# Result measurement in adaptive programming

Kicking off a series of four events on the concept of adaptive programming, the first lunch meeting focused on results based management and adaptive programming. The meeting was organized on 2 November 2016 by the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (MFA).

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 constructively critical dialogue on quantitative versus qualitative result measurement, the tension between accountability and learning, and how these can be improved to enable more flexible security and rule of law programming. The MFA is currently witnessing a strong tendency to work with quantitative indicators in reporting on development funding. In addition, the increased focus on reporting to Parliament creates an emphasis on accountability; with the risk that learning from results is insufficient. The MFA strives to work in a more result-focused and transparent manner. In doing so, a couple of questions have come to the fore. The following questions led the discussion:

- Is the increased focus on quantitative indicators an improvement in terms of adaptive programming?
- What can be done, within the boundaries of the system, to work on meaningful result measurement (including a focus on learning), and to enable adaptive programming at the same time?
- To what extent are implementing organizations involved in this discussion? Do implementing organizations also struggle with balancing the need for accountability on one hand, and the importance of flexible programming and learning on the other? How do other organizations deal with this?

**Key takeaways**

A presentation by the Bureau International Cooperation (BIS) of the MFA on its results based management (RBM) approach kick-started the debate. The following points of attention aim to foster adaptive programming in practice, with the goal of shifting security and justice programming into higher gear:

## A strict focus solely on quantitative indicators can hamper adaptive programming

A focus on quantifiable results and linear processes, it was argued, does not reflect the reality of working in complex and fluctuating contexts, and risks undermining local creative problem solving.

A new way forward might be to include an intermediate level of results, bordering the spheres of control and influence: results that sit in between output and outcome. All of this can be done while continuing to work with a Theory of Change (ToC) that is designed to test assumptions and help programs get to the *why*-questions. Including budgetary space to explore these 'unknowns' would be a constructive way to both recognize and plan for challenges ahead.

## Qualitative results can be quantified in a meaningful way

It is commonly understood that quantitative data are basic calculations that deal with scope and scale of impact, while qualitative results help reveal the meaning behind a certain change, and deal with the nature of impact. However, both results can be displayed in numbers and can thereby be aggregated in a meaningful way. This combining of qualitative and quantitative data, for example through processes such as outcome harvesting, is essential for proper result measurement and learning.

# Concrete results are note the only benchmarks in reporting for accountability purposes

Reporting on results is typically used as a method to account for the judicious use of development spending. However, focusing on results is not the only way to ensure these public funds are being handled properly. Evaluating whether a project was managed well, whether there is a transparent record of decision-making and spending, and the extent to which staff and processes meet professional standards can all be applied to ensure accountability.

# There is a tension between accountability, learning and communication

During the discussion, participants acknowledged the tension between accountability and learning. Pressure to meet targets that are imposed through accountability mechanisms can disincentivize the innovation and honest reflection that is necessary for learning. Participants also pointed out that evaluations, carried out for accountability purposes, often fail to seize the inherent learning opportunity. This is particularly the case when external consultants conduct the evaluation and results are communicated upward rather than feeding into program design. A stronger focus on *why* certain processes of change have occurred, instead of a focus only on *what* has changed, might help bring the accountability and learning processes into better alignment.

Another dimension of this tension exists between accountability, learning and communication. It was suggested that separating external communication about results from internal learning processes may help to avoid conflating these distinct ends, which often leads to compromising the latter. In reporting to the broader public it is important to provide clear and honest communication. This may also include better informing the public about what they should expect: as long as those demanding upward accountancy are not informed of what is realistic in security and rule of law programming in conflict-affected contexts, then unrealistic expectations will continue to be imposed.

# There is a tension between adaptive programming and large-scaled projects

Some offered the view that the tension between adaptive programming and the pressure to report on outcome level results is not necessarily as problematic as it is often presented. Adaptive programming calls for flexible activities and resources (i.e. outputs) in order to allow for better outcomes, which generally remain fixed. The real challenge is therefore not between reporting and adaptive programming; it is between adaptive programming and the growing volume of programs. This scaling up is difficult to marry to an adaptive approach: when managing larger ships, it is more difficult to make nimble adjustments.

# Trust among partners, decentralized decision making, and an incentive structure are the real facilitators of adaptive programming – not necessarily reporting models

Results based programming can encourage innovation, allowing implementers to test different routes to the desired the results; but it should come with a related incentive structure and decentralized decision-making, to encourage responsibility and drive for innovation. Personal qualities of implementing staff, such as creative problem-solving, good judgment, professional competence, and even courageousness, are also factors, as is building a relationship of trust between implementers and their donors.

It was noted that at implementation level, many programs are already being adapted to the context. This usually happens out of necessity, which means that rather than convincing people to work in an adaptive manner, it is important to enable people by providing the right structures, removing obstacles, and addressing things that might suppress creativity.