EVALUATION DEPARTMENT

Norad

Norwegian Aid and Adaptive Programming

WHAT IS ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING?
Over the last decade, the quest for development effectiveness has taken different forms and channels. International aid effectiveness agreements from Paris, Accra and Busan have highlighted the need for more ownership and coordination, the results agenda has focused attention on demonstrating development results, and more recently, a consensus has evolved around the need for more flexible and adaptive development interventions.

Both development practitioners and academics are increasingly supporting the idea of 'adaptive programming'. This is a direct response to an emerging body of evidence[1] suggesting that development is complex, context-specific, non-linear and political, and that conventional development interventions too often fail to take this into account.

Different approaches and communities have been formed around the idea of adaptive programming.[2] While each of these approaches highlight slightly different elements of adaptive programming, they all share four key principles:

> **1. Problem identification:** Adaptive programming approaches underline the need to identify particular problems in particular contexts through a rigorous process of problem identification. Past experience has shown that in too many cases, development interventions start off by prescribing the solution without fully understanding the problem, and impose international best practices and blue prints rather than solutions tailored to local problems.

> **2. Local ownership:** Another key element of adaptive programming is local ownership. Proponents of adaptive programming argue that effective development interventions tend to be locally owned, including the identification of both problems and solutions, and a process that is locally-driven and engages a broad set of local stakeholders. Local ownership is thought to enhance legitimacy, viability and relevance of development interventions.

> **3. Experimentation:** Adaptive programming approaches also highlight the value of experimenting with new ideas, making 'small bets' in an entrepreneurial manner that recognises risks but also potential rewards, and learning from failure and not just from success. All too often, development interventions confine themselves to 'tried and tested' approaches, and are too risk averse to explore new and potentially more effective ways of working.

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1   See, for instance: Booth, D., & Unsworth, S. (2014). Politically smart, locally led development. London: ODI. Easterly, William (2006), The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good, Penguin Books, New York. Pritchett, L., Woolcock, M., & Andrews, M. (2010). Capability Traps? The Mechanisms of Persistent Implementation Failure, Working Paper No. 234. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. Ramalingam, B. (2013). Aid on the edge of chaos: rethinking international cooperation in a complex world. OUP Oxford.

2   Such as Harvard's 'Problem-Driven, Iterative Adaptation' (PDIA), Harvard- and ODI-led 'Doing Development Differently (DDD)' or the World Bank's World Development Report (WDR) 2015: Andrews, M. Pritchett, L. & Woolcock, M (2012) Escaping Capability Traps through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA). CID Working Paper No. 240. Harvard; http://doingdevelopmentdifferently.com/; World Bank (2015) World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior. Washington, DC.

> **4. Learning and adapting:** Finally, and building on the above, adaptive programming approaches encourage rapid cycles of design, implementation, learning and adaptation, in which short feedback loops allow development interventions to constantly learn from both success and failure, to adjust course, and iteratively improve based on what worked and what didn't. This compares differently to many conventional development interventions, which are tied to pre-defined courses of action, and in which learning happens only through long feedback loops at the end of an intervention phase.

Figure 1 below illustrates the four principles of adaptive programming in the project cycle.
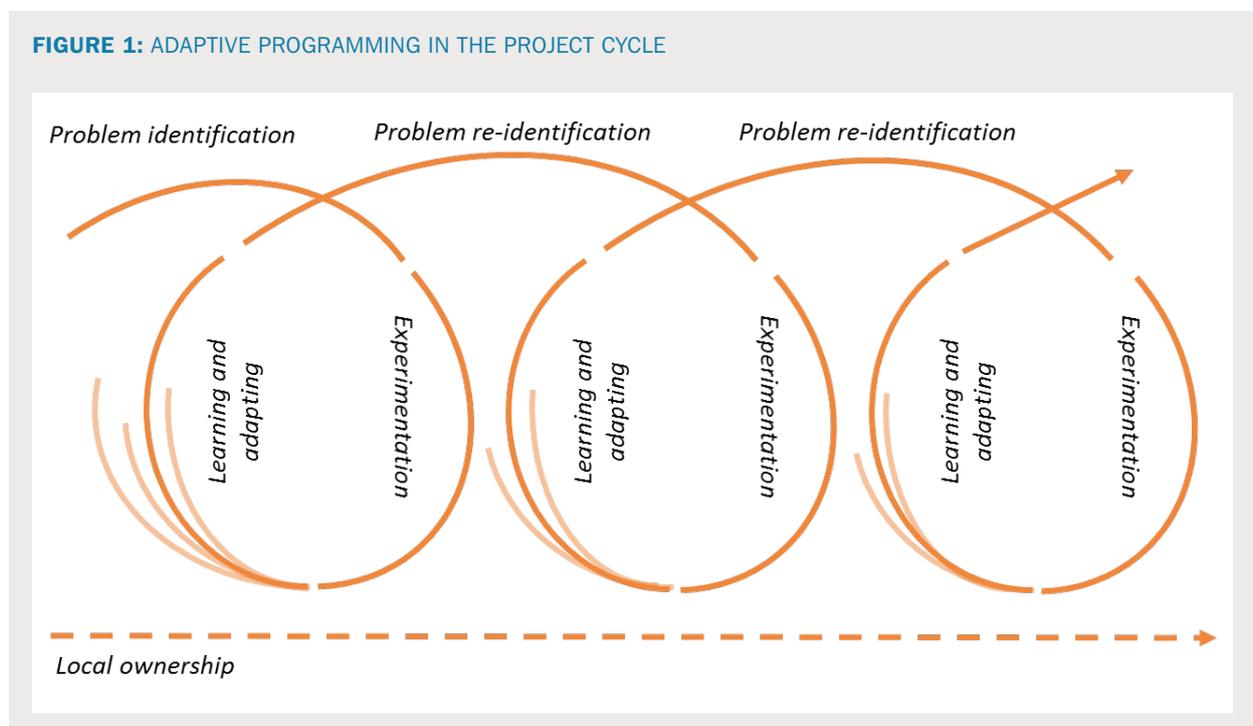
This paper defines adaptive programming as approaches that follow the principles of problem identification, local ownership, experimentation and learning & adapting.

HOW DOES NORWEGIAN AID FIT WITH THIS?
The evaluation of Norwegian capacity development[3] shows that Norwegian aid is already in line with some of the principles of adaptive programming:

First, the evaluation found that a partner-led approach is pro-actively implemented in Norwegian aid, building local ownership and creating space for local partners to play a formative role in deciding the priorities for support and take a lead role in implementation. This is very much in line with the principle of 'local ownership' in adaptive programming approaches, and it is something that is proactively supported by Norwegian aid policies, incentives and culture. Moreover, the evaluation also demonstrated that local ownership of Norwegian interventions was associated with development effectiveness, while a lack of local ownership often led to failure.

Second, another key finding of the evaluation was that Norwegian aid is highly flexible, demonstrating a willingness to change plans, scale up efforts and fund discreet activities as needs arise [4]. This goes some way towards the principles of 'experimentation' and 'learning & adapting' identified from the literature on adaptive programming above. Furthermore, the evaluation also found that Norwegian interventions that were able to evolve and adapt based on their ongoing experiences were more effective.

FIGURE 1: ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING IN THE PROJECT CYCLE

Problem identification   Problem re-identification   Problem re-identification

Learning and adapting   Experimentation   Learning and adapting   Experimentation   Learning and adapting   Experimentation

Local ownership

SOURCE: AUTHORS, BASED ON WORLD BANK (2015)

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3   Lloyd, R., Markie, J. and Schatz, F. (2015), Evaluation of Norwegian support to capacity development. Norad Evaluation Department Report 10/2015, p.74

4   Lloyd et al (2015), op cit, p.74

However, the evaluation did not find that Norwegian aid was proactively seeking to experiment, learn and adapt, unlike in the case of promoting local ownership. Norwegian aid allowed this to happen, but it was not encouraged. There were no policies, systems or incentives in place to promote such an approach, and the application depended too often on the individual programme manager. Where programme managers had an interest in trying out new ways of working and continuously adapting interventions based on past experience, they leveraged Norwegian flexibility to do so. Where programme managers did not have such an interest, nothing encouraged them. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems did not systematically measure outcomes and did not provide concrete evidence of what worked and what didn't, inhibiting evidence-based adaptation and improvement further [5].

Furthermore, the evaluation of Norwegian capacity development also found the lack of problem identification to be a key weakness of Norwegian aid. The absence of a systematic approach to assessing and diagnosing the capacity needs of partners at the start of a capacity development intervention undermined their effectiveness[6]. There were no policies, systems or incentives in place to promote a systematic problem identification, and in many cases Norwegian interventions prescribed international best-practice solutions without fully diagnosing the problem. This is counter to the principle of thorough 'problem identification' supported by adaptive programming approaches.

Overall, it appears that Norwegian aid is already in line with some principles of adaptive programming, but that more could be done to promote the approach further. In particular the principles of problem identification, experimentation, and learning and adapting need further attention. Table 1 below summarises how Norwegian aid currently maps against principles of adaptive programming.

HOW CAN NORWEGIAN AID PROMOTE ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING MORE PROACTIVELY?

With its flexibility and focus on local ownership, Norwegian aid is in a position where the step towards embracing adaptive programming is relatively easy. The following small set of measures could help build on this and further enhance the proactive application of adaptive programming principles in Norwegian aid:

> **1. Develop a generic guidance note on the 'how to' of adaptive programming,** to promote the approach in the organisation and to develop a shared understanding of its key principles. The guidance note should establish key principles of adaptive programming and recommend how to best implement them in practice, taking Norwegian aid policies, systems and procedures into account.

TABLE 1: NORWEGIAN AID AND ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING

Principles of adaptive programming	Norwegian aid fit
Problem identification	**Low:** There are no policies, systems or incentives in place to promote systematic problem identification. The lack of thorough problem identification is a key weakness of Norwegian aid.
Local ownership	**High:** A partner-led approach is proactively promoted by Norwegian aid policies, incentives and culture, ensuring local ownership in intervention design and implementation.
Experimentation	**Medium:** Norwegian aid is highly flexible and able to fund and trial discreet activities before scaling them up. However, there are no policies, systems or incentives to proactively promote this, so that experimentation depends on the individual programme manager's interest.
Learning and adapting	**Medium:** Norwegian aid's flexibility also goes in hand with demonstrating a willingness to change plans and adapt. However, learning is often experiential rather than based on evidence, with M&E systems not being able to measure what is working and what isn't, and feedback loops being too long.

5   Ibid, p.76
6   Ibid, p.75

> **2. Introduce a requirement to undertake a thorough problem identification** in Norwegian aid interventions. This reflects the recommendation from the evaluation of Norwegian capacity development that proposes a systematic needs and context assessment. The second evaluation brief on organisational assessment frameworks takes this recommendation further.

> **3. Fully implement existing requirements that interventions detail how outputs and outcomes are going to be measured.** More outcome data is needed to provide concrete evidence of what works and what doesn't, which can then be used to learn and adapt. This is also reflected in a similar recommendation in the evaluation of Norwegian capacity development.

> **4. Shorten feedback loops in Norwegian aid reporting requirements,** to provide an additional incentive for rapid learning and adaptation. For instance, biannual instead of annual review meetings backed up with output and outcome data (see recommendation 3 above) could promote continuous reflection on success and failure, and provide incentives to change course where necessary. At the same time, it will be important to avoid the bureaucratisation of such shorter feedback loops, and focus on the provision of key data rather than heavy quarterly reports.

Overall, evidence from the evaluation of Norwegian capacity development indicates that the implementation of these recommendations could go a long way in fully aligning Norwegian aid with adaptive programming, and thereby enhance its effectiveness globally.

EVALUATION OVERVIEW

This evaluation brief draws on an evaluation of Norwegian support to capacity development commissioned by the evaluation Department in Norad, conducted by Itad ltd (UK). The evaluation is part of a Scandinavian joint evaluation.

Purpose of the evaluation: To help Norway improve its decision-making and strategy on capacity development in developing countries, particularly in public sector institutions.

Methodology: The evaluation was based on 19 case studies in nine countries. 11 cases were subject to in-depth studies in the three countries Malawi, Mozambique and Vietnam, while the rest were carried out as document reviews supplemented by interviews.

Core evaluation team: Rob Lloyd (Project director), John Markie (Team leader), Joe Bolger and Stephen Peterson (Country team leads), Stein Erik Kruse (Vietnam), Florian Schatz (Mozambique), Gregory Gleed (portfolio and desk reviews, literature review), Zozan Kaya (portfolio and desk reviews).

Publications: There is also a second evaluation brief "Improving the effectiveness of Norwegian support to capacity development: the role of capacity assessments". Both evaluation briefs and the evaluation report are available for download at http://norad.no/en/front/evaluation

This brief is written by Rob Lloyd and Florian Schatz from the evaluation team.