CENTER FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

Adaptive Management in Refugee Programming

Lessons from Re:Build

HELEN DEMPSTER · NICOL HERBERT

Abstract

Humanitarian and development crises are increasingly protracted and complex, lacking clear solutions and paths to reach the most-affected individuals and communities. Those working in such crises must be creative, adaptive, and supported by frameworks that promote efficient and effective responses. *Adaptive management* is a learning-oriented project management approach that centralizes proactive and ongoing reflection on what is and is not working, adapting the program design or operational delivery based on this new information. This approach is being implemented by a five-year program—*Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods* (Re:Build)—aiming to achieve economic self-reliance for urban refugees and other vulnerable residents of Kampala, Uganda and Nairobi, Kenya. The evidence for how to best support refugee economic self-reliance is limited; even less is known about what is effective for urban refugees specifically. Re:Build is utilizing adaptive management principles to navigate this uncertainty with the goal of achieving sustained outcomes for clients and more information about what works. While adaptive management offers a range of potential benefits, it requires implementers and donors to operate in new ways. After summarizing the existing adaptive management literature, this paper outlines lessons from the first two years of Re:Build's attempts to implement an adaptive program. It concludes by sharing practical recommendations, for both implementers and donors, on how to better live out these principles.

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Adaptive Management in Refugee Programming: Lessons from Re:Build

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Introduction

In many humanitarian and development contexts, it can be difficult for implementers to know which pathways will lead to the desired outcomes and impacts. Yet implementers are often held accountable to a set theory of change created at the start of the program, which leaves little room to flexibly adapt as more information and learning become available. Recognizing this complexity, *adaptive management* approaches have grown in importance in recent years. Such approaches build in opportunities for implementers to proactively gather data and reflect on what is or is not working throughout the life cycle of the program and adjust their activities accordingly. Implementing an adaptive program requires a strong enabling environment with all staff (and, crucially, donors) bought in to the approach.

Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development (Re:Build) is a program that sits across both the humanitarian and development contexts. It is attempting to achieve economic self-reliance for urban refugees and other vulnerable residents in two cities: Kampala, Uganda, and Nairobi, Kenya. Implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and partners across the East African region, and supported by the IKEA Foundation, Re:Build recognized from the outset that it would need to be adaptive in nature. There is little evidence of what works to support such populations, and economic self-reliance is influenced by a whole host of systems with complex interdependencies. From the outset of the five-year program, which started in 2021, the inevitability of uncertainty and the necessity of adaptation were therefore recognized.

This paper, written by authors at the IRC and one of Re:Build's partners, the Center for Global Development (CGD), is being published in the third year of the program. It is designed as a stocktaking, to see how well Re:Build has been living out adaptive management principles in the first two years of its programming and to enable all stakeholders, from implementing staff to the IKEA Foundation, to adjust accordingly. The lessons contained in this paper are based on feedback provided by Re:Build staff to a structured survey (see Annex 1) and through semi-structured interviews, as well as input from numerous internal and external reviewers.

The first section outlines the principles of adaptive management, the enabling environment required, various tools to generate evidence, and how it applies within humanitarian contexts. The second section looks at Re:Build, detailing the structure of the program, what we have been learning while implementing adaptive management principles, and the current constraints and enablers. The last section provides recommendations for implementers and donors in creating programs that aim to use adaptive management approaches to solve complex humanitarian and development problems.

Understanding adaptive management

What is adaptive management?

Adaptive management is an approach to humanitarian and development programming. It has grown in prominence within the aid community over the last 10 years, with many implementers frustrated by inflexible logical frameworks ("log-frames") and contracts, which constrain pathways to success within difficult contexts and problems.[1] Though these are distinct ideas, some have also linked it to the movement to devolve power to local actors and recipients of aid projects, or encouraging highly localized solutions to complex crises.[2]

There is not one standard definition of adaptive management, though prevailing definitions have much in common. Essentially, adaptive management recognizes that achieving impact is rarely a linear process, particularly within humanitarian and development "programmes operating on complex challenges and in uncertain contexts."[3] In these contexts, it can be difficult to know which pathways to change will lead to the desired outcomes and impacts, particularly at the beginning of a multiyear program. Holding implementers accountable to a rigid theory of change at the outset of the program is therefore counterproductive to the goal, shared by implementers and donors, of achieving lasting impact.

Instead, adaptive management approaches prioritize flexibility within the design and implementation of programming. They build in "opportunities for structured and collective reflection, ongoing and real-time learning, course correction, and data-based decision making to improve effectiveness."[4] Both implementers and donors work together to design a program that provides enough flexibility to course-correct if the original activities are no longer going to deliver the desired impact, while also providing enough data and evidence to meet reporting requirements. Using such an approach has implications throughout the entire program cycle, from initial design to monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) as well as budgeting, in ways that distinguish adaptive programs from more traditional approaches (Table 1).

1 Alice Obrecht, *Shifting Mindsets: Creating a More Flexible Humanitarian Response* (London: ODI/ALNAP, 2019), https://www.alnap.org/help-library/shifting-mindsets-creating-a-more-flexible-humanitarian-response.

2 David Booth, Daniel Harris, and Leni Wild, *From Political Economy Analysis to Doing Development Differently: A Learning Experience* (London: ODI, 2016), https://odi.org/en/publications/from-political-economy-analysis-to-doing-development-differently-a-learning-experience/.

3 Ed Laws, Alina Rocha Menocal, Emma Proud, and Jamie Pett, *LearnAdapt: A Synthesis of Our Work on Adaptive Programming with DFID/FCDO (2017–2020)* (London: ODI, 2021), https://odi.org/en/publications/learnadapt-a-synthesis-of-our-work-on-adaptive-programming-with-dfidfcdo-20172020/.

4 Karri Byrne, *Applying Adaptive Management to Livelihoods in Emergency Settings: Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington, DC: Mercy Corps/Strengthening Capacity in Agriculture, Livelihoods, and Environment [SCALE], 2022), https://beamexchange.org/resources/1589/.

TABLE 1. How adaptive management approaches to humanitarian and development programming differ from traditional approaches

	Traditional Approaches	Adaptive Management
Plan	Includes lots of advance design and planning; detailed plans and budgets developed for entire programme period.	Initial plans are developed, based on the assumption that they will evolve over time; design and planning is ongoing throughout a programme.
Implement	Implementation follows a predefined plan.	Course corrections are made throughout a programme.
Manage	Management is concerned with ensuring a programme stays on course.	A management task is to constantly adapt a programme in the light of evolving experience.
Monitor	Monitoring is based on predefined indicators, focusing mainly on activities and outputs.	Monitoring covers change at all levels from activities to impact; indicators and M&E tools/methods are constantly being refined.
Evaluate	Evaluation is conducted at the midpoint or end of a programme, designed to *assess* performance at a point in time.	Evaluation is conducted throughout a programme, designed to *enhance* performance.
Learn	Learning is seen as an option, to be included where possible.	Learning is seen as an essential and integral part of a programme.

Source: Nigel Simister, *Adaptive Management* (London: INTRAC, 2017), https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Adaptive-management.pdf.

This is not to say that every humanitarian and development program should be an adaptive program. Some challenges have tested solutions that can be achieved in linear ways using more traditional programming approaches.[5] Yet adaptive management approaches can be useful when it is not clear how to best achieve success in a given context.[6] It enables programs to test multiple potential activities and approaches, conducting cycles of data collection, analysis, reflection, and learning, to assess which activities should be continued. As Table 1 outlines, these activities should be seen as a "series of working hypotheses rather than perfect predictions." Changes to these activities are both expected and encouraged.[7]

5 For example, it is well established that providing free insecticide-treated mosquito nets is one of the most effective ways to fight malaria. A 2004 review of 22 randomized controlled trials (RCTs) "found that, on average, 1,000 more nets distributed contributed to a reduction of 5.5 deaths per year." In 2015, an article in *Nature* concluded that nets prevented 450 million cases of malaria between 2000 and 2015. For more, see Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, "Why Fight Poverty? Nobelists Explain," *Spectrum* (Spring 2020), https://spectrum.mit.edu/spring-2020/why-fight-poverty-nobelists-explain/; Christian Lengeler, "Insecticide-Treated Bed Nets and Curtains for Preventing Malaria," *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, 2(CD000363) (April 2004), https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD000363.pub2; and Samir Bhatt et al., "The Effect of Malaria Control on Plasmodium Falciparum in Africa between 2000 and 2015," *Nature*, 526 (2015): 207–211, https://www.nature.com/articles/nature15535.

6 Obrecht, *Shifting Mindsets*.

7 Ibid.

As discussed by Obrecht (2019), there are two main ways in which a program may attempt to use adaptive management approaches:

1. **Single-stream iterative.** Single-stream iterative programs implement a single intervention which is then changed based on data, other learnings, or changes in the operating environment. Such an approach is not new; NGOs, particularly those operating in changeable humanitarian contexts, have been implementing similar programs for decades, though their experiences with iterating throughout the process of implementation may not be publicly available.[8] Yet such changes are likely to have been ad hoc and not necessarily in response to a planned cycle of reflection and learning.
2. **Portfolio or experimental.** Portfolio or experimental programs implement multiple interventions at the same time, which are then changed and/or prioritized based on lessons learned. They are difficult to implement as they require being comfortable with redundancy (an intervention may be eliminated or changed after some months if it is not leading to the desired outcome or impact) and are hard to monitor, evaluate, and report on. Yet they enable a program to test multiple assumptions to understand the best long-term course of action. Re:Build is an example of a portfolio or experimental approach, as will be described in the next section.

What type of enabling environment is required?

Designing and implementing a humanitarian or development program using adaptive management principles requires a strong enabling environment. The relevant literature speaks extensively about four main factors: funding; organizational culture; organizational structure; and a focus on MEL.

Funding

As Teskey and Tyrrel (2021) note, "the nature of the contract between the donor and the implementing partner is one of the most significant constraints on effective adaptive management."[9] Donor agreements often rely on standard, linear log-frames that require implementers to define their inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts at the beginning of the program, even if it is taking place over multiple years. While the donor's requirements may vary, often implementers will be required to report (quarterly and/or yearly) on their progress against this agreed-upon theory

8 Nigel Simister, *Adaptive Management* (London: INTRAC, 2017), https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Adaptive-management.pdf.

9 Graham Teskey and Lavinia Tyrrel, *Implementing Adaptive Management: A Front-Line Effort—Is There an Emerging Practice?*, The Governance & Development Practice Working Paper Series (Canberra: Abt Associates, 2021), https://abtassocgovernancesoapbox.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/abt-associates_adaptive-management_a-frontline-effort_digital-1.pdf.

of change using quantifiable results. Such an approach "offers greater certainty and reduced risk" for donors, allowing them to plan and budget programs in advance.[10]

Yet this approach does not lend itself well to an adaptive management approach. Most grant agreements do not allow implementers to pursue a portfolio or experimental approach, nor to radically change their planned activities as the program progresses.[11] Such changes may require new theories of change, new staffing structures, or new budget breakdowns, none of which are easy to renegotiate. Also, the bias toward short-term, attributable, and quantitative results often pushes implementers to report on their *outputs* rather than their *impacts* (as described more below).[12] Instead, a variety of alternative qualitative reporting tools such as stories of change could be used to supplement reporting and illustrate a program's impact.[13]

The length of the grant also has a bearing on how easily the program can live out adaptive management principles. Providing short-term grants (for example, only covering a single year) does not give implementers the space to experiment with different approaches and adapt in subsequent rounds of implementation. As described at the start of this section, most humanitarian and development crises are protracted and complex. Short-term grants are therefore less likely to give implementers the ability to deliver on the full suite of desired outcomes. There is a trend, especially notable in the humanitarian sector, toward multiyear and flexible funding, as evidenced by the Grand Bargain Quality Funding Caucus.[14] Yet even the actors involved in the Caucus note that substantial barriers remain, especially risk aversion.

The funding of programs that encourage adaptive management principles is not about absolving implementers of all accountability.[15] Rather it refocuses accountability on higher-level results (*outcomes* and *impacts*) and on how well the program has adapted and contributed to learning.[16] This may require different data collection efforts for different audiences (e.g., internal learning and external reporting mechanisms), as will be explored later. Of course, such an approach comes with trade-offs: employing adaptive management principles can lead to less operational efficiency, less certainty, and greater risk. It is on the latter that interesting work has been done by Teskey and

10 Ibid.
11 Obrecht, *Shifting Mindsets*.
12 Laws et al., *LearnAdapt*.
13 For a good overview of different tools—including case studies, process tracing, contribution analysis, and outcome harvesting—see Katie Naeve et al., *Evaluating Advocacy: An Exploration of Evidence and Tools to Understand What Works and Why*, 3ie Working Paper 29 (New Delhi: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation [3ie], 2017), https://www.3ieimpact.org/evidence-hub/publications/working-papers/evaluating-advocacy-exploration-evidence-and-tools.
14 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), "Grand Bargain Quality Funding Caucus Concludes with New Funding Commitments" (IASC, July 22, 2022), https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-official-website/grand-bargain-quality-funding-caucus-concludes-new-funding-commitments.
15 Leni Wild and Anne Buffardi, *Making Adaptive Rigour Work: Principles and Practices for Strengthening MEL for Adaptive Management* (London: ODI, 2019), https://odi.org/en/publications/making-adaptive-rigour-work-principles-and-practices-for-strengthening-mel-for-adaptive-management/.
16 Simister, *Adaptive Management*.

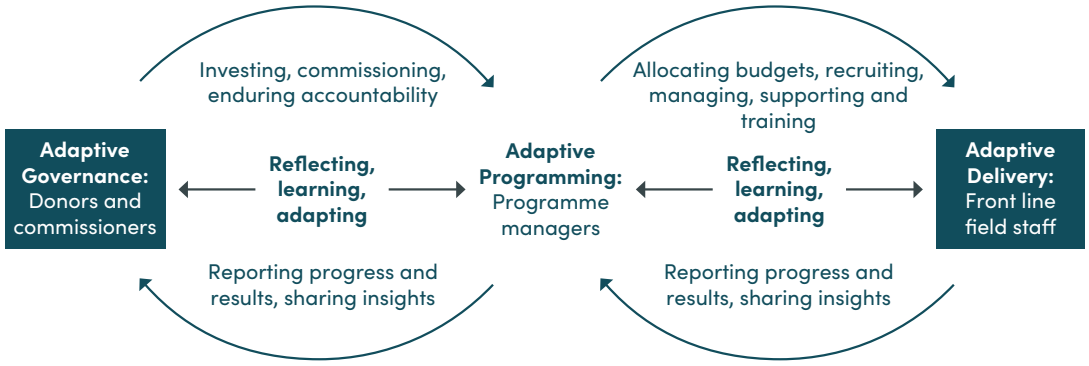
Tyrrell (2021). They outline that *implementation failure* (e.g., not delivering on what was agreed) should be borne by the implementer, but that *development failure* (e.g., outcomes not or only partially met, despite activities being delivered efficiently and effectively) must be borne by the donor.[17] Given donors' and implementers' shared goal of maximizing impact, risk-sharing by both parties is necessary to enable a truly adaptive approach.

Organizational culture

Implementers, for their part, must cultivate an organizational culture that enables and encourages flexibility. As Obrecht (2022) notes, "flexible systems will not lead to greater flexibility … unless individuals take advantage of these systems to apply learning and do things differently."[18] There are two main elements to this: selecting the right staff to implement the project and supporting them in implementing an adaptive program.

All projects require staff with a variety of backgrounds and skills. Yet in hiring, organizations should attempt to identify those staff who have both technical expertise *and* relevant critical-thinking skills. It is those soft skills that will allow staff to critically identify which parts of the program are leading toward the outcome and which are not, and adjust accordingly. There is some debate in the literature as to whether this necessitates hiring generalists (who can more easily pivot to different types of programming), or whether different coordination mechanisms (where different staff are brought in at different times) would suffice. More research and insights are needed here. Certainly all staff have a role to play in adaptive programming, so such critical skills are needed throughout the organization (Figure 1).[19]

FIGURE 1. Adaptation throughout the program cycle, including staff at all levels



Source: Teskey and Tyrrel, *Implementing Adaptive Management* (see note 9).

17 Teskey and Tyrrel, *Implementing Adaptive Management*.

18 Obrecht, *Shifting Mindsets*.

19 Rojan Bolling, Kim van Wijk, and Yannicke Goris, "Adaptive Programme Management in Fragile and Complex Settings" (The Hague: The Broker / Food & Business Knowledge Platform, 2019), https://knowledge4food.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/190205_Practice-note_AdaptiveProgrammeManagement.pdf.

Once staff with these skill sets are in place, it is crucial that the organization creates a culture that enables them to be adaptive. This requires building trust between all levels of staff; frontline field staff need to know that, if they express a view on the impact of a certain program, it will be taken seriously by program managers and operational staff.[20] Organizational policies should allow for course correction. Feedback mechanisms should be developed which give staff the space to express views and concerns without fear of judgment. In addition, staff must be trained in how to gather and interpret data, to enable them to use those data to make changes to the program in real time. This also requires leaders of organizations to prioritize adaptive management and promote it as core to the success of a program.[21]

Organizational structure

One area that is less discussed in the literature is the role that organizational structure plays in supporting adaptive programming. As discussed above, donors play a crucial role in enabling adaptation; rigid funding or reporting structures can constrain the ability of a program to be adaptive. Yet equally important is the organizational structure set up by an implementing partner, as it can end up reimposing rigid structures, regardless of how supportive the original donor intention is.

For example, many implementers subcontract parts of or all programming to local partners such as community-based organizations (CBOs). While decentralizing decision making to the local level could best enable adaptation in theory (due to these partners' in-depth knowledge of the context), allowing such flexibility can be difficult in practice. Implementers are ultimately accountable for meeting the goals and budget of the original grant. Even if donors provide them with flexibility in this, it may be difficult for implementers to pass on this flexibility to local partners due to rigid subcontracting structures or a lack of trust. This demonstrates the need to shift from a capacity-building mentality among implementers to one of capacity sharing: building the relationships required to mainstream flexibility throughout the entire organizational structure.

Here, Christian Aid provides an interesting way forward. Gray and Carl (2022) detail the ways in which Christian Aid has attempted to pass on flexible budgets and reporting structures to its local partners. The responsibility to compile data and report to donors remained with the implementer (Christian Aid headquarters) to "free up partners to implement as best they could in accordance with their learning, rather than requiring them to spend time reporting against performance targets that were sometimes rendered meaningless over time."[22] Local organizations have also been given

20 Simister, *Adaptive Management*.

21 Stephen Gray and Andy Carl, *The Difference Learning Makes: Factors that Enable or Inhibit Adaptive Programming for Christian Aid Ireland and Partner Organisations* (Dublin: Christian Aid Ireland, 2022), https://www.christianaid.ie/resources/difference-learning-makes.

22 Ibid.

the flexibility to reassign costs between budget lines or to entirely new activities. However, this flexibility will be impossible without local partners *also* having the required organizational culture detailed above.

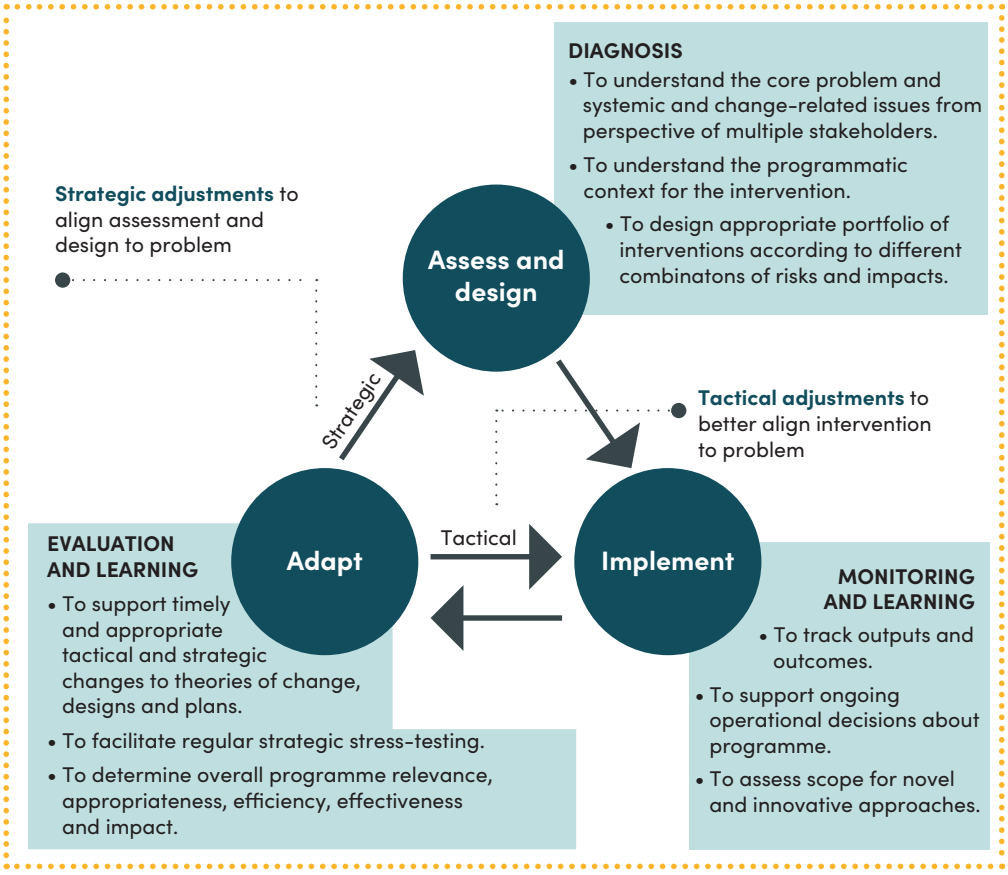
Monitoring, evaluation, and learning

Central to adaptive management is the ability to constantly monitor, evaluate, and learn (MEL) which activities are having the intended impact and which ones are not. These continuous feedback loops can be based on quantitative data or on qualitative insights as to program implementation and changing circumstances. Therefore, adaptive management prioritizes the *L* (learning) above all else. In fact, one of the foundational definitions of adaptive management by Sugden (2016) states that "managing adaptively is about accepting, working with, and learning from change, and using this learning to be more effective."[23]

Such learning requires collecting the right data to inform it. As described above, so often MEL within development and humanitarian programs drops the *L*. Data collection focuses on narrow metrics that merely speak to *activities* or *outputs* (e.g., the number of people who have attended a training program) rather than *outcomes* and *impacts* (e.g., whether attendance at that training program led to greater economic opportunity relative to a reasonable comparison group). It is important to collect output-based metrics to track whether a program has implemented what it set out to implement, but they do not tell a program much about what is working and what is not within the overall theory of change. Instead, MEL systems for adaptive management focus on measuring outcomes and impacts. If certain activities are no longer the best route to achieving those outcomes and impacts, they should be changed. In this way, MEL data can be used to support both strategic and tactical adjustments within the overall program cycle (Figure 2).

23 Jodi Sugden, *Adaptive Management for Resilient Communities: Development in a Volatile Environment*, Resilience in Practice Briefing 3 (London: Practical Action, 2016), https://blackwells.co.uk/bookshop/product/Adaptive-Management-for-Resilient-Communities-by-Jodi-Sugden-Practical-Action-Organization/9781853399527.

FIGURE 2. The role of MEL in adaptive programs



Source: Wild and Buffardi, *Making Adaptive Rigour Work* (see note 15).

Collecting data to inform meaningful MEL may require new tools and approaches, which this paper explores in more detail below. While these tools can be used to make course corrections, adaptive programs must be wary of making decisions too quickly. It is better to wait until the right evidence is available.[24] Otherwise, the program risks dropping activities that would have been impactful in the long term. Implementing such tools therefore requires all elements—organizational culture, people and skills, tools and systems, and the enabling environment—to work together (see Box 1).

24 Simister, *Adaptive Management*.

BOX 1. Adaptive management in practice: USAID's PRIME program

Between 2012 and 2017, USAID provided US$62 million to set up a new project called the Ethiopia Pastoralist Areas Resilience Improvement and Market Expansion (PRIME). It had three objectives: increase household incomes, enhance resilience, and bolster capacity to adapt to climate change among pastoral people in Ethiopia. It was a very complex project, with 10 partner organizations and 7 field offices working in 23 *woredas* (Ethiopia's administrative districts).

The leading implementing agency, Mercy Corps, has long been at the forefront of adaptive management approaches. Given the complexity of the context, it worked with USAID to encourage flexibility in the design and implementation of the program. In 2019, Mercy Corps published a piece exploring how it had lived out these approaches within four buckets:

- **Organizational culture.** While the program attempted to implement a flat and decentralized structure, in practice field staff felt separated from management staff. It was also difficult to hire people with an adaptive mindset.
- **People and skills.** While recruitment processes were shifted and training provided, lessons learned were not always shared with the wider team. In addition, there were not enough staff members, which left those in the program with little capacity to learn.
- **Tools and systems.** PRIME employed a wide range of tools to encourage flexibility and learning, including an innovative "concept note" system that relied more heavily on narrative than on quantitative indicators. Yet research findings were not always disseminated, nor did they always lead to changes in activities.
- **Enabling environment.** USAID provided flexible budget and contract structures; activities could be changed annually. Yet not all partners were used to working in this way, and some reverted to standard ways of implementing programs and reporting on their success.

Sources: Mercy Corps, "Adaptive Management: Responding to the Evolving Needs of PRIME's Complex Systems" (Addis Ababa: Mercy Corps, 2019); Lisa Smith, Tim Frankenberger, Ben Langworthy, Stephanie Martin, Tom Spangler, Suzanne Nelson, and Jeanne Downen, *Ethiopia Pastoralist Areas Resilience Improvement and Market Expansion (PRIME) Project Impact Evaluation, Baseline Survey Report, Volume 1: Main Report*, Rockville, MD: Westat, 2015).

How do you get the right evidence?

Adaptive management requires using tools which gather data and enable staff to flexibly use these data to make changes to the theory of change. There is no one "right" tool, but different options that can be selected to help support different programs.[25]

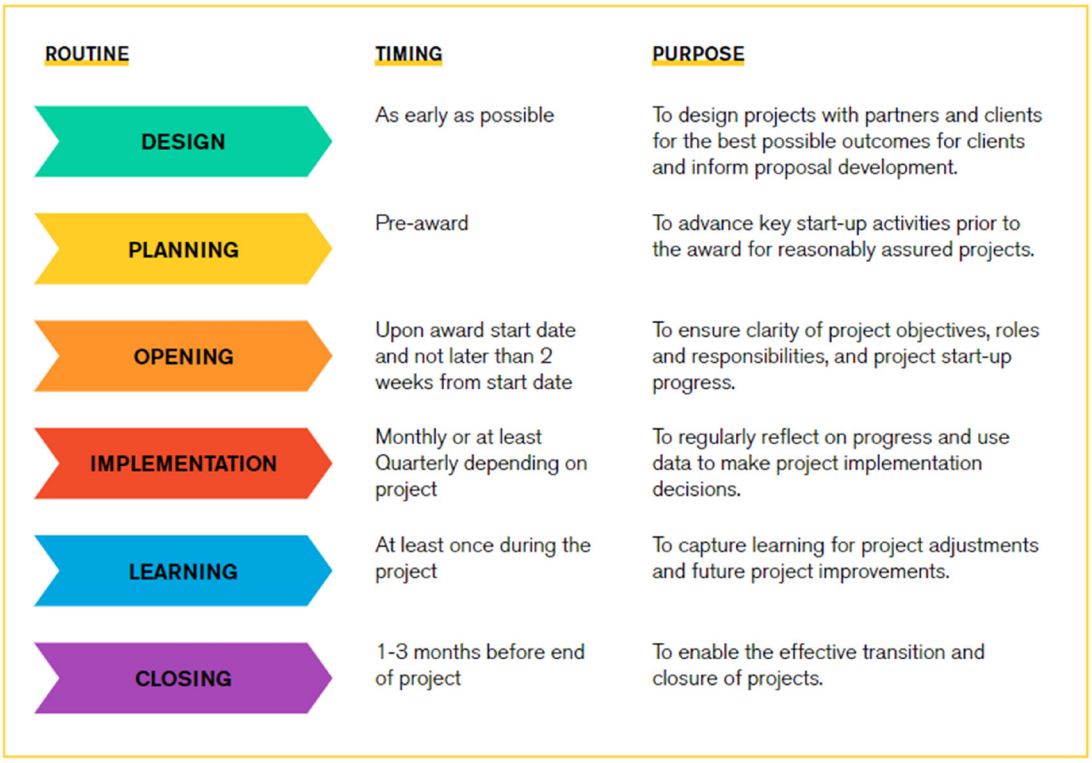
25 Tiina Pasanen, "Getting Intentional about M&E: Choosing Suitable Approaches for Adaptive Programmes," Medium, February 7, 2020, https://medium.com/glam-blog/getting-intentional-about-m-e-choosing-suitable-approaches-for-adaptive-programmes-f76c6b2790d9.

Programming and monitoring tools

Standard programming and monitoring data can provide a useful starting point upon which other tools could be layered. Pasanen and Barnett (2019) provide a good overview of tools that can be useful at the start of, during, and at the end of a program. Those that can support ongoing decision making during implementation include:

- **Outcome mapping.** This tool aims to capture outcomes that are hard to measure, such as policy influence. Intended changes are identified as "expect to see," "like to see," and "love to see" outcomes, with the team collecting information on what happens throughout the project. This is particularly useful in understanding social and institutional change, especially when the pathways to impact are uncertain.
- **Developmental evaluation.** This approach aims to generate understanding about the program by embedding an evaluator within the program over the long term. This person or entity provides real-time (or close to real-time) feedback for the program staff, highlights emerging findings, supports programmatic learning, and documents program adaptations and the rationale for changes. Such an approach can ensure that there is always one eye on adaptation, while supporting staff to think similarly. Of course, to meaningfully change the direction of the program, the evaluator must be both trusted and empowered to operate in this way.
- **Project Cycle Meetings (PCM).** This is an approach developed and used by the IRC to make critical decisions about how best to deliver outcomes in projects and programs. PCM involves six meeting routines (see Figure 3). Principles of adaptive management are embedded throughout but most notably in the implementation and learning meetings. The PCM routines are data-driven and designed to encourage teams to proactively surface learnings, anticipate challenges, and adapt projects. This approach makes regular reflection and course-correction standard in all projects and can be adjusted based on the complexity of the project (e.g., by increasing the frequency of learning meetings where the context is volatile).

FIGURE 3. Project Cycle Meeting (PCM) routines



ROUTINE	TIMING	PURPOSE
DESIGN	As early as possible	To design projects with partners and clients for the best possible outcomes for clients and inform proposal development.
PLANNING	Pre-award	To advance key start-up activities prior to the award for reasonably assured projects.
OPENING	Upon award start date and not later than 2 weeks from start date	To ensure clarity of project objectives, roles and responsibilities, and project start-up progress.
IMPLEMENTATION	Monthly or at least Quarterly depending on project	To regularly reflect on progress and use data to make project implementation decisions.
LEARNING	At least once during the project	To capture learning for project adjustments and future project improvements.
CLOSING	1-3 months before end of project	To enable the effective transition and closure of projects.

Source: International Rescue Committee (IRC), *Project Cycle Meeting (PCM) Overview Guidance* (New York: IRC, 2022).

Research

To complement programming and monitoring tools, some aid projects also include more formal research components. Such research aims to provide the wider community with an understanding of what works within that area of programming, to inform future projects. There are many different types of research that could be implemented, many of which are outlined in Blanchet et al. (2018) alongside their pros and cons.[26] Two of these types of research are worth highlighting here, since they are being implemented in the Re:Build program:

1. **Cross-sectional surveys.** In cross-sectional surveys, a representative sample of people are surveyed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data about the impact of a particular intervention. These people could be surveyed once (say, at the end of the implementation) or at several points over time. Along with other data, the findings can be used in formal evaluations of an intervention. In the Re:Build project, this tool is being used to evaluate

26 Karl Blanchet, Claire Allen, Jonathan Breckon, Phil Davies, Diana Duclos, Jeroen Jansen, Helen Mthiyane, and Mike Clarke, *Using Research Evidence in the Humanitarian Sector: A Practice Guide* (London: Evidence Aid, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and Nesta [Alliance for Useful Evidence], 2018), https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/research-evidence-humanitarian-english.

the impact of the pilots. While there are many pros with this type of research (including its speed and cost), it cannot say anything about the *causal* impact of a particular intervention.

2. **Randomized trials.** Randomized trials compare random and similar people who have received a particular intervention with those who have not. This approach offers the most robust and reliable findings about the *causal* impact of a particular intervention. Yet randomized trials can be difficult and costly to set up, especially if a program prioritizes additional data collection on top of what is collected through standard implementation. The Re:Build program is running four long-term randomized trials to measure the impact of interventions, both separately and in combination.

Both forms of research are what is known as "adaptive experiments" and can enable programs to change their programming based on statistical outcomes (see more in Box 2).

BOX 2. Adaptive management vs. Adaptive experiments

Adaptive management in humanitarian programming is distinct from adaptive experiments. Adaptive management is particular to the service provision inherent within humanitarian programming, while adaptive experiments are a type of design used for social science experiments to evaluate and adapt a service provision based on statistical outcomes.

The Re:Build program includes four randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to evaluate the efficacy of various services for refugees and host communities in urban areas. RCTs are a design in which some people form part of a control group and others receive "treatment." For example, in one of the current Re:Build RCTs, there are a control group and three groups receiving different treatments: cash grants, mentorship groups, and mentorship groups where outcomes depend on their peers' performance.

An adaptive experiment incorporates lessons throughout the experiment, shifting some people into a particular treatment arm that looks the most promising from initial findings based on statistical outcomes.

Caria et al. (2020) use an adaptive experiment design in their RCT looking at job search assistance for Jordanian and Syrian refugees. They first set up a standard RCT with an initial sample including a control group and those receiving treatments of a labelled cash transfer, job search information, or a behavioral nudge. The authors then measure the key outcome of employment after six weeks, for 16 distinct groups of people based on nationality, gender, level of education, and employment history. This allows them to evaluate which service will work best for which populations.

Then, they adapt! Using a Thompson sampling algorithm, the authors update their probabilities and start assigning more people to services that appear more effective. For example, if the labelled cash transfer worked particularly well for Syrian women with low levels of education, women with those characteristics would be more likely to get a labelled cash transfer in the next round.

Adaptive experiments are not always feasible. In implementing an adaptive experiment, key outcomes must be agreed upon in advance, and outcomes must be measured quickly to make decisions. Further, adaptive experiments require a research team who can accurately update the probabilities for particular populations. As adaptive management becomes a more widely used practice within the humanitarian sector, it is to be hoped that adaptive experiments will follow in MEL designs. Given challenging logistics in the research designs and the questions prioritized for the RCTs, it was not feasible to undertake the additional complexities of setting up an adaptive experiment within the first wave of Re:Build RCTs.

Sources: Dave McKenzie, "Slides on Lecture 1: How to Randomize," presentation to NOVA SBE Summer School on Randomized Evaluations, July 2022; Stefanio Caria, Grant Gordon, Maximilian Kasy, Simon Quinn, Soha Shami, and Alex Teytelboym, *An Adaptive Targeted Field Experiment: Job Search Assistance for Refugees in Jordan*, CESifo Working Paper No. 8535, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3689456.

How does it apply to humanitarian contexts?

So far this section has focused on adaptive management approaches that could be employed within any complex project, whether in the humanitarian or development contexts. Such approaches tend to be employed more in the latter than the former. The very nature of humanitarian work, especially within conflict zones, means circumstances are ever changing and hard to predict. This necessitates working in an adaptive way. Yet there are some aspects of working in humanitarian contexts that are unique and may make implementing such adaptive approaches more difficult:[27]

1. **Need for decentralized decision making.** Those on the ground need to be able to pivot quickly with few bureaucratic delays and meaningfully contribute to changing the goals of the program. This power also needs to be extended to aid recipients, with meaningful tools used to collect and use their feedback. Yet agreements are often structured around outputs (as described above), making it "easy for humanitarian actors to become focused on solving the problem as it was described when the activities and outputs were designed" rather than being empowered to respond flexibly.[28]
2. **Lack of data to support adaptation.** MEL tools can be difficult to implement in humanitarian contexts; they are often long-term, cumbersome, and focused on acquiring the "perfect" data rather than the best available light-touch data that are needed for genuine course correction. In addition, most humanitarian programs do not dedicate enough budget and resources to MEL, defaulting to producing a final end-line *process* evaluation rather than

27 Byrne, *Applying Adaptive Management*.

28 Alice Obrecht, "Adaptive Management and Programming: The Humanitarian Perspective," Groupe URD, March 26, 2019, https://www.urd.org/en/review-hem/adaptive-management-and-programming-the-humanitarian-perspective/.

data collection throughout. In fact, Obrecht (2019) notes that there is a "consistent pattern of weak data collection and monitoring mechanisms in humanitarian programming."[29]

3. **Lack of flexible funding.** As was described above, working in an adaptive way requires structuring contracts and budgets to encourage flexibility. While some humanitarian donors have been changing their processes to enable implementers to shift funding and programming where needed (e.g., when a new emergency arises within the context of an existing project), not all have done so. Byrne also notes a disconnect between the way that donors view their structures (as easy and light-touch) versus how implementers view them.

Despite these differences, the recommendations for living out adaptive approaches within humanitarian programs remain broadly the same.[30] Implementers need to focus on creating an organizational culture that allows people to question and revise assumptions, while donors need to provide flexible funding and monitoring structures. Both need to focus on how their programming affects people on the ground (*outcomes* and *impacts*) rather than the implementation of their activities.

The remainder of this paper will explore a program which sits between the humanitarian and development contexts. Re:Build is a large, multiyear, and multipartner program that is aiming to influence refugee livelihoods in urban contexts. From the beginning, the implementers (the IRC and partners) worked with the donor (the IKEA Foundation) to design a program that would respond flexibly to evidence of what works on the ground to promote more sustainable livelihoods. Yet as similar programs have found (see Box 1), living out these adaptive principles has challenged existing structures and practice. This analysis covers the first two years of the program with the hope that the lessons learned can be translated into implementation over the rest of the term.

Re:Build

What is Re:Build?

The scale of the world's refugee crisis is staggering, with 27 million refugees globally, 5 million of whom are in East Africa alone.[31] A majority of refugees make their way to cities, yet little is known about how best to support urban refugees, nor are investments made at scale to address the challenge. *Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development* (Re:Build) is a five-year program being implemented in two refugee-hosting cities: Kampala, Uganda, and Nairobi, Kenya. The program started in 2021, funded by the IKEA Foundation and with the IRC as lead

29 Ibid.
30 Obrecht, *Shifting Mindsets*.
31 UNHCR, Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2021, June 2022.

implementing partner.[32] The outcome that the program aims to achieve is economic self-reliance for urban refugees and other vulnerable residents, but with an overarching goal of expanding understanding of the most effective pathways to achieve this change.

From the outset, the IKEA Foundation's initiating documents recognized that this is a challenge characterized by a high degree of uncertainty, in part because of limited evidence on what interventions are most effective for urban refugees specifically, but also because uncertainty is inherent in the problem itself. Economic self-reliance is influenced—to varying degrees at different times and in different contexts—by a whole host of systems with complex interdependencies. As a result, even as the evidence base expands and more is known about what is effective, a degree of uncertainty and consequently the need to work in adaptive ways will remain.

As the IRC and partners set out to design the program in February 2020, the inevitability of uncertainty and the necessity of adaptation was an important starting assumption. In March 2020, it became exponentially more important. As COVID-19 began to dominate headlines, the context in which the program was being designed became almost impossible to know with any certainty. It was unclear how serious the public health impacts would be, how this would change the needs of refugees in Nairobi and Kampala, the effects on global and national economies, or even the operational feasibility of implementing livelihoods interventions during a global pandemic.

Given the lack of evidence, complexity of the challenge, and tumultuous context, it was clear that traditional linear programming approaches would be inadequate. Instead of using the design phase to create prescriptive log-frames and detailed workplans for the full program cycle—the traditional approach of humanitarian and development programs alike—Re:Build instead focused efforts on three key things that would set the tone for an adaptive approach: hypotheses around promising solutions, channels for generating evidence and learning, and a clear framework for governance and decision making.

Hypotheses around promising solutions

The first priority was to develop hypotheses around promising solutions. Inherent in this approach was a recognition that the solution was unknown. Options developed by the team included interventions likely to be effective based on the evidence that was available, but also more novel solutions or solutions with mixed evidence where the likelihood of success was less certain. This was done through a series of workshops and consultations involving key stakeholders including community members, government, experts, the United Nations, and other peer implementing organizations (with a focus on refugee-led organizations [RLOs] and CBOs). Discussions were

32 Organizations that partnered in year 1 and 2 implementation: Center for Global Development (CGD), L'AFRIKANA, Pamoja Trust, Platform for Vendors in Uganda (PLAVU), Raising Gabdho Foundation (RGF), Refugee-Led Organisation Network (RELON), and Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO).

informed by a comprehensive evidence review to understand what was already known about the universe of solutions across a range of developing country contexts, as well as by local data and the contextual expertise of stakeholders in Nairobi and Kampala. This evidence-based approach enabled the team to group potential solutions into two broad categories:

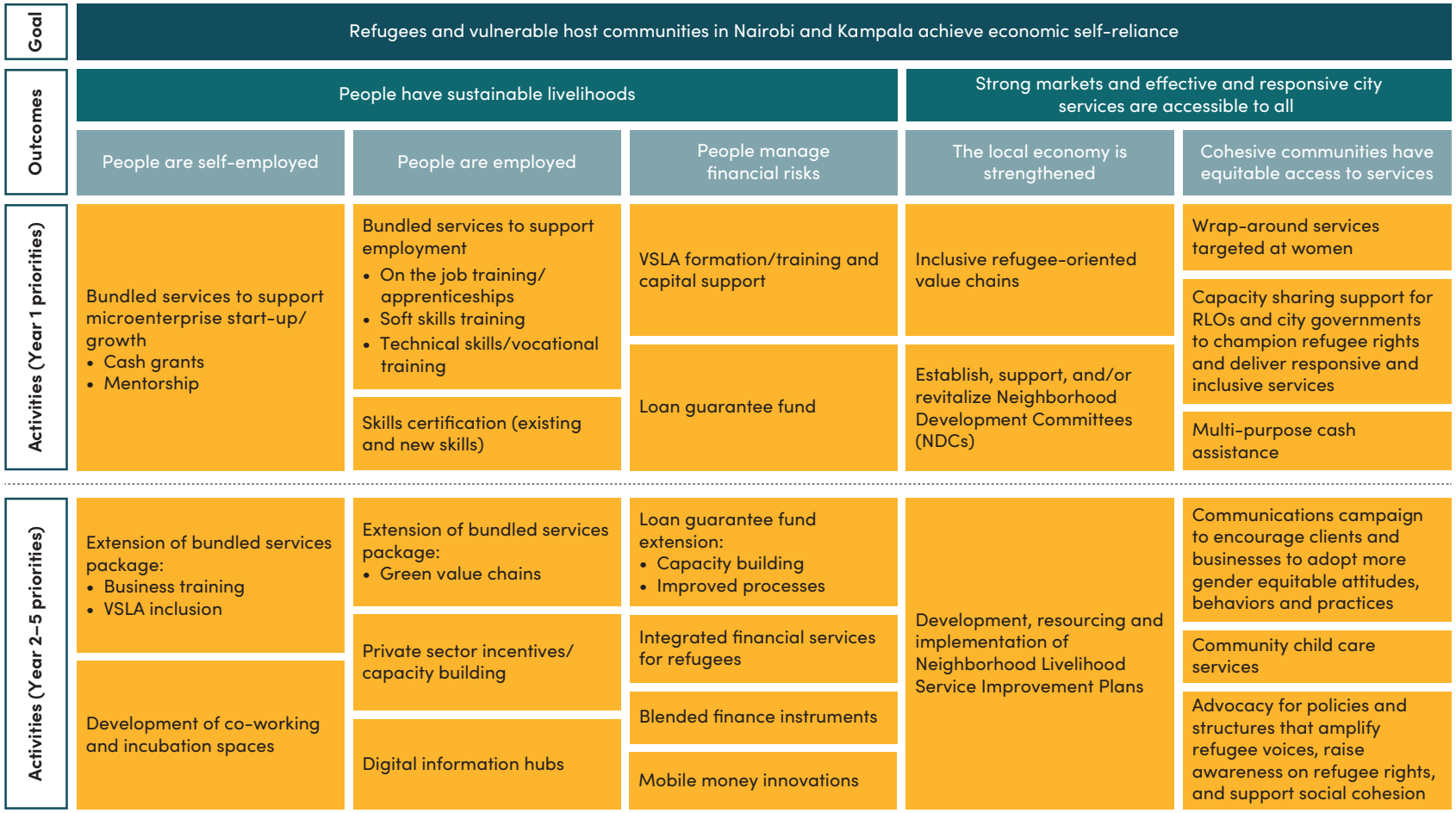
1. Solutions with the potential to be "big bets," where the evidence for the effectiveness of the intervention was stronger, and, in turn, the uncertainty was somewhat lower; and
2. Solutions with the potential to be "small bets," where little was known yet about the effectiveness of the intervention, because either it had not been evaluated in the context or it was novel, and in turn the uncertainty was higher.[33]

Given that much of the evidence is mixed and that effective employment program design is highly context-specific,[34] this process was more art than science. Final options were selected by a smaller design team weighing evidence from a range of developing country contexts with local expertise and data to form the team's initial hypothesis of the combination of solutions likely to achieve the program's goal. A high-level theory of change and potential activities (see Figure 4) were then described in the program strategy, but much was left undecided. For example, the program strategy described the solutions the team would implement in year one but left open the specific combination of activities to be implemented in subsequent years.

33 The terms "big bets" and "small bets" and the concept of parallel learning come from Craig Valters, Clare Cummings, and Hamish Nixon, *Putting Learning at the Centre: Adaptive Development Programming in Practice* (London: ODI, 2016), https://odi.org/en/publications/putting-learning-at-the-centre-adaptive-development-programming-in-practice/.

34 Christopher Blattman and Laura Ralston, *Generating Employment in Poor and Fragile States: Evidence from Labor Market and Entrepreneurship Programs* (Rochester, NY: SSRN, 2015), 34.

FIGURE 4. Re:Build theory of change (service delivery pillar[35])



Source: Re:Build internal communication.

35 The Re:Build program strategy consists of three interdependent pillars: (1) service delivery—activities delivered directly to program clients, or in support of local markets and/or communities, to support economic self-reliance for urban refugees and other vulnerable residents; (2) evidence and learning—activities to test and understand what service delivery activities work to support economic self-reliance; and (3) influence and adoption—activities to encourage adoption of program evidence and learning to change policies, practices, and investments at national, regional, and global levels.

Channels for generating evidence and learning

The second priority during the design phase was to create channels for generating evidence and learning that would ensure the program had the right information, at the right time, to test its strategy. Because the starting assumption was the uncertainty of the solution, it followed that deliberate testing was critical to determine which solutions were working and which were not. Re:Build layered a combination of evidence and learning channels. While other programs utilizing adaptive management have also embedded proactive evidence generation (see above "How do you get the right evidence?"), a point of difference in Re:Build is the tailored approach to testing. Depending on the certainty of the solution, RCTs and pilots have been nested within the program design, alongside outcome measurement, routine monitoring, and client feedback.

For example, there is little evidence on the effectiveness of skills certification interventions, so this activity was implemented as a pilot within the overall framework of the program to allow for more rapid learning and the flexibility to stop, or course-correct, the activity based on new understanding. The question to be answered was broad, looking at any indications that the intervention may have a positive effect. Similarly, the evidence is highly mixed for vocational trainings, and available evidence suggests this intervention is typically not cost effective by itself. Much more needs to be known about how best to design cost-effective skills-centric interventions, so while vocational trainings were delivered to a larger cohort (compared with skills certification), the program planned to measure outcomes for these clients and to intentionally reflect on the effectiveness of the design at predetermined moments in the program life cycle (see the discussion of strategy testing below).

In contrast, the evidence for the effectiveness of microenterprise interventions is stronger, so the team pursued more inflexible (but more rigorous) evidence generation—specifically, RCTs to understand the most effective bundle of services and to answer specific questions of causality. Given the existing evidence, the focus for learning is on adapting the design for optimal impact.

Framework for governance and decision making

The third priority during program design was to articulate a clear framework for governance and decision making. Having a detailed plan (documented in a decisions matrix included in the initial program strategy) for the high-level decisions that needed to be made over the course of the program—when, how, and by whom—gave both the donor and the partners the confidence to proceed without committing to a specific program design for the full program life cycle. Put another way, there was a trade-off between investing time and effort in designing program activities for the full five years (recognizing these were likely to change) versus designing processes to make decisions and adapt based on new information.

Underpinning this framework was an annual cycle of strategy testing, inspired by an approach developed by the Asia Foundation[36] and subsequently adopted by Christian Aid and others.[37] The intention of the annual strategy testing event was to bring together representatives from Re:Build partner organizations to proactively reflect on the program strategy, surfacing what had been learned so far and using these learnings to pressure-test the overall theory of change as well specific intervention design. The planned output was an inventory of key learnings and proposed adaptations based on these learnings, which would then be used to inform annual planning decisions. The annual strategy testing event complements quarterly project implementation meetings (see the project cycle meetings approach described earlier), which were intended to provide an opportunity for more routine reflection on the project data and course correction.

What have we been learning?

Re:Build has so far designed and embedded adaptive management approaches and completed one full cycle of strategy testing. The first strategy testing event was planned for late 2021; however, due to implementation delays and travel restrictions related to COVID-19, a much lighter remote reflection session was held in September 2021, and the first full strategy testing event was not held until August 2022. Before the first annual strategy testing event, a series of interviews with core team members were conducted in May 2022 (midway through the second year of implementation) to document specific learnings and adaptations to date. The annual strategy testing event was held in August 2022, and a follow-up survey was sent to Re:Build team members in October 2022 to understand the team's experience with adaptive management so far.[38] Initial learnings have been surfaced from these interviews and survey responses, as well as from observations and outputs from the strategy testing event.

Adaptive management requires programs to plan differently

As described above, the Re:Build design phase focused on planning the *process* for making program design decisions, as opposed to the program design itself. So far, this approach has generally proven to be effective, enabling Re:Build to be flexible when many of the starting assumptions shifted during year one. Notably, COVID-19 lockdowns in both cities continued far longer than anticipated, requiring service delivery activities to be reprioritized and adjusted. For example, protracted lockdowns in both cities worsened vulnerabilities and created new needs, making a pivot to cash assistance to

36 Debra Ladner, *Strategy Testing: An Innovative Approach to Monitoring Highly Flexible Aid Programs* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2015), https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Strategy-Testing-An-Innovative-Approach-to-Monitoring-Highly-Flexible-Aid-Programs.pdf.

37 David Booth, Karol Balfe, Róisín Gallagher, Gráinne Kilcullen, Sarah O'Boyle and Alix Tiernan, *Learning to Make a Difference: Christian Aid Ireland's Adaptive Programme Management in Governance, Gender, Peace Building and Human Rights* (London: ODI/Christian Aid, 2018), https://odi.org/en/publications/learning-to-make-a-difference-christian-aid-irelands-adaptive-programme-management-in-governance-gender-peace-building-and-human-rights/.

38 The survey was sent to all IRC Re:Build staff, IRC regional and HQ technical staff supporting Re:Build, and staff of implementing and research partner organizations. A total of 44 responses were received; 73 percent of respondents were affiliated with IRC, and 27 percent were affiliated with partner organizations.

support basic needs a priority in year one of implementation. Clear pathways were already defined to make these decisions, which helped the team to navigate the fluidity of the operating environment. There may, however, be an opportunity to improve timeliness by further decentralizing decision making and further clarifying accountability for decisions. Even with a documented decisions matrix, program governance framework, and RACIs,[39] decision making in an adaptive program has proven challenging, and more so where coordination is necessary across multiple countries, partner organizations, and workstreams. This issue is something Re:Build intends to refine in the next year of implementation, particularly through improvements in knowledge management and coordination capacity.

Adaptive programming de-risks creativity and innovation

In linear programming, implementing teams are generally locked into delivering the program as described in the proposal and accompanying log-frame.[40] It follows that the risk involved in pursuing a promising but novel solution is high, as a team may find it is unable to deliver the results expected by the donor. In contrast, adaptive management can provide a safety net of sorts for trial and error. The Re:Build team felt confident incorporating some novel approaches into the program design because intentional testing was built in, theoretically providing the opportunity to fail fast and pivot if needed, and there are clear pathways (linked to the learning above) to make decisions to drop solutions that are not working. That said, some team members cited too much trial and error as a potential risk that could undermine impact if not controlled carefully. They held this view even though prior to the first strategy testing event few substantive adaptations had been made to the program design, and no interventions had yet been dropped. One possible explanation is that the mindset shift required for adaptive management is hard to achieve, particularly where teams are used to linear programming. The strategy testing event, where exercises and prompts from session facilitators required the team to think critically about what was and was not working, was more effective in surfacing the need for change than the more routine quarterly reflections in the program implementation meetings. However, there is still room to build more comfort with failing fast and eliminating poorly performing activities. Another possible explanation for some team members' concern is accountability to output targets (discussed below).

A focus on targets can limit adaptive action

As Valters, Cummings, and Nixon discuss, conventional log-frames, and specifically output targets, are often a barrier to adaptation.[41] These tools place value on achieving deliverables but do not

39 A RACI is a responsibility assignment matrix showing which roles are Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed.

40 Amendments are possible but are generally avoided for two reasons: (1) they are often time-consuming and not well suited for agile adaptation, and (2) donors (whether explicitly or implicitly) often equate amendments with poor planning.

41 Valters, Cummings, and Nixon, *Putting Learning at the Centre* (see note 33).

value learnings about successes and failures in the same way. Scalable solutions is a core principle of Re:Build, and the program has a bold target of 20,000 clients served. This target has helped to put into focus the need to optimize drivers of scale, for instance by exploring different delivery models to maximize efficiency. At the same time, ambitious targets have also created competing incentives. The team has had to make choices about what is valued more: staying the course and meeting targets, or learning—even when this means acknowledging the need to change course. For example, while in the initial theory of change vocational trainings were intended to be bundled with other activities, in practice this intervention was generally delivered by itself in year two. In interviews several team members observed that vocational training alone may not be sufficient for clients to find employment and additional interventions may be required to achieve the desired outcome, confirming a finding of the evidence review. However, when asked (prior to the strategy testing event) how the team had adapted the design based on this new understanding, interviewees indicated some hesitancy given that increasing the dosage of support per client would make it more challenging to meet Re:Build's overall reach target. Similarly, when asked in the follow-up survey how frequently adaptations are made based on new information in general, about half of respondents felt adaptations were almost always or often made, while half of respondents felt adaptations were only sometimes or rarely made. The pressure (real or perceived) to meet targets may explain, at least in part, this discrepancy that some respondents felt between learning and action.

Tailored learning methodologies help to balance the need for timely information and rigorous evidence

Because the program does not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to learning methodologies, the team is generating rigorous evidence alongside more timely and flexible learnings, although finding the right balance remains a work in progress. For example, at first glance there is an apparent tension between RCT methodologies on the one hand, which require fidelity to the original design, and adaptive programming on the other, which encourages change based on new information. The program has attempted to manage this tension by ensuring the learning methodology used is aligned to confidence in the solution. That said, nesting RCTs within an adaptive program has presented some challenges. In particular, it requires high-touch coordination with frequent communication and compromises between research and implementation teams (and appropriate team structures to support this). With these practices in place, however, it has been possible to incorporate rigorous research as part of an adaptive approach. While the first RCTs had not been completed at the time of the strategy testing event, it is expected that they will yield valuable information on which to base decisions about scaling or adapting the microenterprise interventions in future years of the program.

What are the constraints and enablers?

The constraints and enablers described across most adaptive management frameworks are summarized in Table 2. Many of the same themes have surfaced in Re:Build, and a description of the program's experiences follows.

TABLE 2. Common enablers and barriers to adaptive management

Adaptive Management Elements	Enablers	Barriers
People and Teams	Dynamic and collaborative teams; leadership support; personal interest in learning and continuous improvement	Frontline staff are unfamilier with using adaptive management approaches or uncomfortable telling leadership that something is not working; teams are working in silos
Organizational Culture, Strategy, and Political Will	Responsive decision-making and action by implementers and funders; streamlining approval processes for requests to changes in budgets, intervention plans, and results frameworks	Not knowing who to ask for 'permission' to change; lacking the time to think through why change is needed; bias towards quantitative data or soundbites instead of deep learning; office culture that fears failure; top-down management styles
Processes and Learning	Appropriate data and reflective analysis; staff with competencies in reflection, learning, curiosity, and open communications	Staff not knowing what existing rules allow; logframes not designed with an expectation of change; inappropriate M&E method or timing; no strong analysis of data; indicators that are too output-oriented or do not support decision-making
Resources, Time, and Money	Agile and integrated operations; ensuring that finance, planning, and performance management systems enable changes in interventions and budgets	Small M&E budgets; budgets that need to be spent in short or arbitrary timeframes; no inception period or crisis modifier; rigid agreements
Partnerships	Trusting and flexible partnerships (including local partners, private sector, and donors); open communications	Preference for hitting targets over learning; communication limited to formal reporting requirements; internal processes that are overly administrative

Source: Byrne, *Applying Adaptive Management* (see note 4).

Donor policies

Implementing organizations can adopt adaptive management irrespective of donor policies, but ultimately the degree of adaptation possible will be heavily influenced by donor policies—particularly, the ability to make changes at the theory of change and intervention level. The IKEA Foundation's flexibility has been one of the most significant enablers of adaptation in Re:Build. Beyond just ensuring that adaptation is possible within their policies, the IKEA Foundation has actively encouraged such an approach, recognizing in their funding strategy the lack of certainty about solutions and prioritizing expansion of understanding as an outcome in and of itself. The IKEA

Foundation also funded a generous six-month planning phase, during which the team was able to spend time understanding what could be known already about the context, the experience of urban refugees and the evidence base, and then developing well-informed hypotheses of what was likely to work. As a member of the Steering Committee, the IKEA Foundation participates in ongoing program governance and has demonstrated a valuable role for donors as thought partners with implementing organizations by asking challenging questions, pressure-testing assumptions, providing support in making some tough adaptation decisions, and ultimately creating accountability to adapt based on new information.

Multiyear and flexible funding

Evidence is growing for the benefits, in terms of better outcomes and efficiencies delivered, of multiyear and flexible humanitarian funding.[42] One of the key drivers is the enabling environment this type of funding creates for programs to adapt. The IKEA Foundation is funding Re:Build for five years, with a preceding six-month planning grant. This has provided the time and resources necessary for trial and error and iteration, which are critical when addressing complex challenges where the solution is uncertain. Moreover, the IKEA Foundation has taken a generally flexible approach to how funding is allocated. A high-level budget for the full five years was agreed at the outset of the project, but there is flexibility to make regular adjustments to the budget, including during the annual planning process, to be responsive to program learnings. The IKEA Foundation was also supportive of the inclusion of a budget line for a catalytic fund: unallocated funds that will be dispersed by Re:Build to program partners or other community stakeholders to implement new ideas in support of the overall program goal.

Internal policies

The literature discusses extensively the role of donor policies in enabling adaptive management, but much less attention is paid to implementers' own policies and processes. In Re:Build, flexibility (or lack thereof) in internal policies has been almost as influential in creating an enabling environment for adaptive management as flexibility in donor policies. Critically, this flexibility needs to extend to operational policies such as finance and procurement, not just to policies for program design and implementation. An early challenge for Re:Build was a lack of alignment between the program's adaptive management approach and IRC's operational policies, which are more standardized and designed with linear programming as the norm. For example, operations functions sometimes perceived changes in procurement plans or budgets as poor planning and requested a level of specificity in planning that the program team could not provide. This misconception highlighted the need for better socialization of the adaptive management approach with these teams,

42 Farida Bena, Daphne Jayasinghe, Lauren Post, and Caitlin Tulloch, *A Win-Win: Multi-year Flexible Funding Is Better for People and Better Value for Donors* (New York: IRC, 2020), https://www.rescue.org/report/win-win-multi-year-flexible-funding-better-people-and-better-value-donors.

which has subsequently helped to facilitate some modifications to standard practices, suggesting that further efforts are needed to continue to address this barrier.

Leadership support

Alongside the flexibility afforded by the IKEA Foundation, program leadership's support and buy-in has been one of the most significant enablers of adaptation in Re:Build. Program leadership regularly encourages adaptive principles, values learning, and is supportive of change when it is proposed. This support is modelled in how leadership allocates time and resources. Notably, Re:Build leadership invested in bringing core team members from both cities together for three days in the strategy testing event to focus exclusively on learning and adaptation. This not only created space for reflection but also signaled to the team the importance that leadership puts on these activities. The vast majority of survey respondents (91 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that Re:Build leadership is supportive of, and encourages, adaptations.

Participatory and decentralized decision making

The majority of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "all Re:Build team members have opportunities to share learnings and ideas for adaptation." However, one of the most frequent suggestions for improving adaptive management in the program was to further increase participation. While leadership has set the tone for an adaptive culture, respondents felt that more could be done to draw on the experiential learning of a more diverse range of team members and to amplify their voices within the program. In particular, frontline staff and more junior staff often have first-hand insights into what is and is not working, but they have fewer opportunities to share their learnings and ideas for adaptation. A related but separate suggestion by some respondents was to push some decision making closer to the point of delivery. The trade-off here is that status quo bias, particularly when a team is not yet well-practiced in adaptive management, can limit adaptive action (as discussed above), and teams may benefit from top-down prompts to think critically and act on new information.

Access to and use of data

The availability of rich data that span rigorous research, project monitoring, and client feedback has been a key enabler of learning in Re:Build. But synthesizing the volume of information in a way that supports inferences to be drawn, and in turn adaptations to be identified and acted on, has been a complex task. In interviews, team members discussing learnings most frequently referred to their own experiences and observations and less frequently pointed to learnings that they had drawn from the data. Re:Build has developed an interactive project dashboard that provides close-to-real-time visualizations of key project indicators. This has proven to be a valuable innovation, but more can be done to optimize how information is being used. It is apparent that adaptive programs need a greater investment in functions to support data use and learning, beyond standard monitoring

and evaluation systems that are geared toward reporting. In year three, Re:Build will be creating a dedicated role focused on managing the pipeline of information, synthesizing and distilling information into discrete learnings to aid more effective decision making. A key responsibility of this new role will be to facilitate and structure reflection conversations, asking probing questions to draw out learnings and decisions on adaptation. This role will share similarities with the embedded evaluator in the developmental evaluation approach described earlier, by ensuring that teams keep learning and adaptation front of mind.

Recommendations

This paper has attempted to provide a snapshot of how a complex humanitarian and development program is implementing adaptive management approaches. As outlined above, conducting this analysis during year two of a five-year program will allow Re:Build to adjust and better live out these approaches in the final three years. Additionally, it is hoped that this experience provides other humanitarian and development programs with inspiration and some lessons learned about how to best implement adaptive management approaches from day one.

For implementers

- **Socialize adaptive management approaches and expectations with both program and operations functions early on.** It is important that program staff understand and prioritize adaptation of the technical design. However, it is equally important that these principles are socialized with operations functions. The buy-in of operations teams, as well as aligned policies and procedures, are critical to create an enabling environment for agile change and flexibility.
- **Establish a predictable schedule of reflection and adaptation moments aligned with the operational planning cycle.** Manage expectations for how frequently changes will be made, mitigate the risk of flux, and counter status quo bias by establishing a routine cadence for reflection and adaptation. When thinking about the most appropriate cadence, consider how frequently it is feasible to make changes. In Re:Build, the strategy testing event (the most rigorous reflection moment) is held annually, directly before the annual planning period. This maximizes the opportunity to act on ideas for adaptation, as it is the period when most decisions about how time and resources will be allocated are made. This is complemented by lighter-touch quarterly reflections (the project implementation meetings) that provide opportunities to surface learnings before they are lost and to make time-sensitive course corrections and design tweaks when needed.
- **Build in a flexible budget.** Ideally this should be in the form of unallocated contingency funds, but it can also take the form of flexibility to move funds between budget lines. While substantive changes should be aligned with the strategy testing and operational planning cycle, budget flexibility mid-cycle is important to enable time-sensitive course

corrections and more ad hoc design tweaks. It can also be a way of incentivizing new ideas—for example, the catalytic fund that Re:Build has reserved for solutions that local partners and community stakeholders are interested in putting to trial.

- **Focus on defining frameworks to make decisions up front, as opposed to building out detailed project design.** Where the ultimate solution is unknown, having frameworks for decision making in place from the start enables the program to navigate uncertainty effectively. It may also give all stakeholders the assurance necessary to proceed with adaptive management, by providing clear structure for how the program will proceed when some decisions are left undecided. Ways to do this include defining a decision rights matrix (outlining key decisions to be made, when, and by whom) as well as establishing formal governance frameworks.
- **Treat theories of change as an aid to guide thinking and to test hypotheses.** Theories of change are a mainstay of traditional linear programming, but they are also a valuable tool in programs using adaptive management approaches. The difference is in how they are used. When designing adaptive programs, treat theories of change as a hypothesis for what is likely to work as opposed to a road map that must be adhered to. During strategy testing events, proactively consider whether the theory of change aligns with what is actually seen in the data; if not, use the new information to adjust the theory of change. This requires a shift in mindset from traditional linear programming but provides a useful framework with which to structure discussions about what is or is not working.
- **Invest in data use and learning capacity.** Adaptive management is, at its core, about surfacing and acting on learnings. It is critical to build in channels for generating evidence and other pipelines of information such as client feedback, but this is only half of the picture. Synthesizing information, distilling key learnings, and facilitating effective reflection discussions are all critical functions that should be factored into team structures. In programs where there is a high degree of complexity—in volume of information and frequency of learning and reflection—this will likely require a dedicated role or roles to do it well.
- **Incentivize learning.** If all the accountability is placed on meeting output targets, teams will quickly revert to linear mindsets where delivery of the activities as described is the marker of success. It may not be possible (or even desirable) to avoid setting and tracking output targets altogether, but it is important to find ways to ensure that learning is equally valued. This can be done by setting specific learning targets at the outset, as well as more tactical practices like keeping a log of learnings and documenting explicitly the actions taken based on these learnings.

For donors

- **Anticipate adaptation in grant structures.** Better outcomes are supported and efficiencies are delivered when programs can adapt based on new information.[43] In particular, when addressing complex challenges where the solution is uncertain, donors should anticipate that changes to the intervention design or even the theory of change are likely and should simplify the process to approve such changes. As in Re:Build, this could be done by agreeing with recipient organizations on a framework for joint decision making in lieu of a detailed activity plan for the full life cycle of the program. Adjustments to reporting processes—particularly shifting away from reporting focused on log-frames—can also create an enabling environment for adaptive management. In Re:Build, the IKEA Foundation participates in quarterly Steering Committee meetings as well as regular conversations with program leadership, which creates a space for more nuanced discussion about progress as compared with narrative reporting alone.
- **Provide multiyear and flexible funding.** Prioritize funding arrangements that provide a longer time frame for learning and adaptation; it takes time to learn what is and is not working and then to make changes based on this learning. Particularly complex challenges may require multiple cycles of iteration, and short funding cycles cut short the opportunity to build on learnings, effectively requiring teams to start from square one with each new grant. In line with the new funding commitments of the Grand Bargain Quality Funding Caucus, it is recommended that donors recognize multiyear funding as a preferred funding modality and include flexible arrangements to maximize learning opportunities and build momentum toward reaching shared outcome objectives.[44]
- **Value learning outcomes.** Like the recommendation for implementers to incentivize learning, donors should ensure that learnings—both successes and failures—are valued and funding is provided based on these outcomes. This may involve shifting the primary focus away from *outputs* as the indicator of whether a recipient organization has delivered what was expected under the grant, and instead focusing on *outcomes*. Donors can also ensure value is placed on learning by incorporating learning-oriented indicators and holding recipient organizations accountable for adapting when new learnings are surfaced, as opposed to valuing accountability to a predetermined log-frame or workplan.

43 Bena et al., *A Win-Win*.
44 Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Grand Bargain*.

Annex 1. Adaptive management survey

Adaptive programming is a learning-oriented approach that uses purposeful trial and error to make a difference to people's lives in challenging contexts.

Adaptive programming is a key element of the Re:Build program strategy. We planned to implement it by taking a flexible approach to our Theory of Change and activities (in other words, we do not treat the solution as 'known'), building in regular learning and reflection points, and pro-actively iterating on the program design based on what we learn.

This survey seeks to understand how effectively Re:Build has adopted adaptive programming to date, as well as the benefits and challenges of this approach.

The survey should take **less than 10 minutes** to complete and your responses are **anonymous.**

* Required

1. Which organization are you affiliated with? *
   - Re:Build partner organization
   - IRC
2. What best describes your role in Re:Build?
   (If more than one option applies, choose the best fit) *
   - Service Delivery
   - Evidence and Learning (research, evaluation etc.)
   - Influence and Adoption (advocacy, communications etc.)
   - Program management team (PMT)
   - Technical assistance
   - Other
3. In which city are you supporting implementation of Re:Build *
   - Kampala, Uganda
   - Nairobi, Kenya
   - Both
4. In your opinion, how adaptive has Re:Build been so far?
   (By "adaptive", we mean: actively learning and then making changes to program design in response to what has been learned)
   - **Almost always adaptive** (i.e., when learnings suggest adaptation is necessary, we almost always make changes to the program design)
   - **Often adaptive** (i.e., when learnings suggest adaptation is necessary, we often make changes to the program design)
   - **Sometimes adaptive** (i.e., when learnings suggest adaptation is necessary, we sometimes make changes to the program design)

- **Rarely adaptive** (i.e., when learnings suggest adaptation is necessary, we rarely make changes to the program design)
- **Almost never adaptive** (i.e., when learnings suggest adaptation is necessary, we almost never make changes to the program design)

5. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements (as they apply to Re:Build):
   Note: Scale included "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Neither Agree nor Disagree", "Disagree", and "Strongly Disagree"
   - **Leadership:** Re:Build leadership is supportive of, and encourages, adaptations
   - **Organisational Culture:** Re:Build has a culture of adaptation
   - **Conceptual Understanding:** All Re:Build staff have a strong understanding of what adaptive programming is
   - **Staff Capacity:** The Re:Build team has the time and space to be adaptive
   - **Partnership Approaches:** The way Re:Build partnerships are designed and managed is supportive
   - **Participation:** All Re:Build team members have opportunities to share learnings and ideas for adaptation
   - **Methods and Tools:** Re:Build has the right approaches in place to learn and to decide how to adapt based on these learnings
   - **Internal Policies and Procedures:** Are flexible and appropriate for an adaptive program
   - **Donor Policies and Procedures:** Are flexible and appropriate for an adaptive program
6. In your opinion, has Re:Build seen benefits from taking an adaptive programming approach?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Unsure
7. Please share some examples of benefits seen
8. Why do you think Re:Build has not seen benefits from taking an adaptive programming approach?
9. What makes you unsure whether Re:Build has seen benefits from taking an adaptive programming approach?
10. In your opinion, has adaptive programming created any risks or issues for Re:Build?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Unsure
11. Please share an example/s of the risks or issues adaptive programming has created in Re:Build
12. What makes you unsure whether adaptive programming has created risks or issues for Re:Build?
13. Is there anything Re:Build could do differently in Year 3, to be more effective at adaptive programming? Please describe.

Annex 2. Key informant interview guide

April 2022

KII Objective: Identify learnings, and adaptations, that have occurred in Re:Build, so far

- Capture specific adaptations that have occurred (i.e., how we changed and why); and
- Document examples of adaptive programming approaches that have been/are being used in Re:Build

Actual Adaptions Made

Understand what, if any, adaptations have actually been made in Re:Build so far

1. Can you think of any notable adaptations that have been made in Re:Build so far?
   [If respondent needs prompts]
   For example, can you think of any changes we have made to:
   - The needs we are addressing
   - The services or other activities we are implementing
   - The clients we are targeting
   - The location/s where we are operating
   - The stakeholders (including partners) we are working with
   - Anything else about what we are doing or how we are doing it?

   [Choose 2–3 of the respondent's examples and ask the respondent the following for each]

   Thinking about that adaptation:
   a. Can you describe what triggered it (i.e., what prompted us to change what we were doing)?; and
   b. What was the decision-making process (to decide to adapt)?

Potential Triggers for Adaptations—Context Changes

Understand what, if any, contextual changes have occurred and why we did or did not adapt

2. Can you think of any significant contextual changes that have occurred since the beginning of the program?
   [Choose 2–3 of the respondent's examples and ask the respondent the following for each]
   a. Did we make any adaptations as a result of this change?
      [If Yes]
   b. What was the adaptation, and what was the decision-making process (to decide to adapt)?
      [If No]
   c. Why not? [If respondent needs prompting] For example:
      - Decided it wasn't necessary?
      - Couldn't identify/design an adaptation?

- Didn't have enough flexibility to adapt? (e.g., budget not available)
- Didn't have information in time to adapt?

3. What are the main ways we have identified context changes so far? [If respondent needs prompting] For example:
   a. Risk matrices
   b. Context indicators
   c. Stakeholder consultations (including SRG)
   d. Context analysis
   e. Frontline staff/partners

Potential Triggers for Adaptations—Learnings

Understand what, if any, learnings have been generated in Re:Build so far and how we did or did not adapt

4. Can you think of any significant learnings we have made since the beginning of the program?
   [Choose 2–3 of the respondent's examples and ask the respondent the following for each]
   a. Did we make any adaptations as a result of this learning?
      [If Yes]
   b. What was the adaptation, and what was the decision making process (to decide to adapt)?
      [If No]
   c. Why not? [If respondent needs prompting] For example:
      - Decided it wasn't necessary?
      - Couldn't identify/design an adaptation?
      - Didn't have enough flexibility to adapt? (e.g., no budget)
      - Didn't have information in time to adapt?
5. What have been the main sources of learnings in Re:Build so far? [If respondent needs prompting] For example:
   a. Client feedback
   b. Stakeholder consultations
   c. Monitoring data
   d. Pilots results
   e. RCT/Rigorous Evaluation results
   f. External learnings (e.g., results from other programs etc)

Potential Triggers for Adaptations—Proactive Reflection (Strategy Testing)

Understand how effective our current proactive reflection routines are, and how we have or have not adapted as a result of these

In addition to reactive adaptations (i.e., shifting in response to unexpected changes or new information) a key feature of adaptive programming is creating space for proactive reflection and learning. The next set of questions will ask about your experiences with reflection in Re:Build.

6. Ahead of the planning cycle for year 2, in August last year we held a remote workshop to reflect on progress and learnings. How effective was that workshop in creating space to reflect and identify adaptations?
    a. What worked and what could be improved in future?
    b. Can you recall any adaptations we made as a result of that workshop (e.g., did we decide to do anything differently in year 2 after the workshop?)
7. Each quarter, we hold Project Implementation Meetings (PIMs), where we review planned activities and key indicators. How effective are the PIMs in creating space to reflect and identify adaptations?
    a. What is working well and what could be improved in future?
    b. Can you recall any adaptations we have made as a result of the PIMs discussions?
8. We recently held the first joint Partnership Project Review Meeting (PPRMs). How effective was that meeting in creating space to reflect and identify adaptations, alongside partners?
    a. What worked and what could be improved in future?
    b. Have we (including partners) identified any adaptations we have/or will make as a result of the joint-PPRM?
9. Can you think of any other ways we have created space for proactive reflection in Re:Build so far?
10. Overall, have we planned sufficient time and resources for pause and reflect activities?
11. Thinking back to the design and early start-up phase, do you think any of the assumptions underlying the logic of Re:Build have changed?

Barriers and Enablers

Understand the barriers and enables to adaptive programming in Re:Build

12. Overall, how adaptive do you think the Re:Build program has been so far? How are we anticipating and preparing for change?
13. How, if at all, are we tracking the decisions we make to adapt?
14. What are the main enablers or barriers we have faced so far? (i.e., factors that have helped us to be adaptive and/or factors that have prevented us from being adaptive) [If respondent needs prompts] For example:
    a. Leadership
    b. Org culture

c. Conceptual understanding
d. Staff capacities
e. Partnership Approaches
f. Participation
g. Methods and Tools
h. Administrative procedures (e.g., internal systems and processes)
i. Operating Context

15. What, if any, benefits have you seen from taking an adaptive programming approach so far?
16. What, if any, challenges or risks have seen from taking an adaptive programming approach so far?

Specific Approaches and Techniques to Probe (depending on interviewee)

- Have we delegated decisions closer to the frontline, wherever possible?
- Have we rapidly tested solutions to see what works?
- Have we created space for participation? (with partners and clients wherever possible)
- Have we built in flexibility to the program design?
- Have we transferred the flexibility provided by IKEA to our partners?
- Have we built flexibility into the budget?
    - Group budget categories, and then use spending and procurement plans for more detailed planning
    - Hold small reserve budget/integrate contingency lines into budgets to increase actual flexibility to respond to new urgencies
- Have we consistently used implementation meetings to review data, including dedicating some PIMs to review context changes and client feedback and make adaptations accordingly?
- Have we consistently used learning meetings (ahead of annual planning)?
- Are we making decisions, and updating plans, based on new information?
- Have we built strong feedback mechanisms, including strong local community networks and partners for feedback ?
- Do we have adequate resources for data collection, analysis and learning?
- Have we identified key decision points when changes might need to be considered (e.g., upcoming elections, rainy season, internal turn over) and integrated them into the workplan?
- Have we identified the most useful data and information to inform relevant and timely changes?
- Have we used scenario planning to help prepare for changes ?
- Have we used context indicators to help identify changes in context?