

Adaptive programming and learning in the Strategic Partnerships ‘Dialogue and Dissent’

The second lunch meeting in a series of four events on the concept of adaptive programming focused on adaptive programming and learning in the Strategic Partnerships ‘Dialogue and Dissent’. The meeting was organized on 9 November 2016 by the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD).

This summary shares a general overview of the different viewpoints and insights that were shared amongst the participants, while respecting the rule of non-attribution.

Framing questions

The aim of this meeting was to have an open and interactive dialogue on what flexible monitoring systems for adaptive programming can look like, and what difficulties and barriers can exist in implementing flexible monitoring of an adaptive program from in practice. With the Strategic Partnerships (SPs), the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs has introduced an innovative way of cooperating with non-governmental organizations in development programming. However, the extent to which principles of adaptive programming, with a specific focus on flexible monitoring, can be applied within the framework of the Strategic Partnerships merits further exploration. Thus, the following key questions led the discussion:

- What issues, rules or practices currently prevent flexible monitoring and learning from being enacted within the SPs?
- Where has innovation happened on this dimension?
- Where is further change needed?

Key takeaways

The discussion was kick-started by a presentation by NIMD on the way in which their SP program on Effective Policy Influencing tries to advance adaptive programming and learning. In order to achieve this, NIMD makes use of a Theory of Change (ToC) approach and a flexible results framework that is well-suited to complex and dynamic political environments. Presentations by GPPAC, Cordaid and PAX further enriched the discussion. The following takeaways are consistent with the framing questions stated above.

One of the main barriers for flexible monitoring and learning within the SPs is the required compliance with the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) guidelines

Whereas much of the data for monitoring and learning that is currently collected consists of qualitative data, the IATI guidelines demand for quantitatively aggregated results. The IATI guidelines can thus be considered as non-adaptive. For example, activity indicators are developed in order to report on outputs for IATI purposes. Although this information is useful for transparency and accountability, meaningful change happens over years. These longer term changes cannot be included in the IATI framework. As such, the frameworks' short cycle of reporting risks threatening reporting on outcome level. In addition, IATI is not considered as a safe space for sharing information. Much of the data that is dealt with in the realm of security and rule of law programming is highly sensitive in nature. IATI does not provide for a safe opportunity to share this type of information. As a result, important information on results (or reasons for a lack thereof) is missing from the reporting.

The development of a flexible monitoring and learning system and the ongoing analysis that is required to steer programs in a different direction, if needed, are high demanding endeavors. Ensuring enough capacity for this is not always a given. This holds especially at headquarters level. For example, when country programs are all contextually adapted, this poses a challenge for people working at the headquarters in dealing with the complexity of the system, such as the large variety of indicators. Insufficient budgeting for monitoring and learning and a lack of ownership of these processes at a higher organizational level, further hinder improvement.

Differing views on how to use data and results amongst planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME) staff and program managers can hamper effective monitoring and learning. Because of differing contexts and thus variety in outputs, the results do not come together very nicely at the headquarters level. While PME staff prioritize safeguarding the complexity, breadth and depth of data, even if these cannot easily be aggregated, program managers still tend to default to a fixed set of indicators in which commonalities are easy to pin down.

The SPs have provided for more freedom to design the monitoring and evaluation system. This has allowed for successful initiatives, such as increasing responsibility of staff at country level, and involving implementing partners in the development of a Theory of Change from the beginning. Staff at headquarters level is facilitating this process, by developing general guidelines and working on capacity development of partners.

Innovative monitoring and learning systems, such as outcome harvesting and systematically assessing ToCs, have yielded positive results

The strong traits of outcome harvesting are its suitability for learning from complex change processes. This is done by retrospectively looking at what is achieved, instead of measuring progress towards predetermined outcomes. In addition, the active involvement of country level staff as well as implementing partners in gathering data increases learning as well as ownership of the process. Moreover, a solid base of knowledge on outcomes forms the basis for additional, internal as well as external evaluations.

Another approach is to completely abandon the use of blueprints, and to let go of formulating a results framework beforehand. Instead, programs are steered by a global Theory of Change that is continuously reviewed and adjusted. A more systematic assessment of ToCs allows for a shift in focus to understanding how change happens, to seeing how these changes play out in practice, and how organizations can respond to what actually is happening on the ground. This strategy is supported by the formulation of intermediate results that can be adapted along the program cycle, in order to allow for program adaptations should the need for this arise. Moreover, the indicators that are used for this approach have no targets: the change process is leading, and this process cannot be measured with pre-set target levels. Instead, indicators are complemented by Most Significant Change Stories.

Requiring a focus on tracking processes of change, either through strategies of outcome harvesting or adaptive ToC testing, is pivotal in order to stimulate flexible monitoring and learning

The use of these types of monitoring and learning systems would be a way forward in designing programs that are quickly adaptable to a changing context. Ensuring skilled and capacitated staff for this, as well as organizational buy-in at all levels of the organization, should be a top priority. This includes increased budgeting for monitoring and learning systems and behavioral change that exceeds the level of PME staff, including program managers.

There is a need to further discuss how reporting within the framework of IATI can be better linked to the flexible strategies of monitoring and learning that are currently used in the SPs. It is recommended to organize follow-up discussions between the MFA and implementing organizations on this topic, to find space for improvement.