July 2021

MEAL Joint Learning Session 3 Report

How can H2H actors use adaptive management?

The MEAL Advisory Group (MAG) of the H2H Network held a joint learning session 25 March 2021 focused on H2H actors and adaptive management. The session asked participants: How could adaptive management apply to H2H actors? How do H2H actors use evidence and learning to inform decision-making? What could be good practice for H2H actors in adaptive management?

This was the third joint learning session aimed at exploring MEAL challenges and sharing practical solutions for humanitarian-to-humanitarian (H2H) actors. The session was facilitated by Itad, under the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Humanitarian Global Services programme.

Capacity challenges

In the session, participants highlighted the challenges of adaptive management approaches for H2H actors. One problem was insufficient resources for evidence and learning activities, notably a lack of time during project implementation or between projects. Adaptive management was perceived to require additional time, money, and people (i.e., expertise).

Another problem was knowing how to do adaptive management. The challenges here included linking activities with outcomes, collecting timely data and information, and having mature MEAL systems. Questions were raised about where and when to apply adaptive management, how to capture learning during adaptation, and how to do it in collaborative projects.

A third problem identified was donor incentives. The MEAL activities of H2H actors are perceived to be donor-driven, so adaptive management is not done unless donors require it.

At the same time, participants highlighted some interesting practices in evidence-informed decision-making. Some of these involved good use of data collection and analysis, such as real time data and 'dashboards', asking for regular feedback, standardised feedback across projects, and better documentation 'so that learning doesn't just live with people' when staff turnover is high. Other practices involved deliberately carving out learning opportunities, including post-project debrief sessions, biannual organisational learning meetings, and a 'three-month pause to gather evidence and reassess', as part of large two-year project.

Learning culture

In discussing good practices, participants considered what could be expected of H2H actors. First, it was noted that adaptive management was not applicable to all H2H actors. It might not be applicable, for example, in very short cycle programmes. It also required adequate resource allocations. 'Without dedicated resources, it's really hard to do the learning if you're also designing and implementing projects,' said one participant. 'Having internal MEAL staff or contracting external evaluators would be ideal.'

Second, adaptive management needed an organisational culture that encouraged

learning and adaptation. Smaller organisations might be more able to develop learning approaches than larger bureaucratic ones, but it required managers to 'buy into' evidence-based decision-making and key staff to adopt a 'MEAL mindset.'

Third, adaptive management needed standardised approaches to guide H2H actors. These would involve a theory of change or an organisational MEAL framework beyond implementing short-term projects; a plan for MEAL activities; and ways of sharing learning with internal and external stakeholders. A mid-term learning point with partners was considered a useful approach.

Donor incentives

Importantly, adaptive management would require incentives from donors. Most obviously, this could mean donors allocating project funding for evidence and learning outputs, alongside other project outputs, to capture 'what works and how' in specific thematic areas. But it could also mean donors giving sufficient 'openness', 'flexibility', and 'space' to approaches that involve learning during implementation, including when things do not go as well as expected. It was noted that few incentives exist for adaptive approaches in such a competitive sector where there is 'a reluctance to admit failures out of worry that you won't get funding again.' It was also noted that large donors promote adaptive management in principle, but their internal systems may not make it easy in practice.

To accompany this discussion, the facilitators made the following suggestions based on emerging findings and learning from HGS MEAL support about adaptive management. In the absence of recognised good MEAL practices for H2H actors, these remain to be further tested and developed.

1. Understand the 'adaptive' principle. H2H actors should understand the concept of adaptive management. Adaptive management is a term increasingly used in humanitarian action and development assistance, but different understandings abound. As a working definition, we propose that adaptive management is 'a process of evidence generation, structured learning, and transparent decision-making carried out during implementation of a project or programme'. Whether adaptations are minor 'tactical' alterations in response to feedback and monitoring or 'strategic' adaptations based on in-depth learning (Intrac, 2018), adaptive approaches contrast with the more widely used anticipatory approaches which involve planning for and resourcing response options in advance, so that when changes happen, the organisation can shift (Obrecht, 2019).

Adaptive management includes several different aspects. Some authors highlight the role of evidence generation, including 'more intelligent and dynamic use of evidence, information and data, integrated into innovative adaptive methods and approaches' (Wild, and Ramalingam, 2018). Some highlight the importance of timely learning, 'to search out information, learn or analyse and make changes based on this learning in an appropriate timeframe' (Obrecht, 2019). Others highlight the importance of decision-making, 'an intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context' (USAID Learning Lab, 2018).

Adaptive management may be a particularly appropriate approach for addressing humanitarian and development challenges. Compared to traditional 'predictive' approaches, it offers greater transparency about complexity and uncertainty, promotes honesty about inability to control what happens, and designs programmes that change over time to become more appropriate and relevant (Hernandez et al, 2019). It can be suited to humanitarian action which requires ongoing decision-making and course-correction (Dillon, 2019) and development challenges which require innovative and flexible responses that build on new analytical and practical ways of working (Wild, and Ramalingam, 2018). In addition, the approach is promoted by important donors, such as USAID and FCDO, and 'Real time learning and improvement' was also recommended to HGS partners in a recent review (DAI, 2020).

2. Consider its practical application. H2H actors should consider that adaptive management usually involves these key features:

Informed decision-making: in adaptive management, evidence-informed decision-making is a routine part of programme delivery, effective learning depends on the use of data and evidence in MEAL, and multiple perspectives are considered. In particular, the perspective of the 'user' is considered, along with counter-vailing evidence.

Learning mindset: in adaptive management, programmes start from an 'assumption of uncertainty' about what will work. They use a flexible approach including testing, monitoring, feedback, and course-corrections if necessary. They understand an organisation cannot 'plan its way to reliable performance' but must instead create systems, practices and a culture that allows learning to be used to create new ways forward.

MEAL system: in adaptive management, frequent evaluative thinking is applied to project-level decision-making and learning, by simultaneously, measuring and assessing project processes and results in real-time.

Donor support: in adaptive management, accountability to donors focuses on higher-level results (i.e., outcomes, impact), or on how well an organisation learns and adapts in pursuit of its goals. It requires flexible budgets and results frameworks that are constantly reviewed and adapted.

H2H actors should also consider the challenges of adaptive management. These are recognised to include:

MEAL gaps: adaptive management requires programmes to use MEAL approaches more effectively, since most MEAL practices fail to provide a basis for improved feedback loops needed for adaptive management.

Knowhow gaps: while there is much agreement that adaptive management makes sense, less known about *HOW* to do it and the processes needed. Questions arise, for example, about how to ensure a process is useful, practical, and timely, and how to include field learning and tacit knowledge sharing.

Decisions unseen: little is known about how evidence is used to make decisions for adapting management. This is considered a 'black box', which is hard to observe, since most often decisions 'just happen' as part of managing a programme and are not made explicit.

3. Consider its applicability to H2H actors .H2H actors should consider the applicability of adaptive management to their own programmes, bearing in mind the approach may not be applicable to them all. Some H2H actors expressed interest in adaptive management for reasons such as enabling evidence-based decisions *during* implementation, generating evidence and recording decisions, promoting evidence-based decision-making in the sector, (i.e., 'walking the talk'), and remaining 'agile' and 'nimble' in a way that adds value to the humanitarian system. It is assumed that such adaptive approaches would 'serve accountability and reporting purposes with most donors' (DAI, 2020).

Similarly, H2H actors note limitations to adaptive management's applicability. H2H actors would need to use their existing MEAL systems and management processes, which generally lack investment in capacities, processes, and tools. Besides, adaptive management is usually used in situations of complexity, where effectiveness depends strongly on unpredictable contexts, not where cause and effect is known and linear (Intrac, 2018). Many H2H actors may be providing services to humanitarian response actors that work according to relatively predicable processes.

4. Apply an 'evidence and learning' approach. H2H actors should consider experimenting with an 'evidence and learning approach' designed to suit their needs. Such an approach might involve the following:

Articulating value: This means starting with a humanitarian value proposition, addressing such fundamental questions as: What problem/s does your organisation address?

What value does your programme add to existing efforts? What is your organisation's impact goal? What methodology or modality does your organisation use, based on what learning (if any)?

Applying framework: This means translating the main outcome pathway/s into a few key questions to understand 'what works and how', focused on the delivery of your key products and services, who accesses and uses them, and how this contributes to improved humanitarian action at what level (e.g., programme, organisation, response, system).

Generating evidence: This means conducting MEAL activities even if limited (e.g., digital analytics, management information, user consultation, case studies, tacit knowledge) and generating timely evidence.

Facilitating learning: This means preparing (e.g., quarterly) a short evidence table for decision-makers, facilitating a participatory session to consider implications and learn lessons, making specific recommendations to management (e.g., course corrections), and preparing a brief report of evidence and learning (e.g., 4 pages maximum).

Building a narrative: This means using reports to build an organisational progress narrative that serves all MEAL needs, including donor reporting, proposal writing, stakeholder accountability, annual reporting, policy advocacy, resource mobilization, and private sector engagement.

Supporting donors: This means using this narrative to guide donors and support their learning, ensuring the approach aligns with donor accountability (and learning) requirements.

5. Learn from practices. H2H actors should learn from their application of such approaches, share experiences with similar actors, and be informed by the resources below.

Key references:

Shifting Mindsets: Obrecht, A. (2019) presents findings on how humanitarian actors can increase flexibility, through anticipatory and/or adaptive approaches

Alternative approaches to monitoring and evaluation: Dillon, N. (2019) explores a range of MEAL innovations that can support learning, decision-making, and adaptive management approaches

Making Adaptive Rigour Work: Ramalingam et al. (2019) present principles and practices for strengthening MEAL as needed for adaptive management. Includes an inventory of guidance

Evidence-informed adaptive management: Hernandez et al. (2019) offers a roadmap for how development and humanitarian organisations can generate and use evidence for adaptive management

Action Learning: Abbott et al. (2019) outlines a range of learning approaches for humanitarian actors, including better use of tacit learning and more formal ongoing learning activities

Useful tools:

BOND: describes adaptive management and its application in programmes, organisations, funding and partnerships.

Intrac: gives an introduction to adaptive management for CSOs, including requirements and MEAL implications. The author, Nigel Simister, continues discusses constant learning, tactical and strategic adaption in a blog.

USAID: presents its Collaboration, Learning and Adapting Framework to support programmes along with a CLA toolkit. Also the CLA Maturity Tool with further explanation in an overview.

PACT: provides a practical guide to the mindsets, behaviours, resources, and processes needed for an effective adaptive management system, . See related Panel discussion and blog post.

Annex 1: Bibliography

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