.

1. Kick-off and vision setting

The process began with initial discussions to align the teams on the purpose and potential of Propel. These conversations included setting expectations, assessing the programmes' learning maturity, and creating a shared vision for how the platform would enhance their learning processes. This stage also explored existing programme structures, such as the services offered through local justice centres as part of the Damal programme, for instance, to ensure that Propel's implementation aligned with operational needs.

2. Team onboarding

The next phase involved onboarding team members to Propel, providing them with the knowledge and skills to use the platform effectively. Through interactive sessions, participants were introduced to Propel's features, such as its ability to centralise data, generate insights, and facilitate collaborative learning. These sessions also clarified how Propel could be integrated into the teams' existing workflows and reporting processes.

3. Data analysis and learning agenda development

The teams collaborated to analyse available programme data, identifying key insights and gaps to inform the development of a structured learning agenda. This agenda outlined priority areas for reflection and learning, ensuring that Propel would be used to capture and address these areas effectively. The learning agenda was designed to guide data entry and inform how the teams would engage with the platform over time.

4. Filling the learning agenda with historical data

To build a comprehensive knowledge base, historical data and past programme learnings were entered into Propel. This included insights from previous reflections, key adaptations made during programme implementation, and existing reports. By integrating this data, Propel can become a central repository for tracking progress, identifying trends, and facilitating informed decision-making.

Case example: Expectations and needs for Propel

As part of the Propel adoption process, an organisational learning maturity assessment was conducted to understand the expectations, needs, and ideas of the Damal and Miisaan programme teams. The assessment revealed a shared desire for Propel to act as a unifying platform for learning, collaboration, and decision-making.

Teams expressed a strong need for Propel to consolidate learning across consortium members, enabling the integration of diverse data sources into a single platform. This was seen as critical for streamlining programme processes and creating a cohesive exit strategy. Propel's capacity to centralise data and generate actionable insights was identified as a key feature, particularly for improving data analysis, facilitating knowledge sharing, and enhancing decision-making.

Additionally, teams sought to address challenges in integrating qualitative and quantitative data, improve mechanisms for tracking learning outcomes, and build skills in emerging technologies. By automating and simplifying data management, Propel was expected to make learning processes more efficient, actionable, and aligned with strategic objectives.

This example highlights the practical and strategic motivations for adopting Propel, illustrating how the tool was tailored to meet the specific learning needs of the programmes and foster a culture of collaboration and reflection.

This phased approach ensured that Propel was tailored to the needs of the Damal and Miisaan programmes, enabling them to systematically capture, organise, and apply learnings while fostering collaboration and adaptability. The following sections will explore the key results and lessons learned from this process.

Insights and reflections on initial impact

The introduction of Propel to the Damal and Miisaan programmes is an important step in organising and exploring their accumulated learning. However, the process has not been without challenges, as the programmes are already far along in their implementation cycles. Embedding a new tool into established practices to support learning as a continuous process requires careful navigation and adaptation.

Laying the foundations for learning: collaboration and challenges

The onboarding phase brought an initial focus, with programme teams collaboratively defining their learning questions and sharing existing reflection and evaluation documentation. This allowed Propel to centralise the programmes' previously disconnected data, enabling insights that could be explored and shared across the teams.

The programmes already had a learning trajectory in place and had recorded substantial learnings, which provided a solid foundation for Propel's introduction. However, while there was

collaboration, much of the early work relied on the organisation and input of available data, a process that was initially more extractive than immediately collaborative.

In a remote setup, it has been challenging to fully engage all team members and ensure that they experience the value of Propel firsthand. Rather than onboarding everyone at once, the programmes opted to dedicate specific members to work on the platform, which streamlined the process but also limited broader team engagement early on. This highlights a tension between the time-intensive nature of setting up a new tool and the immediate expectations for its impact.

Moving towards value addition

As Propel is now operational, the teams have started validating the entered data, adding their own inputs, and determining how best to use the platform to support their work. Each programme has its own dedicated space for learning, while a shared space allows the programmes to explore thematic connections and cross-cutting insights. This structure has created opportunities to move beyond merely storing data to identifying meaningful patterns and drawing actionable conclusions.

The counterpart from the door-side, in this case the connected embassy, plays overall a key part in facilitating learning across the consortia. Therefore, they were also made aware of the process with Propel. However, in conversations with the direct counterpart from the donor-side, it was discussed to not include the donor directly in the learning space. The concern was that if the donor can immediately access the learning space, which is technically possible in Propel, members of the programmes might feel an inhibition to share learnings as openly as possible. While the donor in this case, is also interested in learning about potential challenges, this way the implementing consortia members can still focus on consolidating learnings as openly and honestly as possible and can then share these with the donor at more systematic or strategic checkpoints.

Case example: Challenges and benefits of a shared learning space

One of the unique features of Propel's adoption has been the creation of a shared space to connect insights from the two programmes. This can be valuable for drawing thematic connections, such as the shared emphasis on grassroots approaches and strengthening the social contract. However, setting up this space remotely and ensuring meaningful team engagement requires continuous attention.

For instance, while the teams initially collaborated to input data, much of the organisational work was driven by Propel's facilitators, leaving some team members potentially less connected to the process. Considering that Propel's adoption is coming in the last year of implementation, team members have many obligations that require their time. Hence, during phases of the adoption of Propel they did not have the capacity to be as involved as they wanted to be. This highlights the difficulty of fostering a fully collaborative learning culture in a remote setting and the longer timeline required to embed a new tool in established practices, particularly since Propel is coming in at the last year of both programmes.

Despite these challenges, the shared space has begun to reveal opportunities for cross-programmatic insights, such as identifying common strategies for engaging local stakeholders and navigating political complexities. For both the Damal and Miisaan programmes, the available learning data is entered and coming together on the shared level. Now, it is possible to explore learnings from both programmes according to the topic or context in which they are implemented. These insights, moving forward, will be the basis upon which we will hold reflection and validation session with the teams.

Still, embedding Propel as an integral part of team workflows remains a longer process. While the tool has begun to organise and consolidate learnings, the challenge lies in ensuring it actively adds value to the teams' ongoing work rather than focusing solely on processing past data. The teams are now exploring how to use Propel for forward-looking activities, such as informing their exit strategies, sustainability plans, aligning learnings with programme outcomes, and reflecting on their current progress to plan future directions.

Case example: Leveraging learning for justice sector reform

Propel's introduction to the Damal and Miisaan programmes has opened up opportunities to organise and synthesise learning data in ways that directly inform justice sector reforms, a critical focus in the Security and Rule of Law (SRoL) sector. While the teams are still in the early stages of using Propel, hypothetical applications highlight how it could be used to enhance the impact of current key initiatives like alternative dispute resolution (ADR) as well as to inform the set-up of traditional transitional justice process and mechanisms.

For example, the **Damal programme** has piloted ADR services, including mobile units and hotlines, to address accessibility challenges in justice delivery. Propel could serve as a tool to consolidate data from these services, enabling the programme team to track patterns in disputes resolved through ADR, identify gaps in service coverage, and assess community satisfaction with these mechanisms. This type of analysis would allow the team to refine their approach, ensuring that ADR services are responsive to the needs of underserved populations and aligned with broader justice sector goals.

Similarly, in the **Miisaan programme**, transitional justice initiatives often involve navigating complex stakeholder dynamics and addressing historical grievances. Propel could be used to compare data from community consultations, reflection sessions, and evaluation reports to identify recurring themes or challenges in reconciliation and trust-building efforts. By synthesising this information, the programme could generate evidence-based recommendations for improving stakeholder engagement and scaling successful practices.

These future-oriented examples for the programmes to tap into now that their shared learning space is set up illustrate Propel's potential to bridge programmatic learning with strategic decision-making in the SRoL sector. By providing a structured platform for analysing and applying insights, Propel could enable programmes to adapt more effectively, contribute to sustainable justice sector reforms, and inform future programming in fragile contexts.

Lessons Learned and recommendations

The adoption of Propel in the Damal and Miisaan programmes provides several valuable lessons and recommendations for integrating digital tools into programmatic learning in the Security and Rule of Law (SRoL) sector:

Lessons Learned

1. **Collaborative visioning is key but time-intensive:** Setting a shared vision and collaboratively defining learning questions were critical steps in aligning Propel with the programmes' goals. However, enough time should be reserved for this process, particularly in remote settings where team engagement can be more challenging.
2. **Balancing extraction with contribution:** Initial data entry and organisation were largely managed by the Propel team, which enabled a swift setup. However, this approach risked feeling extractive rather than collaborative, emphasising the importance of ensuring that teams feel ownership over the process early on.
3. **The value of structured reflection:** Propel's structured approach to organising and connecting data has highlighted gaps and opportunities that might otherwise have remained hidden in disconnected reports.
4. **Sector-specific context is crucial:** In the SRoL sector, where programmes address complex governance and justice challenges, tools like Propel must be flexible enough to account for unique sectoral needs, such as grassroots approaches and social contract building.
5. **Scaling learning beyond programme timelines:** As the programmes near their conclusion, using Propel to synthesise learnings into actionable recommendations for future programming and policy discussions has been identified as a priority. This demonstrates the importance of aligning learning processes with programme lifecycles and exit strategies.

Recommendations

1. Start early and embed learning:

Introduce tools like Propel early in a programme's lifecycle to ensure learning becomes an embedded and continuous process. Starting early allows teams to define learning objectives that align with programme goals, timelines, and budgets, creating clear accountability structures. For instance, teams should establish a learning agenda that ties learning activities to specific milestones, allocate dedicated resources for learning, and set up periodic reviews to integrate insights. This proactive approach reduces the risk of losing valuable insights during post-hoc efforts to synthesise learnings at the programme's end, especially if, as in the Miisaan and Damal programmes, documentation has been inconsistent.

2. Invest in team engagement:

While assigning specific team members to manage the tool is efficient, broader team involvement is essential for long-term adoption and impact. Foster a culture of learning by

conducting regular, inclusive workshops or reflection sessions where all team members can contribute to and engage with the learning process. These sessions should highlight how individual contributions feed into programme outcomes, ensuring a shared understanding of the tool's value. It is key to communicate and ensure that it is clear that a tool is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Hence, to establish a culture of engagement and learning, a tool, such as Propel, can be used as a facilitator and as a supporting mechanism, while the focus is still for the teams to engage with the content of the learnings. Additionally, consider implementing peer-learning mechanisms where staff members can share their experiences and insights on using the tool, building collective ownership and reducing resistance to change.

3. Customise to context:

Digital tools should be tailored to reflect the unique priorities and challenges of SRoL programming, such as addressing historical grievances, fostering inclusive dialogue, or engaging diverse stakeholders. Ensure the tool's design is flexible enough to capture and present data in formats that resonate with the programme's specific needs. For example, use Propel to create a guiding system that aligns with programme objectives and stakeholder expectations. By doing so, the tool can document learnings as well as serve as a practical guide for decision-making in complex contexts.

4. Link learning to outcomes:

Explicitly connect learnings to outcomes by using tools like Propel to track what has been done, what has been achieved and how something has been achieved. Damal and Miisaan reported that they missed out on linking learning to concrete objectives, time, budget, and deliverables. This limited the level of accountability regarding learning. Therefore, it is key to develop a clear framework that ties learnings to deliverables, measurable objectives, and indicators of success. For example, if a programme aims to improve governance, Propel can help track the progress of related activities, identify gaps, and assess their impact on governance structures over time. This alignment ensures that learning remains actionable and directly informs strategic decisions, enhancing both accountability and programme effectiveness.

5. Plan for the long term:

Teams, project and organisations can leverage digital tools, including Propel's shared spaces and cross-programmatic insights, to synthesise learnings into actionable recommendations for future programming and policy-level discussions. Teams should prioritise creating structured outputs that detail what worked, what did not, and why, linked to concrete evidence and lessons from the programme. This approach could include a "learning synthesis report" tied to programme close-out processes, with clearly defined next steps for stakeholders. By embedding this synthesis into institutional processes, teams can ensure their insights inform not only future interventions but also broader sectoral strategies and funding decisions.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates both the potential and the challenges of integrating digital tools like Propel into programmatic learning. By consolidating scattered learnings, creating shared spaces for cross-programmatic insights, and facilitating structured reflection, Propel is supporting the Damal and Miisaan programmes in better understanding their work and informing future directions. However, the process has also highlighted the complexities of embedding a new tool at the end of a programme, including the need for time, team engagement, and iterative adjustments.

The experience of the Damal and Miisaan programmes shows that applying digital tools for programmatic learning is feasible and valuable, particularly when there is an existing learning mindset. These tools can help teams move beyond fragmented documentation to uncover patterns and generate actionable insights. However, their success depends on thoughtful implementation, tailored support, and a commitment to fostering collaboration and ownership among stakeholders.

Specifically in the Security and Rule of Law (SRoL) sector, the value of digital tools lies in their ability to address unique challenges such as the need to synthesise data across diverse contexts, navigate complex stakeholder dynamics, and adapt to evolving political realities. While the adoption of such tools is not without its hurdles, Propel's application in this sector suggests that, when implemented thoughtfully, they can provide critical support for adaptive management, reform, and policy-level recommendations. By continuing to refine their use, programmes in the SRoL sector can leverage digital tools to enhance learning and drive sustainable impact.